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Gay-themed advertising in a cultural context

And its influence on brand image

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Gay-themed advertising in a cultural context

And its influence on brand image

Adrián Vázquez Anido, Fleur Querida Dassen & Sofi Hagander

Abstract

Aim: The purpose of this research is to investigate cultural differences in the perception of brand image when portraying gay lifestyle in advertising in Sweden and Spain.

Approach: This study is based on a qualitative approach. One round of focus groups has been conducted, with one group of Spanish participants and one group of Swedish participants. The insights of each group have been analyzed and discussed with the support of existing literature.

Findings: This research found that gay-themed advertising in combination with culture impacts the brand associations of values and user profile, as well as feelings towards a brand. Additionally, it was shown that gay-advertising does not necessarily affect usage situations and personal experience definitions, which may be more related to prior (or lack of) brand experiences.

Originality/ value: The paper is first of its kind to investigate gay-themed advertising's impact on brand image among consumers in Sweden and Spain.

Limitations: Only one round of focus groups was made, which provides limited insights for the discussion. Besides, the focus groups were very homogeneous; more differences in age and educational background would provide a better picture of the countries. Furthermore, the cultures comparison was based on Hofstede, which has a static view of culture; Using more dynamic approaches in future research may give a better understanding of each culture nuances. To end with, the conclusions of this paper are based on contemporary definitions of the assessed cultures.

Keywords: Brand image, Brand feelings, Brand associations, Culture, Gay-themed advertising

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

During the past decades, developed countries have experienced an increase in self-expression values, which have encouraged a more positive attitude towards homosexuality and ethnical minorities. This change in the social values has impacted the role of these individuals in society, who now enjoy a higher degree of freedom and participation (Inglehart, 2018). In fact, gay consumers are considered to have relatively high disposable income (Oakenfull, 2012) and therefore form an important potential target market for companies (Um, 2016). Previous research has found that gay advertising has a positive effect on homosexuals' brand image (Tuten, 2005).

However, according to Aaker et al. (2000), it is also important to investigate the effects of target marketing on consumers who do not belong to this intended target market. Accordingly, research has shown that gay-themed advertising often has a less positive effect, or even a negative effect, on heterosexual consumers (Um, 2014). This can damage the brand image, which is important to consider since a positive brand image influences customer loyalty, purchase decisions and price sensitivity (Keller, 1993; Keller, 2001; Esch et al. 2006; Anselmsson, Bondesson & Johansson, 2014). Moreover, the concept of culture is of increasing and vital importance to consider since more companies expand internationally and must deal with different cultures in their business and marketing strategies. With the current phenomenon of globalization, it is important to consider whether and to what extent a brand must adapt to local culture of the host country (Van Gelder, 2004).

Considering the above, the purpose of this research is to investigate cultural differences in the perception of brand image when portraying gay lifestyle in advertising in Sweden and Spain. For the purpose of this research, gay-themed advertising,

refers to advertising with at least one gay subject in it. Previous research has focused on gay-themed advertising and brand image (Hester et al. 2007) and on gay-themed advertising and the effect on heterosexual consumers (Pounders et al., 2016) or on homosexual consumers (Oakenfull, 2007). Moreover, research has compared reactions on gay-themed advertising between heterosexuals and homosexuals (Um, 2016). However, none of the research has included cultural context or considered cultural differences in their investigation of brand image and gay-themed advertising.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to investigate cultural differences in the perception of brand image when portraying gay lifestyle in advertising. In order to narrow the scope of comparisons, two cultures have been selected: Sweden and Spain. The research questions to help this aim are:

1. How does the national culture affect the perception of gay-themed advertising?
2. How does the consumer's perception of gay-themed advertising affect the brand image?
3. How does culture influence the connection between associations and feelings towards gay-themed advertising and brand image?

Literature Review

Brand image

Brand image is a concept that has gotten many definitions over the years by a wide variety of researchers. This is why it is important to define this concept clearly before diving into this research. Some authors claim that brand image is only associated with the recent experience a consumer has with a brand, and that this image is favourable due to high perceived quality, satisfaction and value (Johnson et al. 2001; Andreesen & Lindestad, 1998). Zhang (2015) claims that brand image has

an influence on consumer behaviour due to that brand image refers to consumer perception and feeling of a brand.

According to Park et al. (1986), brand image is about the understanding consumers have from all the firm's brand-related activities. Since this research will not consider all brand-related activities of the chosen cases and considering the purpose of this research, diving into consumers' perceptions and not solely understanding, this would not be a relevant definition to use. Another definition of brand image is conceptualized by Aaker (1996), defining it as the way consumers perceive a product or a brand. This definition comes closer to the purpose of this research. However, this does not cover the concept fully. However, most authors seem to agree that brand image exists in the minds of consumers as a result of interpretation and perception of a brand through exposure to communication, consumption and social influence (Hung, 2008; Kapferer, 2012; Aaker 1991; Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Keller, 2009). This means that the brand image can differ among individuals due to the different associations consumers hold about the brand (Hung, 2008). Therefore it is crucial that the brand image is aligned with the company's vision, to avoid and minimize the risk for ambiguity (Hatch and Schultz, 2001).

