The Representations of Gay Families in Advertising: Consumer Responses to an Emergent Target Group

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Representation of Gay Families in Advertising: Consumer Responses to an Emergent Target Group
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ABSTRACT
This paper investigates consumer responses to gay families portrayed in advertising, drawing on critical visual analysis, reader response analysis and queer theory. The results from twenty-five interviews showed that the ability to discover a family theme in ads is related to how consumers define ‘family:’ that attitude toward target ads influences attitude toward the advertiser, and that interpretive frame affects overall evaluation of advertising imagery. Several themes emerged from the interviews, including ‘straightening up’—reading apparently gay images as heterosexual, or straight, despite rather overt gay signals. Marketing communications work as representational systems and signifying practices that reflect, create and resolve cultural tensions of identity, sexuality and intersubjectivity, making representations of gay families in advertising crucial sites of negotiation in consumer culture.

INTRODUCTION
There is an ongoing debate about how certain groups are portrayed in ads, including women, homosexuals, and ethnic minorities (see Borgerson and Schroeder 2002). As the gay movement matures and same sex marriages, gay adoptions and assisted reproduction become more and more frequent, homosexual families will be an increasing target customer group (Johnson and Piore 2004). These new family constellations are still not accepted overall in society. How political development proceeds will determine the possibilities for forming gay and lesbian parented families and consequently the attractiveness of marketing towards them. Because of homosexual families’ relatively recent entrance as a target market, and because of the sensitive nature of the theme, the representation of homosexual families in advertisements remains limited. Homosexual consumers, in general, are not so widely represented in advertising, as many companies fear that they will alienate their heterosexual target market. Thus, advertisers have found ways to speak to homosexual consumers that may go unnoticed by straight consumers—gay “window dressing” or “gay vague” images play in building brand meaning (Borgerson and Schroeder 2005; Schroeder 2002). From a critical visual analysis perspective, pictures of families in ads “are not random collections of persons but deliberate constructions of the significant relationships among them” (Brilliant 1991, p. 92-3). Thus, marketing images of families offer insight into how consumers think about domestic groups, identities, and shifting cultural norms about families and their implications for marketing communication strategy.

TARGETING AND ADDRESSING FAMILIES IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION
Based on the assumption that the domestic group is an important target market, marketing management analyses and adapts their market communication to the family lifecycle, household decision making, consumer socialization (especially that of children), and gender roles in a domestic group, household, or family (e.g., Arnould, Price and Zinkhan 2004; Solomon, Bamossy, and Askegaard 2002). Depending on the results of segmentation analyses, the marketers direct their market communication to different people included in the domestic group. Therefore, advertising with the purpose of selling a product to a family or a domestic group has to attract the decision maker for the particular product category. However, we could find few studies that looked explicitly at the family as it is portrayed in marketing communication.

Sociologist Erving Goffman argued that families are “well adapted to the requirements of pictorial representation. All of the members of almost any actual family can be contained easily within the same close picture, and, properly positioned, a visual representation of the members can nicely serve as a symbolization of the family’s social structure” (Goffman 1979, p. 36). He suggested that the presence of at least one girl and one boy enables the symbolization of the full set of intra-family relations, including the presumed special bonds between the mother and the daughter as well as between the father and the son. Thus, Goffman’s advertising study suggests a quite traditional image of the family, consisting of a mother, father, and a boy and girl. Contemporary ads reveal a much more complex pictorial conception of the family.

What the beholder perceives as a family varies depending on her or his ideological and cultural background. We believe that leaving the decision making to the reader is a more appropriate way
of approaching the term family, than to try to give a definition of a family that is generally applicable. On the other hand, the marketing definition is also relevant because it explains how marketers reason about families, which will be reflected in their marketing communication. If we turn to the field of consumer behavior, we find a functional definition with regard to the real diversity of family structure:

Domestic groups, families, and households differ. Families comprise individuals related by blood, marriage, adoption, and emotional commitment. However, we know from our own experience that family includes a broader range of people than the domestic group with whom we regularly reside, interact, and make consumption decisions. Households are another group, defined as co-resident, activity groups. Although the terms domestic group and household are closely related, they are not necessarily the same. Some domestic groups may not share a home yet share consumption decisions. Households are often made up of family members but also include fictive kin, individuals informally adopted into a household as family members, and nonkin. (Arnould, et al. 2004, p. 553, emphasis in original)

According to this definition, families consist of individuals related by blood, marriage, adoption, and emotional commitment—biological sex is not a prerequisite, nor even children are a necessity for forming a family. Therefore, the definition used in consumer behavior does not define various kinds of families such as the nuclear family, extended family or homosexual family—it includes them all. As we can see, the reality is obviously more diverse than the traditional family definition.

