

# THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL ORIENTATION ON GENDER ROLE REPRESENTATIONS: HORIZONTAL-VERTICAL VALUES IN CROSS-CULTURAL ADVERTISING

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*Employing traditional Hofstedian dimensions in conjunction with recent paradigms of horizontal-vertical cultural orientations, examines variances in representational framing of gender-roles in advertisements across cultures. Sweden, a horizontal individualistic (HI) nation, and Great Britain, a vertical individualistic (VI) nation, were selected for analysis. Differences in horizontal-vertical cultural values are of interest because these differences indicate divergences in cultural attitudes toward egalitarianism—horizontal nations emphasize equality while vertical nations emphasize status. Both nations depicted mother figures according to conventional notions of femininity. Sweden positioned fathers in gender-neutral or gender-reversal roles. Great Britain positioned fathers as breadwinners, leaders and executives—adhering to prevailing stereotypes.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Orientation; Gender Role; Cross-Cultural; Horizontal-Vertical; Cultural Values

## Introduction

Advertising has become a ubiquitous presence in the everyday life of consumers. Chadwick (1988) suggests that advertisements constitute a complex cosmopolitan form of communication. Dyer (2008) argues that the purpose of advertising extends beyond the basic desire to transmit messages—advertisements function as the very lifeline of mass communication. In fact, the impact of advertising lies not within the

superficial capacity to communicate content; it lies in the power to communicate, directly and indirectly, norms, judgments and values (Wiles, Wiles and Tjernlund 1996).

The application of cross-cultural studies to understanding advertising and gender representations in a globalized context has continued to develop as new communication technologies facilitate business across borders (Lalwani and Shavitt 2011). Hofstede (1980) developed arguably one of the most influential models of analysis for cross-cultural research. The outcome of his study produced a model consisting of five broad cultural categorizations that made the operationalization of cross-cultural studies feasible (Taras and Steel 2009). However, there are some paradoxes within the dimensions.

The present study aims to address the gap between the cultural categorization of two countries, Sweden and Great Britain, in relation to cultural gender-constructs by problematizing the static index of “independent vs. collectivist.” Rather than looking at culture as an “either/or” dichotomy, this study will incorporate the concept of vertical and horizontal cultural orientation (Triandis and Gelfand 1998) to cross-cultural gender analysis. By incorporating the two new cultural values into the pre-existing notion of independent vs. collectivist, a new understanding of the cultural differences between Sweden and Great Britain can be explored.

Previous research has already demonstrated that cultural conditions influence gender representations in advertisements (Lalwani and Shavitt 2011). This study aims to contribute to the literature by further advancing cross-cultural gender studies and will explore how horizontal/vertical cultural orientation may influence the representation of gender within advertising. Moreover, within the immense literature encompassing gender-role stereotyping, there is not enough research that explores cultural factors within the greater context of representations of sexuality, especially within the advertising domain (Buttle 1989). This project will address this gap by focusing attention predominantly on the influence of cultural orientation in relation to gender-role depictions.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Carefully constructed images are rampant in consumer societies, and through these images citizens cultivate an understanding of the world around them. More than ever, consumers experience events through mediated platforms and the depictions within these media landscapes allow them to imagine things prior to undergoing them (Lippmann 1998).

A principal source of ideologies and knowledge for citizens today stems from media discourses (Williamson 2002). Fundamentally, the media provides society with a means of experiencing phenomena without having to be present for the physical event; whatever is represented via visual means thus becomes the accepted norm (Jhally 1990; Hall 1997). Advertising has the prominent capacity to symbolically embody, as well as construct, cultural and social standards—resulting in advertising that either reflects the cultural status quo or challenges it (Jhally 1990; Butler 2011).

Culture serves a pre-eminent role in generating gender representations within advertising—marketers typically resolve to alter their content either subtly or forthrightly to parallel the accepted social values of the given target market (Lalwani and Shavitt 2011). Patterns of framing messages and even attitudes towards product placement can differ dramatically from culture to culture; consequently, it remains critical that advertisers understand the social norms of their markets. Regarding representations of sexuality in relation to culture, Nelson and Paek (2005) found that depictions of women differed vastly within the same publication—*Cosmopolitan Magazine*—contingent upon which country the ad-inserts were directing their attention to.

Additionally, research on gender in advertising indicates that there are gender dissimilarities in collectivism and individualism (Triandis 1995; Hofstede 2001), yet gender stereotypes continue to be perpetuated through advertising. It remains critical that scholars analyze the social consequences of advertising on women as it can serve to reinforce negative gender stereotypes or relegate women to subordinate positions (Eisend 2010). Both men and women within commercial campaigns have been found to be regularly depicted in gender-specific and stereotypical roles. Indeed, some scholars even suggest that rather than progressing towards less restricted gendered roles, stereotyping by sex has become increasingly prevalent as advertising has now seeped its way into the very foundations of consumerist societies (Milner and Higgs 2004). Eisend (2010) found that gender-role stereotyping remains widespread in advertising, with occupational status having the highest level of stereotyping in comparison to any other component.