Finally, considering multiple different definitions, this research will use the definition of Keller (1993), as he defines brand image as "the perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (Keller, 1993, p. 3). Brand image is interchangeably used with the concept of brand meaning and is about the associations that consumers hold toward a brand (Keller, 2001). This definition is most relevant for this research since it provides the most holistic view and focuses on both brand associations and perception. Moreover, Keller's definition is not limited to one product category and is

cited, agreed on and used the most by other marketing and branding related research.

Additionally, brand image is often linked to brand identity. However, despite this there is an important difference. As mentioned earlier, brand image refers to the perception of a brand in the consumer's mind, which means that it has a strong external focus, while brand identity is focusing internally on how the brand sees itself (Kapferer, 2012). Although the authors of this paper recognize the importance of brand identity, it is beyond the scope of this study. In order to fulfill the purpose of this research, this paper will focus solely on brand image since the aim is about finding out how consumers perceive brands, rather than about how the brand wants to be perceived.

Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Pyramid

In order to measure brand equity, which is the added value of a product or service (Kotler & Keller, 2016), Keller (2001) designed the Customer-Based Brand Equity pyramid (Fig. 1). The added value, or the brand equity, can be partly reflected in the way consumers think, feel and act regarding the brand (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Armstrong & Kotler, 2015; Farquhar, 1989). This is why brand image forms part of the pyramid model. The left side of the model focuses on the rational part of brand equity, whereas the right side focuses on the emotional part. Evoking emotions and building emotional ties with the consumer is of high relevance in building a strong brand (Farquhar, 1989). Therefore, in line with the purpose of this research, the focus lies on the right side of the pyramid, containing brand imagery and consumer feelings.

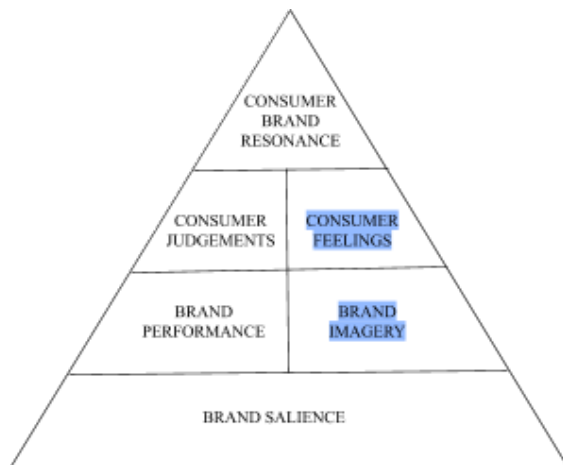


Figure 1. Customer-Based Brand Equity Pyramid by Keller (2001)

Brand meaning

As mentioned before, brand image and brand meaning are used simultaneously. This can be explained by the fact that brand image is seen as the creator of brand meaning (Keller, 2001). Brand meaning forms the second layer of the pyramid, consisting of brand performance and brand imagery. Accordingly, brand associations contain the meaning of the brand for consumers (Keller, 1993; Barry, 2000). Brand performance is about the functionality and thus performance-related associations of the product or service. These are rational and concrete thoughts on what a product entails and can do.

However, this research focuses on gay-themed advertising and on how consumers abstractly think and feel about a brand accordingly and not about the functions of the product showed in the ads. Subsequently, it is decided to leave brand performance out of this research and to solely focus on the emotional side of brand meaning, which is expressed by brand imagery. Furthermore, building emotional associations is found to be of great importance in building a positive brand image (Chang & Chien, 2006; Low & Lamb, 2000; Barry, 2000). In this regard, brand imagery consists of four categories. Namely user profiles, purchase and usage situations, personality and values, and

history, heritage and experiences (Keller, 2001). User and usage imagery are non-product related attributes and can be formed by a consumers' direct experience with the brand or it can be formed indirectly, by for example looking at the people depicted in the brand's advertising (Keller, 1993). Considering the latter, it heavily depends on whether one already knew the brand before watching the ad. Therefore, user profiles can be either about actual users or idealized users (Keller, 2001).

Moreover, usage and purchase situations describe in which context the product could be used and bought. Furthermore, personality and values also form a part of brand meaning and are about the human traits and values of the brand (Keller, 2001). This is relevant to consider since consumers tend to select a brand they feel well disposed towards and which confirm their own self-image, or as Melin points out: '... consumers choose brands in the same way as they choose friends' (Melin, 2002, p. 118). Keller (2001) highlights certain human traits, which are sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. Lastly, within the category of history, heritage and experience, this research will only focus on past personal experiences and associations with the brand. This can be interesting since these may be different per individual and can form the basis of their associations with a brand's gay-themed ad.