Due to the nature of our research method, it is important to keep the visual aspects of the family in mind. This perspective focuses on the visual codes, which imply that an image represents a family (e.g., Brilliant 1991). For example, the people in an advertisement may be chosen to look like and represent a family, although they are perfect strangers in real life. However, if the advertisement is created to make the reader associate to a family, the visual impression is more important than the real life of the people who are in the image. For example, several well-known companies feature homosexual families—such as images of two same-sex parents with a child—in their current marketing campaigns, which appear in mainstream media.

GAY REPRESENTATION IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION

Both the words gay and homosexual are used as a definition of someone who practices homosexuality: including a sexual or erotic attraction to persons of the same sex. Gay can also refer to homosexual men, as lesbian often refers to gay women. However, following how the term is used by our interview subjects, we occasionally employ the word gay to refer to the general category of homosexual people. In order lay the foreground for the understanding of how homosexual families are represented in advertisements, we find it useful to discuss how homosexuals in general are portrayed in marketing communications. There are many stereotyped images of homosexuals in advertising, and seeing why and how they are illustrated will add to the understanding of how gay families appear in the marketing pantheon.

There have been gay consumers as long as there have been commodities to consume; however it is not until recent years homosexual consumers have received attention from advertisers (Chasin 2000; Glockman and Reed 1997). There are still relatively few advertisements directed toward homosexuals within so-called mainstream media—as a result those companies targeting gays and lesbians enjoy a higher market visibility and are therefore likely to benefit from support from the gay community (Wardlow 1996). Another reason to target gay consumers revolves around politics; by targeting homosexual consumers companies may demonstrate moral agency and ethical business practices (Chasin 2000). This study is not focused on why there are homosexual families featured in marketing communications but on how they are represented. Though we found it interesting to briefly touch on the subject of if and why advertisers target homosexuals because it will ultimately relate to why advertisers are now targeting families with same sex couples.

If until recent years homosexuals were fairly invisible in mainstream media, currently they are quite visible, if represented most often by stereotypes and clichés (Dines and Humez 1994; Glockman and Reed 1997; Wardlow 1996). One stereotype that informs gay marketing representation consists of a highly educated, affluent, white gay professional (Dines and Humez 1994; Chasin 2000; Kates 1999; Wardlow 1996). For example, Lisa Peñaloza argues that the portrayal of gays and lesbians is a representation that is distorted, with the persistent images of white, upper-middle class, “straight looking” people (Peñaloza 1996). Furthermore, she states that this distorted representation comes at the expense of those distanced and threatening to the mainstream, such as poor, ethnical minorities, and butch lesbians. Steven Kates, who also challenges this stereotype, acknowledges that there are gay men with little formal education, gay men of color and lesbian women—all of which may be economically disadvantaged, pointing out that the stereotype of “gay spender” still persists and motivates marketers to exploit that market opportunity (Kates 1999).

During the last decade there have been a few companies that have illustrated homosexuals in their advertisements as “normal folks”. One example that some people have seen as a positive illustration of homosexuals is a 1994 television commercial run by IKEA, the huge Swedish household furnishing company. The US ad featured a gay couple shopping for a dining room table together—one of the first time gays featured in a mainstream media television spot and among the first to illustrate the emergent role of gays as affluent and style appreciating (Wardlow 1996). Even though some people think the ad—and others like it—portray a positive and normal image of homosexuals; others could interpret the ad as being quite stereotypical of gay men.

Generally, companies have been reluctant to market directly to gay consumers due to the fear of a backlash from homophobic elements in society, such as the radical right or religious movements (Dines, and Humez 1994; Glockman and Reed 1997; Wardlow 1996). One way for advertisers to reach the homosexual consumers without alienating their much larger heterosexual market involves the use of a dual marketing method also known as “gay window advertising”. The idea is that the advertisement is composed in a way that speaks to the homosexual consumer in a way that is not immediately noticeable to the straight consumer (Clark 2000; Rohlinger 2002; Schroeder and Borgerson 2003). Gay window advertising draws on what is called “gay vague”, which implies that the sexual preference of the person or persons in the advertisement is not clear. This means that the advertisements generally avoid explicit references to heterosexuality by only featuring one individual or individuals of the same sex. Furthermore, the model or models in the ad depict sexual ambiguity or an androgynous style (Schroeder 2002; Tsai 2004). Whether the advertisement can be determined as gay vague is in the eye of the beholder—a straight person might consider two guys in an ad as being just friends,
whereas a gay person might pick up on indirect codes and understand that the ad also is directed toward homosexual consumers (Kates 1998; Solomon, Bamossy, and Askegaard 2002).

