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Critiquing the Sweet “Somethings” on Candy Hearts

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Abstract

After establishing the ubiquitous nature of candy conversation hearts in our popular culture and Valentine's Day celebrations, this paper provides an outline of a simple classroom assignment that can be used to achieve three possible objectives: to analyze cultural messages about love; to illustrate the research method of content analysis; and to challenge students to construct their own cultural critique of the messages on candy hearts and the age group most likely to give and receive them on Valentine's Day.

Candy Hearts in our Popular Culture

It is one of the oldest ways in our popular culture for Americans to share their sweet nothings: the candy conversation heart. *Sweethearts* first introduced to the consumer in 1902 by New England Confectionery Company, also known as Necco, evolved from an even earlier lozenge version which was first developed in 1866 (Necco, n.d.). Consequently, we began sending our love through small candy messages around the same time as Jesse James started robbing banks. Not long ago, Necco (n.d.) estimated eight billion *Sweethearts* were produced each year, resulting in an approximate 100,000 pounds of conversation candy hearts sold per day during the typical Valentine's Day six week sales season. While it was the leading producer of candy hearts, the Necco factory in Revere, Massachusetts closed unexpectedly in July 2018 upsetting fans around the country (Conti, 2018; Clarke, 2018). Although it is uncertain if production will begin again, there are other choices for the candy heart enthusiasts including Wonka *SweetTarts Hearts* and Brach's, Inc. who debuted their candy conversation hearts in the 1930s (Alexander, 1993).

No matter the brand, consumers of candy hearts receive messages about how our culture communicates love, romance, and even sex. While most messages are consumed rather immediately you can keep your *Sweethearts* for about five years as they will not lose their flavor or go stale for quite some time (Hartel & Hartel, 2014). Consumers without a sweet tooth can enjoy candy conversation hearts even longer as a quick survey of the Pinterest.com website will show an infinite number of valentine craft ideas using candy conversation hearts from table top topiaries to picture frames. In fact, Pinterest members can even “pin” an anatomically correct looking heart constructed out of candy conversation hearts. In 2014, those who were not so crafty and had more money to spend could opt to purchase a 24-karat gold customizable conversation heart (Passy, 2014).

As a sociologist with an interest in popular culture, I argue that candy conversation hearts should be understood within their social, historical, and cultural context and thus I challenge students to do the same. I begin by asking students to consider their reaction if they were to receive one or more of the following conversation hearts on Valentine's Day: “Page Me,” “Bite Me,” “You Are Gay”. Most of my students are hard pressed to explain the meaning behind “Page Me,” a saying introduced to conversation hearts in 1997 (St. George, 1997). In an effort of full disclosure, I let students know that even I had to

think for a minute about what this saying meant when I first began investigating candy conversation hearts. It took me a few moments and then I remembered the trend in the 1990s of doctors and tech savvy people wearing pagers as a form of communication. Today the smart phone has made pagers virtually obsolete. Next, students laugh and indicate that “Bite Me” is offensive until I tell them that this saying was found in a box of vampire inspired candy hearts sold to capitalize on the *Twilight* phenomenon (May, 2009; Meyer, 2005). Of course, no saying illustrates the importance of understanding social, historical, and cultural context more so than: “You are Gay.” Once imprinted on candy conversation hearts, this saying no longer appears as the meaning of the word gay has changed significantly over the last century evolving from a word describing cheer or happiness to a word describing sexual identity (Alexander, 1993). As students point out, in some cases gay is also utilized as a derogatory slang term for stupid. Students can also see how candy conversation hearts reflect the social, historical, and cultural trends of the time by examining how they have embraced changing technology from the “Fax Me” saying in 1995 to @tweethearts messages on Twitter in 2014 (Necco, n.d.; Newman, 2014). In sum, candy conversation hearts are firmly rooted in our popular culture’s history and despite the closing of the Necco factory they are likely to remain a ritual part of our Valentine’s Day celebrations in to the future.