Hofstede's cultural index represents a useful tool to explain cross-cultural differences, but his framework fails to account for variations within the same umbrella category. Scholars have noted that the type of individualism in vertical nations (Great Britain, United States, France) differs from the type of individualism that exists within horizontal nations (Sweden, Denmark, Norway). The present study will address this issue by integrating the cultural orientations of horizontal-vertical values within

Hofstede's paradigm of IND-COL as a conceptual framework. The nesting of horizontal-vertical values within individualism will allow for a more detailed interpretation of the interplay regarding culture, gender representation and advertising.

Rather than reducing cultures to a diametrical polarity, this integration creates a dynamic paradigm by distinguishing between the different categories of individualism or collectivism within nations, thereby generating a more holistic concept of culture. A vertical independent culture—Great Britain—and a horizontal independent culture—Sweden—will be the cultural units of focus for this study to analyze the impact of horizontal-vertical orientation on gender representations within advertising. Present research on cross-cultural advertising indicates that there are gender differences between cultures, but few studies have focused specifically on the differences between VI and HI nations. Furthermore, gender-role depictions, although widely studied, are rarely analyzed from a cultural perspective (Ojalehto and Medin 2015).

As Sweden is a horizontal society, with more policies advocating gender equality, gender-role depictions may be less restricted than gender depictions in Great Britain. Research suggests that men may be more likely to be in “dominant” positions in vertical nations. Conversely, given the strong emphasis of egalitarianism in horizontal nations, sex-roles may be less pronounced in a horizontal society. A pilot study conducted by current researchers consisting of magazine advertisements from Great Britain and Sweden has indicated that, although men are present in “housework” roles within advertising from each country, men are more commonly decoded as “leaders” in Great Britain as compared to Sweden. Although findings from the pilot study were of interest, a larger sample size is necessary to fully operationalize the variable, which this study will provide.

Using the conceptual frameworks of horizontal-vertical cultural orientation and ideology within advertising, this research aims to address the gap between Hofstede's IND-COL index and the different cultural attitudes toward gender in HI and VI nations. In doing so, this paper seeks to answer the research question: To what degree does the difference between horizontal-vertical cultural orientation impact gender-role representations in advertising within Great Britain (VI) and Sweden (HI)?

In order to analyze the research question, the researcher will consider the types of framing employed by the advertisers and the decoded meanings they render. Additionally, the researcher will analyze how sex-roles are depicted within the advertisements and how a semiotic reading of the visual text may indicate deeper cultural values regarding equality or hierarchy.

## **Methodology**

To explore the previously-mentioned research question, Barthes' (1977, 1967) visual semiotic analysis will be applied to a sample of advertisements from a VI culture—Great Britain—and an HI culture—Sweden—in order to analyze the degree to which cultural orientation influences gender-role representations. The semiotic mode of analysis proves practical for the purposes of this research as the research question centers around the impact of cultural orientation on gender representations and ideologies within advertising. As a methodological tool, semiotics appropriately addresses these key criteria for analyses. Firstly, semiotic visual analysis is an ideal means of studying culture as the structural patterns used in languages are also transferable as an instrument to interpret cultural codes (Lamb and Makkai 1976).

Secondly, this research aims to comprehend the ideological functions that images serve, and semiotic analysis is a widely-accepted approach to recognize the ways in which ideologies are perpetuated through advertising (Williamson 2002). Lastly, semiotics is a suitable method to apply because it goes beyond merely quantifying occurrences, but delves deeper to comprehend the greater social implications of subtle persuasive codes within advertising (Jhally 1990; Dyer 2008).

## **Sampling Strategy**

The samples sourced for analysis came from physical magazines from a VI nation—Great Britain—and an HI nation—Sweden. Magazine advertisements were chosen as the primary unit of analysis as gender-representations within advertising, and the potential ideological norms it disseminates are a focal point of this study. As a result, publications provide a suitable platform for such analysis since, according to market research firm VSS, an estimated 59.5% of consumer magazine revenue comes from digital and print advertising (Holcomb and Mitchell 2014). Advertisers bear more than 50% of costs, indicating that advertisers invest heavily in content creation within magazines (Sumner 2001). Furthermore, samples were specifically selected from magazines over other mediums, such as television or the Internet, because research indicates that consumers are considerably more satisfied with magazine advertising than any other channel (Soley and Krishnan 1987). Lastly, the transition from print to digital indicates that, unlike traditional print versions, magazine content can now remain in circulation much longer and be archived with greater ease.

Due to the vast variety of genres that target different consumer demographics, the decision was made to narrow the sample scope to include magazine content that would address the research question. Most magazine franchises carefully segment the market to develop their consumer base (Jhally 1990)—the way in which some magazines position themselves in the market therefore results in erroneous content for this research. For example, gender-specific magazines had to be discarded as the target audience of advertisers mimicked the magazine demographic. Consequently, magazine genres that targeted women (women's fashion, makeup, etc.) and those that explicitly targeted men (men's fashion, sports, etc.) were not used, as the advertising content specifically caters to a female or male audience. Instead, the researchers selected a magazine category that targets both genders: parenting. Since this study is interested in the overall way in which sex-roles are influenced by culture, it is imperative that both images of men and women are utilized, rendering parenting magazines an appropriate source for data collection.