A few companies—such as Diesel, IKEA, and Volvo—openly target homosexual consumers in mainstream media. For example, a recent Volvo campaign was created in response to research that showed that gay focus groups had a strong preference for messages targeted directly to them (Wilke 2003)). They complained that when advertisers talk about families, gay people usually think it does not include their type of family. This campaign makes Volvo one of few car companies to create tailored gay market advertising (see figure 1).

A second advertisement is a 2002 print ad from IKEA Netherlands—one of 11 gay-themed ads from a campaign (figure 2). IKEA has been running gay-friendly ads for a decade and was one of the first major advertisers to feature a gay relationship. A third advertisement that we have analyzed is from G & L Internet Bank that appears to target lesbian consumers (see figure 3). This study looks at consumer response to fairly openly ‘gay’ advertising, by looking at how marketing representation of families—typical and homosexual—influence perceptions and evaluations of contemporary marketing campaigns that draw upon gay imagery.

**METHOD**

A total of 20 advertisements were collected from Swedish lifestyle magazines, international publications, such as Elle, and The Commercial Closet website which gathers gay-themed advertising from around the world. From these, five print advertisements from the Cyprus Tourist Bureau, G & L Bank, IKEA, and Volvo were chosen for stimulus material. These organizations generally target families, and each has featured families with same sex couples in their advertising. Although we work with a limited and Western sample, this selection represents large mainstream companies. Twenty interviews were conducted in two urban parks in Stockholm, Sweden, with an average length of 15-20 minutes. The age of the respondents ranged from early 20s to late 50s. Efforts were made to ask an equal number of women, men, mothers with strollers, fathers with strollers, elderly people and younger people. The sample was mostly Swedish, but also has a representation of non-Swedes, mainly from the United Kingdom. Three main questions drove the interview: (1) what signaled a ‘couple’ in ads? (2) what signaled a ‘family’?; and (3) what signaled ‘gay’? To understand how these concepts influenced interpretation and evaluation, subjects were asked about their attitude toward the ads, and how this affected their attitude toward the advertiser.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted through the use of a questionnaire composed of five main questions and three follow-up questions. The follow-up questions were only asked if they mentioned a certain key word: couple, family and gay/lesbian or homosexual. This method was chosen because we did not want to guide the respondents to give us any answers they did not detect themselves. However, our first question: “What is your spontaneous definition of a family?” could have primed the respondents following answers, by indicating the family theme of the study. Therefore, it may have influenced the respondents to look for any signs of a family. At the end of the interview, the content of the two final questions revealed that the theme was homosexual families in advertising.
We chose five images for the respondents to discuss. In order to avoid making the respondents directly aware of the dominant homosexual family theme of the study, we included two distracter ads: one image featuring a traditional family—that is one that showed a mom and dad with two kids—and one image of a man and a woman, along with three ads featuring gay couples and families with same sex couples (see figures 1, 2, and 3). In a few of the ads, the pictures were very small and sometimes had a visually unclear text. Concerning the text, this was partly intentional so that the gay theme of the ads would not be too obvious to the respondents. Furthermore, this would make clear if an image representing two people of the same sex simply would be enough for people to perceive them as a gay couple.

The Volvo advertisement contains six small pictures of people and two different car models. Each picture contains two adults of the same sex; all appear to be happy, given that everyone is smiling. All of the people in the pictures are either standing physically close to one another or touching each other in an affectionate way. In some instances they are standing a little too close to be considered friends, which gives the impression that the couples might have an intimate relationship. In one of the pictures one woman appears to be pregnant and in the other image the couple is lying on a bed. Another image shows two men and a baby. Yet another picture shows two men embracing a dog. Two pictures portray a female and male couple, where the female couple is sitting on a sofa touching each other and the male couple is standing close to each other, leaning their head against another. Most of the couples seem to be situated in homey backgrounds, such as sitting on a couch or lying on a bed.

The G and L Bank ad portrays two women and a child sitting at a table; one of the women is filling out papers. The women are presented in a casual way, wearing everyday clothes in classically female colors as red and purple. The women are presumably in their mid thirties-forties, white and middle-class. The fact that all of them are females, even the child, may imply that women are the company’s target group. Since both the girl and the woman, standing to the left in the picture, have brown eyes it leads us to believe that the woman might be the girl’s mother. However, the way the girl is positioned to the other woman makes us consider that the girl could also have some kind of close bond or relationship to the other woman. When reading the text of the ad: “Joint income, Joint Ownership” and “Families with same gender partners deserve friendly, full-service...
It gives an indication that the advertisement is for a gay and lesbian bank. So, if we for instance were reading the text simultaneously as looking at the image, we may realize that the two women are supposed to portray a lesbian couple. However, if we were only looking at the picture, without reading the print, it is not certain we would identify the two women as a couple. The text, therefore, helps to frame the meaning of the advertisement. We believe that the strongest indication in the picture signifying that the two women are a couple is that they are sitting very close to each other, implying a close and intimate relationship.