Classroom Activity

This simple classroom activity challenges students to think critically about the messages that appear on a ubiquitous piece of candy. It is something we hardly give a second thought to and that is precisely why we should examine it. This content analysis of candy conversation hearts may be used in a variety of teaching scenarios. I use it in my *Sociology of Gender and Sexuality* class with the primary objective to analyze cultural concepts about love and I use it in a *Research Methods* class to demonstrate how to conduct a content analysis. Ultimately, both objectives are achieved in both courses. A content analysis requires a methodical examination of a selected artifact. Students in my research course delve deeper into the methods of content analysis by consulting a textbook such as Kimberly Neuendorf’s *The Content Analysis Guidebook* who defines content analysis as “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” (p. 1). In contrast, students in my *Sociology of Gender and Sexuality* class use this activity to focus more on feminist theory than methodology. Content analyses have been successfully implemented in a variety of classroom projects from investigating the media presentation of people in the criminal justice system (Finley, 2004) to analyzing the music of Harry Potter films (Messinger, 2012).

I begin the classroom activity with a discussion of theory. Sociologists employ a variety of theoretical perspectives to help to explain the social world and I challenge students to apply the theory of symbolic interactionism to critique the taken for granted messages on the candy conversation hearts. In a nut shell, symbolic interactionism is a theory which tries to understand how human beings communicate with one another through the use of meaningful objects or symbols (Blumer, 1986). A symbol can be an object, a physical gesture, a shape, a color, or even a letter of the alphabet. Symbols play very important roles in our society. Consider the letters S.T.O.P. written on a red metal octagon atop a sign post at the corner of a busy intersection. This symbol, or stop sign, has a significant legal and even lifesaving meaning in our culture. Candy conversation hearts may not stop traffic but they do communicate important messages about how our culture expresses romance through the use of similar types of symbols including color, shape, and written language.

This classroom activity challenges students to conduct a content analysis and critique the symbolic messages on the candy conversation hearts that they may give or receive this Valentine’s Day and Valentine’s Days in the future. To begin, ask each student to take five candy conversations hearts at random from a package of any brand of candy conversation hearts. The students should line up the five candy hearts side by side. This should be repeated three more times so that there are four rows of candy hearts.

Analysis

The analysis begins with a qualitative examination of the candy narratives arranged in front of the students. Students should be instructed to code the messages as if they are spoken sentences instead of a handful of candies. The typical codes include love, sex, and friendship but students should be encouraged to develop their own coding schemes. Students then share their codes and interpretations with the rest of the class. Students in my class found many interesting combinations of messages

including: *1 on 1*, *U Can Do It*, *Wink Wink*, *Kiss Me*, *U Can Do It* and *U R It*, *U Can Do It*, *Wink Wink*, *Say Yes*, *Go Go Go*. Clearly many sayings intentionally employ a double entendre and this exercise makes this point more apparent by placing the candies together in a storyline. Consider the following example: *1 on 1*, *Jump 4 Me*, *Reach 4 It*, *Smile*, *U Can Do It*. The “1 on 1.” It could be construed as an invitation to play basketball but most of my students argued that it was an invitation for sex. Similarly, the “it” in “Reach 4 It” may mean your goals but my students suggested something completely different. In some cases students found the messages to be fun as they coded the following candy narrative to be about dancing: *Shake It*, *For Ever*, *Go Go Go*, *Time 2 Dance*, *Soul Mate*. Like beauty, language is in the eye of the beholder and this becomes an important part of the class discussion. Ultimately, my class was surprised, amused, and even more importantly, critical of what was implied in the messages. Faculty should decide the depth to which they want to analyze the messages. They can keep it superficial or dive in to critical discussions such as what do these messages mean in the era of the #MeToo movement? Students in my *Sociology of Gender and Sexuality* course examine the messages within the context of our understanding of affirmative consent. Since our college is located in New York State, we discuss the “Enough is Enough” law to combat sexual assault on college campuses which defines affirmative consent as “knowing, voluntary, and mutual decision among all participants to engage in sexual activity.” (New York State, 2015). We discuss whether or not messages such as “Kiss Me” and “Say Yes” are problematic or if they in fact work to encourage affirmative consent.