Brand response

Brand image is closely linked to brand response. The brand image is about what the brand is, regarding the associations and the image consumers have of the brand. Whereas brand response is about what consumers think or feel regarding the brand and, regarding this research, particularly its marketing activity (Keller, 2001). Positive associations, and thus a positive brand image, result into positive brand responses, which in turn can result to brand loyalty

(Keller, 2001; Belén del Río et al, 2001). Brand responses consist of brand judgments (rational) and brand feelings (emotional). Since this research focuses on the emotional side of Keller's pyramid, brand judgment is left out of this research. Emotional brand responses, and thus brand feelings, are especially important to consider since strong consumer relationships and consumers' dedication are mainly built by emotion-based motivations (Fernandes & Proenca, 2013). The most important types of brand feelings are covered by Keller (2001). Brands can evoke feelings of warmth (related to calmth), fun, excitement (related to feeling energized and experiencing something special), security, social approval and self-respect.

Gay-themed advertising

During the 1990s, advertisers began to recognize the potential of the gay and lesbian market (Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2004). Despite the growth of gay-themed advertising, the topic has received little attention in academic literature.

Through showing four different gay-themed ads, varying in levels of intimacy, in combination with a survey, Oakenfull and Greenlee (2004) found that generally, heterosexual consumers received advertisement with lesbian subjects more positively than advertisements with male couples. Accordingly, heterosexual men were found to have a more negative attitude towards the latter than heterosexual women had (Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2004). However, their research mainly focused on participant's attitude towards the shown ads in terms of quality, favorability and likeability and did not pay attention to the participants' image of the brand itself. Moreover, this research was only conducted in a US context with American participants and was mainly aimed at comparing gender. Nevertheless, this paper will contribute to the academic field of gay-themed advertising by focusing on brand image and

placing it in a cultural context by comparing Swedish with Spanish consumers.

Grier and Brumbaugh (1999) recognize the importance of (sub)cultures when creating meaning in the advertisement. Their research focused on target and non-target markets and examined the difference in minority subcultures and their interpretation of advertisements targeted at these subcultures. These cultures were based on ethnicity (black/white) and sexual preference. Accordingly, it was found that meaning created by targeted and non-targeted viewers of ads depends on differences in cultural expertise, power, distinctiveness and stigmatization among these subcultures. Although it considered culture as an important source for meaning making (Grier & Brumbaugh, 1999), this research did not focus on national culture and was limited to US context. Moreover, it purely focused on the formed meanings of the advertisements, and not of the brand itself as a consequence.

Even though marketers generally consider homosexuals as a desirable market segment, many companies avoid creating advertisements with gay subjects because of the fear that heterosexuals will react negatively to these messages (Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2008). This fear is grounded in the vision that advertising can affect the brand in different ways, either the brand image can be strengthened or weakened (Kapferer, 2012). According to Angelini and Bradley (2010), advertisers' fear is justified since negative attitudes evoked by gay-themed advertising could extend to one's attitude to the brand in general. Accordingly, Bhat et al. (1996) found that heterosexuals emotional and attitudinal response to a gay-themed advertisement depends on their general attitude toward homosexuality. Due to this, it could mean that countries with low tolerance to homosexuality, may respond more negatively to gay-themed advertising. This emphasizes that it is crucial for brands to take culture into consideration when

developing gay-themed advertising with regards to their brand image.

On the other hand, gay-themed advertisement can be received positively. When showing printed advertisements, Angelini and Bradley (2010) found that participants took longer to process gay-themed advertisements. Consequently, this generated greater attention and participants memorized and recalled the gay-themed ads better. This could be explained by the rarity of gay-themed advertising, since it is in contrast with many mainstream ads one is exposed to daily. So, in a country where gay-advertisement is rare, this can form an opportunity for a brand to stand out and gain a result in high recall. Furthermore, Tutens (2005) strengthen this argument by suggesting that gay-themed advertisements can generate a positive reaction among homosexual consumers and a neutral reaction among heterosexuals.

Considering all aforementioned research on gay-themed advertising was conducted quantitatively, this research will contribute to the academic field by providing a more in-depth exploration by taking a qualitative approach. Moreover, it will contribute to former research on gay-advertising since this research will consider brand image perceptions in a cultural context.

Swedish & Spanish Cultures and their approach to Homosexuality

In order to answer the research question and to fulfill the purpose of this study, one key aspect is to understand the similarities and differences between Swedish and Spanish culture. This is done by evaluating the cultures through Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of cultural context. Despite the limitations of this model, criticized by several authors (Fang, 2010; Touborg, 2016; Magala, 2005), its clarity and consistency in identifying cultural differences allow cross-cultural comparison, and that makes it the most helpful model to frame this research

findings. It is worth to mention that although Hofstede's model is used as the ground for discussion, external elements affecting national culture may be considered when relevant, following a constructive approach of culture (Fang, 2010).

