CHAPTER 8

Fatherhood through direct marketing

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As the first country in the world to do so, Sweden introduced paid parental leave for fathers in 1974. This was a unique challenge to the traditional division of duties between men and women. Since then, a great many political reforms have been carried out to strengthen the participation of fathers in children’s lives (Klinth 2008) and to create a gender-equal, dual-earner/dual-carer family in which both parents can combine work and parenthood (Berggren 2005; Forsberg 2009). Becoming a parent in Sweden today, one in different ways is met by these political aims. At the same time, socialization into parenthood also is pursued, for example, by the private consumer market. Direct marketing to new parents begins at an early stage, advising them what to buy and how best to take care of their infant. Such advice can be seen as complementing or competing with the policies promoted by state officials. This essay discusses the potential clash of values between the Swedish state and visual consumption in the medium of direct marketing.

Why look at fathers?

Caring for a child is associated with expenditures realized through the market. Consuming for children, and hence initiating their participation in marketplaces, begins even before a child is born. To understand children’s part in the market society it is vital to understand the role of parents, as neither children nor parents are independent actors in relation to consumption (Cook 2008). Since parents as a category are
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relational and gendered, it is important to critically examine differences and similarities in parental child consumption.

Daniel Thomas Cook (2009) points to the close connection between motherhood and consumption, emphasizing the particular importance of considering mothers when conducting research on child consumption. As he argues, 'There has been little or no recognition of women as mothers – and thus of accompanying caring obligations and ties – in general approaches to consumption and consumer culture' (Cook 2008: 231). Recognizing children in the field of consumption, he claims, 'necessarily places the lives and experiences of mothers directly in the crux of the inquiry' (ibid.). This viewpoint is challenging as it backgrounds the role of fathers, and consequently there is a risk that research takes stereotypical parental roles for granted and reproduces them.

In Sweden, stereotypical roles of parenthood do not go unchallenged, for the male breadwinner system is weak and mothers have been active in the labour market for a long time (Hirdman 2001; Nyberg 2000; Sommestad 1998; Klinth 2008). Traditional divisions of labour, where mothers care for children at home and fathers are family breadwinners, are thus not applicable to Sweden. Swedish men are also increasingly apt to be engaged in the lives of their children and have appropriated the norm of an 'involved fatherhood' (Forsberg 2009: 117–19). As the involved father, or 'new man', is connected both to participation in the family and to a consumerist lifestyle (Aarseth 2009), fathers should be recognized as consuming in order to benefit the household and care for their children. The involved father is therefore an interesting figure in the study of child consumption. Yet the same is also true of the breadwinner father, performing traditional fatherhood: being the main provider, he can have a great say in negotiations about what to buy for the family and at what price.

A study from the US shows that single fathers spend less on child-specific goods than do single mothers and married parents (Ziol-Guest 2009). Whether Swedish fathers likewise make consumer decisions for their children that differ from the mothers', and whether they relate differently to the child market, has yet to be established. At least the child market relates to fathers in other ways than it does to mothers (Pugh 2005). Conducting research on how fatherhood
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is shaped, and how fathers are involved and positioned in everyday consumption, is therefore just as important as studying mothers. Research has to recognize men as fathers, and their caring obligations and ties to consumption and consumer culture, to paraphrase Cook (2008). In investigating how men as fathers are represented and addressed by the market, this essay is a contribution to the understanding of how fathers are invited and constructed through visual advertisements and consumption.

The chosen source material is direct mail from Swedish and international businesses received by a Swedish first-time father, here called Mike, during his daughter Stella’s first year of life in 2008–2009. The aim is to discuss the adverts’ visual approach to fatherhood in relation to gender-equal parenthood and the dual-earner/dual-carer norm promoted by the Swedish state, asking how fathers are represented and addressed as childcare consumers, and how advertisements relate to notions of involved fatherhood and Sweden’s policies on parenting.