Furthermore, parenting magazines were selected as the categorization of analysis since advertising's influence on inter-group and self-identification is particularly prominent when adopting new social roles, and parenting presents a perfect platform for analyzing ideological discourses (Williams et al. 2010). Becoming a parent represents a major life-event, so the ideological potential advertising holds may increase as parents seek guidance on how to acclimatize to a new social identity. Previous research into ideology within public discourses about parenting suggests that cultural products tend to be conservative in their representations, and reinforce existing stereotypes rather than be innovative in representations of gender relations (Gregory and Milner 2011, p. 588). The researcher is interested in seeing whether the inclusion of advertising comparisons from a cultural dimension will yield any counter-narratives to this finding in more egalitarian HI nations.

Vi Föräldrar (We Parents) was the magazine chosen for analysis from the HI nation, Sweden. This particular parenting publication was chosen over others because it represents Sweden's "largest magazine for parents of young children" (viforaldrar.se 2015) and is the most widely subscribed to. In the VI country, Great Britain, Prima Baby & Pregnancy (Prima Baby) was sourced because it represents the most popular for-profit parenting magazine that targets both the mother and father (Patel 2012). Other gender-specific magazines, such as Mother & Baby, were not suitable for the aims of this research due to content incompatibility, whereas both Vi Föräldrar and Prima Baby claim to target fathers and mothers, offering rich narratives for analysis.

To maintain consistency, a total of 12 issues, a one-year cycle, were sourced from each publication, resulting in a collection of 24 issues for analysis. It is necessary for the sampling timeframe from the two publications to be as evenly distributed as possible so that external temporal variables would not influence the findings. Accordingly, all issues were selected from September 2014 to August 2015 to ensure sample selection uniformity. The first image to depict a mother, and the first advertisement to depict a father within the frame, were chosen for analysis from each issue. For issues that contained both parents within the same frame, these images were also incorporated within the visual corpus. This selection process yielded a total of sample size of (n=42) advertisements, with 23 images extracted from the Swedish magazine and 19 images extracted from the British magazine. Repeat images, although inventoried during the data collection process, were discarded during the analysis phase. This is because, unlike in quantitative analyses, the number of occurrences of an advert is of lesser interest than the tacit meaning constructs rooted with the selected samples (Rose, 2012). Refer to Table 1 and Table 2 for an account of collected samples.

### **Design of Research Tools**

The initial sampling frame resulted in a total of n=42 adverts that suited the criteria of analysis. Within the extracted sample, 45% were derived from Prima Baby in Great Britain and 55% from Vi Föräldrar in Sweden. The analytical framework applied to the advertisements was predominantly Barthesian semiotics, focusing on deconstructing the relationship between signifiers and the signified (Barthes, 1977), although the work of other semioticians were also referenced.

The signifier characterizes the first layer of the sign and it represents the object or material vehicle in reference. The signified is the second layer of the sign, and is a mental concept or reference (Dyer 2008). In conjunction with these definitions, Barthes also proposed the notion of denotative meaning and connotative meanings of signs. Denotative signs require minimal effort to decode as there is no encoding that must be deciphered: what is presented is taken as reality (Van Leeuwen 2004). Connotative signs, in comparison, carry a range of higher-level meanings (Rose 2012). Connotation refers to meanings that are beyond what is objectively present, but relies on cultural codes to embody a more intricate message (Dyer 2008).

In accordance with the definitions of signification, adverts were systematically categorized to construct a record of the basic signifiers and

their corresponding signified meanings. Following the work of Van Leeuwen (2004), the first process was to classify signifiers within advertisements at their most basic level: the denotative signifier. The “denotative signified”, or the mental linguistic reference point, was subsequently inventoried. The denotative signifier refers to the literal meaning of a sign—for example, a rose or red flower (Dyer, 2008). Denotative signified becomes the second layer of meaning for denotations in which linguistic lexis and cultural constructs then dictate how individuals may reference the signifier of rose (ibid). Based on cultural cues, the rose would come to symbolize romance, and advertisements function to perpetuate this socially-constructed myth (Barthes 1977; Butler 2011). In the second phase, adverts were dissected for their connotative meanings in relation to mythologies (Van Leeuwen 2004).

Proposed meanings uncovered under the connotation signified were then linked back to Barthes’ notion of mythologies (Barthes 1977). The level of myth represents the ideological component of visual texts and is the highest-level of symbolic exchange. According to Rose, myth inserts itself as a non-historical truth. Myth makes us forget that things were, and are, made: instead it naturalizes the way things are. Myth is thus a form of ideology (Rose 2012). Connotations and myths can also surface through photogenia—the photographic techniques or style of artwork (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001) such as framing, distance, lighting, focus, speed (Barthes 1977). Employing these research tools, the visual corpus was evaluated for evidence of ideological representations of gender. Representations were divided by cultural categorization, according to the literature, to see whether cultural orientation had any influence on depictions of gender roles when examining the social modality. Upon completion of data collection and classification, repeating themes were identified and analyzed.

### **Research Process**

Two phases of data collection occurred during this study. In the first phase, random sampling was employed. Random sampling contends that all content should be equally likely to be chosen, therefore, the Nth element of a given data set must be selected evenly across all populations (Sweetland 1972). During the first phase of sampling, combinations of purposive and random strategies were used because advertisements had to have certain characteristics to suit the study. The first advert to show both parents within the frame, the first advert to have a single shot of a mother in the frame, and the first advertisement to feature a male only were

inventoried during phase one. Repeat images were not included within the visual milieu and were discarded. This resulted in a total image sample size of 22 adverts from Sweden and 19 from Great Britain.