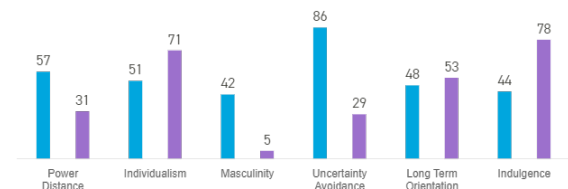


Figure 2. Comparison of Spain and Sweden's Hofstede dimensions scores (Hofstede, 2019)

In order to assess the cultural background that may explain the differences between Spain and Sweden and their approach to homosexuality, three dimensions have been found relevant for the purpose of these research, namely: Individualism-Collectivism, Masculinity-Femininity and Indulgence-Restraint.

Individualism-Collectivism. Hofstede (1980) defines this dimension as the extent to which the self or the group constitutes the center point of identification for the individual. Furthermore, it is related to the degree of contextuality in communication. In this sense, Sweden is an individualistic society, which implies that people care more about themselves and their immediate family than about others (Hofstede, 2019). On the contrary, Spain is relatively more collectivistic in an european context and therefore, this culture cares more about relationships and loyalty exchanges compared to Sweden.

These differences have an impact on advertising; according to Mooij (2019) advertising oriented to collectivistic cultures should seek to build relationships and trust, while advertising oriented to individualistic cultures should be more informative and focused on changing

attitudes in the short term (Mooij, 2019; Hofstede & Mooij, 2010). For this research, two campaigns with a collectivistic approach were shown to two groups whose cultures scored different in I/C (Hofstede, 2019), so strong differences in the individuals' associations and feelings may arise.

Masculinity-Femininity this dimension is defined as the extent to which traditional masculine values, such as assertiveness and caring little for others are valued, while feminine societies are the opposite (Hofstede, 2019). Sweden is considered to have a strong feminine culture, whilst Spain a strong masculine culture (Hofstede, 2019). This dimension relates to the understanding of positions of men and women in the society, social classes and acceptance of homosexuality. According to Ghauri and Cateora (2014), these interpretations in culture have an effect on marketing, as they influence behaviour, values and the overall patterns of life, which can affect the associations and feelings towards brands.

With regards to homosexuality, both Sweden and Spain are considered amongst the most advanced countries in the world with a positive proven attitude towards LGBT individuals and rights (Popovski 2014; ILGA-Europe 2019; AEGAL, 2019). However, it is also worth mention that also in both countries, certain homophobic behavior persists. (El Pais, 2019; The Local, 2019). For the aim of this research, differences in Swedish and Spanish score have been considered relevant, as they suggest each of these cultures may have a different approach towards gay-themed advertising.

Indulgence-Restraint As Hofstede (2014) explains "People with this orientation have the perception that their actions are restrained by social norms and feel that indulging themselves is somewhat wrong." Furthermore, indulgent societies have a wider acceptance towards dissidence

(Hofstede, 2019). This has a pivotal implication for this research, as gay-themed advertising displays certain attitudes and relationships that may be understood as challenging the established social norms. While Sweden has a high score in this dimension, which reflects its inhabitants' positive attitude and a high degree of acceptance towards dissidence (Hofstede, 2019), Spain is closer to Restraint, which implies that its inhabitants are more pessimistic and reluctant to accept dissidence (Hofstede, 2019). This research will try to understand how this dimension's scores of each nationality impacts the individuals' feelings and associations towards gay-themed advertising.

Methodology

To fulfil the purpose of this study a qualitative approach has been taken to provide detailed insights, in the form of personal opinions and the underlying dimensions of how people perceive, think and feel about gay-themed advertising (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Additionally, this method is based on primary data through semi-structured focus groups, which has been complemented with scientific articles. These articles consisted of a combination between newly published and modern articles as complementary to the older, well-cited articles, since the studied subject is dynamic and constantly changing. By that, it is important to point out that the conclusion is drawn from contemporary conditions.

The participants were found through convenience sampling and accessibility (Easterby et al. 2015). Moreover, particular individuals were selected by following a purposive method: only individuals with strong cultural background either from Spain or Sweden were selected, so a comparison between these two cultures could be made. Furthermore, all individuals knew each other, which eased the

conversations, as it allowed a sympathetic environment where individuals felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts, feelings and perceptions (Onwuegbuzie et al, 2009). Accordingly, two focus groups were conducted for approximately fifty minutes, one formed by six Spanish individuals and another formed by six Swedish individuals, with ages varying between 20-25 and contained both genders. The small number of participants was decided upon the goal to make sure to capture each participant's opinion and thoughts. Moreover, this is especially relevant when discussing emotionally charged topics, such as homosexuality, since this demands a high level of participants' involvement (Morgan, 1996).