In investigating these questions, theories and methods of visual discourse analysis (Rose 2007) and visual culture (Sturken & Cartwright 2009; Mitchell 1994; 2002) have been employed. Special attention has been paid to the visual address (Sturken & Cartwright 2009) and recurring visual patterns and contradictions (Rose 2007). The material has been approached from a visual point of view, where words are seen as part of the visual communication. It is at the intersection of image and text (Mitchell 1986, 2002) that discourses about fatherhood are activated and negotiated.

In the direct mail Mike received there are 31 images in which men appear (printed in total 45 times). The procedure has been to use these images as a focal point and to study them in isolation and in context. Despite the fact that some images of men were published several times, the immediate impression from the material is that there is a lack of representations of men. Not only are they numerically outnumbered by images of children and women; of the 31 images, fully 14 show men out of focus, or only in part, or the images are extremely small, demanding a very close look to interpret them as men. The 31 images of men position them as fathers, but while there are also other positions evident, such as journalist and
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bridegroom, there are for example no grandfathers, male nurses or physicians. Images of fathers are closer in number to the 18 images of elderly women (labelled grandmothers) than they are to those of children (604) or women (236).

Economic values of children and parenthood

In Sweden, as in other Western countries, the notion of children and childhood has been re-evaluated during the past 150 years. As children's contribution to the family has shifted from an economic contribution through labour to an emotional contribution, children's value being discussed in terms of pricelessness means that families can now spend a great amount on money on children in the name of this emotional value (Zelizer 1985; Sandin 2003).

Large amounts of commodities are purchased for children today, partly out of sheer necessity, but also because commodities construct, express, and provide identity positions related to gender, age, ideology, status, and the like. Commodities also play a part in transitions into parenthood (Uth Thomsen & Sørensen 2006).
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While most children are co-consumers, influencing and negotiating family consumption (Ekström 1999; Johansson 2005; Cook 2008), infants have little or no influence on what is bought for them. The act of materially defining who they are is therefore left in the hands of others. Being dressed by someone else means adapting to the other’s view of oneself (Lurie 1992), and the same holds true for other symbolic matters that impact on infants. Parents are therefore in powerful positions to express their thoughts and wishes about the infant’s identity, who can then be thought of as an extension of the parent’s self (Johansson 2005).

That children are worth spending great amounts of money on is true not only in the family context; it is also seen in how the Swedish state spends tax revenue on child benefits. Motivated by a characterization of children as bearers of the future, many costly political reforms benefiting children have been implemented (Halldén 2007). The conditions for childhood have thus been closely connected to the building of the Swedish welfare state (Sandin & Halldén 2003c; Sandin in this volume).

Today, publicly financed institutions supporting families are strongly established and well developed. At baby clinics and visits to local drop-in preschools, parents meet authorities and professionals who support and govern their parenthood. The state is in this way involved in the family, blurring the borders between public and private (Sandin 2003). Not least, the Swedish state governs the lives of families through the design of the parental insurance system. Under the present system, parents have 480 days’ paid leave per child, of which 60 days are earmarked for each parent. An additional 10 days are reserved for the father immediately following the birth – for those 10 days, parents are allowed to be on parental leave together. The remainder of the days can be divided between the parents as they see fit, but they cannot both be on leave at the same time. Either parent can take full care of the child a few months when the other is working, or both can work part-time, taking daily or even hourly turns caring for the child (Försäkringskassan 2012). Despite this flexibility and a slow increase in men’s uptake, fathers used only 23.7 per cent of the parental leave in 2011 (Orpana 2012). The success of creating gender equality in Sweden is thus a matter of some doubt.
While a parent is on leave, the family's income falls, as the parental benefit only covers up to about 80 per cent of the individual salary. However, tax reduction is given to couples who divide their parental leave equally between them (Försäkringskassan 2012), and a child allowance of about €112 a month is paid to all children up to the age of 16 (Försäkringskassan 2010). With this financial support, the state tries both to increase gender equality and to secure a certain material standard for children (Berggren 2005). It is also an encouragement for parents to consume, and to create or maintain strong bonds to the consumer market through their child. In this way the welfare state society and the consumer market are woven together and intersect.

