“More than pink – we want to think!”

A qualitative study

Author: Andrea Sánchez-Pascuala Masip, 920311-T134, as223np@student.lnu.se
Author: Cajsa Holmbom, 900715-5782, ch222ew@student.lnu.se
Author: Sasha Hallin, 900512-1166, shazh09@student.lnu.se

Supervisor: Monika Müller
Examiner: Setayesh Sattari
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Sasha Hallin                       Cajsa Holmbom                  Andrea Sánchez-Pascuala Masip
Abstract

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Authors: Hallin Sasha, Holmbom Cajsa, Sánchez-Pascuala Masip Andrea

Tutor: Monika Müller

Examiner: Setayesh Sattari

Title: “More than pink – we want to think!” – A qualitative study

Keywords: Socially responsible marketing, Gender stereotypes, Marketing towards children, Advertising, Perception

Background: Reinforcing gender stereotypes still occurs in toy advertisements even though it is stated that gender stereotyping in marketing is a public concern. Parents perception of gender stereotyping will further influence how children act according to gender, which is why it is of importance to explore how parents perceive gender stereotyped advertising towards their children and how this is linked to socially responsible marketing.

Research questions: RQ: What are the perceptions of Swedish parents on gender stereotypes in advertisements targeted at children, and how can this be linked to socially responsible marketing?

SQ1: What are the perceptions of parents on advertisements towards children where stereotyped gender roles are being reinforced?

SQ2: What are the perceptions of parents on advertisements towards children where stereotyped gender roles are being challenged?

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to link the idea of socially responsible marketing with gender stereotyping and advertising targeting children.

Methodology: Using visual materials as stimuli in semi-structured focused interviews.

Conclusion: The empirical investigation revealed that parents perceived gender stereotypes in advertising as harmful to society, particularly to children. Socially responsible marketing should therefore reflect more on this subject and portray both girls and boys sharing colors, attributes and toys.
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1 Introduction

The introductory chapter will give prominence to a background that briefly brings up the key concepts as well as a problem discussion of the research area, which will lead to the purpose and research questions of this thesis. The chapter ends with delimitations and an outline of the thesis.

Ella: You could have borrowed my ‘Happy Birthday’-sweater, Charlie, but I only have one for girls.

Author: But it does not say anything about girls; it only says ‘Happy Birthday’?

Charlie: But it is in pink and white, and that is for girls. Everyone knows that.

This conversation took place in January 2014 between one of the authors, her younger brother Charlie and his friend Ella, both of the age of eight. The issue was that Ella only had one design on the ‘Happy Birthday’-sweater for soft toys, which was in bright pink and white. Charlie’s soft toy was named Bobby, and he was a boy.

At this very moment, the seed of this thesis was planted. As early as in the age of eight, social codes of gender appropriateness were deeply rooted into the minds of the small people sitting with innocent eyes playing on the carpet. The author’s, i.e. big sister’s sudden awareness awoke a question on how these codes had been introduced to them. Is there a social responsibility in how marketers mediate gender to children and what do parents, as an important stakeholder, think about this?
1.1 Background

The conversation presented above is an example of what is described as the social and psychological phenomenon of gender, which differentiates from the biological sex (Solomon et al., 2010). Gender is constantly recreated through culture, ascribing attributes of what it means to be a girl or a boy (Alvesson & Svenningson, 2007). Femininity and masculinity are hence cultural associations and expectations related to one’s biological sex in order to fit society’s assumptions of what is a proper gender role (Solomon et al., 2010). Solomon et al. (2010) further state that in advertising, gender is constantly elaborated upon and negative reinforcement of stereotyping unfortunately occurs for both men and women. Women are often portrayed in traditional roles or as stupid, submissive or as sexual objects. Men are portrayed as tough, aggressive and muscular, which is negative because it is not a role that all men recognize themselves in, leading to low self-esteem when not being able to match it (Solomon et al., 2010). This gender stereotyping through ads, with marketers telling you what expectations there are on appropriate behavior for your sex, begins young. Bakir and Palan (2010) state that in advertisements that are targeting children, girls and boys are already described very differently. Not only are boys over represented when it comes to commercial characters, but they are also ascribed different attributes than girls, leaning towards more powerful characteristics such as knowledge, dominance and activity. Girls are instead portrayed with features of a more defensive sort, such as shyness or a giggle covered by a hand (Bakir & Palan, 2010).

Even though children have an impact on what toys are being purchased, Auster and Mansbach (2012) state that it is adults such as parents or grandparents that have the main control of the purchase throughout the childhood years. The attitudes of these adults regarding what is gender appropriate will naturally be reflected in the consumption process. For example, girls tend to be more flexible towards gender crossing than boys since parents tend to discourage boys to engage in activities that could be seen as “feminine” (Auster & Mansbach, 2012). Ditum (2012) states that even as a parent trying to keep out the prepossessed gender roles, the children will sooner or later detect that greater forces want them to conform into what is considered appropriate. Even so, Ditum (2012) emphasizes that as a parent “you can't resist the gender sorting hat forever, but you can give children a start that shows them the gender sorting hat isn't a natural and inevitable part of being human.”
On the original Disney Web Store, gender is the prominent category where toys are primary divided in “girls” and “boys” (Auster & Mansbach, 2012). On the Swedish version, however, this category has been merged into the category of “children” (Disney Store, 2014). In Sweden, other examples can be found on the pursuit of gender equality. A class of sixth graders complained on the gender biased marketing in a Toys ‘R’ Us catalogue, which resulted in the company promoting a Christmas catalogue with images challenging traditional gender roles in 2012. For example, girls shooting with toy guns and boys playing with dolls as well as pictures of girls and boys playing together with toys that are usually seen as gender specific (Huffington Post, 2012). The catalogue inspired other Swedish toy companies as well and the gender-neutral tone was also seen in following year’s catalogue. The initiative brought a lot of media attention in Europe, the loudest voices being critical, but was in Sweden warmly welcomed by the parents (Thomsen, 2013; Sveriges Radio/Swedish Radio, 2013).

1.2 Problem discussion

Socially responsible marketing is a concept which means that companies and managers should have a “social conscience”, which means to conduct a philosophy of socially responsible and ethical behavior (Armstrong et al., 2009). Customers generally value when this perspective has been undertaken (Patino et al., 2014). When discussing ethics in marketing, advertising is most commonly brought up (Axelsson & Agndal, 2005). Schlegelmilch (1998) states that because of its interplay with emotional appeals, where there is a possibility of misleading and deceptive messages, advertising is often criticized. Critique has also been brought forth regarding whether advertisements reflect “right” values or not (Schlegelmilch, 1998). Solomon et al. (2010) pursue a theory of cognitive development, where it is said that children below the age of six cannot make use of storage and retrieval strategies, which is a children’s ability to store and retrieve information from memory. Children between six and twelve can make use of storage and retrieval when such strategies are being prompted, which means that they are in this age more vulnerable to persuasive messages than children above twelve, who do possess this kind of strategic thinking. Therefore, children are more easily influenced by advertisements than adults (Schlegelmilch, 1998). This is for one exemplified in that advertising towards children under the age of twelve is regulated in Sweden since children cannot defend themselves towards the media as well as adults can (Axelsson & Agndal, 2005). However, Solomon et al. (2010) state that a purchase request from a
child could influence the parents in their purchase decision. When parents ‘surrender’ to this request it is described as “parental yielding”. Apart from simply asking, one strategy often used by children is saying that they have seen the product on television (Solomon et al., 2010).

Solomon et al. (2010) state that the very traditional role that women are being ascribed in media today are changing since advertisers try to keep in pace with reality. Even so, research in as late as 2010 shows that since the 1950s, there has been little change in toy advertisement and that gender stereotyped roles are still being fortified (Auster & Mansbach, 2012). Even though a regulation towards children exists, it is difficult for parents to control what children of a younger age are actually being exposed to. Gender roles and social norms are constantly surrounding us and are almost impossible to ward off, whereas parents should be concerned in what responsibility companies take in their creation of advertisements that are targeting their children. Parents can regulate at least some of the sources that their children are being exposed to, where television programs as well as commercials are a big influence on what children interpret as “the real world” (Solomon et al., 2010).

Neuburger et al. (2012) emphasize that gender differences start to emerge at about the age of ten. Nonetheless, gender as a concept is picked up as early as when a child is one to three years old (Solomon et al., 2010). The attitudes, beliefs and performances of children are evident to develop from the parents’ attitudes and endorsement of gender stereotypes. Tomasetto et al. (2011) state that when gender stereotyping leads to negative effect, it is often referred to as stereotype threat. In the early school years, children start forming beliefs in their own competence, whereas parents work as important sources of information (Tomasetto et al., 2011). However, Tomasetto et al. (2011) further state that children of parents that reject gender stereotypes are less likely to be vulnerable to stereotype threats; their performance will not decrease under stereotype threats if their parents are not reinforcing gender roles.

To reinforce traditional gender stereotypes is according to Tomasetto et al. (2011) a threatening environment, where making gender identity salient can affect performance in areas that are stereotyped i.e. not in accord with your gender role. An individual does not have to endorse the stereotype ascribed to be negatively affected by it. When faced
with a gender stereotype that one does not personally believe in, the urge to disprove the stereotype could still affect one’s performance. This phenomenon is especially salient in female stereotypes (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014; Neuburger et al., 2012; Tomasetto et al., 2011). For example, when children reach fourth grade they already identify spatial activities, such as construction, mathematics and technology as more typical for boys than girls. Such stereotyping will potentially affect both abilities and performances of girls in these areas, since it will lead to an attitude that in turn will affect whether the child will gather experience relevant or not (Neuburger et al., 2012). Another example is in sports, where gender stereotypes are consistently reinforced by parents and teachers which influences the way that children see their own ability to carry out their athletic performances in relation to their sex (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). Even if parents would reject gender stereotypes, children could still be affected by gender stereotyping through other sources. Eisend (2010) states that public policy is concerned with marketing that involves gender stereotyping, since it becomes problematic when such expectations and judgments restrict life opportunities for subjects of a social category. Fortifying gender roles in marketing can therefore be seen as having harmful effects on society (Solomon et al., 2010).

To summarize this problem discussion, public policy has stated that gender stereotypes in marketing is an issue of great importance, as the media are influencing children through gender stereotypes in toy advertisements. In addition to this, parents’ perceptions on gender stereotyping are evident for how children will act according to their gender. For example, stereotype threat was not as evident in children who had parents that did not reinforce gender stereotypes. Therefore, it is of interest to investigate how parents perceive advertisements that are targeting their children.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this research is to link the idea of socially responsible marketing with gender stereotyping and children. To accomplish this task, this thesis explores the perceptions of Swedish parents on how gender stereotypes are represented in advertising towards children and on the responsibility of advertisers.
1.4 Research question(s)

What are the perceptions of Swedish parents on gender stereotypes in advertisements targeted at children, and how can this be linked to socially responsible marketing?