The IKEA ad features a child in a mouse costume sitting on top of a coffee table set with two men standing behind her and two vases in the background. One of the men is kissing the other on his cheek. The red background, the heart shaped white spot on the belly of the child’s mouse costume and the kiss creates a loving atmosphere. But even though the men are kissing, they do not display too much body contact neither with each other nor the child. It seems as if it is just enough body contact to make clear that they are a couple and not give too sexual associations. If this is the case, it might only be to avoid associations to the stereotypic way gays have been portrayed before, for example as pornographers and pedophiles (Dines and Humez 1994).

Even though it might seem somewhat obvious that the two men are a couple, the text “My daddies are also a set” helps to further frame the image by indicating that they together with the child are a family. Therefore, the text limits the number of interpretations likely to be made. Furthermore, that the text is in rather large print and located at the top of the picture makes it more likely to be the first thing the reader notices. Consequently this enhances the likelihood of the message getting across to the reader.

We introduced the interviews by asking: “What is your spontaneous definition of a family?”. Thereafter, each respondent was asked to answer questions relating to what the ads portrayed and what the ads’ messages were. We did not in any way mention our interest in homosexual families until the final two questions. Further, we maintain the respondents anonymity throughout analysis and data reporting. Interviews were transcribed and translated into English, if necessary. Data analysis involved several steps. First, each interview was reviewed and summarized. Second, the interviews were scrutinized by the interviewers—two of this paper’s authors—for themes and categories. In the third step, all four of the researchers met to consider and refine the categories and codings, and to assess the fit of the themes across the data. In the final stage,
higher order themes were proposed, and then checked with the interview data by the research team.

RESULTS

In evaluating the interviews, we found the readers’ response generating and applying dualistic categories to make sense of the images. Comparisons borne out in the visual interpretation of the advertisements gave meanings to the images that were then expressed throughout the interviews, such as traditional versus modern; gay versus straight; family values versus erotic connections; and so-called normal ways of being versus a more anything goes attitude. More straightforward physical signals also grounded reader response: body contact or closeness indicated some form intimacy; hair, eye, and skin color were referred to as evidence of blood relationship, or, on the contrary, lack of blood relation, and therefore possible romantic or erotic attachment within a grouping. The presence of children was read as indication of a family bond and a gesture to the future. Signs of emotion, especially smiles indicating happiness, were also commented upon frequently, and gave a general sense of the advertisement’s demonstration of depicted groups’ mood.

How people spontaneously define a family may affect the way they perceive an advertisement portraying some kind of family constellation. About a third of the respondents gave a definition that corresponds to the traditional heterosexual nuclear family—a mother, a father and at least one child. Moreover, about half of subjects (including the previous responses) defined a family as consisting of two adults and at least one child. In sum, most of the definitions required children to be considered a family. The responses show that a few believe that two adults are all that is needed to be a family or who are blood related. Other definitions of the family include people who are living together or who care about each other.

What Signaled A Family?

Considering that we had primed the interview, by beginning with the question “What is your spontaneous definition of a family”, intentionally giving a hint that the theme of the interview this research study was families. Even though we did this priming, a majority of the respondents did not pick up on the family theme, since they did not identify the people as families in most of the ads. In following section we will further explain how many respondents picked up on the family theme and clarify why they did so. One control was an ad for Cyprus tourist agency. A large majority of the respondents said that the advertisement showed a family on vacation. A few explicitly said that the ad portrayed a traditional or nuclear family. As one respondent reported: “It wants to say that you can go away, have a nice time. The dream of the ideal family is still alive, the traditional family, a young and beautiful family.”

Most respondents had mentioned the word family and over half of these replied that the people in the ad were a family because they were holding hands or had close physical contact. A few mentioned that one could see that it was a family since the children had a resemblance to each other; and some replied that a mom, a dad and children together is usually what a family looks like.

In the Volvo advertisement nearly a quarter of the interviewed indicated that the ad portrayed a family. The presence of physical contact and closeness was what generally made the respondents indicate that the people appeared to be families. Moreover, the texts mentioning of family was also primarily an indication that made the respondents identify the people as families. As one respondent stated:

“It portrays family happiness, though it is seen from the pictures, not the cars. Friendship, some could be families. The first picture is a family, the second is of friends because it looks like they are having a heart-to-heart conversation, the third could be brothers and the image of the dog looks familiar.”

The ‘family’ cues included closeness, children and other consumption themes: “I thought it was families because it looks like a photo album. Then, the text says it too. It illustrates adults with children and adults with dogs.”