During the second phase, adverts were narrowed down, based on the richness of the narrative contained within the images. In semiotics, the sample is selected according to how conceptually interesting they are, and images are discussed in close relation to semiological theory (Rose 2012). In accordance with this understanding, adverts in this stage were selected purely based on the richness of the visual discourse or ideologies laden within the advert. Designated images were then methodically decoded to uncover concealed mythological signifiers; these findings are presented in the following sections.

## **Results and Interpretation**

### **Representation of Men**

Within the 12 issues of Prima Baby analyzed, only 4 issues featured a single shot of a male parent within the same frame as children. Accordingly, images containing only a male and the children occurred with a frequency of 33%. This indicates a low priority for featuring single fathers or the potential of fathers being the primary caregivers by the advertisers using Prima Baby as a medium. Frames in which both parents were featured were slightly more prominent in comparison. Within the 12-month cycle, from Sep. 2014 to Aug. 2015, a total of 6 issues had both parents presented in the advert, indicating a representation rate of 50%. Not all of these images are documented in the appendix because reoccurring images were not inventoried. Lastly, shots of a mother only occurred in the highest degree, at 100%, as all 12 issues contained this category within the corpus (refer to Table 1 below).

**Table 1: Representational Occurrences in Prima Baby & Pregnancy**

Prima Baby			
Issue	Image of parents (both)	Image of mother (single)	Image of father (single)
Sept. 2014	Not Featured	Featured	Featured
Oct. 2014	Featured	Featured	Not Featured
Nov. 2014	Featured	Featured	Not Featured
Dec. 2014	Not Featured	Featured	Not Featured
Jan. 2014	Not Featured	Featured	Not Featured
Feb. 2015	Not Featured	Featured	Not Featured
Mar. 2015	Featured	Featured	Not Featured
Apr. 2015	Featured	Featured	Featured
May. 2015	Not Featured	Featured	Featured
Jun. 2015	Featured	Featured	Not Featured
Jul. 2015	Not Featured	Featured	Featured
Aug. 2015	Featured	Featured	Not Featured

### Vertical Independent (VI) Representations of Gender

The first step of analysis was to examine all of the single shots of a male parent in Prima Baby. Within the 4 issues containing a male parent, 2 adverts were redundant. Thus, the final sample under this categorization yielded only 3 distinct images (Figures 14, 15 and 16). During the analytical process, the visual frames were explored to look for recurring ideological themes and symbolic signifiers. After examining all distinct representations of a male within Great Britain parenting magazine, Prima Baby, it became apparent that, although men were depicted in domestic environments, the way in which they were situated adhered to traditional notions of masculinity rather than offering counter discourses.

Following Barthes' guidelines for semiotic analysis, the first layer, or denotative meanings of signifiers in the images were examined (Rose 2012). To answer the question, "What, or who, is being depicted here?" (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001), it was necessary to recognize the situation and persons involved. The denotative interpretation or literal reading of visual content, of Figure 14 can ultimately be understood as a video conversation between father and child. In Figure 14, an image of a father is presented in a Panasonic video-camera ad campaign during a video chat with his baby. In the advert, the father's screen is superimposed over the infant's face so that only the face of the father and figure of the baby can be seen by the reader. The clothing of the child is covered with red stains, presumably from pasta sauce and the father's face shows spots of red from pasta sauce as well, linking the two screens, via shared actions, as though to become one.

The denotative signifiers of this image can be object-signifiers, which are objects that are in-laid with contextual meanings (Rose 2012). Denotative signifiers present in this advert are the camera, the plate of pasta, and the superimposed shots. After cataloguing key denotative signifiers, the denotative signified (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001) meanings that are attributed to the object-signs are explored. The signification of the camera, especially by superimposing the two images together, communicates to the reader that video conversations allow people to share in cherished moments virtually, even when unable to be physically present. By placing the father's face over the figure of the child, the connection is drawn that they are linked, virtually, to be present for the same occasion. Through doing this, it becomes possible for the father to be present for events in his child's life, and this is further signified by the pasta sauce that stains both the father's face and the child's clothing. The placement of red sauce on both characters illustrates to readers a sense of participation.

The ultimate connotative meaning constructed by the combination of these signifiers facilitates traditional paradigms of masculinity. Stereotypically, men are placed in more active roles than women, and men go out in the world while women take on nurturing positions (Dyer 2008). Reiterating the ideologies that men should be primary breadwinners in a relationship (Goffman 1985), the connotative reading of this image adheres to the notion that men must take on duties beyond the home. Connotative significations are related to the final and most complex layer of meaning for Barthes, mythologies (Barthes 1977). The fact that the father has to use the Panasonic camera as a proxy for parenting disseminates the myth that the paternal role needs to be satisfied by working from outside the home. The myth disseminated through this representation is that men should be the primary breadwinners within a household (Goffman 1985). This semiotic reading parallels previous research on gender representations, which suggests that fathers are featured less often, particularly at home, indicating that they remain invisible in an important sense (Adams, Walker and O'Connell 2011). Indeed, it is apparent in advert 14 that the father is away from home and is only able to balance domestic time and working obligations by means of communication substitutions.