In order to operationalize this research question, two sub questions were formulated:
- What are the perceptions of parents on advertisements towards children where stereotyped gender roles are being reinforced?
- What are the perceptions of parents on advertisements towards children where stereotyped gender roles are being challenged?

1.5 Delimitations

For ethical reasons this research did not approach children. Even though the social codes of gender are a natural part of children's lives, it is not desirable to make them aware of the phenomenon. The psychological effects that a discussion on gender stereotyping could have on children and the influence on this matter is not the authors’ to make. This has limited the research in the way that the perceptions of the children are not taken in consideration. However, children are unaware of the long-term effects and harmfulness and lack the knowledge of a bigger picture, which is why parents are of interest. It is believed that parents have the highest concern on what their children are exposed to and therefore are crucial stakeholders in children’s advertising. To narrow the scope of the study, the research is focused on Swedish parents of children under the age of twelve years old. The delimitation was chosen since this is an age cohort where children are sensitive to persuasive messages, but where gender differences are not particularly salient yet.
1.6 Outline of thesis

Figure 1. The outline of the thesis.
2 Literature review

This chapter provides with a review of existing literature on the concept of socially responsible marketing as well as considerations of gender issues and children in advertising. This is followed by theory on the concept of perception. The chapter ends with an explanation of the research gap.

2.1 Socially responsible marketing

There is a conflict in business between succeeding in the marketplace and performing honest business (Solomon et al., 2010). In literature there are many terms involved in the concept of responsibility in marketing. The terms are somewhat similar, but the one thing they usually have in common is the connection to ethics, even though it is not always clear how this connection plays out. Responsible marketers, according to Armstrong et al. (2009), are marketers following the marketing concept of customer value and mutual gain. This explanation, however, gives little room for the consumers’ and society’s well being and is more focused on the marketing system. Axelsson and Agndal (2005) bring up the concept of social marketing, described as promotion that includes the notion of change; it thus wants to influence people to act or not to act in certain ways, usually without a commercial purpose. This could be concerned with health/environmental issues or with change in behavior/social phenomena. Armstrong et al. (2009:565) explain the concept of societal marketing, where a company “makes marketing decisions by considering consumers’ wants and interests, the company’s requirements and society’s long-term interests”. In societal marketing, societal problems are seen as an opportunity and the company goes against neglecting what is bad for the consumer and/or society. Armstrong et al. (2009) further mention two philosophies regarding ethics and social responsibility for marketers and companies. One philosophy is that ethical dilemmas are decided by the free market and legal system, liberating marketers and companies from the responsibility of making moral judgments. What is stated by Armstrong et al. (2009) to be the more enlightened philosophy instead puts the responsibility on individual managers and companies and means that a company should have a social conscience, where the companies and managers have to conduct a philosophy of socially responsible and ethical behavior. This includes weighing in personal integrity, corporate conscience and long-term consumer welfare, despite what is legal or allowed (Armstrong et al., 2009). This last philosophy is closest connected to
the issue of this thesis and thus the term *socially responsible marketing* will be further used to describe theories connected to this subject, a concept that goes hand in hand with the idea of a social conscience of companies and the concept of ethics.

There are many companies that use questionable marketing practices that affect society in large, as well as there are supposedly innocent actions that do the same (Armstrong et al., 2009). Marketing can, indeed, have harmful effects on society even if the practices conducted are not illegal as such (Solomon et al., 2010). This is where the concept of ethics in relation to marketing is introduced. Marketing ethics are explained as how moral standards are applied to marketing decisions, behaviors and intuition (Schlegelmilch, 1998). There are different stakeholders to take in consideration in socially responsible marketing such as distribution channel partners, governments, consumers etc. When it comes to consumers, socially responsible marketing is generally valued in a company and could get the consumer to switch to brands that have embodied this perspective (Patino et al., 2014). This brings the discussion towards the receiver of the message. In order to understand the perception of the consumer in relation to socially responsible marketing practices, it is important to consider that there are differences in interpreting ethical issues (Patino et al., 2014). According to Schlegelmilch (1998), the question of what is considered right and wrong lies within the upbringing of a person. It is the family, school, religion, friends, role models, the media etc. that will affect whether individuals interpret something as ethical or not. Ethics can therefore be seen as something that is learned, with a belief system as a guide of morals and actions. However, as individuals’ upbringing and learning are different, the individuals’ perceptions are different as well (Schlegelmilch, 1998). For example, Patino et al. (2014) suggests that women are more likely to consider marketing practices as unethical than men. A more general view is on culture, where there are diverse meanings of what is ethical; different cultures can stand for opposite opinions. In line with this, there are also great differences in opinions on what is harmful or not to society (Schlegelmilch, 1998).

Since ethics is a difficult term to pinpoint, Axelsson and Agndal (2005) connects it to the issues of the marketing mix; product, price, place and promotion. Here, marketing is discussed as unethical, for example, if the product is distributed in ways that negatively affect individuals, if it impacts the social climate negatively or if it is discriminating or
oppressing social groups. Nowadays, socially responsible marketing is not only recognized as an ethical responsibility, it is also a competitive and economic imperative, where companies compete in the attempts to minimize the negative impact and maximize the positive impact of marketing (Patino et al., 2014). Even though all aspects of the marketing mix are of importance in ethical questions, promotion is the one more often debated, which is the part that is closely connected to advertising (Axelsson & Agndal, 2005). Advertising is a form of mass communication via different media channels such as magazines, radio, Internet or television. It is a communication tool that is being paid for by a sponsor and aims to target multiple receivers (Chitty et al., 2012). Communication in this form could have many different purposes, depending on what the messenger wants to accomplish with the receiver, for example whether to promote a certain product or to change her or his values (Axelsson & Agndal, 2005). Advertising is often criticized mostly because of its interplay with emotional appeals, where there is a possibility of misleading and deceptive messages, and whether it creates “right” values or not (Schlegelmilch, 1998). Solomon et al. (2010:14) even portrays people as being “at the mercy of marketers”, since advertising in its many different forms is one important factor influencing how we see the world and are taught to act in it – our perceptions are “filtered” by marketers. Since it has been pointed out that gender and how it is promoted in advertising could be harmful to society, it is an issue connected to socially responsible marketing and will therefore be further developed.

2.2 Gender issues in advertising

The concept of gender is communicated to us in many ways, and one of many channels is through advertising (Solomon et al., 2010). Fahlgren in Frih and Söderberg (2010:22-23) explains gender as “complicated social, cultural and discourse processes that creates different conditions for women and men, gives them different social positions and values, which makes them different.” The author describes these discourse processes as something that infiltrates every epoch's different levels and power structures. It is the collected statements, manifestations, ideas and given complex that determine what could be thought or said. Ideas and meanings of what is feminine or masculine are built up in media where some degree of power is included, such as conversation, pictures or television programs. This has an impact and direct consequences in our lives (Frih & Söderberg, 2010). However, there is a difference between sex and gender; sex is a biological phenomenon, while gender is a social and psychological phenomenon.
This is known as a social constructionist perspective of gender, which explains that our gender roles in society are not based on our biological sex, but a construction of how we act upon and relate to the expected sex-roles (Alvesson & Svenningson, 2007). Some scientists have decided not to distinguish between biological sex and gender, but refer to the gathered concept of sex, as they mean that there are no such "true" categories; that sex can never be understood without our constructed idea of gender (Frih & Söderberg, 2010). Gender is a constant process of people’s interpretations, creations, recreations and practices of what it means, in our culture, to be woman or man hence feminine or masculine (Alvesson & Svenningson, 2007). Femininity and masculinity, unlike femaleness and maleness, are hence cultural associations and expectations that are related to one’s biological sex by society’s assumptions of a proper gender role (Solomon et al., 2010; Chan et al., 2011).

Frih and Söderberg (2010) explain that there is a pattern in what is expected of us in our sex-roles. The roles that we take on are created through continuous repetitions of the linguistic and nonlinguistic actions of the roles that put us in different positions. When gender attributes, objects or practices are ascribed these positions and appears natural to us, it has become what is described as normative. Frih and Söderberg (2010) further state that each repetition of role identity provides a displacement, whereas this gender pattern is in constant change. How we "create" gender is in turn decided by patterns in our surroundings. This creation will also have consequences for the outside world and affect new patterns which results in what way we see normality, gender typicality etc. (Frih & Söderberg, 2010). Solomon et al. (2010) state that sexual identity is, indeed, an important part of the self-concept and that a conformation towards a culture’s expectations of one’s gender is common. Children gradually catch on to the cultural expectations of their gender based on their interpretation of what is expected of them (Chan et al., 2011). Solomon et al. (2010) states that children as young as one or two years old capture the concept of gender. Children are perceptive of constructing stereotypes as of associated beliefs in memory, although, the inappropriateness of these ascriptions cannot be recalled until later in life (Cowart & Darke, 2014). Because of this, it is also of interest to see how marketers handle children in advertising.
2.3 Considering children in advertising

To be able to discuss children in advertising, it is needed to put children in the light of consumers. Solomon et al. (2010:434) speaks of customer socialization as the process “by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning in the marketplace”. Two main socialization sources are recognized as being family and media. Parents automatically project their own values onto their children and serve as role models for observational learning, with children imitating their behavior (Solomon et al., 2010). The purchase intention of parents is higher when, for example, a television commercial is targeted to the parent and not the child. The perception of what is considered a better product is different for parents and children, where commercials targeting adults are emphasizing what is convenient and beneficial for the product instead of only being “fun” (Jones & Fabrianesi, 2007). Campenni (1999) writes that the parental toy choices as well as the interactions with toys between the child and the parent will send clear messages to the child on gender-typed behavior. For example, Auster and Mansbach (2012) state that parents tend to discourage boys to engage in activities that could be seen as “feminine”, whereas girls tend to be more flexible towards gender crossing. Campenni (1999) continues by stating that the sex roles of the mothers and fathers will result in different behavior when playing with their children, which may also be influenced by the sex of the children, i.e. if they are playing with a girl or a boy.

Auster and Mansbach (2012:375) extend Campenni’s theory by stating “children learn about the toys seen as appropriate for their gender not only from adults and children but also through the media, which serves as an important source of socialization”. Children are commonly exposed to the medium of television, where both commercials and programs directed towards children, and sometimes, content directed to adults is what will form the child’s image of what is “real” (Solomon et al., 2010). When it comes to persuasive messages, children are far more vulnerable since they have immature cognitive abilities, therefore, they cannot interpret information in the same way as adults (Hogan, 2007). Children have a harder time defining what is “real” and what is not, for example in a television commercial (Solomon et al., 2010). Therefore children are more susceptible to the television worldview than parents and are more easily affected by values and opinions that are represented in a television commercial (Pike & Jennings, 2005).
Because of children's vulnerability to media it is argued that parents are partly responsible for how much exposure their child will have to media sources or market places (Solomon et al., 2010). In Sweden, there are additional official regulations in advertising towards children. The advertisement is not allowed to target children under the age of twelve, and they are not allowed to be broadcasted directly before or after a kids programme, nor interrupt such programme if the programme is targeting a younger age cohort (Riksdagen/Parliament, 2014). However, these regulations can only be applied to Swedish broadcasters, whereas several Swedish channels are owned by international companies that have other regulations (Myndigheten för Radio och TV/Authority of Radio and Television, 2014). In all advertising towards children it is still important to conduct an ethical evaluation to see if it is manipulative or create wrong ideas on the products (Schlegelmilch, 1998). This is because the children are a vulnerable consumer group that can be more easily influenced than adults by means of advertisements. Therefore, targeting children in advertising could be seen as an exploitation of their limitation on distinguishing what is “real” and not, which could be questioned by the parents (Hogan, 2007). Along with this statement, research was found on that parents perceived television advertisements to be a factor that is highly affecting children in both demand for a product but also for being partly responsible for their children’s behavior (Mittal et al., 2010). This indicates that the perception of parents towards advertisements targeting children is of interest. Companies need to persuade not only children but parents, and capture a positive perception amongst them (Hogan, 2007).