A majority of respondents mentioned in the G & L Bank that the people portrayed a family. The most common answer was that the physical closeness signalled that women and child were a family. Another frequent answer from the respondents was that they were a family because they looked related through physical traits, such as the eyes and the red hair. An important fact to consider is that most of the respondents thought that the females were a family in the sense of three generations: grandmother, mother and child. Only a handful of respondents thought they were a family in that of two mothers and their child. Our interpretation of the G & L Bank ad concluded that the three females were a family mainly because the harmonious, symmetric, and close positioning as well as the similarities between the females. Another strong indication that made us believe that the females were a family was the text stating: “...Families with same gender partners deserve friendly, full-service banking”.

In the IKEA ad 1 in 5 of the respondents that mentioned that they thought the people in the ad were a family. The two most common things the respondents’ said indicated that the people were a family; was the kiss between the men and the content of text. Although, one response had a different view on why the two men were considered to be a family. The response indicated that they were father and son because of the kiss on the cheek, since for heterosexual Arabs it is considered normal for a father to kiss his son on the cheek. This response is the result of respondents having different cultural backgrounds. As we have clarified by the earlier argumentation, what the respondent perceives as a family varies depending on her or his ideological and cultural background (cf. Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999). What made us believe that the people in the IKEA ad portrayed a family was the physical contact in the form of a kiss between the men and what further helped to support this belief was the child being present as well as the text indicating that they were a family.

The results from the analyses show that there are clearly families portrayed in this sample of advertisements. Respondents report two reasons why the family theme is clear: the advertisements’ text and the positioning of the people in the images. The respondents identify that when the people are positioned close to each other, the relationships are more intimate. Additionally, the age and the physical features of the people are relevant for the perception of a family. In the advertisement for G & L Bank, for example, the three women are sitting very close to each other. They also share common features such as skin, hair, and eye color, as well as the color of their clothes, which signal unity and familiarity.

In general, what respondents thought indicated a family included: text, physical contact, touching, a resemblance between the people, and visual distinctions between friends and family, including closeness. Even though all these signals seem clear enough to recognize a family the majority of respondents did not identify the homosexual couples with or without children as families. What could be the reasons for this? Why does it appear to be so difficult to detect a homosexual family? Could it be because the respondents were afraid of mentioning it or simply because the idea of the ads portraying homosexual families was just unthinkable for some of the respondents?
What Signaled Gay?

All of our three ads can be said to portray gay families, however we believe that this is done in more and less noticeable ways. Few respondents thought either the Volvo and G & L Bank ads portrayed gay people. However, the IKEA ad prompted most to indicate that the men were a gay couple: “they are a family because they have the same colors, are kissing and are holding each other” and “You see that they are a couple because of the text and the kiss, of course if they are from Turkey or India where it is usual for men to kiss each other”. Next, we will further explore what in the ads signaled that the people were homosexual and thereafter we will also look into why there were such a large number of observations made in the IKEA ad in contrary to the two other ads.

Starting with the Volvo advertisement, the results from the interviews show that there were only a handful of the respondents that identified the people in the Volvo ad as homosexuals. According to the responses, what signalled that the people were gay was physical contact, such as specifically touching heads, and that they looked affectionate of one another. The result from our ad analysis show that we thought the people were gay since each small image contains two adults of the same sex, standing very close or touching each other in an affectionate way. This gave us the impression that the two adults had an intimate relationship.

The interview results from the G & L Bank ad showed that an overwhelming majority of the respondents did not notice that the ad portrayed a gay couple. Of the few that did notice, they mentioned that they identified the women as a lesbian couple because of how the text stated, “Joint income”. The reason why such a large number of respondents did not distinguish the women as lesbians will be discussed below.

There were a very large number of the respondents that had mentioned that the people in the IKEA ad were homosexual. The most common response to why the respondents believed that the people were homosexual was that the text saying “My daddies are also a set”. Furthermore, many respondents mentioned that it was also noticeable because of the kiss or the hug. Although to one respondent the kiss did not necessarily mean that they were gay, since the two men could have been from countries such as Turkey or India where it is usual for men to kiss each other. The results from our ad analysis show similar conclusions to that of majority of respondents. We thought the kiss on the cheek signaled that the two men were gay and that text also helped to reinforce that assumption.

The reason why there were such a large number of respondents who noticed that people were gay in the IKEA ad compared to the G & L Bank ad might be due to the size and location of the text. In the IKEA ad the large size of the text and the texts location at the top of the ad could have caused the higher observation rate among the respondents. Furthermore, taking into the consideration that the text in the G & L Bank ad was sort of blurry, but also the text location at the bottom of the ad, might be reasons for why so many respondents did not pick up on the gay theme. The explanation why so few respondents identified the people in the Volvo ad as being homosexual could be because the pictures were very small and so many. There were a number of respondents who indicated that it was hard to focus on the ad since it contained so many images and therefore they thought the overall message became blurry. Therefore, it might have been easier for the respondents to focus on the two cars rather than what kind of relationship was being portrayed within each picture.

