

Godiva's dig at obligatory Valentine's chocolates stirs debate in Japan

Japan should stop giving out giri choco (obligatory chocolate).

That was the message in a full-page ad that Godiva published last week which instantly went viral, stirring up debate, once again, on the pros and cons of women giving out inexpensive courtesy chocolates to their male co-workers and friends on Valentine's Day — a cultural quirk of Japan.

Published in the Nihon Keizai Shimbun on Thursday, the ad by the high-end Belgian chocolate company urges top business leaders to tell their female workers to refrain from giving out courtesy chocolates if they feel pressured to do so.

“Some women say they hate Valentine's Day because it takes a lot of energy to think whom to give it to and make preparations,” Jerome Chouchan, president of Godiva Japan, said in the ad. “Valentine's Day is the day people convey their true feelings, not the day people coordinate relationships at work.”

The Godiva ad immediately provoked a response.

Yuraku Confectionery Co., maker of the popular and inexpensive Black Thunder chocolate bar, tweeted: “Every person is different, and that's OK. Yuraku Confectionery will keep supporting the culture of giri choco as a chance to show appreciation.”

Yuraku Confectionery sells more than 110 million Black Thunder bars a year. It has been selling a special chocolate bar for Valentine's Day since 2003 as “a chocolate you can instantly tell is a courtesy.”

The company launched the product to reverse a drop in Valentine's Day sales as consumers shifted more to buying expensive chocolates.

Misa Yamazaki, the marketing manager at Yuraku Confectionery, said the firm was able to gauge how people feel toward giri choco through social media responses to the Godiva ad.

“We want people to use Black Thunders as a communication tool for expressing their daily appreciation,” Yamazaki said. “We want people to give our products with love, not when they don't want to. In that sense, our concept is basically the same as Godiva's.”

The custom of women giving chocolates to co-workers goes back decades in Japan.

“In the past, women expressing romantic feelings toward men was considered disgraceful in Japan. So chocolate companies are said to have started advertising Valentine’s Day as a special day that women could profess their love,” said Harumichi Yamada, a professor of social science and geography at Tokyo Keizai University.

But as the social status of women improved and confessing their love was no longer taboo, Valentine’s Day merely became the day women gave chocolate to men, Yamada said. It was during this process that the giri choco custom emerged.

The tradition still seems to be prevalent.

According to a survey released last week by Mynavi Women, a lifestyle website for women, 71 percent of those surveyed said they feel comfortable giving chocolates to co-workers on Valentine’s Day.

But the survey, conducted in December on 252 women aged between 22 to 39, also found that 1 in 4 have given chocolates to co-workers because they thought they were expected to.

“My boss banned giri choco at the office, as it would cost female workers a lot and take up their time,” said Yoko Tanaka, a 52-year-old office worker who came to buy chocolates for herself at the Mitsukoshi Nihonbashi Main Store in Chuo Ward, Tokyo.

“I personally like giving away chocolates so I’m OK with the custom of giri choco,” said Tanaka’s colleague, Chika Okano, 33, who also came to buy chocolates for herself. “But I think Godiva can say such things because nobody buys Godiva’s high-quality chocolates as giri choco.”

Godiva ad...

“There are women who say that they hate Valentine’s Day and there are also women who feel relieved when Valentine’s Day falls on a weekend. Why? Because of the difficulty and inconvenience of thinking of who to give giri choco to, and then having to buy it. They have to spend mental energy and money, but it’s hard to break the cycle, and they feel irritated about the custom every year.

We at Godiva speak from your experience because we see this happen annually. Of course, it’s OK to give chocolate to someone you genuinely have feelings for, but it’s OK not to give anyone giri choco. Honestly, in this day and age, it’s better not to. This is what we’ve come to believe.”