The main reason for using focus groups for data collection, is its opportunity to observe a large number of interactions on a topic in a limited time period, while also getting an in-depth understanding of individuals opinions and experiences (Morgan, 1996). One of the ethical concerns was that participants would be cautious in their opinions, due to the controversial topic and social desirability. However, to overcome this obstacle, the focus groups were conducted in a friendly, open and safe environment (Morgan, 1996). Furthermore, all participants signed a consent form beforehand, providing information about the research aim, ensuring anonymity and giving permission to be recorded (Appendix 1). Moreover, to ensure participants were comfortable expressing themselves, each focus group had the possibility to choose their language of preference. Consequently, the Spanish focus group was held in Spanish. However, the Swedish participants explicitly indicated they were comfortable enough with talking English. Another potential threat of focus groups is that the moderator's behaviour has consequences and impact for the group interviews direction (Morgan, 1996). To prevent this, the moderator did not ask leading questions and needed to stick to the topic guide which

was based on the literature review (Appendix 2) .

Accordingly, both groups were exposed to different gay-themed advertisements from two different brands. Firstly, Coca-Cola was selected due to its high level of awareness worldwide and its global target marketing strategy (Donovan et al. 2002; Bhasin, 2018) The selected advertisements were from "love is love" campaign in Hungary 2019 and their campaign from the Olympic games in 2012 (see Appendix 2). These ads were selected because it was subtle, as the subjects drinking Coca-Cola together could be interpreted as same-sex couples, but it was not so evident.

The second brand was the Dutch suit brand Suitsupply and was chosen due to its low brand awareness among foreigners. This allowed assessing on how brand image of an unknown brand can be formed based on a gay-themed advertisement. Here, the participants watched a video from their gay-themed campaign back in 2018. This ad was selected since the gay subjects were less subtle and more intimate together, compared to the first ad.

After each ad, the participants were asked to reflect on it and questions were asked to discuss the brand values, personality, user profile, usage situations and feelings of the brand (Appendix 1). Finally, the participants were requested to select which advertising campaign they preferred and why, which would allow the researchers to obtain genuine reasons for preference (Colucci, 2007). After the focus groups, the authors transcribed both audios and inserted it in an Excel file in order to code and to discover common keywords and themes. Based on this, the analysis was conducted.

Findings & Analysis

Brand imagery

User profile. Despite Coca-cola follows a rather undifferentiated targeting strategy

worldwide (Bhasin, 2018), the perceptions of both groups differ. When asked about the user profile for Coca-cola, both groups gave different answers, which derived from already existing associations. For instance, the Spanish respondents related Coca-cola to sugar and its products to unhealthy users or young consumers with unhealthy lifestyles. Whereas the Swedish respondents considered Coca-cola and its product a non-targeted product, likely to be consumed by 'everyone'. Through this, it is clear that a relationship between the country where the contributors live and their understanding of the user profile exists. Spanish consumers appear to be more health conscious and the importance of healthy lifestyle habits in their culture may explain their definition of user profile. However, the associations of both groups appeared to be solely based on previous experience and were not affected by the shown gay-themed ad.

With respect to Suitsupply, both groups considered that the brand and products would be most likely consumed by young businessmen who seek novelty, are concerned about style, and who aspire to become successful. Important to mention is that the advert only portrayed homosexual male subjects. Interestingly, respondents' perceptions were partly based on the assumption that gay men dress more stylish than straight men. Nevertheless, in both discussions, the contributors suggested that gay consumers would be more likely to purchase Suitsupply suits than straight consumers. Considering Swedish culture is feminine and Spain is more masculine according to Hofstede (2019), it would be expected that the Swedish group would not consider Suitsupply limited to gay consumers only. However, they did agree with the Spanish group and thus it was found of importance that this ad challenges traditional male roles and masculine values. However, these brand associations can also be linked to the fact that the majority of the contributors were unaware of the existence

of Suitsupply beforehand and therefore their assumptions were solely on the advert.

Furthermore, both Swedish and Spanish cultures are similar in their approach to homosexuality and that may explain the similarity in their perceptions. However, it is interesting to see that despite the differences in scores on masculinity in Hofstede's (2019) model both groups of participants felt that straight men wearing Suitsupply may be perceived as homosexual, and that discouraged them from purchasing the clothes. Although different reactions may be expected from each national culture considering Hofstede, both groups' reactions were similar. Moreover, it was also discovered that the perception to brand image changed by some participants. For instance, these two Swedish participants said:

"If I would have bought a suit from the brand, and I didn't know anything of the brand, then this would constrict my view of the brand, then the commercial would probably affect how I feel wearing the brand. But if this would be in line with what I think of the brand, then it wouldn't affect me at all."