2.4 Perception

The concept of perception will be used in order to link the three concepts of socially responsible marketing, gender issues in advertising and considering children in advertising in order to meet the purpose of this investigation. Perception is how we tend to see or not to see things because of psychological mechanisms, as well as how we tend to see things in certain ways (Axelsson & Agndal, 2005). Hence, the study of perception is focusing on how we assign meaning to sensation.
Sensation is our response to basic stimuli such as, for example, color and sound. Perception is the way we organize and interpret these stimuli (Solomon et al., 2010). Sensory systems refer to our five senses and how it picks up raw data, where vision, smell, sound, touch and taste are usually brought up (Solomon et al., 2010). For television advertisements, the stimuli of vision and sound are relevant. Vision is particularly important since it sends the most signals to our brain, where the interpretation and understanding of incoming sensory stimuli will be affected by our previous experiences (Bergström, 2004). Solomon et al. (2010) bring up color as the main topic discussed in vision. Colors are said to play a role in cultural meanings and to be rich in symbolic value, which is why colors are commonly a central aspect in marketing strategies. Sound is another stimulus that could affect people's feelings and behavior. Both literal sounds of the brand name as well as the music playing in commercials could have an impact on the consumers’ perception. There are, however, thresholds in our sensory system, where differential threshold involves the detection of changes or differences between two stimuli. It is the relative difference that is important (Solomon et al., 2010). Part of sensation is the concept of exposure, which is "the degree to which people notice a stimulus that is within range of their sensory receptors" (Solomon et al., 2010:129). One factor that will determine a consumer’s exposure to a stimulus is the past experience, which will influence what and how we process the stimuli. When a stimulus becomes too familiar to the consumer and leads to the consumer not paying any more attention to the stimuli, it is referred to as adaptation (Solomon et al., 2010).
Attention is "the degree to which consumers focus on stimuli within their range of exposure" (Solomon et al., 2010:130). Marketers need to be creative in their advertisement since we are today exposed to a larger amount of marketing stimuli. A common way to do this is through creating contrasts, whereas one stimulus will receive attention as it is different from stimuli around it. It is also becoming more common to give a twist to advertising clichés, for example by being self-referential and create sympathy through mocking advertisement or cultural stereotypes (Solomon et al., 2010).

The perception will finally lead to ascribing meaning to what has been experienced, which is referred to as interpretation (Bergström, 2004). People will differ in what sensory stimuli they take in, but they will also vary in the meaning that they ascribe these stimuli since incoming stimulus are typically related to what is already in our memory (Solomon et al., 2010). This meaning will be based on a set of beliefs that the consumer withholds and is described as interpretation (Chitty et al., 2012). Solomon et al. (2010:134) explain, "When we try to make sense of a marketing stimulus (...), we do so by interpretation of its meaning in the light of associations we have with these images". This is of importance for marketers since a deeper understanding of how customers will respond will facilitate the development of suitable marketing practices (Axelsson & Agndal, 2005). Others sometimes share an interpretation of how we make sense of the world, which is explained as one indicator in the forming of cultures (Solomon et al., 2010; Chitty et al., 2012).

Perception, as outlined in this section, is a concept that refers to the perceptual process and how people connect sensation and meaning. This concept, thus, is a crucial element in this research as it links sensation and meaning of advertisements to gender stereotypes in advertising towards children and eventually to the issue of socially responsible marketing.

2.5 Research gap

The different literatures that were reviewed led to a determination of socially responsible marketing. This usually concerns topics such as production and product safety, sustainability, alcohol, tobacco or obesity (Armstrong et al., 2009). When it comes to gender, socially responsible marketing has mostly been brought up in the form
of gender response differences and sexism, but does not consider gender stereotypes in advertising, particularly in advertising towards children (Eisend, 2010; Miller, 2005; Wolin, 2003). However, there was no link found from the concept of socially responsible marketing to gender stereotyped advertising, and especially not in combination with advertising towards children as the most vulnerable consumer group, even though toy companies and cartoons are still taking part in reinforcing gender stereotypes (Solomon et al., 2010). This is where the research gap was detected and the intention of this thesis is therefore to address this gap by linking the three topics.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 3. Visualization of how the thesis aims to address the gap.*

Furthermore, what does not seem to have been investigated is what one of the most important stakeholders of children’s products, e.g. the parents, think of the ethical matter in these cases or what happens to these perceptions when challengers towards gender stereotyping come along. Another consideration that has not been widely investigated is how the targeting of children influences the relationship between toy companies and parents (Hogan, 2007). This is why the research gap was addressed by exploring parents’ perceptions of advertising gender stereotypes towards children.
3 Methodology

This chapter explains how the empirical investigation was carried out. It consists of theoretical reviews on methodology as well as motivations on the choices made concerning the method used to collect and analyze the empirical data.

3.1 Research design

The choice of research design will depend on what objectives are set in the research questions, i.e. defining the research purpose (Silver et al., 2012). Whether the research aims are to conduct an exploration of a certain phenomenon, describe one in a precise manner or investigate a cause and effect relationship, the research purpose will distinguish between three categories of research designs; exploratory, descriptive or causal. Christensen et al. (2010) connect the different research design with the three questions of what (exploratory), how (descriptive) and why (causal). The purpose of this study does not match with a descriptive or causal research design, since the research question is to find out what the perception of parents are on gender stereotypes in advertisements targeted at children. This means that the design of the thesis is exploratory. Furthermore, there is little knowledge about the subject being investigated, which also speaks for an exploratory study (Christensen et al., 2010). This is established in that the objective for this research is to increase an understanding and provide insight in the matter of investigation (Silver et al., 2012). Furthermore, Silver et al. (2012) explains an exploratory purpose as a “detective’s work”; a search for “clues” to why a phenomenon is taking place, where curiosity and flexibility are key words.

3.2 Research approach

3.2.1 Quantitative or qualitative

Quantitative research entails the collection of numerical data and employs measurement procedures, therefore emphasizing on how variables are related. It follows a specific process where the main steps do not need to be done strictly, however these steps make the research strategy precise and structured. Theory and hypothesis come first and drive the process of collecting data. Therefore, the investigator deduces the hypothesis on the basis of a specific theory (Bryman & Bell, 2011).
Qualitative research tends to focus on words rather than on numbers and is less formalized, it can be flexible and is able to change during the investigation. A qualitative strategy strives to gain a deeper understanding and knowledge of the studied problem through the eyes of the respondents, where it can identify underlying behaviors and perceptions. It can therefore be used to describe and emphasize different contexts and their complexity (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The investigator has the possibility to get a clearer picture of the underlying patterns and reasons for why something is the way it is. With qualitative data, an opportunity to build theories or theoretical/work hypothesis is given (Christensen et al., 2010:74). Whereas quantitative research takes a sample in order to generalize the findings, qualitative research is more concerned with a deeper understanding of a particular context (Silver et al., 2012).

Table 1. Qualitative vs. Quantitative Methods (adapted from Silver et al., 2012).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
<th>Quantitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective/purpose</td>
<td>Gain understanding of underlying motive; explore ill-structured problems.</td>
<td>Test hypotheses; generalize from sample results to the population of interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample/data collection</td>
<td>Small sample; unstructured, flexible, data collection involving observation, interviews, and field notes.</td>
<td>Large sample; numerical values assigned to subjects’ responses: primary survey data or secondary data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>Continuous as data is collected; analysis affects next step in the research; non-statistical analysis.</td>
<td>Analysis takes place after all data collected: statistical methods used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned outcome</td>
<td>Develop an initial understanding and/or description; begin theory development.</td>
<td>Provide a specific recommendation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Silver et al. (2012:56) explains a qualitative study as being beneficial to “non-routine problems that have no clear solution”. Since the research questions of this study cannot provide with a correct or incorrect answer, but is of an exploratory purpose, i.e. has no clear solution, a qualitative study is relevant for the case. It is concerned with the meanings that people attach to, for example, advertising and marketing (Silver et al., 2012).
3.2.2 Inductive or deductive

In business research, there are two main approaches to the relation between theory and data; deductive and inductive. A deductive approach is the most common, where theory generates data, whereas inductive research is when theory is the outcome of research. The inductive research takes form in that the findings and observations work as a basis of generalizable conclusions that in turn generates theory (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The deductive research has its beginning in existing literature and from there usually develops one or several hypotheses that are brought forth on the basis of the theory found. The hypotheses are then tested through empirical observation and are either supported or rejected. A possible revision of the existing theory could be proven necessary (Crowther & Lancaster, 2008). The deductive approach is often used in a quantitative research, whereas the inductive is more common in qualitative research, but that does not mean that they are solely ascribed these functions. Deductive and inductive strategies should rather be seen as tendencies than a hard-and-fast distinction (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

As there was not much existing research of the chosen subject, the structure of an exploratory research was appropriate in order to collect empirical observations and create findings of the subject. This speaks for a genuine deductive research. Because of the qualitative suitability in this research, it will diminish the testing of hypothesis, even though the research is of a deductive approach.

3.2.3 Epistemological and ontological assumptions

It is important to distinguish between epistemological and ontological assumptions to understand that business research does not function in vacuum, but is part of the social sciences. The underlying assumptions will affect the whole research strategy, such as the formulating of research questions, the way the research is carried out, approaches towards research design and data collection methods (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Epistemological assumptions concern the nature of science and what is seen as acceptable knowledge (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In epistemology one can take on an approach of positivism and interpretivism, also referred to as realist or relativist orientations. The difference between these orientations is that a realist orientation believes in a single reality where only facts and observable phenomenon are seen as a
reliable truth, independent of observers. In contrast, a relativist orientation takes on the approach where reality is interpreted by the one who is studying it and means that all knowledge about reality is therefore subjective; findings are observer dependent (Yin, 2014; Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Ontological assumptions concern the nature of social entities and bring to light the discussion regarding whether or not there is a reality that is independent of the beholder. The positions of ontology are divided into objectivism and constructionism. Objectivism is explained as social phenomena and their meanings being independent of its individual actors. Constructionism, however, means that social phenomena are both produced by social interaction and in constant change; that the perception of reality depends on how we see it and how we communicate it to each other (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

This research has an epistemological position of interpretivism and an ontological position of constructionism. Silver et al. (2012) state that an underlying assumption in qualitative research is that reality, as we know it, is created by humans, which is why the only way to understand human behavior is to study this reality. Ethics, gender and perceptions are all being thought of as socially constructed phenomenon that has been revised through time and is to constantly change.