In Figure 16, another distinct image of a father (solo shot) is read at a denotative level as an advert for Joie™ car seats. Within the frame, the father is signified as driving the car, his back turned away from the two children buckled in Joie™ seats in the back. An interesting symbolic signifier in this frame is the father himself. The relevance of object-signs, however, should also be taken into consideration. As Berger posits, object-

signs should not be disregarded because they are signs meant to convey certain notions about what people are like (Berger 2012). The denotative object-signifiers of interest in this advert are the car itself, the steering wheel and the gear lever. Due to the relevant role they play in constructing a form of identification for the father, these three object-signifiers were further explored to understand the connotative and socio-cultural implications they have in perpetuating mythologies.

Connotatively, the signified meanings of codes found during denotative decoding take on a much more complex and multifaceted dimension. In examining the three object signifiers: the car itself, the steering wheel and the gear lever, the connotative connection can be made between the practice of driving and the notion of leadership. The car can be understood as a signification of a gendered object, as research has consistently demonstrated that automobile advertisers predominantly target men (Walsh 2009). Moreover, not only have women been historically sexualized in automobile adverts, they are also commonly depicted as “adjuncts rather than drivers” (Walsh 2009). Despite the extensive research conducted into discriminatory gender representations in car adverts, men are still more frequently depicted driving—so this advert for Joie™ car seats reiterates the myth that cars represent a form of masculine leadership (Williamson 2002). Furthermore, the father’s left hand is operating the gear lever while his right hand is grasping the wheel. The connotative signification of the father’s position at the head of the car and his autonomy in navigation re-affirms masculine myths of control, leadership and guidance (Dyer 2008; Williamson 2002).

Figures 17 and 18 are the two selected representations of fathers in a dynamic shot with the mother. The denotative reading of Figure 18, an advertisement for a family ski resort, depicts two mother-like figures being highly inactive and taking on caring roles. The father-type image, conversely, is positioned in an action role within a sub-frame located at the bottom right corner of the advert. Direct denotative readings from this advert give an impression of the stereotypical active father and the nurturing mother (Dyer 2008). Figure 17 features, at the denotative level, a young mother and father walking through a park. The mother holds a cup of coffee in her right hand, while holding her husband with the other. The father, using one hand, pushes the Jane brand stroller containing a baby.

Connotative readings of signification for images 17 and 18 offer a much richer understanding of the in-laid cultural stereotypes and the myths these adverts engender. For Barthes, the connotative rendering of meaning is essential to decoding advertisements because it represents a fundamental component to decomposing the narrative of mythology generated (Jhally

1990). Firstly, in decoding the connotative signified meanings of codes found in Figure 18, it is once again possible to draw a parallel between the stereotyped concepts of gender and the representations within the advert. Although the sub-frame containing an image of the father within Figure 18 represents only a small portion of the entire advert, it is the only demonstration of an actor in action—both adult mother-figures are passive or nurturing. Thus, this advert appears to be reinforcing pre-existing notions of ideological gender domination, ultimately perpetuating the mythical ideology of active men who are more likely to engage with the outside environment and the passive female (Dyer 2008; Williamson 2002).

An examination of Figure 17, which presents a woman holding coffee while a man pushes a stroller, also offers interesting insights in the social-construction of sex-roles. Connotatively, the ideological implications that adhere to stereotypical gender norms are much subtler than previous adverts—upon closer examination, however, overt parallels can be drawn between the social positioning of actors in image 17 and Goffman's theory of "function ranking" (Goffman 1985). Advertising that presents both a man and woman, presumably in equal roles, can have subtle undertones of female subordination; females are most typically presented as somehow restricted in mobility—limited by objects or environment—while the man is likely to perform the executive role (Goffman 1985). This function ranking can be applied to the roles given to characters in Figure 17. Coffee, the object-signifier carried by the mother, represents a restriction on her mobility via an external object. In the frame, the mother's left hand is grasping the coffee while her right arm is inter-linked with the father figure, effectively limiting any potential movements of the arms. Connotative significations of this image work to suggest that the myth of an "executive male" is still relevant to modern society. The male figure is depicted pushing the stroller and he only uses his right hand to push while his left remains fully mobile, creating undertones supporting mythical notions of a strong masculine figure. Indeed, the father is well seen in executive positioning as he takes on the slightly more active role in comparison to the mother (Goffman 1985; Dyer 2008).

### **Representation of Women**

After completing data collection and creating an inventory of various representation categories within Prima Baby, it became quickly apparent that the frame containing a mother-like figure in a single shot occurred most frequently. Every issue within the one-year time frame contained a

minimum of three adverts of mother, solo shot, with child, and most contained much more. It was found that this category of a mother with child was the most commonly occurring visual categorization of parenting, and was presented at a rate of 100% within the 12 issues. However, much of the implicit social codes disseminated by these ads corroborate previous research on gender representation (Williamson 2002; Butler 2011; Carothers and Reis 2013). Women depicted in these settings offered few counter-narratives to challenge the status quo, and were positioned in ways that acquiesce in traditional notions of feminine motherhood.

Due to the large sample size of mothers in a single shot attained during data collection, it was possible to analyze the extracted images for recurring themes or narratives—repeat images were discarded from the corpus. After carefully cross-referencing the visual data, the frequent use of the color white to dress the mother was noted as a common contextual signifier to symbolize purity. The use of the color white comprised over 92% of the visual data (see Figures 1–9 and 11–13), further illustrating its wide employment by advertisers as a cultural signifier.