Addressing Mike?

In Sweden, companies can first get access to addresses of newborn babies' parents only eight weeks after the birth (SPAR 2012), but Mike received his first direct mail concerning child consumption when Stella was 11 weeks. During the first year Mike was an involved father, sharing parental leave with Stella's mother. Since she had chosen to make her personal data at Sweden's SPAR Register unavailable to companies that use direct marketing, all the direct mail that came to their home was addressed only to Mike.

In total, Mike received 24 separate mailings, including postcards, brochures, coupons, and free samples. It is a complex, visual material, often three-dimensional in physical character. The mailings often contained several items printed on both sides, and every now and then several companies were promoted in the same delivery. One envelope, for example, contained eight leaflets from separate companies. A special edition of the glossy magazine Föräldrar & barn called Föräldrar & barn, baby – gratis specialtäckning till dig som just fått barn ('Parents & child, baby – free special magazine for new parents') also arrived. The magazine consisted of editorial copy functioning as an advertisement in itself, encouraging the reader to buy or subscribe to the magazine. It also contained adverts for subscription, and numerous adverts for other companies. In total, the collected material used in the present study comprised 107 different pieces of marketing.

Viviana Zelizer (2005) argues that economy and consumption
permeate all relationships and are under constant negotiation. Even those relations primarily considered emotional rather than economic have economic implications, and hence also the relationship between parents and infants. The message from Mike's direct mail is clear: the relationship not only has economic implications, it is dependent on consumption. Being a good parent demands being a consumer of a range of commodities.

The commodities promoted by the adverts were mainly related to five themes: children's bodies, children's play, knowledge, memoria bilia, and motherhood. Fathers are visible in marketing for all these types of commodities except for those related to motherhood, which highlighted the pregnant and breast-feeding body. Since the advertisements were sent to Mike in his capacity as a new father, one might expect him to be offered products of particular interest to men, for example from a growing daddy-gadget market, but that was not the case.

The first delivery was a letter from the largely Swedish-owned
company SCA’s nappy brand Libero, offering membership of the ‘Libero Club’. The letter began: ‘Hi Mike. Congratulations on your baby – I hope you are enjoying this first wonderful time together with your family.’ This joyful and personal tone is repeated throughout the advertisements. By using Mike’s given name, it seems as if Libero is making their offer to him exclusively; however, that is not the case, as the letter used the plural form of the Swedish word for ‘you’ – the second person pronoun can be singular or plural, which makes it easy to tell if one or more people are being addressed – and hence the offer was also directed at Stella’s mother. The interpreta-
tion that Libero was speaking to her is strengthened by the fact that the club members’ introductory gift pack shown not only included nappies, disposable bibs, toys, and baby socks, but also sanitary towels. Libero seems to assume that all potential ‘Libero Club’ member families include a woman. When sending the letter to a man, as in this case, a nuclear heterosexual family norm is being articulated; had the letter been sent to a woman, a father would only be present hidden in the word ‘family’. As the gift pack is intended to reach a woman, it seems as if it is mainly mothers who are thought of as potential members of the club – and as nappy buyers.

In a postcard also sent by Libero (Image 3), the central element is an infant with a man visualized as a safe background. His cropped face hides his identity, but it is still possible to interpret him as smiling, looking down at the infant in his arms. The gaze correlates with the text saying ‘Enjoy seeing how your child develops’. As the plural ‘you’ is used, fatherhood is represented in both image and words, but positioned as something cooperative and shared by a spouse.