3.3 Data collection method

The decision of primary or secondary data being used will affect the methods of data collection (Kothari, 2004). Primary data are facts that have been collected for the purpose of the research, whereas secondary data have been collected by someone else and at another time (Christensen et al., 2010; Kothari, 2004). This thesis uses primary data in order to answer the research question. According to Bryman and Bell (2011), the main methods used when collecting primary data for quantitative research are considered to be surveys and content analysis. For qualitative research the main methods are observations, focus groups, and interviews. However, there is also a growing interest in business research to use visual materials as research tools. Visual materials include for example photographs, websites or video clips (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Since the research question investigates the interpretation of advertisements, visual data will be gathered. This brought up the alternative method of focused
interviews. The method was first introduced by Merton and Kendall (1946), and is an interview performed with an individual or with a group where a stimulus such as a video or radio broadcast is presented in order to start a conversation. Since this is a research of qualitative character, only methods connected to this approach will be further discussed.

3.4 Data collection instrument

3.4.1 In-depth interviews
An interview in qualitative research differentiates from a quantitative interview in the way that it is less structured to reach the interviewees’ own perspectives. It is further encouraged to go off in the area of subject to get an understanding of what the interviewee see as relevant, and the researcher is looking for rich and detailed answers (Bryman & Bell, 2011). An interview can take place in two forms; individual or as a group (Armstrong et al., 2009). The interviewer also has a chance of influencing the structure (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The interviewer collects the information personally and meets the people from whom data have been collected. This gives more freedom on how to interact with the respondents. Also, with interviews personal information can easily be obtained and the language of the interview can be adopted, which can avoid possible misinterpretations concerning the questions (Kothari, 2004). The data collection method is non-directional since the interviewers use either unstructured or semi-structured questions to encourage a broader discussion (Flick, 2009). An unstructured interview is where one or no questions are asked and is compared to a casual conversation (Bryman & Bell, 2011). If the interview is semi-structured, however, an interview guide is typically designed to conduct the conversation, with questions that works more as a guideline than as a hard structure. The interviewer can also come up with new questions during the interview, for example, to follow up what the respondent have said (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This data collection method is highly relevant for this research because of its qualitative approach and its need for rich and detailed answers. However, as discussed in chapter 3.3, it was decided that visual material would be gathered in order to answer the research question, and so the in-depth interviews took the shape of focused interviews. Focused interviews combined in-depth interviews with some elements from focus groups, namely the idea of a stimulus (e.g., visual) and how it influences processes of making sense of this stimulus.
3.4.2 Focus groups

A focus group is a form of group interview that typically involves six to twelve participants, where participants are provided with a defined topic, or a stimulus, and the emphasis is on the group’s interaction (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Bryman and Bell (2011) mean that the interaction with others facilitates the conversation since it opens up for discussion amongst participants. The participants have more control over the conversation than in an interview, which allows them to speak about issues that might not have been brought up otherwise. There is a chance that the participants will also challenge each others views of the subjects, which could provide the moderator with a more realistic result of what people think. Finally, it opens up for a way to see how the process of making sense of a phenomenon takes place, which is of high interest in this research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, Morgan (1998 cited in Bryman & Bell, 2011:508-509) suggests that when a topic is controversial or complex or if the participant has some emotional preoccupation towards the subject, a smaller group is to prefer. Focus groups are closely related to focused interviews, which are outlined in the next section.

3.4.3 Focused interview

The concept of focused interviews is an established method in social sciences, introduced by Merton and Kendall (1946). It is an interview form that is used to conduct a conversation after presenting a stimulus such as a video or radio broadcast. The interview method allows collecting data on how the stimulus impacts the participants (Flick, 2009). As previously discussed, visual material acted as a stimuli in this investigation. Therefore, it was determined that the focused interview was the most suitable data collection instrument for this research. This facilitated the process of gathering qualitative data on parents’ perception towards the phenomenon of gender marketing towards children. The participants of a focused interview are characterized by their involvement within specific shared contexts, for example a certain social situation (Merton & Kendall, 1946). Within this research, the shared context was defined in two parts. Firstly, the participants shared the social role of being parents. Secondly, they experienced the same visual material being presented to them by the interviewers. A content analysis of the stimulus presented was also needed before used, in order to determine the differences between what was actually happening in the stimulus versus the subjective experience based on personal connotations attributed to the stimulus by
the participants (Flick, 2009). The decision on a focused interview was because of it being an extension of in-depth interviewing. However, it was decided to conduct the focused interviews in smaller groups of two to three participants in order to gain the positive features of interaction in a focus group.

3.4.4 Collecting visual material

Bryman and Bell (2011) emphasize that findings from only one single case cannot usually be representative in general. The research is narrowed down to a specific phenomenon rather than, for example, an organization, which makes it difficult to do an in-depth analysis as in an organizational case that would result in a reliable theoretical generalization. Therefore, it is suitable to choose several examples for analysis in order to gain a more overall understanding (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Furthermore, Bryman and Bell (2011:63) explains the “logic of comparison”, whereas it is easier to get an understanding of social phenomena in comparison and relation to two or more other cases. This research will gather its visual data at one point of time and also aim to “detect patterns of association” (Bryman & Bell, 2011:54). Based on the theoretical framework, a first step of coding and analysis had to be conducted by the researcher to be able to continue reliable sampling of visual material. Bryman and Bell (2011) distinguish between three main ways of using visual materials in qualitative research; as illustrative, as data or as prompts. The theoretical analysis of this research used visual material as prompts, whereas they were seen as a means for starting a discussion on what was represented within the subject of interest. The visual materials of this research consisted of extant data since they had not been produced, but gathered, for this research (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.4.5 Operationalization

Operationalization is explained as how researchers move from a general idea to an actual measurement of the real world (Babbie, 2013). It starts with the intimately linked conceptualization, which is a specification of abstract concepts. This thesis uses the theoretical concept of perception. Perception has in turn been conceptualized in the three main concepts of sensation, attention and interpretation. Furthermore, Babbie (2013) describes operationalization as how to develop research procedures in order to represent those concepts in the empirical findings and the real world. Exposing participants to visual material through focused interviews searched for these concepts of
sensation, attention and interpretation. In the interview guide, questions were designed to match the concepts in order to enlighten perception in the conversation (see Appendix A). There was hope for that the data found would bring forth how gender stereotyped advertising to children influence parents in their perception of the visual material and how they perceive it as linked to socially responsible marketing. This process is necessary in order to explain the context between the literature review and the questions asked to respondents in the data collection (Babbie, 2013). To facilitate the understanding of this process, see figure 4 below.

![Figure 4. Visualization of operationalization.](image)

### 3.5 Sample selection

Choosing a sample from a given population requires defining a plan where the conducting procedure is explained in order to select the sample. This process is called sample design and needs to be defined before the collection of data. There are different sample designs that can be chosen depending on the research study that is carried out. Two sample designs are typically outlined: non-probability sampling, which means researchers select a random sampling, and probability sampling, where researchers collect data from a convenience sampling (Kothari, 2004). Sample refers to a specific segment of the population that the researcher selects to carry out an investigation. As Bryman and Bell (2012:176) state a sampling frame is “the listing of all units in the population from which the sample will be selected.” Taking in consideration geographical, social, or individual characteristics among others could choose the sample. To make the size of sample optimum, this needs to be efficient, representative, reliable and flexible and try to minimize the cost of collecting data and the cost of an incorrect inference (Kothari, 2004).
The selection process and sampling technique that was conducted for this investigation implies a non-probability sampling, since the individuals were selected based on geographical convenience as well as on feasibility in reaching the target group of parents. There is no register of parents in order to form a sampling frame, whereas creative ways of reaching them had to be done. A non-probability sampling technique may imply a risk in researcher influence since she/he might choose a sample that results in favorable outcomes for the purpose of the study and therefore a possible bias result. Hence, there is a necessity of impartiality and judgment in order to obtain as reliable result as of when a probability sampling is conducted (Kothari, 2004).

3.5.1 Sampling visual materials

The visual materials selected were a result of a first step of analysis related to the literature review in order to select advertisements that connect to the sub questions. Two different advertisements that are demonstrating the concepts of reinforcing and challenging gender stereotypes were found in the examples of LEGO Friends and GoldieBlox. There is also a resemblance in products presented between the two advertisements, as both LEGO Friends and GoldieBlox aims for girls’ interest in building and creating, which speaks for an interesting analysis in comparing different ways of marketing the same subject.

LEGO Friends

An advertisement connected to the first sub question regarding reinforcing gender stereotypes was found in LEGO Friends. The product line was an investment by the Danish brand to regain female customers (Wieners, 2011). It has been harshly criticized in media for its reinforcement of traditional female gender roles, where the head characters are being depicted in pink and purple, encouraged to stay home and be pretty in contrast to the more adventurous and fun boys’ LEGO (Pullman, 2012). The introductory advertisement connected to the product line has been used in educational purposes regarding gender (Mediekompass, 2014) and has been compared to previous advertisements conducted by LEGO to emphasize the contrasts between then and now (Miller & Gray, 2012). A petition with more than 68 000 signatures (at the time of writing) has been carried out in protest to the product line of LEGO Friends and its gender stereotyping (Change, 2014), which is why this advertisement seemed of high relevance to the sub question of reinforcing gender stereotypes.
The commercial starts with two blonde girls approximately of the age of eight to ten forming their hands into a heart shape. A voice is welcoming the viewer to “Beautiful Heartlake City”, showing the city framed in a heart of purple glitter. The main characters are presented one by one in connection to their activity, with their names in purple glitter and a sparkling sound. Stephanie is “going to a party at the new café” with Olivia, who “just finished decorating her house”. It continues by showing the character Emma who is at the beauty salon, “styled and ready to go”. Mia is a veterinarian who is depicted feeding her horse. While the café is being built in fast forward speed it is explained as “the coolest spot in Heartlake city” where the last character presented, Andrea, works. An oven is opened by a child’s hand with the line “Cupcakes are ready!”. Next, a group picture is taken of the LEGO characters sitting at the café, with lines saying “I love being together with my friends” followed by “Me too”. The product packaging is in bright purple. The final scene is the five girls animated, holding each other around the waist, giggling in front of a purple background with the logo of LEGO friends, glitter and a flying butterfly. The colors that are prominent are mainly purple and pink, followed by yellow, turquoise and other pastel colors.¹

GoldieBlox

An advertisement connected to the second sub question regarding challenging gender stereotypes was found in GoldieBlox. GoldieBlox is a company founded in 2012, with the aim to get little girls interested in science, technology, math and engineering, an area highly dominated by men. Their products are construction toys designed from a female perspective (GoldieBlox1, 2014). The company has gotten a lot of media attention not only for its brand concept, but for its advertisement; a parody of television commercials targeting girls that are emphasizing the ‘pink and pretty’ (GoldieBlox2, 2014; Wiley, 2013; Wee, 2013; Isaacson, 2012). The advertisement won a contest held by Intuit in 2014, with the prize of being aired on Super Bowl, side by side with brands such as Coca-Cola and Budweiser (Clark, 2014; Kavilanz, 2014).