As mentioned earlier, brand image is the perception about a brand reflected by the associations held in consumer memory (Keller, 1993). As a brand image is static, first impressions matter and ads that challenge the norm are likely to be memorized better (Angelini & Bradley, 2010). Thus, this ad would result into Suitsupply being associated with gay consumers. In sum, Suitsupply was initially perceived as a brand for young progressive businessmen, but later on it was perceived as a brand mainly for gay men. The ad challenges traditional male roles and values in Swedish and Spanish cultures, which made them not identify with the subjects.

Usage situations. It was found in this research that the definition of usage situation was not linked to the cultural

background of the individuals and it was also not connected to gay-themed advertising. Instead, other aspects were taken into account to define the usage situations, for instance emulation of friends meetings and family gatherings in the case of Coca-cola, and the possible connection of the suits with a business environment, in the case of Suitsupply.

“Young business men who need to wear suits for work may purchase these” -
Swedish participant

Participants in both focus groups, despite cultural background, found that the usage situation of Coca-cola is primarily linked with family situations. This was both expressed in the Swedish and Spanish focus group:

“I consume Coca-Cola in special occasions, or when I have people over.” -
Swedish participant

“I associate it with family meals, I go out with friends, dinners...” - Spanish participant

Furthermore, in the case of the SuitSupply advert, all participants pointed out that the suits could be worn in business occasions. Although it was identified as a gay-themed advertisement, this did not seem to affect the usage situation. Moreover, as both groups associated the ad with similar usage situations, it cannot be concluded that culture is an underlying cause of this.

In sum, this element of brand image does not seem to be related to culture or the shown ads. Consequently, identifying other aspects that might influence the participants' perceptions of usage situations is outside the scope of this research.

Personality and values. As Melin (2002) expresses, consumers choose brands as they choose friends. Therefore, it can be discussed if individuals belonging to a specific culture are biased by this culture's

shared values on their feelings towards certain brands. Furthermore, it was clearly recognized in the focus groups that consumers tend to select brands they feel well disposed towards (Melin, 2002). This was especially obvious in they way both focus groups were seeing Coca-Cola:

‘Coca-cola reminds me of fun moments with my friends and family’ - Swedish participant

The Swedish respondents perceive happiness, joy, friendship and community as main values for the brand. Similarly, the Spanish respondents perceived Coca-Cola as friendly and open-minded. In both cases, contributors' self-image is confirmed by the subjects shown by the ads, which pictures happy people who enjoy spending time together. This association was not affected by the gay subjects. This motivates that the participants were persuaded by this brand, and that they might choose to drink Coca-cola to confirm their self image (Graeff, 1996; Melin, 2002).

In the case of Suitsupply, again both groups associated the brand to similar values: modernity, innovation, bravery, progressiveness and open-mindedness. It is interesting to mention that despite the differences in I/R scores, bravery in the sense of 'challenging the current society' was highly valued by participants in both national groups. However, despite the positive associations, some participants expressed their concern about heterosexual potential users who could be discouraged to consume the brand due to its connection with homosexuality.

‘I think that some people would not wear them [Suitsupply Suits], to avoid others thinking they are gay’ - Swedish participant

‘I think some people would feel uncomfortable wearing these suits [Suitsupply] because others could think they are gay’ - Spanish participant

Besides, most of the male participants in our focus group, who were in touch with Suitsupply for the first time, had a hard time trying to identify the product being advertised. As their self-image differed from the one portrayed in the advert (gay couples), and the advert did not communicate functional attributes, the potential consumers in the focus group were not persuaded (Graeff, 1996). Furthermore, this paper could identify the relevance of Indulgence dimension of culture when bravery value was positively associated to the brand, although no clear differences between the cultures were identified. However, as introduced above, the personal values still played an important role on the participants associations.

Personal experiences. With regards to history and experiences, it was found that prior experience with the brand was an important factor. Firstly, when individuals were asked about Coca-cola, both groups based their associations on personal past experiences with the product. Regarding this experience, the Spanish group linked Coca-cola to having family dinners, barbecues and drinks with friends. The Swedish group linked it to special occasions with family and friends. The gay couples in the Coca-cola ads did not seem to challenge these past experiences, and therefore it had almost no impact on the respondents' brand image of Coca-cola. In contrast, in the case of Suitsupply, it was clear that by the lack of prior experience with the brand, the gay-themed ad had a bigger impact on the respondents' brand associations and feelings, as their perceptions were solely based on the ads. As a result, Suitsupply was seen as a brand mainly for homosexuals.

Furthermore, the groups had different experiences with gay-themed advertisement in general in their countries. For instance, all the Swedish participants indicated that gay-themed advertisements were very common in Sweden. This affected their perception of the ads, since they focused

more on the ads being genuine or not. For example, they said that the Coca-Cola advertisements were forced and felt fake. The reason for this was that they all found it obvious that Coca-Cola wanted to incorporate the values of gay-acceptance into their brand to move along with contemporary trends. As one respondent indicated:

"It feels forced. We are not stupid. In Sweden we see this a lot"

Moreover, the Swedish focus group also discussed that their perceptions toward gay-themed advertisements are less enthusiastic since it is common in Sweden. As one participant explained:

"Some Swedes are pissed if we talk about LGBT the whole time, even though they support the movement."