In evaluating the interviews, we found the readers’ response relied on dualistic categories to make sense of the images, generating and applying binary oppositions of traditional/modern, heterosexual/homosexual, family/not family, normal/not normal and so forth. More straightforward physical signals also grounded reader response: body contact or closeness indicated some form intimacy; hair, eye, and skin color were referred to as evidence of blood relationship, or, on the contrary, lack of blood relation, and therefore possible romantic or erotic attachment within a grouping. The presence of children was read as indication of a family bond and a gesture to the future. Signs of emotion, especially smiles indicating happiness, were also commented upon frequently, and gave a general sense of the advertisement’s demonstration of depicted groups’ mood. A few of the respondents pointed out, without the text mentioning or hinting to homosexuality, the connection never would have been made. Yet, we believe that the intimate relationships portrayed in the ads are quite enough to open up to an interpretation of them as homosexual. The Volvo ad is for example filled with a bit “too much” body contact for heterosexual friends or siblings. Also, the kiss in the IKEA ad is too intimate for two male friends or family members in Sweden to be straight. Furthermore, we believe the entire interpretation of the G & L Bank ad indicates that they are a lesbian couple. They are sitting so closely, wearing the same colors, the same hair color, and are performing typically family tasks, such as feeding with bank errands. Though, perhaps the text is more important when making spontaneous analysis on a short time basis as the people interviewed did, but we have to insist that the homosexual theme becomes quite visible without the text when making a deeper analysis.

Concluding each interview, we asked two follow up questions. We asked, “What do you think about advertisements that show families with same sex couples?” The answers were limited to a six-graded scale. The majority clearly answered neutral, whereas none answered very negative. The rest answered: very positive (24%), pretty positive (12%), pretty negative (4%), or I don’t know (4%). The final question was, “Do you think advertisements showing families with same sex couples will influence your attitude towards the company? If so, how?” This question examines the asked individual’s attitude at a deeper level making personal comments possible. The results show that almost half believed that their attitudes towards companies would not be affected by the use of advertisements showing families with same sex couples, while the slightly more than half believed they would. The people who answered that they would not be affected generally meant that they first and foremost focused on the product and its features. If the product is good and fulfills a purpose in an effective way, it does not matter what the advertisement portrays. However, aspects of answers suggest that consumers might be more affected than they believe.

The people who answered that they would be affected gave a slightly more diverse result. The majority believed that they would be positively affected by the use of advertisements showing families with same sex couples. The answers revealed that many considered it positive that companies use the theme of same sex families. The companies appear to be updated on the trends in society and seem to be recognizing and supporting new family constellations. However, there were a number of negative reactions among those who claimed to be affected. These responses represent skepticism towards the purpose of using the theme of the homosexual family. Some meant that it is only a populist technique to make the company seem trendy. The importance of being sensitive in how the homosexual families are portrayed is underlined: “If it is carried out in a good way, it is positive. … The cause and the idea are good, but it is strained and may get corny. But, that can also be the case for the nuclear family.” In the next section, we present a key theme in consumers response to ads aimed at a controversial, emergent target market.
Straightening Up: Heterosexualization of Homosexuals in Ads

Highlighting a tendency to read advertisements differently depending upon varying backgrounds and cultural and historical contexts, in several cases, interviews displayed a process of “straightening up” ads. Certain respondents refused to mention gay content or possibility in even the most straightforward of advertisements, including those with text that supported a homosexual presence. Straightening up appears in several forms. Some respondents claimed the ads made little sense. For example, upon viewing the Volvo ad, said: “It portrays people who care about each other. You do not really understand that it is an advertisement for Volvo... Volvo cars for the family. But the pictures do not show that.” Another was mystified by the G and L image:

I don’t know what it portrays. Maybe a mother and her two children, one of them being a bit older than the other. They look alike with the same colors. They belong together, but I don’t know how. Perhaps they are two sisters and the daughter of one of them. They are not really a family... The adults don’t belong together, just through the child.

Another fails to appreciate the IKEA ads: “The picture is overworked. It says nothing to me, can not understand it. It would have passed me by without a trace since I do not understand it.”

Some consumers remain concerned with product attributes, avoiding image based meaning inherent in these ads. For example, despite the fact that little product or performance information is present in the Volvo image, one respondent reported: “This is a family car with room for everyone. Practical. The message is to sell that new car... It is good to pack things in.” Another focused on product benefits when looking at the G and L ad: “This is a mother (right) and a daughter (girl), but who is the third? They talk about money, to save money for the future, which is the child. The third women may be the mother and the one to right with the paper may be an official helping them.”