The commercial starts off with three girls with diversity in looks that are sitting in front of a television. They are looking at a show with three girls in pink dresses and tiaras dancing to a song where you can detect words like “pretty world”. The three girls watching look clearly bored. A hand of one of the girls puts on a toy vinyl record in

¹ For link to video clip, see YouTube1 (2012).
yellow and red, which is part of the product line. The next scenes are glances of different tools; first a yellow tool kit, secondly a yellow and orange construction helmet. One of the girls is then shown on a pink carpet, putting on protective goggles. The melody from the vinyl record briefly stops and sets a machine of obstacles with a domino effect in motion. The machine is built of all different kinds of girls’ toys in pink in combination with the products of GoldieBlox, and is accompanied by a song with a revolutionary song text. For example “you think you know what we want”, “just like the 50’s”, “you like to buy us pink toys, and everything else is for boys”, “it’s time to change, we deserve to see a range”, “we are all more than princess maids”, “girls that grow up knowing they can engineer that”, “don’t underestimate girls” etc. The machine ends back in the living room with the three girls cheering on. The final motion is switching the channel from the pink princesses to a blonde animated girl in suspender pants and a toolkit towards a bright purple background who connects a red cord and winds the logo of the product together around a light bulb. It finishes with the animated figure pulling a turquoise tape, which brings a bright light followed by the presentation of the product. The product packaging is in red, pink, yellow and orange. The finish statement is “Toys for Future Engineers” in orange and a sound of giggles. The prominent colors of the advertisement is in its settings brown, yellow, blue, green and white, but is through the machine of toys also in pink and purple. After the logo has been presented in yellow, the three girls are portrayed one last time standing in line with their tools on, crossing their arms.2

3.5.2 Sampling for focused interviews
The sampling for focused interviews involved Swedish parents of children below the age of twelve years old. In order to analyze how parents perceive gender stereotypes when it comes to marketing towards children it was necessary for this investigation to gather information from this segment since they are crucial stakeholders in children’s advertising and are partly responsible for what their children are exposed to. It was decided not to mention gender as an issue in the initial contact with schools or parents, since this could enhance prejudice opinions in the subject and influence their otherwise natural perceptions regarding this phenomenon.

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2 For link to video clip, see YouTube2 (2013).
The selection process for this sample is somewhat following the theory of *snowball sampling*. Snowball sampling means that the data collection process is through a convenience sample, where the initial contact is with a small group of people who fit the sample needed for the research and then gathers new contacts through these people (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The first attempt to reach parents was through elementary schools. There are thirty-seven elementary schools in the municipality of Växjö (Växjö kommun/Växjö municipality, 2014). After looking into which schools matched the requirements in age cohort as well as a convenient distance for the parents, the sampling frame was narrowed down to fifteen. E-mails were sent out to the headmasters, teachers and other contact persons at the schools that could be of relevance in the pursuit of getting in contact with parents. 131 emails were sent out 2014-04-22. Four answers were received where one declined and three were interested in further contact. An online form where parents could fill in date and time possible for an interview was sent out as a reminder and facilitator to their administration, both to the three interested parties as well as to the 127 emails that had not responded. Three parents answered the online form. A Facebook group was therefore started in order to reach out to personal contacts. To gain even more participants, a physical form was designed and handed out on 2014-05-02 and 2014-05-03 outside a toy store, a grocery store and downtown Växjö City. The initial contact was in this thesis random, although the dispersion of gathering participants continued with encouraging participants to contact others appropriate for the target group. This took form in both the handout forms as well as in the creation of a Facebook group.

### 3.6 Data analysis method

The coding of the research was similar to the techniques of grounded theory. Grounded theory is, according to Bryman and Bell (2011:576), “theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another.” This research will in some way be of selective coding, since the coding of the empirical data will be analyzed in relation to the concepts brought up in literature review. Even so, the approach towards the data collection in both analysis of visual materials as well as focused interviews will be of open coding, where the researcher develop codes based on the material. Open coding is explained as “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data” (Bryman & Bell 2011:578).
3.7 Quality assurance

In a qualitative research, the terms of reliability and validity take on other forms than of quantitative research, since the results are not measurable in the same meaning. A qualitative research is in general hard to replicate since data are generated through social contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Bryman and Bell (2011:395-399) provide with two other primary criteria that can be evaluated in qualitative research, trustworthiness and authenticity.

3.7.1 Trustworthiness

The concept of trustworthiness consists of four criteria; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This thesis’ trustworthiness in strengthened since the visual materials used as stimuli were chosen on theoretical bases. Credibility is an argumentation for that the research has been carried out with good practice and in a feasible way. It also concerns the validation of the participants’ responses (Bryman & Bell, 2011). It is possible to replicate the analysis of literature review, to use the same visual materials, as well as conducting focused interviews with the same agenda. Even though the result of literature review analysis as well as the focused interviews will differ because of subjective interpretations of individuals, the method of bringing forth the research is trustworthy, which also strengthens the transferability of the research. Dependability concerns whether the phases of the research have been stored by the researchers and audited by a third party (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The process of this thesis has been thoroughly followed through seminars, tutoring sessions and oppositions along the way. It is suggested that the interviewer record the responses accurately and completely (Kothari, 2004). The focused interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to be able to go back and reassure what had been said and how it was said, which is of importance when conducting a focused interview. This strengthens the trustworthiness since it raises the chances of a correct interpretation even after some time has passed (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Bryman and Bell (2011) continues with confirmability, which concerns whether personal values may have affected the research or findings. The researchers inevitably have own interpretations of the different concepts brought up in the research. This could have affected the outcome of coding and concepts, although, a neutral approach has been strived for.
3.7.2 Authenticity

*Authenticity* is explained by Bryman and Bell (2011:398) as criteria that “raise a wider set of issues concerning the wider political impact of research.” Since this research has, to some degree, a political agenda in the way that social responsibility, gender issues as well as regulations and ethics in advertising towards children the authenticity is determined to be relevant. The findings of this research will provide with different viewpoints and if other members of the social setting would come upon these findings, they would hopefully gain a better understanding of their social milieu and better perspectives of others. This further strengthens the *authenticity* (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.7.3 Source criticism

*Internet*

When it comes to Internet sources, it might be difficult to decide its quality and whether or not the source is trustworthy (Christensen et al., 2010). In this thesis, Internet sources have solely been used for getting a wider understanding of the public opinion on the matters and how different subjects have been presented in media. The two video clips have been collected from YouTube, which is a well known website for providing video material. The commercials were assured to be produced by the brands in question through the companies’ official websites.

*Scientific articles*

All scientific articles are collected from the Library of the Linnaeus University, using the database of OneSearch. The articles are written by well-established authors and have been peer-reviewed. With exception from a few articles, all information is relatively up to date, starting around the millennium and forward. The reason for adding the article from 1946 is in order to support that the concept of focused interviews is well established in social sciences.

*Books*

The sources of books are mainly course literature that has been used by the authors’ through their studies in marketing. In addition to this, books regarding other topics such as gender and ethics have been found through the Library of the Linnaeus University. The theories are developed starting around the millennium and forward.
4 Empirical investigation

The empirical chapter of this thesis consists of the summarized information gathered through focused interviews. The chapter is divided into the sub research questions operationalized in connection to the response on the two stimuli as well as a more general discussion on advertising and responsibility.

The participants for the focused interviews had the shared experience of the social role of being a parent. They were in the range of approximately 25-35 years old (although one participant was 44 years old) and all had children under the age of twelve, following the criteria for the target group of this research. There was an equal amount of female and male participants (see Appendix B). The occupations of the parents varied, examples are kindergarten teacher, firefighter, business developer, sales advisor, student of human resources etc. They were exposed to two commercials that worked as stimuli and that were played one by one with discussion in between. They were asked guiding questions with an aim to investigate their perceptions of gender stereotypes in advertising towards children. To do this, the responses of the participants were structured around the themes of sensation, attention and interpretation. Sensation referred to the immediate response to the commercials as well as descriptive traits. Attention referred to what the different participants naturally took notice of. Finally, interpretation referred to the meaning that the participants ascribed these images.

4.1 Commercial 1: Reinforcing gender stereotypes

4.1.1 Sensation

The commercial of LEGO Friends was the first stimulus presented. As for sensation, the immediate response amongst the participants on the commercial was that it was extremely “girly”. The commercial was explained as a perfect world that portrayed a happy surrounding. Even though the descriptive words were “cool”, “hip” and “super cute”, this was generally not said in a positive manner. Traits that were mentioned for this commercial were cute, girly, fluffy, beautiful, styled but also segregating and passive. “All the creepy stuff of the girls’ culture mixed into one thick sauce” (Participant B). It was at one point described as “a brainwash of pink” (Participant C). The majority of the participants agreed on that the commercial showed traditional
gender roles. They agreed on that it was directed to girls, and colors were repeatedly mentioned. Colors connected to the commercial were pink, purple, pastel colors and turquoise, which were all mentioned as girly colors and unusual for the original brand. Another participant stated that you almost forgot the brand of the product, since the product was so far away from its original design. The figures were no longer the original; they were thinner and styled with hair and make up. The beginning of the commercial was mentioned with the two girls holding their hands in the shape of a heart, introducing the viewer to a “fantastic and super pretty world where everything is perfect.” (Participant E). This was said in a condescending tone, where the participants also made fun of the high pitch voice that presented the product. It was said that the sound of the voice made it clear that it was targeting girls. Even though the commercial was stated to be targeting girls, one participant said “I don’t want to say that it’s feminine, because for me, femininity is something else” (Participant A).

4.1.2 Attention

As for attention, most participants automatically and instantly brought up the concept of gender when discussing the commercial. However, in one of the interviews the concept of gender was not initially brought up, only activities performed by girls doing “things that girls usually like, such as going to the hairdresser, baking, taking care of animals etc.” (Participant K). In another interview where gender was not specifically mentioned, the ethnicity of the figures was instead a noticed detail. The ethnicity issue was mentioned in several interviews, but noticed differently. The commercial got positive response for having ethnicity diversification, where the participants in one interview stated that the figures seemed happy and were being nice to each other. However, in other interviews, it got criticized for not having a variation in other attributes such as different body types. There was a calling for different weights and heights. The fact that all figures were pretty, beautiful and “styled” was not appreciated. It was not thought of as a problem to add different colors to the figures, or to change face expressions, clothes, hairstyles etc., but that if a company starts depicting body types, they need to include all different types of bodies. Barbie was brought up as an example of what was accepted in the 1950’s, but which has been criticized in our modern society. The opinion was that the equality awareness of 2014 should permeate product development today. That commercials and products are still stereotyped and following prejudice characteristics was explained as “embarrassing” and “really bothersome” (Participant
B). In another interview the commercial was explained as being sexist. A participant stated that when you promote clear gender roles to children, you are enforcing certain connotations that they will grow up defending, which was thought of as an issue.