On the contrary, Spanish respondents indicated that gay-themed advertising was not common in Spain. They discussed that the shown gay-themed ads would definitely get a lot of attention when launching it in Spain. However, when discussing whether the adverts would be appreciated in Spain, they all had mixed feelings. Some of them said that it would definitely work while others said it was too soon, meaning that the campaign would be received negatively and negatively affect the brand image.

In sum, prior experience with the brand and prior experience with gay-themed advertising in general plays a big role when forming brand associations regarding gay-themed advertisements, and this experience is related to culture.

Brand feelings

Once the potential consumers have established certain associations with the brands, they develop certain responses towards them, which can be in the form of feelings (Keller 2001). This research focused on the emotional responses, rather

than rational reactions, since this is more linked to the values and norms dictated by society rather than performance and functional needs (Keller, 2001).

Several feelings regarding both brands could be identified through the focus groups. The Spanish participants had an intense feeling of fun towards Coca-cola. They emphasized that they enjoyed Coca-cola's communication campaigns and consuming the product was related to having a fun time. Besides, they felt warmth towards this brand, especially since the ad was related to their prior experience with family and friends. Moreover, a mild sense of excitement was especially sparked by the ad, as gay advertising is uncommon in Spain and they regarded this as something special. Conversely, the Swedish contributors had an intense feeling of social approval, as one of the main reasons why they would purchase Coca-cola is because their friends would expect it. Additionally, similar to the Spaniards, they had a strong feeling of fun and warmth, as Coca-cola was related to being with friends and family, enforced by the shown ads. Furthermore, a mild feeling of security was also pointed out, related to Coca-cola's function as a seal of guarantee.

Regarding Suitsupply, no clear differences could be found between the two groups. In both groups, participants felt excitement after watching the advertising due to its sexual elements. Both groups found the Suitsupply ad special in this sense. However, the Spanish excitement was more related to their unfamiliarity with gay subjects in advertisements. While the Swedish group found the sensuality special in general. They indicated that their feelings toward the ad were not affected by the kissing gay couples, but by the sensuality of the ad in general. The Swedes found the advert too obscene. Interestingly, the Suitsupply ad evoked a strong sense of striving for social-approval. Both focus groups expressed their concern about others' opinions if one would wear the

brand and their concern that others might consider them gay. This would discourage potential heterosexual consumers from buying Suitsupply. In contrast, respondents associated the brand with style, class and progressiveness and they indicated that consumers wearing these suits would have a sense of self-respect and pride, as it takes courage to wear these clothes and it is going against the norm.

From the above insights, it is clear that different kind of gay-themed advertisements evokes different types of feelings. The authors believe that seeking for social approval, self-respect and excitement are closely linked to cultural backgrounds. For example, as Suitsupply is seen as going against the norm, people from collectivistic cultures would not buy the suits since social approval is highly valued. However, social approval also seems to be of high concern in an individualistic country like Sweden, which highlights the criticism of Hofstede's static dimensions. Moreover, the more alien (gay) advertisements are in the country, the more consumers might feel a sense of excitement.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate cultural differences in the perception of brand image when portraying gay lifestyle in advertising in Sweden and Spain. Accordingly, Keller's brand equity pyramid (2001) and Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions were taken as point of theoretical departure. Additionally, two focus groups were held, consisting of Spanish or Swedish participants. Gay-themed ads of Coca-Cola and Suitsupply were shown.

It was found that culture is an underlying dimension in some elements of brand meaning. User profile especially appeared to be affected by culture when the gay-themed advertisements were challenging traditional masculinity roles and values.

Moreover, some brand associations were related to the culture's main concerns, such as the importance of health in Spain and social acceptance in Sweden. Furthermore, even though Sweden was considered to be more individualistic than Spain, both groups associated the Coca-cola ad with social gatherings. This shows the limitation of Hofstede's static dimensions, since culture is dynamic and individuals can simultaneously be individualistic and collectivistic.

Additionally, a relationship between the gay-themed advertising and the values associated to the brands could be found in both groups and in relation to both brands. Users identified values such as open mindedness and progressiveness as a result of these brands' usage of gay subjects in their communications. Additionally, the definition of these values is connected to the culture; Spain and Sweden are tolerant with homosexuality, and supporting it is seen as openminded and friendly, however this perception may be different in other cultures.

Moreover, it was found that usage situations associations and the definition of Coca-cola user profile did not appear to be affected by the shown gay-themed ads. Rather, it was linked to prior experience with the brand, which is another dimension of brand meaning. In this regard, prior experience with the brand seems to form the basis of forming brand associations and feelings.