In the rest of the direct marketing material, the second person plural is seldom seen. When it is, it is not used consistently in an unambiguously inclusive mode of address. The global company Procter & Gamble sent several advertisements for its brand of nappy, Pampers; for example, in two issues of the booklet Pampers Village Magasin. In one of the booklets, exercises to help the reader avoid getting a bad back from carrying the growing infant are discussed. The topic could be of interest to both mothers and fathers, and the text first addresses a non-gendered singular ‘you’. However, the text is accompanied by five images of women doing gymnastic movements, visually turning the address to mothers. The interpretation that women are the intended audience is reinforced later in the text, where the neutral singular ‘you’ is changed to mean ‘you the mother’ by making the connection between a sore back, pregnancy, and breast-feeding.

Jane Sunderland (2006: 507, 512) uses the concept of ‘slippage’, showing how texts about parenthood start out in a gender-neutral way, using inclusive neutral words such as the plural ‘you’ and ‘parents’, but then slowly slip into addressing only mothers. For example, a plural or gender-neutral heading is followed by a section of text that only refers to mothers, or positions the reader as a woman, with the
result that fathers are excluded or positioned as less important. As I have shown here, it is not only the texts but also the visual elements that create this slippage towards mothers. Both the images of sanitary towels and those of exercising women are examples of what I would term *image slippages*, where mothers are highlighted and fathers are quietly excluded. In the material as a whole, there is a tendency for mothers to be constructed as both important in collaborative parenthood and as an independent parent, while fatherhood is invisible, or, when included, is something shared by a woman.

**Competent, masculine, and intimate**

Studies of advertisements, parenting books, and parenting magazines from the US and UK show that fathers are positioned as less important to the child and less competent than mothers (Kaufman 1999; Pugh 2005; Sunderland 2000, 2006). As paternity leave is more common in Sweden than in most countries, it might be expected that representations of fathers in Swedish adverts would show a different tendency. If depicting an equally shared parenthood, they should, according to Sunderland (2006), consist of a genuine inclusiveness, with both fathers and mothers varying and directly addressed; they should offer representations of a variety of parents and types of family; and they should explicitly construct both men and women as social actors. If aligned with the official policy, Mike’s direct mail would also portray fatherhood as competent and involved. The adverts could even resemble Swedish government-initiated paternity leave campaigns that highlight men’s ability to care (Klinth 2008).

Mike’s material does portray fathers in ways that could be argued to visualize competent, ‘involved fatherhood’. A father is seen loading a car, reading a book to a child, looking in a bathroom cabinet and, according to the text, fetching medicine for a child with a fever. Men are also seen cuddling and supporting infants learning to walk and swim, but most often fathers are shown holding the infant in their arms or in a baby carrier.

In the advert for Spacebabies (Image 4) and the feature in *Föraldrar & barn, baby* (Image 5), men are shown carrying infants next to several women. Being outnumbered among women, fatherhood
becomes a visual exception to a female norm of parenthood. The fathers are not only different by sex, but also in their interaction with the infant and the camera. In the Föräldrar & barn, baby feature, the man is the only one looking down to make eye contact with
the infant, focusing all his attention on the infant, and seemingly unaware of the photo shoot, while the women confidently face the camera. In the Spacebabies advert, two women look down at their infants while the man puts his face down close to kiss and smell the infant's head. In both images, the fathers are more intimate towards the infant, leading them to stand out as the visually most attentive and loving parents. At the same time, fatherhood is marginalized and subordinated to the norm of motherhood. That fathers are seen and mentioned in the adverts should accordingly not be understood as being examples of slippage towards fatherhood; rather, fathers are treated as special, positioned as the marked others (Pugh 2005; Sturken & Cartwright 2009) in relation to a powerful female norm.

Images of men with infants have been used to promote a range of commodities since the 1970s, owing their origin to the earliest paternity leave campaign (Hagström 1999) that showed the famous Swedish weightlifter, Lennart 'Hoa Hoa' Dahlgren posing with an infant (Image 6). Roger Klinth (2008) argues that the image showed that even the most masculine of men can be a competent and responsible parent. It reassured people that caring for an infant and being on paternity leave does not undermine a man's masculinity. Charlotte Hagström (1999) points out that images of men together with infants often are sexualized, and that the infants function as symbolic proof of the man's virility. This means that images of men involved in (female) tending can reinforce masculinity rather than the opposite.