4.1.3 Interpretation

All participants agreed on that this commercial would have a negative effect on their children. There were different reasons for this. One was the reflection of a perfect world, which the parents thought would give the children a false impression of how life really is. Another was the description of traditional gender roles as well as normative reinforcements in the commercial. Furthermore, the excluding of boys and segregation between genders was widely discussed. The participants stated that children being part of different groups are usually not harmful, although grouping through gender norms are. It was stated that this, however, is not only an issue in advertising but in our culture. One participant stated that roles are important in order to feel secure and safe, whereas a comment on this was “of course we need roles but they do not have to be gender specific” (Participant F).

No boys allowed

The overall reaction was that the commercial did not depict a natural setting, where girls and boys were doing things together. It was agreed that this is not a correct version of reality. “Even if they do not mention it, you perceive it as an exclusive club for girls doing girly things” (Participant A). The participants agreed on that gender identity is important for children, where the fact that there were only girls starring in the commercial would have a great impact on children. They thought of it as simple psychology. Where there are only girls, girls will believe the product is for them. Where there are only boys, boys will think the same. They agreed that this could be dangerous for both children and adults, since even as an adult with a critical mind, the messages being told will affect you. The commercial was thought of as in many ways limiting since children have a harder time to choose a path that is different from others. It was said that it could be difficult even for adults to have the strength to stand out, but for kids it is even harder. A common opinion was that boys would generally not have appreciated this commercial, since it is a learnt behavior not to. This would also go for girls, who would appreciate it since it is what they have been taught is suitable for them. However, the participants had a theory in that a younger child, girl or boy, that has not
yet detected gender differences (four to five years old) would probably not reflect over the fact that the product was targeting girls but only react to colors and atmosphere. It was said that for older children, however, the commercial would affect the child in the way that this commercial presented the gateway on how you are supposed to behave in your gender role. This was expressed as being the case not only for this brand but also for other products targeting girls in particular (mentioned examples were Bratz, Barbie, etc.). It was stated that girls might want this product, but they do not detect the message it is sending, they only know that they want it.

No girls allowed
In several of the focused interviews a contradictory product line of the same brand was brought up; LEGO Star Wars. One opinion was that only boys would buy LEGO Star Wars. It was stated that the product is not particularly for boys, but that this is how the brand has chosen to market that product line. It was agreed that the brand do not longer develop products that are neutral and that encourages you to build what you make up in your own mind. The products are always limited to a theme and a gender. Another opinion was that it was difficult to sell LEGO Star Wars to girls, along with other product lines of LEGO, which is why the company chose to create this, also gender stereotyped, product line of LEGO Friends. When a participant questioned the gender oriented roles, one comment suggested that LEGO was “excused” since this is how the brand “always acts” and that it is a part of their marketing concept.

4.2 Commercial 2: Challenging gender stereotypes
The second stimulus was the commercial of GoldieBlox, which was chosen to represent the second sub question of challenging gender stereotypes. The same questions were asked as for the first stimulus in order to get a good comparison of the perceptions connected to the different advertisements.

4.2.1 Sensation
The first reactions to the commercial were overall positive. The positive attitude was mostly regarding that what is considered “girly” toys were used more freely; that the girls in the commercial had all the classic girl toys, but did entirely different things with them. Most participants appreciated that products that were ’pink and pretty’ were used
in a creative way, which they thought of as an example of showing that ‘pink and pretty’ is not always delimiting. However, even if there was a positive attitude towards the creativity and towards the machine that was built, there was a shared view on that the product being promoted in the commercial was, in the end, still “girly” in its colors and presentation. The commercial was also described as “messy” in a positive way; it did not show the perfect world that is usually surrounding little girls. Although traits such as activity, creativity, imaginative and fun were a first reaction to the commercial, the actual question of the participants’ feelings towards it brought up an unsettled attitude. The overall opinion was that it was still targeting a very obvious group where segregation and exclusion were once again brought up. The commercial was explained to be very ‘pro girls’, especially through the music which explained that girls can make it without the boys. “Kind of like, ‘we have a brain’” (Participant C).

4.2.2 Attention
Generally, the participants stated that even though this commercial brought up the issue of gender it was still gender biased. They considered this commercial as emphasizing differences between genders, saying that there are typical boy toys that are now ascribed girl attributes. The fact that they also used different “typically male things”, such as the tool belt and the goggles was noticed and commented upon. The participants reacted on the fact that there were only girls in this commercial as well. This commercial was, however, seen as considering gender issues in a more neutral way than the first commercial, for example in how they dressed the girls and presented colors. It also awoke a curiosity to take another look at the product. However, other participants did not recall what product the commercial was promoting. The diversity was once again brought up as an attempt by the company to capture an ethnicity that each and everyone could identify with.

4.2.3 Interpretation
All of the participants preferred this second commercial to the first; challenging gender stereotypes over reinforcing them. They would also prefer their children to watch the second commercial over the first one, even though a few participants stated that the first one would probably catch their kid’s attention more. In one interview the participants stated that the second commercial was more entertaining and suited for a larger audience. However, approximately a third of the participants did not fully support the
second commercial either. The commercial was still thought of as depicting a specific gender ideology rather than a proper gender equality situation. One participant formulated this commercial as being a “protest commercial” that might work in today’s gender discussion. However, the idea of all ads promoting girls in this role was not considered the ideal. Because of this, the commercial was even discussed as being more extreme than the commercial reinforcing gender stereotypes.

Still no boys allowed
It was stated that some might appreciate a clear dividing of girls and boys in commercials because of an importance in gender identity, but that it would be preferable if girls and boys would interplay. Again it was stated that it would be more natural with a group of mixed sex, since there is no problem in having girls and boys interplaying in active commercials, but what is often missing in commercials is that boys are the ones that are drifty while the girls have the roles as helpers. Even if the commercial was said to probably target parents, there was an opinion in that it was indirectly targeting children, who will also come upon it. Even though participants said that gender roles start as soon as we are born, they further said that children are usually unaware of these gender roles since it is too early for children to understand what that is. Even so, children will identify themselves with how society expects them to be according to gender. It was expressed that a little boy would not find himself playing with these toys since he could not identify with them through this ad. As well as when girls are left out of toy commercials targeting boys, there was an announced dissatisfaction in that the same thing is done to boys. “I can see my boy sitting there asking himself, ‘why cannot I do these things that these girls are doing?’ - and that is an issue” (Participant F). Even though the commercial was breaking the norm, there was an expression in that a gender neutral ideology has to acknowledge that you cannot specify girls or boys, you have to have both; marketing should involve equality to become balanced. Most participants also agreed that the most neutral way of doing a commercial would be to mix genders in interplay. Even for this commercial, it would have been preferable with girls and boys building and playing together.

No girls allowed in pink
In one of the interviews, it was stated that the grouping of girls and boys is more bothersome than colors and cute things. The shared opinion was that children should not
be limited to different colors suitable for their gender, everyone should be allowed to like anything they want. Colors were not seen to be the problem; it was the driving process of grouping that was thought of as cynical. The message of this commercial was by one participant interpreted as to tell girls that it is ok for you not to like ‘pink and pretty’, these girls do not either, they turn it off. However, there was a concern in that this did not only enhance a grouping between girls and boys, but also exclusion between the groups of girls. The contradiction between the girls sitting in front of the television and the girls in pink dresses on the TV that is later turned off was not preferable either, since this sent a message on that you cannot be both ‘pink and pretty’ but at the same time creative. The participants would prefer if the ‘pink and pretty’ was de-dramatized instead of excluded. One participant thought that this commercial was not challenging gender stereotypes, but that the suggestion of this being a challenger towards gender stereotyping was provocative. The participant meant that what was portrayed in the commercial was a play that any normal intelligent person would do, and did not have anything to do with gender. The overall opinion was that children should be able to play with the toy that they want, no matter what role society attributes to that toy. Marketing should not separate them in commercials.

4.3 Parents perception on responsibility in advertising

4.3.1 Gender issues

All participants thought that advertising has an impact on their children and how they see the world and that this affects the way they feel like they are supposed to act according to gender. Children were said not to be able to make conscience choices, and not being able to guard themselves towards advertising messages. The participants therefore spoke of an occurring dishonesty in targeting children in advertising. It was said that especially since children are struggling in identifying themselves, this struggle might become harder for them if there are only very biased ways shown of how to be a girl or a boy which do not suit the way they feel. Regarding the commercial reinforcing gender stereotypes, one participant stated “for a little boy that is interested in playing café or becoming a hairdresser, there is no room for him here. He has to take on a different gender role to be ‘allowed’ to do that. Even if my son loves baking at home, he would never touch this product. He gets that it is wrong for him, since it is for girls.” (Participant A). Furthermore, it was not seen as a problem to love ‘pink and pretty’ as
long as it would be ok for everyone to enjoy it. To enhance the cliché of not allowing pink was not considered a solution, not for girls nor boys. “When a girl has her ‘princess phase’ and has a younger brother, it is natural for him to follow his sister’s lead, also wishing for dresses and tiaras. This should not be restricted, society should be thankful that it consists of people that dress freely. As for girls, ‘pink and pretty’ should not be stopped, but it should be a choice, not an enforcement” (Participant B).

The participants’ statements presented above were part of an argumentation for why it is even more important that marketers take responsibility in marketing gender roles. Advertising should not propagate gender stereotypes since it conditions people to behave according to what is thought of as expected of them by society. There was a unanimous opinion in that girls and boys are portrayed differently in advertising towards children. This was stated as extremely bad, sad and unfortunately very noticeable. One example was in clothing stores, where clothes are strictly divided into girls’ and boys’ sections, girls’ clothes being tight and short and boys’ clothes being long-sleeved and “baggy”. There was a concern that advertising towards children was an area where companies did not care about gender equality because it involves too much money. A response to gender specific product lines being part of a marketing strategy was that “they may act like that, but that doesn’t mean that it is right” (Participant F). There was one participant whose daughter was a customer of a product line said to target boys. The daughter had heard several comments on this being a “boy’s product”, whereas the parent had had to explain that a toy is a toy. However, the same parent had strong opinions on the product line promoted in the commercial reinforcing gender stereotypes and had even asked friends and family not to buy this product to the daughter. “I raise my daughter to become a ninja skate surfer and I do not want her to be affected by that kind of advertising” (Participant B).

4.3.2 The companies’ role

There was a solid agreement on that companies play an important role in what children are being exposed to and that this comes with an inevitable responsibility. It was stated that companies have a responsibility through law but also an ethical responsibility., whereas companies should try to meet society’s expectations and values. If companies do not embrace this responsibility in their advertising towards children it was determined to do possible harm to society. It was said to be too simple to target
children, which is therefore not considered an appropriate behavior for companies. The participants did not think that the size of a company mattered in order to have a responsibility in its actions. As each individual has their own responsibility, so do the companies. They cannot hide behind being larger organizations; they consist of human beings that each beholds an individual responsibility.