Furthermore, it was found that gay-themed advertising and culture have an impact on the feelings associated to a brand. Gay-themed advertisement evokes certain kinds of feelings, and these are in different context more or less dependent on the cultural background of the individual. For instance, the Spanish respondents were not used to seeing gay-themed ads, they tended to respond with more excitement. The Swedish familiarity with gay-themed advertising resulted in being extra critical

whether the gay-themed ads were genuine or not.

To sum up, this research found that gay-themed advertising in combination with culture impact the brand associations of values and user profile, as well as feelings towards a brand. Additionally, it was shown that gay-advertising does not necessarily affect usage situations and personal experience definitions, which may be more related to prior (or lack of) brand experiences.

Limitations and future research

Due to time restrictions, it was decided to carry the focus group only one round and with just two cultures. This made it impossible to provide a holistic view on the impact culture has on brand image when being exposed to gay-themed ads. However, the results form a good starting point for more in-depth future research.

Another limitation was that focus group members only represented a group within their societies (20-25 year old, highly educated individuals). Establish focus groups varying in age and level of education could provide insights more relevant for a wider cultural understanding. It could also be more interesting to choose two cultures that differ more from each other than Sweden and Spain.

Furthermore, the researchers identified some room for improvement. After conducting the focus groups, it was clear that the different format of each advertising campaign (static images vs. video commercial) influenced the respondents' perceptions as well. Future research should control for this and select ads of similar outlets, which will allow a more genuine comparison between brand's marketing activities.

Lastly, in order to understand gay-themed advertising and its influence on brand image associations placed in the cultural context,

future research could consider using a different, more flexible framework of culture, as Hofstede's dimensions were found to be very limited in this research. Finally, it is important to mention that the conclusions are drawn from contemporary conditions, and thus the significance of this study lies in how the above factors can help guide further research in the subject area.

Managerial implications

To the researchers' knowledge, the present study is the first qualitative attempt to relate cultural background and brand associations and feelings towards gay-themed advertising. From a managerial perspective, the findings show that the choice of including homosexuals as a target market in advertisements comes with the possible risk of influencing the brand feelings and associations of heterosexual consumers. However, implementing gay subjects subtly in one's communication and making sure it is in line with consumers' past experience and brand values (like Coca-Cola did), could overcome this risk of exclusion. This could form an opportunity to include the gay consumer segment without excluding heterosexual consumers and without going against their brand feelings.

However, when entering a new country, the differences in cultural context should be taken into account. It is important to consider whether the consumers in the host country have prior experience with gay-themed advertising and their stance on traditional masculinity, etc. and homosexual acceptance in general. Since brand image is static and hard to change, the brand's first impression on consumers is important in forming brand associations and feelings. Therefore, it is advised that when launching a new brand, managers should understand how gay subjects could affect brand associations and feelings in the entry market before including them in marketing activities.

This study gives marketers guidance to identify the most sensitive aspects of brand image when cultural difference comes into play, and this guidance can be used to design communication strategies where gay-subjects may be presented and avoid communication failure in international markets.

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Appendix 1 - Consent Form Focus groups

Advertising Focus Group Participant Demographics		
Date:	Time:	Place:
Your age:	Your gender: Male Female	Your field of studies:

Consent to Participate in the Focus Group

You have been asked to participate in a focus group as part of a Research project conducted by a group of Master students in the Lund University. The purpose of the group is to try and understand what the effect of advertising campaigns on the customer's associations to brands is.

You can choose whether or not to participate in the focus group and stop at any time. Although the focus group will be recorded, your responses will remain anonymous and no names will be mentioned in the report.

There are no right or wrong answers to the focus group questions. We want to hear many different viewpoints and would like to hear from everyone. We hope you can be honest even when your responses may not coincide with the rest of the group. In respect for each other, we ask that only one individual speak at a time in the group and that responses made by all participants be kept confidential.

I understand this information and agree to participate fully under the conditions stated above:

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 2. Interview guide

ENGAGEMENT QUESTIONS:

1. How much attention do you pay to advertising?
2. How much do you think it affects your decisions when purchasing a brand?

We present the brand, Coca-Cola:



EXPLORATORY QUESTIONS:

3. What is your knowledge about this brand?

4. What are your feelings for it? (Quality, price, taste, relationship, sustainability)
5. What do you think about this advertising campaign?
6. Who would you consider to be the typical consumer of this brand?

We show the video of SuitSupply: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-bnphMDKao>

7. What is your knowledge about this brand?
8. What are your feelings for it? (Quality, price, taste, relationship, sustainability)
9. What do you think about this advertising campaign?
10. Who would you consider to be the typical consumer of this brand?

EXIT QUESTION

11. How likely it would be that you purchase either of these brands?
11. Is there anything else you would like to comment on?