Another aspect of straightening up finds consumer focused on possible heterosexual family relations in lieu of gay family relationships:

“It portrays many generations: grandmother, mother and daughter. It is safety in all generations... It is grandmother and child because they seem to have a close relationship. Mother is fixing things and grandmother in the background. But still the age difference is slightly too small. It could be a lesbian couple, but I don’t think so.”

Other consumers invoke cultural norms and differences to accommodate apparent gay imagery: “They are father and son because of the kiss on the cheek. For heterosexual Arabs it is normal for a father to kiss the son on the cheek… in my country gays and lesbians are not okay, but in Sweden it is.” Another reveals a growing awareness and discomfort in interpreting the Volvo ad:

I see two cars for two different purposes--family and modern. It is tricky, not so clear. Two ladies with a baby, two ladies touching, a man, woman, and a baby, two men and a dog (are they gay?) two gay men. They are showing different sexualities with the cars. The sporty car is for the gay... the gay people are: the men with the dog, the people who are close or touching--are they ALL GAY?

His straightening up goes only so far in this gay ad, revealing the fragility of interpretive strategies and the malleable nature of representation.

We present straightening up as a useful and illuminating concept to understanding consumer response to gay-themed advertising representation, and suggest that it has strategic implications as well. From our finding, we conclude that many consumers are not so concerned with the use of gay imagery, and that they may not even see the themes; further, via straightening up, they may avoid gay interpretations even in the face of overt gay ads. The presence of non-mainstream, or ‘normal’ elements often created a reader distance from the advertising image, inspiring questions around company motivations for engaging non-heterosexual family constellations. Thus, interviews raised notions of marketing strategy.

Limitations

This study is limited to a Swedish sample, and due to Sweden’s progressive gender and childcare policies, this may bias the results. We do not claim to have a random sample; rather we were interested in average consumers, going about their business. Furthermore, the stimulus ads were a selection. Through the search of advertisements portraying gay families we tried to find equal numbers portraying gay respectively lesbian families. However, there were a very scarce number of advertisements illustrating families where the couple was lesbian; in fact we only found two: an ad for Hancock financial services and the ad for G&L Internet Bank, which we also have chosen for this study. As a contrast, we found 18 ads portraying families where the couples were gay men. This indicates that in an overwhelming number of advertisements in which homosexual families are being portrayed, the couple consists of gay men, although this might not be visible from our ad analysis since we chose to have an equal number of gay respectively lesbian families.

DISCUSSION

One may ask why consumers applied traditional patterns of heterosexual roles on the apparent homosexual families in this set of images. Is it that power dynamics automatically fall into heterosexual stereotypes because those are the ones we are most familiar with? As a way to try to understand this, we can put the representation in relation to whom the advertisement is addressing. If the ad targets the heterosexual market, or both the heterosexual market and the homosexual market, then heterosexualization might be a way to avoid alienating heterosexual (or homophobic) consumers. Since the perception of a family is in the eye of the reader, the heterosexual family consumers might be more able to identify with a homosexual family if it succeeds in representing a heterosexual pattern of family gender roles. In this way, couplehood and the presence of a pet or child may ward off associations to gay promiscuity, HIV, or perversity and emphasize the shared humanity with heterosexuals, which may bridge the gap between two sexual camps (Kates 1999). We see examples of this in Volvo’s ad, where a gay couple caresses their dog as if it was a baby, a child appears in one of the other images in the same ad, as well as a pregnant woman. As we mentioned earlier, the advertisement from IKEA and G&L Bank includes children too. The combination of the homosexual theme and heterosexual connotations may inform a dual marketing approach, so called gay window dressing.

Queer deconstruction enables us to discover the various sexual and nonssexual interpretations ads may generate in order to explore “queer” or gay marketing communications (e.g., Kates 1999; Schroeder and Borgerson 2003; Stern 1993). This method has its roots in queer theory—a body of work that questions the coherence between biological sex, sexual desire, and gender identity (Butler 1990; Moi 1985). Queer theory does not automatically presume that a biological male or female will have heterosexual desire and a masculine or feminine gender identity; that is, “‘queer’ refers both to an identity (that of a non-heterosexual person, context, image, or
situation) and a positionality that opposes the normal” (Kates 1999, p. 27). Queer deconstruction can derive different meanings from ads via shifts in cultural codes and context.

Kates uses the method of queering to deconstruct an advertisement picturing a gay family of two men and their dogs that appeared in an Australian gay men’s media newspaper: “The product is not just a car and not simply the family car, for the poetic device of metonymy (i.e., the part represents the whole in continuous visual space) inscribes the car in a particular field of discourse—that of gay identity, gay families, and gay politics—implicating the car in a visual field” (Kates 1999, p. 30).