The parents stated that children are exposed to more media channels than ever before and that it is an inevitable part of their lives. The parents were therefore concerned in that media had a major part of how kids interpret the world, since the impression was that companies have a history in making doubtful actions in order to sell. There was also a concern regarding how much space social media takes in children’s life today, where the world is depicted as constantly perfect. “The world today is filtered” (Participant C). There was, however, a theory of that consumers today have a lot more control through social media, which is why it is wise for companies not to upset the consumer or make any mistakes that could be devastating for the company. It was said that parents could have the opinion that companies should take responsibility, but from the companies’ perspective the marketers might defend themselves in saying that it is the parents that have the main responsibility. There was a wish in that this responsibility should be equally divided between the two parties; companies should illustrate a more realistic view of the world and at the same time parents should support and speak to their children.

4.3.3 The parents’ role

Unanimously the participants stated that they do not feel like they have control over what their children are being exposed to. Some participants had regulations at home on what channels to subscribe but stated that this is only a small part of what media the children will eventually come upon. There main concern regarding this was the lack of control. However, there was also a statement that it is wrong to try to control what the children are being exposed to since it will keep them from what reality is like. More important is to be there for the children, explaining why the world is depicted as it is in media and have a continuous conversation with them regarding this.

It was further stated that even grownups fall in the traps of advertised gender roles in children’s commercials. For example, when shopping for birthday presents to other
children, the parents said they could also feel insecure about what is suitable for a boy or a girl. Even though media was seen as a major influence, one participant stated that parents are the most influential part of how children interpret their world. It was explained as when the child is exposed to new ideas (through school, peers and teachers), the parents will accept or reject those ideas and make a decision for the child on which ideas to keep or to dismiss. The participant continued with that media will, however, not only directly affect the children but also indirectly affect children through their parents since what the parents have learnt from media is projected on their children. One of the parents, referring to gender stereotyping, even states, “the biggest threat for my children are the other parents” (Participant B).

Furthermore, it was said that for parents, time is a quality good. Because of this, it was emphasized that parents as consumers are also vulnerable targets because of their lack of time in decision making. They thought there were so many products and commercials to guard against in gender issues, which is why they at some point fail to be consistent. “As a parent, you have to pick your battles. And the more battles being fought, the more you will lose. I would prefer a label that I feel is fighting with me in these battles, not against me” (Participant B).
5 Analysis

This chapter consists of an analysis of the gathered empirical data in relation to the literature review. The aim with this part of the paper is to provide with an answering of the research question.

5.1 Parents perception of the commercials

5.1.1 Gender stereotyped sensation

Our study found that colors were ascribed to be very normative. All participants stated that the commercials were using “girly colors”, which was emphasized in many occasions. Colors seemed to be ascribed with being female or male colors, which refers back to the theory of Solomon et al. (2010) regarding colors having cultural meaning. Even though they were affected by the cultural meaning of colors, they did not want to reinforce a gendered color meaning. Right now, every time you see pink or purple, girls surround it. Instead, the parents wanted to de-dramatize the ‘pink and pretty’. The parents all noticed the fact that there were only girls portrayed in both of the commercials. Regarding the commercial challenging gender stereotypes, where the parents stated that the product was still “girly”, it seemed as if the parents might not have reacted to the product being in pastel colors if there would have been boys in the commercial. Except from pink, the colors of the product were of turquoise, yellow, red and purple. The product was perceived as only for girls most of all because there were only girls starring. If boys would have been portrayed playing along with the girls, the product might have just been thought of as a colorful toy. Colors are hence normative even in parents’ perception, but it could also be connected to whether there are girls or boys depicted in the commercial.

The sound of the commercials was brought up in both cases. This confirms that sound is an important stimulus in perception. Indeed, Solomon et al. (2010) explained that sound could affect people’s feelings and behavior. The high pitch voice in the commercial reinforcing gender stereotypes was described as an obvious attempt to target girls, selling in “the perfect world”. The parents responded with cynicism and irony towards this. The song in the commercial challenging gender stereotypes was promoting girls in a revolutionary way. The parents’ response to the song was that it was funny, but also
seen as too extreme and in some degree segregating. Even in sound, the commercials could be seen as examples of reinforcing and challenging gender stereotypes. This shows that the sound is an important part of parents’ perception in advertisements targeting children.

5.1.2 Making sense of gender stereotypes

Most parents brought up the concept of gender after the first commercial had been showed, but this was not the case for all interviews. As Solomon et al. (2010) state, past experience will influence what and how we process the stimuli. Some participants seemed to have more insight to the subject of gender than others, which might have influenced their perception of the advertisements. However, the participants that did not initially bring up gender did so after the commercial of challenging gender stereotypes had been showed. It seemed as if this second commercial evoked an awareness on that the first commercial had been reinforcing gender stereotypes. The difference between the stimuli was detected, which connects back to the theory of differential threshold (Solomon et al., 2010).

The parents were very aware of that gender expectations are occurring in their children’s lives. Their worry was concerned with that what is expected of their children today in regards to gender is something that is harmful; that the actual expectation is not healthy. This is why they perceived the commercial reinforcing gender stereotypes as being harmful. The expectation for girls in this commercial was to be concerned about looks and to retain passive roles. They thought of this as a problem since children are easily influenced by what is shown on television and that they then interpret what is appropriate for their gender, which matches theory presented by Auster and Mansbach, (2012) and Chan et al. (2011). The commercial that was challenging gender stereotypes unanimously got positive first reactions. There was no comment on that what the girls were doing in this commercial would be in any way wrong, except from that it was messy (expressed in a fun way). The participants stated that this commercial was funny because it was a little bit provocative, giving an innuendo to the ‘pink and pretty’ in other commercials. This might be a reason for why it was perceived as more positive. It was a contrast from reinforcing gender stereotypes and was making fun of the cultural stereotype with the girls in pink on the television, whereas it matches the theory of attention (Solomon et al., 2010). For the parents that had strong opinions on gender to
begin with, the commercial *reinforcing* gender stereotypes stirred up a conversation. Although, the commercial *challenging* gender stereotypes indeed caught more attention amongst the participants. The parents perceived this commercial as targeting adults more than children. This could be another reason for the participants preference of this commercial, relating to the theory of Jones and Fabrianesi (2007) where the perception of the parents was stated to be more positive when the commercial was targeting them. However, there was still an expression of that the commercial was not entirely correct. Even though the perception was positive, it was still not something for the children to see. The parents meant that adults can understand what the commercial is about, seeing the pun in the contrasts. But for a child it is another set of segregation, pointing towards the grouping between girls. And in this case, it could even be seen as double segregation. The commercial is telling you not to be a boy, but not to be a ‘girly-girl’. Again, media is telling girls what they are supposed to be.

5.1.3 Judging gender stereotypes

According to the theory of marketing ethics, explained by Axelsson and Agndal (2005), participants would agree on that both commercials were in some degree unethical, since, even if one was *challenging* gender stereotypes, they were both discriminating social groups; in this case boys. The commercial *challenging* gender stereotypes was perceived as a ‘girl power’-concept, but also as discriminating the princesses in pink portrayed on the television. One participant said that the turning off of the television with the princesses was a message of that girls do not have to be what media tells you to, which was considered a good thing. Although, another participant stated that this portraying of two different girl groups was still segregation. This was because it showed that you have to be either or, not that you are free to be whatever you like. There was a shared expression in that the commercial *challenging* gender stereotypes was therefore not as ‘innocent’ as they played out to be. One participant also stated it to be provocative that this commercial would be seen as *challenging* gender stereotypes. This emphasizes that parents think that media shows a wry vision of the world, since the commercial aims to be a defiant commercial, but the participants state that this is how normal kids behave that has nothing to do with gender. Again, media was in a way patronizing girls’ intelligence by saying that this is unusual behavior for them. The participants agreed that media is not portraying a natural setting; they are forcing settings since the reality is that girls and boys do play together. If marketers would go
for natural settings, only depicting real scenarios, there might be a conflict in the theory of attention since it could mean that the consumer becomes too familiar with the stimuli presented to them (Solomon et al., 2010). However, it is argued that marketers can create attention in other ways than using extreme methods of gender stereotypes. It is possible, and should be highly considered, to be creative and make contrasts using something other than gender stereotypes, since this was perceived as harmful. Using gender stereotypes could be seen as a “cheap trick”, since it is an easy solution to create attention. This is an argument for why socially responsible marketing needs to be connected to the issue.

In the literature review, Campenni (1999) explained that parental toy choices would send messages to the child on gender-typed behavior. In the empirical investigation there was an example of parental toy choice that evoked through the discussion of the commercial reinforcing gender stereotypes. Even though the participants had strong opinions on gender equality, there was an underlying sense of that it seemed more acceptable for a girl to have what is considered boy attributes, than for a boy to take on what is considered girl attributes. This was, for example, expressed in how many of the parents mentioned that their sons would never touch the product line that was promoted in the commercial reinforcing gender stereotypes since it was so targeted to girls. In difference to this, one participant was forbidding the very “girly” product line for the daughter, but was then promoting a product line of the same brand that was perceived by other parents as targeting boys. To some extent, this relates back to the theory regarding girls being more flexible in gender crossing proposed by Auster and Mansbach (2012). The difference, however, was that the latter participant did not discourage a boy to engage in “feminine” activities, but a girl. The reason, then, for girls being more flexible in gender crossing could be that the considered girl attributes are perceived as negative and of a patronizing kind, where girls are portrayed in a passive role, with shyness or as “helpers”. This relates to Solomon et al. (2010) and Pike and Jennings (2005) since when this is how girls are constantly portrayed, this will be how children detect the world to be, and it starts young. The children, and some parents regarding their children, do not seem to want to be “girly” because it is not portrayed as creative, active or fun. As the parents stated, there is no problem with colors, but it is the attributes ascribed for girls that not all children want to be associated with. They might not wish to be passive, pretty princesses, as the commercial challenging gender
stereotypes was trying to pinpoint in there portraying of the girls. The issue was said to be that boys are repeatedly ascribed one set of attribute, whereas girls are repeatedly ascribed another set of attributes. This does not give room for children to be children, making it okay for them to be either active or passive, pink or blue; regardless of gender.

5.2 The link to socially responsible marketing

The perception of the participants seemed to be that commercials that are reinforcing gender stereotypes are using questionable marketing practices, mentioned by Armstrong et al. (2009). The brand wanted to target girls and this was the way they did it, but it was considered wrong by the participants. Armstrong et al. (2009) further explained that there were also cases of supposedly innocent actions that could also affect larger society negatively. This would go for how the participants perceived the commercial that was challenging gender stereotypes. The argument for using this commercial in the research was that it was analyzed as sending the message of that girls can do what boys do, i.e. challenging the typical portraying of girls in children’s commercials. But, it was then considered by parents as still affecting larger society negatively, because it is still excluding and segregating. At first glance the commercial seemed like a good initiative, but on the other hand it was still only targeting girls and still showing the world in a skewed way.