At the denotative level, Figures 1–9 and 11–13 can be described in a rather analogous way—all adverts feature the mother in some variation of pristine white apparel and the mothers are typically depicted as holding their infant child close to their body: advertisers seem to predominantly utilize the head-to-chest position. As the symbolic signifier of the color white and positional statuses of the characters represent frames which consistently appeared in every issue within the annual archive, these signifiers were further interpreted at the connotative level.

Connotatively, the color white carries many social meanings without the need for contextual cues, as it already embodies platitudes of cultural beliefs, especially in many Western European societies. This renders the color white a symbolic sign in social semiotics. Symbolic signs demonstrate an arbitrary link between signifier and signified as it is not grounded in any external association, as indexical signs are (Dyer 2008; Rose 2012). With symbolic signs, structures of meaning are constructed based almost entirely upon cultural appropriations of value. Within these adverts, the color white is featured prominently to symbolize purity (Goffman 1985). Da Silva (2008) contends that the symbolic value of white is engrained in readers at a very young age—fairy tales, such as Snow White, disseminate the ideology that white represents “ideal womanhood” to young girls.

Furthermore, the connotative signification of the color white used in association with women is purity as it has paradigmatic connections with virginity (Adams and Osgood 1973). It is interesting to note that while

white is a cultural symbol for purity, children and babies themselves are also seen as a physical embodiment of innocence in cultures across the world. By drawing a parallel between female purity and infant innocence, it is as though mothers and children become linked by this cultural myth. This finding alludes to Goffman's visual analysis in which he theorizes that both children and mothers take on a subordinate role within a family unit (Goffman 1985). Ultimately, these adverts adhered to ascribed cultural notions of perfect womanhood by suggesting that women, especially mothers, should be as pure as the children they care for—perpetuating a mythical ideology of feminine purity. Interestingly, men were never framed in such a way as to be seen as pure or innocent, rather men were dressed in shades of blue or gray.

**Table 2: Representational Occurrences in Vi Föräldrar**

Vi Föräldrar			
Issue	Image of parents (both)	Image of mother (single)	Image of father (single)
Sep. 2014	Featured	Featured	Not Featured
Oct. 2014	Featured	Featured	Featured
Nov. 2014	Featured	Featured	Featured
Dec. 2014	Featured	Featured	Featured
Jan. 2015	Featured	Featured	Not Featured
Feb. 2015	Featured	Featured	Featured
Mar. 2015	Featured	Featured	Featured
Apr. 2015	Featured	Featured	Featured
May. 2015	Featured	Featured	Featured
Jun. 2015	Not Featured	Featured	Featured
Jul. 2015	Featured	Featured	Featured
Aug. 2015	Not Featured	Featured	Not Featured

Dyer posits that positional communication can illustrate the relationships between actors and show intimacy (Dyer 2008). It is precisely the non-verbal cues of positioning that further perpetuate the myth of domestic femininity within the samples. Figures 1–7 and 11–13 all feature a mother holding her child in a typical protective position—the child's head is leaning toward the mother's chest and the mother has enveloped her arms around the baby. This particular frame has been imbued with qualities of nurturing and maternal protection (Goffman 1985): it has therefore become a feminine position, which can be corroborated by the fact that no men were depicted holding a child like that in *Prima Baby* magazine. As alluded to earlier, these images once again restrict the mother to the domestic realm (Dyer 2008) and connotatively suggest to readers that it is

their duty as mothers to be the main caregivers while fathers take on roles outside the home (Rose 2012). Ultimately, these positional codes lend subtle cues to readers of the advert that further disseminate traditional notions of the gender status quo, supporting mythical notions of gendered activities.

### **Horizontal Independent (HI) Representations of Gender Representation of Men**

Advertisements found in *Vi Föräldrar*, a parenting magazine originating from the HI culture of Sweden, were found to differ substantially from those in *Prima Baby*. Numerical occurrences of a father in a solo shot were higher in the Swedish magazine than the British one. In *Vi Föräldrar*, solo frames of the father were featured in 9 out of the 12 issues (75%), as opposed to only 4 out of 12 issues in *Prima Baby* (33%). Furthermore, the frequency of families occurring in the same frame were also higher in *Vi Föräldrar*, where such images were featured in 10 out of 12 issues (83%) whereas in *Prima Baby* only 6 of the 12 issues (50%) contained this representation (refer to table 2 above).

Recent research has pointed to the theory that sexuality is actually a socially constructed ideology—that, indeed, there is actually no empirical evidence to support the notion that women are biologically better suited to domestic work, while men are relegated to authoritarian roles (Peterson and Zubriggen 2010; Carothers and Reis 2013). Although there has been increased awareness and public discourse regarding the systematic institutional subjugation women face, many advertising agencies are still legally allowed to perpetuate harmful ideologies without much scrutiny. However, it appears that Sweden, being an HI culture, treats men and women as equal in their roles as parents, breadwinners and citizens (Törrönen 2014). In conducting an analysis of the shifting representations of women in Swedish advertising over time, Törrönen found that women's positions have expanded from the traditional private domain to the public sphere in advertising. Moreover, although it appears that traditional gender discourses continue to be circulated in Sweden, they are slowly disintegrating and being replaced by gender-equal norms (Törrönen 2014).