The visualized relationships between fathers and infants in Mike's direct mail are close — in fact, more intimate than the image from the 1970s promoting paternity leave. Especially intimate is the image on a flyer from the Swedish Portrait Club (Image 7), which shows an undressed man holding an infant in his arms. The man's secure grip and affectionate look puts the focus on the small infant, who becomes the most important element in the image. The man is not muscular and hyper-masculine like the weightlifter in the 1970s paternity leave campaign, but everything about him signals manhood. That no clothes are seen makes the image unusual, as undressed men are rarely seen in advertisements (Schroeder & Zwick 2004), but Patricia Holland (2004) argues that intimate closeness to a baby can legitimize nakedness in an image. The man's naked-
ness gives the presumably staged image a very private character. He is stripped of all symbols of working life, which turns him into a solely private individual, an emotional father who is there for his infant. Without clothes to date the photo, its character becomes timeless. Therefore it could be argued that the nudity ties the father and infant to nature, emphasizing the father-child relationship as a natural, private and timeless bond. The sexual aspects of the man's naked body as an object for a gaze of desire exist side-by-side with the purity of the new father-child relationship. The image turns masculinity, fatherhood, and sexuality into a romantic state where fatherhood is seen as something highly desirable.
Jonathan Schroeder and Janet Borgerson (1998) argue that women in advertisements are often portrayed as combining two types of social symbols: aggressiveness and attractiveness. 'Female models may seem to adopt the powerful stance similar to a stereotypical man's: however, this is tempered by signals of glamour and submission' (ibid. 172). In this material where women are visualized mostly as mothers, such aggression is not seen. However, Schroeder and Borgerson's discussion is interesting in relation to how fathers are portrayed in Mike's advertisements where the fathers seem to adopt the stereotypical mother's role, which is a powerful stance in this context. The stereotypical mother's role is, then, tempered by a distinct masculine body expressing affection and closeness to the infant. It seems that an effort has been made to show men as loving parents. Since motherhood seems to be understood to equate loving parenthood, mothers need not to be overtly portrayed as such, while fathers, on the other hand, are visualized as exceptionally good and loving parents.
Looking closer at the images of the loving father, his practical involvement in childcare is seen to have limits. Men are not seen doing everything women do; for example, feeding children. In *Pampers Village Magasin*, fathers are singled out as special, and a separate section, called ‘Daddy’s corner’, is dedicated to men. As there is no ‘Mummy’s corner’, it can be argued that the other ten sections mainly address mothers. But not even in ‘Daddy’s corner’, where anecdotes formulated as real-life stories describe men participating in their children’s lives, are fathers fully involved.

In a story entitled ‘Put to bed by Dad’ (Image 8), an anonymous
man describes putting his son to bed. The story is accompanied by an image of father and son wearing similar green shirts. Again, the man gives all his attention to the child, keeping him close by holding a firm hand on the child’s tummy as if hindering him from moving away from the bed. A gold wedding ring is visible on the man’s right hand, placing him and the boy in a nuclear family setting. The mother herself is not seen in the image, but is present in the text.

When Marcus was about 9 months old his mother had an extremely hard week with tooth ache and it just happened that I put him to bed the whole week and then it just automatically continued. Before that we used to take turns, but usually [Marcus’s mother] did it anyway most of the time. As time went by I started looking forward to our evening rituals. And so did Marcus, I think. Like many dads I wasn’t on parental leave much in the beginning, so I never got to spend much time with him when he was really young. … So the bathing and putting to bed became our little moment together and I always tried to get home early – even if it meant that I was forced to go to work at five o’clock the following morning to finish something. (Pampers Village Magazine Month II–14: 12)

