

A Diamond Is(n't) Forever

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I want you to imagine your favorite couple on the Bachelor or Bachelorette. You spend a whole season rooting for these two (almost obnoxiously) beautiful people to finally acknowledge that they're soulmates, destined to get married and grow old together. You've completely ransacked your snack cabinet and gone through tubs of ice cream while anxiously watching your other favorites get eliminated, one by one, until your all-time favorite contestant is in the finals. I want you to imagine that one of them takes the other to the spot that holds special significance for the both of them, gets down on one knee, and pulls out the most beautiful diamond engagement ring that you've ever seen. It goes on their left ring finger, they embrace, the music swells, and the moment is nothing less than perfect. The season ends full of love, joy, and victory for the new couple.

It's a perfect moment, right? It's everything you've dreamed of finally coming true for these two people you've watched for months. What's responsible for this moment? You might think their completely unbreakable magnetic connection as seen from the hours that they appeared on screen together (maybe, just a guess). Maybe you call on fate or destiny. I really don't want to burst your bubble here, but there's more to it than just the sparkly ring and happy music that stays stuck in your head for hours. That ring that goes on the lucky lady's finger? They only get to keep it if the couple gets married and stays married for a specified number of years, as said in the lengthy contract that they sign, according to a piece by the Uneek Jewelry Blog. And, not to burst your bubble further, but this monumental moment of becoming engaged is actually all a marketing ploy made by one of the biggest competitors in the diamond industry. The ring itself, though shiny and pretty and bound to get some exclamations from family and

friends, means nothing and has no value unless it is given value. In fact, as we'll get into, diamonds are actually not rare at all. The diamond engagement ring alone is nothing, but once brought into the proposal situation becomes seen as a symbol for the love between two people and a promise of their joint future.

Diamond engagement rings haven't been around forever. In fact, the craze all began because of a company known as DeBeers. Here's the story, as summarized by Uri Friedman in his article about DeBeers and the engagement ring: in the late 1800s, a whole bunch of diamond mines appeared in South Africa. The British who were responsible for these mines realized that they've got all these diamonds that could make them a ton of money, but with all these diamonds suddenly making an appearance, they had literally no way of preventing the world from getting their hands on them. Therefore, the diamonds would lose all value with how many had been uncovered in the mines. They had to, essentially, create a big lie that diamonds were still incredibly rare and valuable to maintain the status that they had before the mines were discovered. So, they created this cartel, which is now known as DeBeers, and became kings of the diamond industry.

It's not really a new thing for people to get greedy and capitalize off of a lie. Greed plays a big role in business in all aspects. But what does that have to do with engagement rings now? Well, DeBeers became the dominant player in the diamond industry and (still is today, controlling $\frac{2}{3}$ of the diamond market, according to a study conducted by Fram and Baron in the *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*). Then, after the Great Depression had taken its course, DeBeers found themselves in a bit of a predicament. According to Friedman's article, Harry Oppenheimer hired ad agency N.W. Ayer to help bolster sales in the U.S. to convince men that the bigger the diamond, the bigger his love and level of commitment,

and women that diamonds were the only way to seal the deal on a relationship. With this came the iconic phrase, “A Diamond is Forever”.

It should be noted that, obviously, a pretty engagement ring that makes people say something along the lines of “Look at that rock!” doesn’t guarantee a happy relationship. Far from it, actually, according to a study conducted by Francis-Tan and Mialon published in *Economic Inquiry*. There’s no concrete evidence found in the study that an expensive diamond engagement ring, nor a fancy wedding ceremony, does anything at all for the lifespan of a marriage. So why do we give it all this weight?

Rings are symbolic of something greater. Before these diamond rings even existed, humans had a way of making symbols for love. For example, Melanie Nathan explores the legend of cavemen wrapping grass ropes around their partner’s hands or feet to signify their connection (the birth of the phrase “tying the knot”, which makes it that much sweeter). Even way back millions of years ago, our ancestors understood the importance of the symbol of the grass rope. As we’ve evolved from cavemen, our culture and society has evolved in tandem. DeBeers convinced the public that the bigger the engagement ring, the more valuable the love that it symbolized. But standing alone, that diamond ring was just that: a diamond ring. It means nothing. It only has the meaning that we interpret and believe, because humans have given it that meaning over the years of its existence. But why? Why does it still have that meaning? As said in the article on Medium by Daniel Goldman: “The question is then, *who gives a symbol its meaning*? And my answer is ‘the one who uses it’”. The diamond engagement ring only has meaning because the one proposing and the one receiving the ring make it so. DeBeers certainly influenced that meaning, but it has only grown since that marketing campaign was launched. If it hadn’t resonated with the public, the diamond engagement ring would have gone out of style as

quickly as it came into style. But the diamond engagement ring is still around and thriving. But giving something that is as superficial as a piece of jewelry the weight of carrying an entire marriage, or even the love that preceded it, isn't the way to prove that you love somebody else. It's sweet, sure, that can't be denied. But we, as human beings who so crave that companionship, need to rethink what's most important. It's not a diamond engagement ring that drains your entire bank account. It's the person that you're committing to spending the rest of your life to.

Let's go back to that Bachelor/Bachelorette couple in the beginning. It's that special night. You and the entire audience have been waiting anxiously for the question to be popped. This time, as he begins to give his speech about how the woman before him has changed his life and perspective on love, he doesn't get on one knee. There's no felt-covered box in his pocket that holds a massive diamond ring. He has only his truth and his word to promise to love her for the rest of his life. And for her, that is more than enough. She doesn't need that shiny diamond engagement ring. Once again, they embrace, the music swells, and the moment is nothing less than perfect. You, the viewer, are still brought to tears and feel the same surge of joy you felt for previous contestants with their shiny diamond rings. But this one is different. This one is special, because they have nothing to prove to each other. They only have their mutually shared love and the promise of their future. And they lived happily ever after.

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