Although traditional sex-roles continue to be employed and disseminated by advertisers, it appears that, in Sweden, there are a greater number of counter-narratives that serve to disrupt the established institution. In the British advertisements, while fathers were presented—albeit infrequently—in a single shot with children, the decoded readings of these adverts

always functioned to advocate historical myths of masculine leadership. Conversely, in Sweden, as Figures 29-37 demonstrate, fathers presented in single shots are positioned in gender-neutral frames. At the denotative level, positional signifiers can be prominently noted in these images. Since the relationship between actors can signify levels of authority through positional communication (Dyer 2008), it is important to note the way in which fathers are situated within these frames. Denotatively, all the images appear to feature the father holding the child in the common head-to-chest positioning.

Interestingly, the head-to-chest poses in which a parental figure holds a child were typically used in *Prima Baby* in association with mothers. It has been suggested that this type of situational placement is utilized to indicate motherhood due to the nurturing codes that are culturally engrained within this gesture (Goffman 1985; Jhally 1990). Applying this commonly employed notion—that has traditionally been utilized to represent motherhood—to men gives it fresh connotative meanings. Firstly, in deconstructing the connotative implications of positional communication, the signified meanings of the head-to-chest positioning in Figures 29, 30, 33, 34, 35 and 37 need to be examined. Connotatively, this positioning is an indexical sign—indexical signs indicate a relationship between the signifier and the signified (Rose 2012)—since placing the child’s head close to the father’s heart has a sequential correlation to connotations of love and nurturing. These findings run counter to conventional myths, such as those found in *Prima Baby*, since these ads reverse the notion that women are confined to the private realm while men are supposed to work in the public space (Carothers and Reis 2013). These adverts offer prominent counter-narratives to traditional myths by suggesting to readers that both men and women should contribute to domestic duties. Finally, since this exact same coded placement of the child on the chest of a parent, which signifies love and nurture, is taken on by both female and male characters, it works to diminish the very concept of gendered roles.

Adverts that featured both a mother and a father within the frame also seemed to challenge the status quo rather than adhere to the ideological institution. In Figure 39, an image of a household is depicted at the denotative level: readers can see that both parents hold babies in their arms. The family is sitting on a couch and the mother wears a gray-white color, while the father is in blue. In decoding the connotative meanings of this advert, it becomes apparent that this image purports an egalitarian social structure—the father does not take on a more active role, seem incompetent as a parent, or have an authoritarian role, which are common sex-roles prescribed to men (Goffman 1985; Peterson and Zurbriggen

2010; Carothers and Reis 2013). However, at the same time as this image actively mobilizes a narrative to challenge gender stereotypes, some subtle gender conventions remain. For example, the father is still depicted in blue—a typical boy color—while the mother is in grey-white, perhaps indicating purity (Adams and Osgood 1973). This advert simultaneously defies gender-norms while still adhering to conventional chromatic signifiers.

### **Representation of Women**

Representations of women in the Swedish *Vi Föräldrar* magazine had depictions that were very like those found in *Prima Baby*. As in *Prima Baby*, images of a mother in a single shot with a child was the most commonly occurring form of illustration found throughout the 12 issues of *Vi Föräldrar*. Once again, this frame occurred at a frequency of 100% because 12 out of 12 issues contained this type of image, and each issue had at least 3 depictions of a mother in a single shot with child. Since there are many redundancies between representations of women in *Vi Föräldrar* and representations of women in *Prima Baby*, this section will only cursorily overview the narratives constructed around the concept of motherhood. However, there were more interesting non-conventional presentations of motherhood that will be further explored in the counter narratives section.

To avoid repetition from the previous semiotic analysis regarding myths of femininity in advertising, the analysis of mothers in the Swedish magazine will be brief, as many similar themes were found. In examining Figures 20–28, it was once again observed that mother-figures were typically dressed in varying shades of white. Denotatively, we can see in Figures 20–28 that the recurring themes and consistent variables between these adverts have to do with the chromatic codes and positional communication tools coded within the images—much as in *Prima Baby*.

As mentioned in the previous section, the connotative interpretation of adorning the mother in white clothing can be a signifier used to relate childhood innocence to feminine purity (Adams and Osgood 1973). Culturally, white has commonly been used in society to symbolize purity, especially to young girls when watching fairytale stories—indeed, Snow White’s purity communicates to the audience that “ideal womanhood” should contain this factor (Da Silva 2008). Employing white to accentuate feminine fragility and purity is a further perpetuation of gender-normative myths. Men are commonly depicted as wearing blue or different shades of gray—however, the fact that these colors are chosen for men as opposed to

women is simply due to cultural constructs rather than inherent differences (Butler 2011). Since the choice of color is arbitrary, it is interesting that conventional gender chromatic signifiers continue to be employed, even in HI societies.

Positional signifiers at the connotative level relay to readers the relationship between agents situated within the advert (Dyer 2008). As in the previous analysis, mothers were once again commonly positioned holding their children close to their head. This head-to-chest position is used to connote and signify to readers the emotional bond between characters in the ad—these positions have historically been applied to indicate motherhood, owing to the strong nurturing overtones (Goffman 1985). The difference between *Vi Föräldrar* and *Prima Baby* is that while both magazines had mothers situated in this way, only the Swedish parenting magazine offered equivalent illustrations of a father in such a position. By utilizing both parents interchangeably in this role, preset ideologies of a female domestic realm and a male public realm slowly begin to blur, and hopefully, ultimately disintegrate (Törrönen 2014).