The story starts from the position that men do not normally participate in daily childcare activities. It describes the mother as responsible for the boy and the father as out at work and not as involved in his care. Because of a severe situation, the father has to help the mother out. He is content with letting the bedtime routine continue, discovering a positive side that is worth maintaining. The moral is that to become an involved father one has to find a joyful task to engage in. That men are encouraged to engage in joyful childcare constructs caring as neither obviously rewarding in itself, nor something that must be done whether it is satisfying or not. Implying that the rest of the child’s care falls to the mother, motherhood is positioned as a responsibility, while fatherhood is a fun commitment to engage in when it suits. This constructs the father as the secondary parent, similar to that seen in previous research on toy adverts and parenting magazines and books (Pugh 2005; Sunderland 2000, 2006). These constructs of parenthood are not in line with the Swedish dual-earner/dual-carer
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family norm. However, the story is one of few in the material studied here where parental leave is explicitly mentioned. As the father is said not to be on parental leave much, just ‘like many dads’, Pampers is normalizing fathers taking fewer days’ parental leave.

The difficult period that follows parents’ return to work after parental leave is discussed in the two Pampers Village Magasin folders. By textual and visual slippage, the topic of combining work and home is framed as a problematic issue for women:

Share housework equally
Make sure you share the housework equally: as a working mother, you’re busy during the day. It’s now really important that you and your child’s father share the cleaning, the laundry, and the cooking equally, or that he takes most of the responsibility for the housework if he is on parental leave. (Pampers Village Magasin Month 11–14: 17, my emphasis)

According to this, fathers seem to have a choice whether to take parental leave. Also, it assumes that housework will not have been shared to begin with, and that the father would only take on a major responsibility for the housework if he is on parental leave. Paternity leave is thus not requested. Elsewhere in the booklet, nursery school and grandmothers, but not paternity leave, are mentioned as alternatives when a mother is about to go back to work.

Fathers’ childcare and housework are not seen as something self-evident, but men are expected to be competent enough to step in and take more responsibility, suggesting that they have an accommodating approach to participation. Fathers are thus constructed as capable, but only marginally involved in family duties. Equal responsibility is not framed as something that men might want, or as an issue of equal interest to both sexes. Instead, the historically recurring theme of positioning women as the ones to find solutions to inequality issues (Hirdman 2001) is reiterated when mothers are encouraged to make sure that the housework is shared. Fathers’ (lack of) involvement is framed as a problem for individual women, and the task of changing this situation is assigned to them. Mothers are positioned as gatekeepers, encouraging (or preventing) dual-earner/dual-carer parenthood.
Swedish politics visualized

To promote genuinely shared parenting, texts and images have to 'mirror current social realities and practices', Sunderland argues (2006: 506). From a feminist perspective, however, she proposes that such representations be even more progressive, challenging parental gender stereotypes. The present analysis of direct marketing addressed to Mike shows that the direct mail he received certainly does not align with a feminist viewpoint. Instead, it minimizes the importance of fathers in infants' lives, positioning fatherhood in a subordinate relation to motherhood. Heedless of the state's norms of gender equality, the adverts present Mike with messages of a traditional division of family life. There was one exception where the stereotypes were challenged, though: an advert for the now defunct Swedish company allt-i-tyg.se, published in Föräldrar & barn, baby (Image 9).

The text of the allt-i-tyg.se advert emphasizes their cloth nappies and carriers as an investment in an environmental friendly future. Both the products and the hopes for the future seem to spring from an alternative lifestyle, and signal an alternative future when it comes to gender roles. In the image, a strong-looking, unshaven father carries an infant while keeping a firm grip on a broom. Confidently facing the camera, as he performs both childcare and cleaning, this man seems to be in charge of his duties, not merely helping out. Visualized as independent and fully competent, he simultaneously embodies the male parent while carrying out domestic chores. The intimacy and attentive paternal gaze of earlier images are not repeated here. Facing the camera, his portrayal is closer to that of the mothers in Image 5, and his parenthood seems just as self-evident as theirs. There seems to be no need to impress this father's love and care on the viewer.

