

## **Cultural Differences in Promotion and Products in the Fast Food Industry: A Case of the U.S. and Sweden Dyad**

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*The fast food industry is rapidly growing and heavily promoted in both US and Sweden. It is possible that cultural aspects influence the promotion to fit the population. Eighty-six fast food TV advertisements were compared to examine how nutrition and health are promoted. The main objective was to examine if marketing strategies, evidenced by cultural differences in advertising, highlight cultural consideration by multinational corporations. The results show that marketing strategies seem to differ with consideration for cultural differences and support the theory that a localized marketing approach is used by the multinational companies.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Swedish fast food industry is growing rapidly. According to the Swedish Statistical Bureau (2015) the fast food industry grew 5.9% in 2013, and an additional 10.1% in 2013. Swedes prefer to purchase low priced, quality products, according to Euromonitor (2014). Currently, three American fast food giants have a presence in the Sweden industry. McDonald's currently has 220 locations in Sweden (McDonalds.se), Subway has 90 locations (Subway.se), and Burger King has 70 locations (Burgerking.se). Their main competitors in the Swedish market are Max Hamburgare and Sibylla. The companies use TV advertisements to reach potential consumers in Sweden and America. The two countries do, however, have cultural differences. Research by Euromonitor (2014), indicates that Swedes look for healthier food, which could explain why only 18.6% of swedes were obese in 2008. Americans had obesity rates of 33% in the same time period according to the CIA World Fact Book (2008). There is also a cultural difference in how men and women are portrayed in advertisements. The results of a study by Tjernlund (1991) suggest that there is a major difference in how men and women are portrayed in magazine advertisements. Tjernlund (1991) also claims that Swedish magazine advertisers are more likely to portray women in working roles, far more likely to depict women in recreational roles, and far less likely to depict women in decorative roles than US magazine advertisers. Another cultural difference is the role that fast food plays in society. Research done by Mattson and Helmersson (2007) explains that McDonald's is not associated with poverty in Sweden, rather it is a place where people from all social

classes go, especially teenagers and parents with small children. The statement infers that fast food is connected to lower income consumers in the US which may be a cause to advertise products differently.

The purpose of this study is to see if marketing strategies, evidenced by differences in advertising, highlight cultural considerations by multinational corporations. In doing so, it will be researched if American companies use a standardized, or localized, advertising method in their TV advertisements. According to Kanso and Nelson (2006), firms with large sales volume in foreign markets are more likely to use a standardized advertising approach than a localized approach. American firms, more than non-American firms, tend to follow the localized advertising approach.

## OBJECTIVES

The main objective is to see if TV advertisements in Sweden differ from American TV advertisements and if potential differences are in line with the following cultural differences. The main cultural differences between the two countries are how men and women are portrayed, and the importance of nutritional value and product quality to potential consumers. The purpose of the study is to see if TV advertisements are customized to fit the culture when it comes to the two major differences. If they are, the American fast food chains would be using a localized advertising approach. This study will compare differences in advertisements when all selected companies are included. Secondly, the study will compare television advertisements in both countries to determine whether the ads are similar regardless of location.

**TABLE 1  
LITERATURE REVIEW**

Name	Key Findings
A Comparison of Role Portrayal of Men and Women in Magazine Advertising in the USA and Sweden.	A study by Wiles, C. R., & Tjernlund, A. (1991) shows that men and women are portrayed very differently in magazine advertisements in Sweden and the US. Swedish magazines portray both sexes in recreational roles, whereas American magazines portray both sexes in decorative roles. In the women's magazine category, Swedish advertisers are more likely to portray women in working roles, far more likely to depict women in recreational roles, and far less likely to depict women in decorative roles than US magazine advertisers.
Attitudes of Parents Toward Advertising to Children in the UK, Sweden and New Zealand	Research conducted by Young, B. M., de Bruin, A., & Eagle, L. (2003) establishes that people in Sweden and the UK agree that (1) advertising makes children put pressure on their parents to buy those things, (2) the more advertising children watch, the more they will want products advertised, (3) Children are deceived by adverts more easily than adults, (4) Children are exposed to too much TV advertising and (5) advertising persuades people to buy products they do not really need. The majority of people would disagree that the products advertised the most on TV are the best products to buy.
Older and Bigger: Do Larger, More Established International Firms Use Standardized Advertising More than Their Younger, Smaller Counterparts?	Kanso, A. M., & Nelson, R. A. (2006) proved that firms with large sales volume in foreign markets are more likely to use a standardized advertising approach than a localized approach in a reserach study. In fact, about 45% of firms with large sales volume use a standardized approach. About 45.3% of the established companies use a standardized approach, while only 21.4% of the young companies do so. American firms, more than non-American firms, tend to follow a localized advertising approach. In fact, 80% of the American firms use the localized approach, while only 56% of the non-American firms do so.
Health at a Glance 2013	The OECD (2013) reported that only 17% of children were obese in 2013 in Sweden, which contrasts to 30% of American children.