It was clear that all participants were part of the enlightened philosophy regarding ethics and social responsibility brought up by Armstrong et al. (2009). Even if the concept was not brought up in words, all parents agreed to that companies should have a social conscience. Patino et al., (2014) stated that ethical responsibility is for companies today a competitive imperative. There is a concern in how you would compete in ethical behavior, since this should be something that is natural; not just a part of your marketing strategy but inevitable. It should not be something that companies add in order to gain customers or money. In one interview group there were expressions in that the commercial that was challenging gender stereotypes was “riding on the wave of the gender equality debate” that is presently occurring. The perceptions of the commercial were that they are aiming to sell their product but they are doing it while saying that they are ‘pro girls’, using a political debate in order to sell. The underlying reason might therefore be doubtful, because even if the commercial was challenging gender
situations it was perceived as in first hand to benefit the company. It was seen to be
disguised in being pro gender equality, but then again still being excluding and molding
girls into roles. If the commercial would truly have had the aim to promote gender
equality, the participants stated that it should naturally have been starring both and girls
and boys. However, the participants had an opinion on that this could anyhow be seen
as a win-win situation, especially when put in comparison to the commercial where
gender stereotypes were reinforced. Even if companies were using the follow-up of the
political debate as a competitive advantage so that the imperative would not be not
completely honest, it would still bring up the debate and be a step away from
reinforcing gender stereotypes, which society in large would gain from. This relates, for
one, to how Armstrong et al. (2009) explained societal marketing, but also responsible
marketing, where Armstrong et al. (2009) highlighted mutual gain. Parents expressed
that they wanted the companies to help them fight the battles towards gender equality.
This is connected to the concept of social marketing (Axelsson & Agndal, 2005), since
this could involve a change in behavior or social phenomena. Also, since parents were
concerned not only in how advertising would affect their children, but our whole
surrounding, they pleaded for companies to take this responsibility in that gender
equality would be promoted in our overall social behavior.

Parents were concerned with that the world is indeed “filtered by marketers”, as phrased
by Solomon et al. (2010). It was agreed that media has a large impact and that if the
picture of reality they provide with is not accurate, or at least showing how reality
should be, it will affect us all. In addition to this, there was an expression in that
parents’ impact is important, related to the concept of observational learning (Solomon
et al., 2010). This is why other parents were announced as possible threats since media,
which is then transferred to their children, also affects adults. This was further
emphasized in that parents’ opinion on ethics, which was explained by Schlegelmilch
(1998) to be connected to culture and upbringing. The background of the parents will
affect how their children will be exposed to, and how they will perceive, gender. For
example, one participant had a strong belief system in that the product line that was
promoted in the commercial reinforcing gender stereotypes should be rejected but not
the other product lines of the brand, other had regulations on their television channels in
order to protect their kids from that media source. Both examples are of ethical issues of
the parents that will be projected to their children’s upbringing.
Almost every participant did in some way express opinions that seemed like they were sharing the perspective of social constructionism on gender issues; that gender is something that society has created, as proposed by Alvesson and Svenningson (2007). The overall opinion was that this is the way it is but that it does not have to be. The participants considered it wrong that it is so divided between genders. An interesting fact, however, was that some of the interview groups were automatically explaining the first commercial as doing “girly” things, or that “this is what girls like”, which could be seen as evidence of that parents are also a part of this construct and a norm, since it seemed natural even to the parents that these things were for girls. Some participants also stated that the girls were using “boy toys”. This is another example of where the parents naturally ascribed objects to boys instead of being neutral toys. Both of the commercials as well as the parents, perhaps more unintentionally though, were still saying that the objects were actually for boys, but now custom-made for girls. As for the commercial challenging gender stereotypes, no one expressed that the girls were doing “boy things”, but they did in some degree express that the girls were doing activities unusual for their gender. It was stated by one participant that even if you have a critical mind as an adult, you would still be affected. That regardless to if you have the opinion that everything should be neutral, there is still a learnt behavior in what is suitable for a girl or for a boy. Even if there would not be value put into it, we are keepers of first assumptions that are typically involving gender prejudice.

From what could be read out from the empirical investigation, the theory of that consumers would prefer a brand that takes on social responsibility in their marketing practices (Patino et al., 2014) seems to be valid. Even though the research did not include purchase intention, it was read out that the participants had strong negative opinions about the product line in the commercial that was reinforcing gender stereotypes. Furthermore, Patino et al. (2014) proposed that women would be more likely to consider marketing practices as unethical than men. However, the empirical investigation for this research rejects that theory. The focused interviews had an equal amount of female and male participants, with no noteworthy difference in opinions in regards to genders. If any, the male participants were perceived as having more hard drawn opinions on the subject, whereas the female participants were more tolerant.
6 Conclusion and implications

In this concluding chapter, the main findings are discussed in order to answer the purpose of the thesis. Furthermore, it brings up theoretical and managerial implications along with limitations that have been encountered during the investigation. The chapter ends with suggestions for further research on the topic.

6.1 Discussion

This investigation aimed to find out the perceptions of Swedish parents on gender stereotypes in advertisements targeted at children, and to link these findings to socially responsible marketing. The empirical investigation revealed that parents perceived gender stereotypes as something harmful to society and especially to their children. The parents did not approve of reinforcing gender stereotypes; they rather saw it as unethical for marketers to use it in their marketing practices. The parents agreed on that girls and boys are portrayed differently and perceived colors as symbolic for female respectively male. However, the parents did not perceive the color dividing as a problem in gender stereotyping, but the segregation and exclusion of either gender. Even though the strongest opinion was in that marketers should not reinforce gender stereotypes, the findings also reveals that challenging gender stereotypes is not always perceived as responsible either, since it was seen as the other side of an axis instead of gender equality. The parents stated that advertising should not propagate gender stereotypes in general, and also expressed a concern in how much influence media has on their children, since it will affect how their children see the world. In line with this, the parents stated that they would prefer companies that were on their side in the battle towards gender equality and wished for a shared responsibility between companies and parents. This shows an obvious link between advertising gender stereotypes towards children and socially responsible marketing.

6.2 Research implications

6.2.1 Theoretical implications

The findings of this thesis link socially responsible marketing issues to gender stereotyped advertising towards children, which had not been found in previous
research (Armstrong et al., 2009; Axelsson & Agndal, 2005; Solomon et al., 2010; Wolin, 2003). Until now, socially responsible marketing mainly discusses production and product safety issues, sustainability, alcohol, tobacco, obesity or sexism (Armstrong et al., 2009; Eisend, 2010; Miller, 2005). The findings of this thesis strongly indicate that gender stereotypes in advertising, particularly towards children, have been absent so far in the discussion of socially responsible marketing. Gender stereotyping is seen as a threatening environment since such expectations and judgments restrict life opportunities and is harmful to society (Eisend, 2010; Solomon et al., 2010; Tomasetto et al., 2011), which is why this topic is of importance. The empirical investigation further provides with evidence on that gender stereotyping towards children really is part of socially responsible marketing, which is a theoretical implication suggesting that this is something literature should put more focus in.

6.2.2 Managerial implications

It was seen through this study that socially responsible marketing should reflect more on gender stereotypes in advertising, especially when targeting children, because it was found in the data that it is a sensitive issue and that parents are concerned of this matter. The managerial implication is that advertising towards children should to the largest extent possible portray both girls and boys sharing colors, attributes and toys in order to gain the appreciation of the parents as important stakeholders as well as contributing to society’s long-term interests.

6.3 Limitations

The findings in this thesis were limited to the perception of two stimuli, whereas other commercials could have brought forth other interpretations. It could therefore imply that the findings are in some degree connected to the producer of the commercials, whereas one was more established than the other. There was also a limitation in that the stimuli used were only targeting girls. This was because there were no commercials found targeting boys that matched the second sub question of challenging gender stereotypes. The small sample size that is typically used in a qualitative study makes a generalization of the findings difficult. However, this is an exploratory investigation, which is why it could be used as a pilot study, where broader research on the connection between literature on socially responsible marketing and gender-stereotyped advertising targeting children is needed.
6.4 Suggestions for future research

Based on the findings of this research, and since this investigation could be seen as a pilot study, it is recommended to consider doing a more elaborate study, for example in a master thesis, on the subject of socially responsible marketing in connection to gender stereotypes in advertising towards children. The investigation could be done with a larger sample size in order to generate further evidence on how these concepts are connected. It could also involve parents from other areas of Sweden to get a broader spectrum in diversity. There could also be a need to distinguish between age cohorts of parents, since perceptions could be different in different generations.

Research could also be done on stimuli targeting boys as well, since this would provide with a more balanced answer to the research question. A larger stimuli sample size could be another example. Also, having stimuli that are different in other ways than in reinforcing and challenging gender stereotypes, such as brand and surroundings, could affect the personal associations to the many differences apart from that focus. Therefore, with enough resources, a suggestion would be to produce stimuli for the particular research, only changing minimal aspects such as girls or boys in activities reinforcing or challenging gender stereotypes.

Since not all channels broadcasting in Sweden were addressed by Swedish regulations, children are exposed to commercials produced in other countries, which could then be targeting children under the age of twelve. Also, since ethics is perceived differently according to culture, and gender was handled differently in different markets as seen in the example of the Disney Web Store, they could be exposed to advertising that is not adapted to the marketing ethics in Sweden. This is why it would be of interest to do a further investigation of parents’ perception on the matter in other countries.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide for focused interviews

SQ 1: What are the perceptions of parents on advertisements towards children where stereotyped gender roles are being reinforced?

1. LEGO Friends
   - What did you see in this commercial? (Recap)
   - What traits do you associate this commercial with?
   - In what way, if any, do you think this commercial could have an affect on your children? (Boys/girls?)

SQ 2: What are the perceptions of parents on advertisements towards children where stereotyped gender roles are being challenged?

2. GoldieBlox
   - What did you see in this commercial? (Recap)
   - What traits do you associate this commercial with?
   - In what way, if any, do you think this commercial could have an affect on your children? (Boys/girls?)

3. Concluding questions
   - Do you prefer any of the commercials? Which one and why?
   - What is your opinion about the following statements?
     - Boys and girls are presented differently in advertisements towards children.
     - Television commercials have an impact on how my children see the world and how to act in it according to gender.
     - I feel like I have control over what my children are exposed to in media.
     - Companies have a responsibility in their marketing towards children.
Appendix B: List of focused interviews

Participant A, female, 5th of May 2014.
Participant B, male, 5th of May 2014.
Participant C, female, 6th of May 2014.
Participant D, female, 6th of May 2014.
Participant E, male, 6th of May 2014.
Participant F, male, 7th of May 2014.
Participant G, female, 7th of May 2014.
Participant H, male, 7th of May 2014.
Participant I, male, 7th of May 2014.
Participant J, female, 7th of May 2014.
Participant K, female, 9th of May 2014.
Participant L, male, 9th of May 2014.
Participant M, female, 14th of May 2014.
Participant N, male, 14th of May 2014.