The text promises products for the 'whole family', yet the visualization of the family concept is represented by two infants and a lone man. Acknowledging the variety of real family constellations, he could be read as a single parent or a parent in a homosexual relationship. Yet, if interpreting the image from a gender-equal dual-earner/dual-carer perspective, it is quite possible to imagine
a female spouse; a mother off at work while the father performs the domestic work.

Concluding discussion

When communicating what products infants and new parents need, akin to parenting self-help books, advertisements give advice on parenthood and infant care (Pugh 2005). Gayle Kaufman (1999) suggests that adverts may act as socializing agents for parents and particularly for fathers, who may be more inclined to look to role models for comparison at a time when involved fatherhood is widely expected. From a gender-equal perspective, child consumption would be conducted by either parent. Likewise, if promoting ‘involved fatherhood’, companies would encourage fathers to engage in consumption. Yet that is not the case, and the role models Mike was offered to compare himself with were few, however portrayed as very affectionate. Fathers were positioned as involved, yet not as much as mothers were. The fact that the adverts mainly address women and promote items related to motherhood shows that mothers – rather
than parents, or for that matter mothers and fathers – are the focus for the companies that approached Mike. Even though his name is on all the direct mail, Mike seems not to be the ideal consumer. It might even be that he was not thought of as the recipient in the first place, and was only sent this mail because Stella’s mother had blocked direct marketing to her name. The adverts strongly signal that Mike and other fathers are not seen as being consumers and child carers equal to mothers.

Since visual representations in adverts can influence individual, as well as cultural, conceptions of identity (Schroeder & Zwick 2004), the way parents and children are visualized both produces and reproduces societal notions and expectations of childhood (Cook 1999; Higonnet 1998) and parenthood. The recurrent positioning of the father as a secondary parent could be partially explained by the fact that some of the companies which approached Mike are not originally Swedish, and thus the advertisements might be translated from other languages and other cultural contexts where involved fatherhood is not expected. However, Swedish companies also reproduce this image. It was an advert produced by a small Swedish company that adopted the most alternative stance on fatherhood, showing it not only as involving love but also household duties. By demonstrating that masculinity can embrace both childcare and housework, it takes the image of fatherhood in the marketing sphere a step further. Here, masculinity and fatherhood are forced towards the officially promoted discourse, showing the implications of the dual-earner/dual-carer ideal. It is an image that probably would not cause a stir if used in a paternity leave campaign – but it is surprising to find it in the direct mail sent to Mike, as the totality of the marketing he received merely strengthens stereotypes and undermines gender equality. Even though only one image, its existence shows that state-promoted norms of gender equality, and the identity and contents of an involved fatherhood, are being negotiated at the consumer levels of Swedish society.
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Notes

1. There are, for example, several state-financed allowances to apply for when one has a child, and health services for children and pregnant women are free. All children are also guaranteed daycare at a low cost, and free compulsory elementary education including lunches (Halldén 2007).

2. The Swedish SPAR Register, administered by the Swedish Tax Agency, contains personal records of everyone resident in Sweden and can be used by companies trying to target a specific group of consumers; for example those who have just became parents. If someone is blocked in the register, companies are not allowed/able to use those records for marketing purposes (SPAR 2012).

3. The category covers products such as clothing, nappies, skin care, prams, baby carriers, child seats for cars, and products for feeding.

4. Products for play sometimes have educational aims, so it is not obvious whether baby gyms, for example, should be classified as entertaining toys or as products to stimulate children’s knowledge and development, the third category.

5. The category covers products that focus on learning and on developing skills. It includes those educating parents about children’s development and upbringing through books and magazines, but also products aimed at increasing infants’ knowledge and physical, cognitive, and intellectual development, such as children’s books and baby swim classes.

6. The products in the category emphasize the uniqueness of infancy, marketing products such as cameras, professional portrait photography, printed matter, and objects decorated with the child’s name or hand- and footprints.

7. The category covers, for example, maternity clothes, breast-feeding equipment, and prenatal vitamins.

References


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