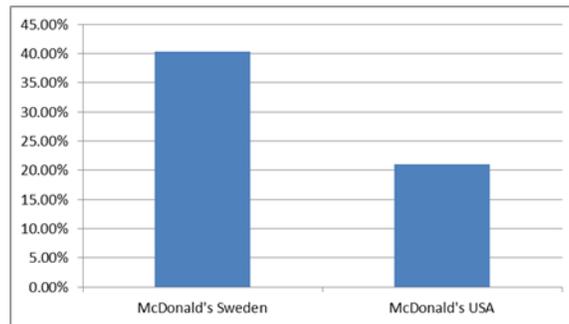
EC permits Sweden to Continue Child Ad Ban	The European Commission has permitted Sweden to continue its ban on television advertising to children under twelve, according to Tylee (2003)
Eating Fast Food: attitudes of Swedish high-school students	Mattsson, J., & Helmersson, H. (2007) has established that Swedish high school students are aware of both the positive and negative characteristics of fast food. In Sweden McDonald's is not associated with low income consumers; rather, it is a place where people from all social classes go, especially teenagers and parents with small children.
International advertising strategy: A review, reassessment and recommendation	Standardization of advertising can take a very strict approach and claim that an advertisement must be identical across markets to qualify as standardized, according to Melewar, T. C., & Vemmervik, C. (2004). However, the same study shows that this strict definition is not very practical since almost no advertisements would qualify as standardized. All promotional efforts must be adapted to some degree even if that only means a translation into the local language. The most justifiable school-of-thought of international advertising is the compromise school that not only recognizes local differences but also some degree of advertising standardization is not only possible but also desirable.
Fast-Food Restaurant Advertising on Television and Its Influence on Childhood Obesity	A study by Chou, Rashad, and Grossman (2008) shows that a ban on fast food TV advertisements would reduce the number of overweight children ages 3–11 in a fixed population by 18 percent and would reduce the number of overweight adolescents ages 12–18 by 14 percent.
The Global Gender Gap Report: 2013	A report by World Economic Forum (2013) shows that Sweden ranks number four in the world in equality, number five in political empowerment. America ranks number 20 in equality, number 54 in political empowerment.
Television food advertising and the prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity: a multi country comparison	Fast food advertising exposure is highest in US, lowest in Sweden. Child obesity rates are highest in US, lowest in Sweden, according to Goris, Petersen, Stamatakis and Veerman (2010).
Fast Food in Sweden	Euromonitor International (2014) proved that with Swedes' increased spending on foodservice, the demand has also started to shift towards more qualitative fast food. Food should be served quickly, for a decent price and with quality. With the limited time that Swedes have on their hands today, the priority to cook food at home is no longer as high on the list. However, as Swedes are also generally concerned about eating healthily, the foodservice they would like to opt for should not only save them time, but also be at least as good as homemade food. McDonald's Corp with all of its franchised outlets led sales in fast food in 2013 with a 26% value share and SEK5.4 billion in sales. The company's high share comes from it being the most well-known fast food outlet in Sweden and globally, and it has the most outlets in Sweden among burger fast food outlets with 227. In number of visitors and transactions, McDonald's also dominates with 22% share of transactions in fast food.
A Socio-cultural Examination of Gender Role: A Study of projection of Women in Advertisements	Research conducted by Grover, S., & Hundal, B. S. (2014) shows that the major stimuli which makes the person dislike the ad is its sex appeal so the advertiser should try to use the stimuli with caution as it can negatively affect sales in majority of cases. Advertisers should not focus on representing women model with an unrelated product since that negatively effects sales volume.

## METHODOLOGY

The first step to reach the stated objectives of the study is to determine which companies are to be examined. The five largest companies from each country were selected to avoid biased results. The five

largest companies in respective country along with the number of TV advertisements examined are stated in the table II below. To collect the necessary data 86 advertisements were downloaded from the official YouTube channels of the companies. The number of examined advertisements is based on online availability.