The second step of this classroom activity encourages the class to work together and quantify the results for the entire class sample. For example, one of my recent classes randomly sampled a total of 440 candy conversation hearts from individual serving size bags and found 63 unique messages. “1 on 1” and “Love Me” were the most frequently occurring messages while “Love Bug” and “Tweet Me” were among the least frequent sayings in our sample. Closer examination of the data showed that the majority of sayings demanded that the recipient of the candy heart do something or show affection for the giver of the candy heart such as “Love Me,” “Adore Me,” “Marry Me,” “Friend Me,” “Call Me,” “Kiss Me,” “Ask Me,” “Pick Me,” “Text Me,” and “Meet Me.” Still others such as “Reach 4 It,” “Shake It,” “Step Up,” “Jump for Me,” “Go Go Go,” “Time 2 Dance,” “Boogie,” “Play Now” and “Say Yes” instructed the receiver of the candy hearts to perform for the candy giver. The prevalence of candies demanding affection and performance were especially relevant to my class discussions on affirmative consent. There were also positive and cute messages that did not raise concerns such as “Hold Hands,” “Puppy Love,” “Soul Mate,” “True Love,” “First Kiss,” and “Sweet Pea.” In addition, complimentary sayings such as “Cutie Pie,” “You Rock” and the ever so blunt “U R Hot” rounded out the sample.

See Figure with quantitative data collected, *Candy Conversation Heart Sayings*, in Endnote below Conclusion.

Conclusion

Singularly or strung together, candy conversation hearts tell an interesting story and raise important questions. It is clear that they are more than sweet nothings but are in fact, sweet “somethings” in need of critical analysis and commentary. Why? Ask your students one final question; who do you think is most likely to eat and enjoy candy conversation hearts? Adults or children? I would imagine that the majority of candy heart consumers are children who derive a great deal of joy from delivering their valentines to the construction paper mailboxes sitting on their friends’ desks at school. The messages about love and sexuality written on the candy hearts are likely consumed by children in elementary and middle school. As a case in point, when news broke that Necco might close its factory, sixth grade students from Oregon wrote letters to the Mayor of Revere, Massachusetts offering their support. One letter suggested to #SaveNecco while another letter stated they “will be devastated” if the maker of *Sweethearts* goes out of business (Clarke, 2018). Encourage students to reevaluate their original analysis of the messages on the candy hearts and to contemplate whether or not the probable young age of the consumer would change their critique and if so, in what ways?

Finally, you may instruct your students to eat the candy if they wish. Whether they like them or not, they will most likely reminisce about the last time they had a candy conversation heart as few will have escaped a school Valentine’s Day party without having had at least one.

Figure 1: Candy Conversation Heart Sayings					
N= 440 hearts (63 sayings)					
<u>Saying</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Saying</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Saying</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
<i>I on I</i>	18	<i>U Can Do It</i>	8	<i>Baby Doll</i>	4
<i>Love Me</i>	18	<i>Boogie</i>	7	<i>Crazy 4 U</i>	4
<i>Hold Hands</i>	17	<i>Love Her</i>	7	<i>Girl</i>	4
<i>Reach 4 It</i>	16	<i>Call Me</i>	6	<i>Me & You</i>	4
<i>Time 2 Dance</i>	16	<i>Cutie Pie</i>	6	<i>My Love</i>	4
<i>Adore Me</i>	15	<i>Game On</i>	6	<i>Say Yes</i>	4
<i>Marry Me</i>	14	<i>High Five</i>	6	<i>Text Me</i>	4
<i>Play Now</i>	14	<i>Jump 4 Me</i>	6	<i>U R Hot</i>	4
<i>Go Go Go</i>	12	<i>Love Him</i>	6	<i>Wink Wink</i>	4
<i>Puppy Love</i>	12	<i>Me</i>	6	<i>Be Mine</i>	3
<i>Soul Mate</i>	12	<i>Pick Me</i>	6	<i>Let's Ride</i>	3
<i>Friend Me</i>	11	<i>Sweet Pea</i>	6	<i>Mate</i>	3
<i>Race Me</i>	11	<i>Sweet Talk</i>	6	<i>Meet Me</i>	2
<i>Shake It</i>	11	<i>You Rock</i>	6	<i>Real</i> ♥	2
<i>Smile</i>	10	<i>First Kiss</i>	5	<i>Sweet Love</i>	2
<i>True Love</i>	10	<i>For Ever</i>	5	<i>Win Me</i>	2
<i>I ♥ You</i>	9	<i>My Team</i>	5	<i>Face Me</i>	1
<i>Kiss Me</i>	9	<i>Step Up</i>	5	<i>Hey There</i>	1
<i>Play Time</i>	9	<i>XOXO</i>	5	<i>Love Bug</i>	1
<i>U R It</i>	9	<i>Angel</i>	4	<i>Mine</i>	1
<i>Love You</i>	8	<i>Ask Me</i>	4	<i>Tweet Me</i>	1

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