## Conclusion

By directing focus to examining the way in which horizontal individualism differs from vertical individualism, and by shifting attention specifically to parental figures, this work offers alternative insights to cross-cultural studies, which have predominantly relied solely on Hofstedian frameworks. In utilizing the conceptual framework of the horizontal-vertical index to apply Barthesian semiotic analysis of adverts found in top parenting magazines within Sweden and Great Britain, findings indicated that indeed there were divergences in gender representations, contingent on cultural context. Interestingly, this paper suggests that representational frames of men differed most prominently across cultures. Firstly, it was found that the British magazine *Prima Baby*, featured males in single shots only 33% of the time in 12 issues, while *Vi Föräldrar* included such images 75% of the time. This echoes existing literature which suggests that Swedes, in a horizontal society, may be more comfortable in a convergence of gender roles (Törrönen 2014). Indeed, it seems that more adverts are mobilized to provide subversive narratives on the notion that women are confined to the domestic field.

It is interesting to note, however, that adverts from both *Vi Föräldrar* and *Prima Baby* seemed to depict mothers in a single-shot with similar signifiers. Mother-figures were predominately framed to be pure and nurturing via the use of chromatic and positional signification in both

Sweden and Great Britain. Despite this, it appears that Sweden, the HI nation, also commonly depicted fathers in the standard head-to-chest placement, while British ads reserved this solely to indicate motherhood. Both parents in *Vi Föräldrar* played passive and active roles interchangeably in adverts, indicating to readers that placements are arbitrary. Conversely, *Prima Baby* nearly always had more passive mothers and active fathers, adhering to traditional ideologies of gender.

Furthermore, while *Prima Baby* offered no examples of any extreme gender-reversal situations, with mothers in leadership positions, *Vi Föräldrar* provided counter-narratives in this respect. Research consistently points to the subjugation and objectification of females in car advertisements because cars are considered a gendered product. Most typically, when targeting males only, car ads present women as objects. While targeting a family, car adverts always feature the male driving while the female passively sits caring for the child—effectively enabling myths of feminine fragility and male leadership. An advert in the March 2015 issue provided a subversion of the status quo in which a mother-figure was depicted as the driver, while the father sat in the back to nurture the child. Thusly, although both cultures feature traditional sex-roles for parents, the Swedish adverts offer substantially more counter-discourses which help to dispel arbitrary gender norms.

Ultimately, when presenting fathers only in the vertical nation, fathers were always situated as breadwinners, leaders and active—which maintains conventional notions of gender inequality. In the horizontal nation, when fathers were in single-shots with a child, they were decoded as nurturing. This goes counter to studies on paternal depictions in advertising because fathers were usually invisible or incompetent in domestic roles. Women in both nations were semiotically decoded as pure and nurturing, which echoes past studies. Interestingly, though, there were still stark divergences between HI and VI adverts and female representations. While *Pima Baby* provided no instances of counter-discourse, *Vi Föräldrar* provided a gender-reversal frame which featured a mother as leader and father as passive.

Given the reliance of the analytical framework on semiotics, this research has demonstrated how cultural orientation may influence the decoding of signifiers used to non-verbal ideological cues. However, it remains critical to maintain self-reflexivity in analysis as the researcher's own cultural background and social underpinnings may have predisposed certain interpretations of the visual sample. Although it is difficult not to involve researcher participation in knowledge-production via any means of methodological analysis (Rose 2012), structuralist scholars continue to

suggest that cross-validation of semiological readings would render them more convincing. Even though complete objectivity cannot be achieved because quantitative methods can be skewed due to human bias (McQuarrie and Mick 1992), some quantitative measures, such as inter-coder reliability tests in content analysis, can serve to mitigate perceived external influences.

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### **Acknowledgements**

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## Appendices

### Visual Sample Collection from *Prima Baby & Pregnancy*

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*Mother in Single Shot—Prima Baby.*

Figures 1-3.

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- Contains Vitamins A, B1, B2, B6, B12, C, E, K, and Zinc

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Figures 4-6.



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**TWIN CAMERA™**

*Fathers in Single Shot—Prima Baby.*

Figures 14-16.



Visual Sample Collection from *Vi Föräldrar*



*Mothers in Single Shot— Vi Föräldrar.*

Figures 20-22.



**Ekologisk hudvård för mamma och barn – utan parfym**

**NYHET! White Hullen** är helhetslösningen för extremt känslig hud. När barn smetats av svett. Vår mjuka Hullen innehåller naturliga ingredienser som hjälper till att lugna huden. Vi har också utvecklat Hullen i olika varianter för olika typer av hud: Hullen Baby, Hullen Mama och Hullen Baby Change Cream.

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Figures 26-28.



*Fathers in Single Shot— Vi Föräldrar.*

Figures 29-31.

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TILL BARNENS FÖRSTA BOENDE!**

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Figures 32-34.

82 The Influence of Cultural Orientation on Gender Role Representations



Figures 35-37.

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*Both Parents in Double Shot-- Vi Föräldrar.*

Figures 38-40.



Figures 41-42.