Kates views the binary family/not a family as the most dominant dualism in the advertisement, because of the text that is clearly implying that there is a family (“the family car”) and the advertisement’s placement in a gay men’s magazine. When a large car company like Toyota runs this kind of advertisement in a gay men’s magazine, the family binary is working as a strong symbol in a political imperative of legitimizing gay relationships. Kates implies that the binary of family/not a family expresses the tension between the gay rights movement and its enemies, and that it in turn is related to other binaries. He argues that, whereas the Christian Coalition links the heterosexual nuclear family to what is seen as normal, decent, clean, safe, beautiful, natural, Christian, legal, moral, spiritual, healthy, and chaste. The gay nonfamily becomes the oppositional dark other, representing what is abnormal, obscene, dirty, dangerous, ugly, unnatural, sacrilegious, illegal, immoral, profane, perverse, and promiscuous.

According to Kates, the particular kind of advertisement that he has analyzed is of a contradictory character. The first and “intended” meaning of the ad, which was derived from the structural analysis, is that Toyota Seca is the best car for gays and that the company is socially enlightened by acknowledging the right of gays (and lesbians) to form families. It positions Toyota Seca as the car for the gay family and thereby also implying that the gay family is just another family constellation. But at second glance, after a textual sex-change of the advertisement (that is, a queer deconstruction) it rather seems to say something like “we accept gays as long as they act straight in public”. Thus, the ad portrays the men as two healthy, good-looking, masculine, wholesome men. The couplehood helps promote monogamy, and evade notions of promiscuity. Furthermore, dogs symbolize gay men’s shared humanity with heterosexuals, bridging the gap between two sexual preferences. Kates questions why this kind of gay portrayal are seen upon as positive while images of gays with AIDS, leathermen, and so forth, are not, and argues that they illustrate the market sanitation of homosexuality (Kates 1999). Although some gays embrace these “positive” heterosexualized images of gays/gay families/couples, others protest this tendency to normalize gay relations.

Thus, it could be argued that all three ‘gay’ ads include strong influences of heterosexual norms of relations between gender and power. However, as the portrayals are inspired by heterosexual gender roles, they are infected by the fact that heterosexuality is not flawless at all. The images strive for imitating an idealistic vision of something that in reality is imperfect. Instead of portraying the homosexuals in a typical stereotypical way in these ads, they are portrayed using a division in heterosexual gender roles (whether they are traditional or reversed). Portrayed in a traditional way, they are just as stereotypical as the homosexual stereotypes. The result is that in trying to avoid homosexual stereotypes one uses other stereotypes, that is heterosexual ones. The thing is that the representations of homosexuals using heterosexual stereotypes are by some people considered as being more positive and “normal” than the ones using homosexual stereotypes. But, the same straight looking representations are also criticized by others. The perception is of course subjective since the interpretation is individual and based on the previous knowledge and opinions of the beholder.

CONCLUSION: THE PERCEPTION OF FAMILIES IN MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

The purpose of this study was not to ask why gay families are represented in marketing communications, but to investigate how consumers respond to these representations, and what strategies they employ when viewing ideologically charged representations. We found evidence of an interpretive strategy of straightening up, in which consumers frame even fairly openly gay ads with heterosexual norms. The ability to discover the family theme in ads relates to what the reader personally perceives as a family generally, which further acts to influence, or prime, what the reader perceives. In advertising, visual aspects and codes are crucial for the perception of a family. According to the interview responses, the inclusion of children signals crucial aspects of family. Other important signs indicating family include the close positioning of the people, their similar features, and the text clearly expressing the family theme.

Consumers read ads with a host of psychological, social, and cultural frames, including defensive mechanisms, unconscious denial, conscious refusal, and tacit interpretation (e.g., Schroeder and Borgerson 2004). We add to the literature of consumer interpretation by introducing the concept of straightening up to capture a provocative interpretive frame that allows consumers to avoid potentially uncomfortable readings, in this case, normalizing what advertisers intend—and many consumers perceive—as gay imagery. Thus, this phenomenon is the reverse of queering imagery, in that apparently queer imagery appears “straight.” One might argue that this happens constantly in a normative heterosexual world, however, until recently, few advertisements drew upon overtly gay imagery. For advertisers, this finding shows how flexibly consumers read imagery, and may dampen fears of offending certain target markets by invoking gay themes. For researchers, it points to the complex perceptual mechanisms that underlie consumer response, including psychological and cultural frames that may preclude certain interpretations, and strengthens the advertising as representation research stream.

Future research may investigate the implications of consumer responses for companies using homosexual families in marketing communications. Do the advertisements have the desired effects or not? Is there an ideological or political reason for using the theme, such as showing acceptance of homosexual identities—a charged cultural issue? Political or not, the use of gay family themes in marketing communications positions companies and their products within the discourse of gay identities, practices, and families.

REFERENCES