**FIGURE 1**  
**TIME DEVOTED TO VEGETABLES AND FRUITS BY MCDONALD'S**



**TABLE 2**  
**SUMMARY OF FAST FOOD ADVERTISEMENTS**

<b>USA</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Sweden</b>	<b>N</b>
McDonald's	10	McDonalds	10
Burger King	10	Burger King	6
Subway	8	Subway	7
Taco Bell	10	Max Hamburgare	10
Wendy's	8	Sibylla	7

The second step to reach the objectives is to determine three factors that will illustrate potential differences between the advertisements. Four variables were used to examine if Swedish fast food restaurants portray their food as healthier. The variables were examined by measuring total time displayed in the advertisements, and then dividing that number by the total advertisement length, to achieve proportional results.

The following variables were used in the nutritional comparison namely Cheese, French Fries/Chips, Drinks, and Vegetables and fruits. Displaying more vegetables and fruits in TV advertisements will be considered an attempt to seem healthy in this study. A company who may want to be perceived as healthy will display significantly more vegetables and fruits in their advertisements than other companies. Drinks in the study are assumed to be unhealthy unless an advertisement says otherwise. A company displaying more drinks in an advertisement will therefore be thought of as less healthy. Medium sized French Fries from McDonald's contain 340 calories and can, therefore, be thought of as an unhealthy product. A company displaying more French fries in an advertisement will be thought of as unhealthy in the study. Two slices of American cheese from McDonald's contains 100 calories and can, therefore, be thought of as an unhealthy product since it is not a necessity and would not have to be replaced if removed. A company displaying more cheese in an advertisement will be thought of as unhealthy in the study. Third, there is an examination to see if there was a difference in how much men and women were displayed in the advertisements. The total time for how long both men and women individually, as well as men and women together, was timed and divided by total advertisement length to get a proportional value. The proportional values should be equal if there are no differences between the advertisements. Fourth,

appeals were examined to see if a difference in how customers are reached exists. It is possible that different appeals are used to promote different products. If there is a difference in what is promoted in term of healthy/unhealthy products, a difference should also be featured in the appeals used. Last, the main objective of the advertisement will be examined. The actual products promoted were not examined, instead, the qualities of that product in question was. The main promoted qualities are expected to be price and taste.

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS

First, the results of the nutritional comparison showed that there was no major difference in time devoted to the different variables. Swedish advertisements devotes

- 7.5% more time to vegetables and fruit.
- 7% more time to French Fries/Chips.
- 1% less time to Cheese.
- 2.4% more time to Drinks.

The three multinational companies - McDonald's, Burger King, and Subway – do not seem to advertise their food as healthier in Sweden when looking at the general numbers. However, one major difference, as featured in figure 1, is that Swedish McDonald's displays vegetables and fruits 19.3% more than its American counterpart. Swedish Burger King also promoted vegetables and fruit more heavily than American Burger King. Subway, however, promotes vegetables and fruits more heavily in the US than they do in Sweden. The Swedish restaurant devotes almost twice as much time to French fries as the American restaurants. Max Hamburgare and Sibylla promote fries and chips more than any company in America, with the exception of American McDonald's. The multinational companies seem to follow the trend in Sweden since they all, with the exception of McDonald's, promote French fries and chips more in Sweden than in America. There is no difference in the promotion of cheese between the countries. Swedish Burger King and McDonald's displays drinks more in advertisements than its American counterparties. However, Swedish subway promotes drinks more than American Subway. The complete results for the nutritional comparison are summarized in the table 3 below.

**TABLE 3  
RESULTS**

<b>Company Name</b>	<b>Vegetables and fruit %</b>	<b>French Fries/Chips %</b>	<b>Cheese %</b>	<b>Drink %</b>
MAX Hamburgare	31.9%	22.0%	24.6%	10.4%
Burger King Sweden	51.7%	21.7%	35.0%	21.7%
McDonald's Sweden	40.3%	15.6%	35.5%	26.0%
Sibylla	21.1%	11.6%	10.3%	16.6%
Subway Sweden	24.3%	0.0%	11.0%	4.8%
<b>AVG Sweden</b>	<b>33.9%</b>	<b>14.2%</b>	<b>23.3%</b>	<b>15.9%</b>
Wendy's	24.1%	7.1%	34.3%	12.7%
Burger King USA	37.8%	0.0%	35.4%	5.3%
Taco Bell	7.9%	7.4%	12.9%	10.5%
Subway USA	41.2%	2.2%	9.9%	21.3%
McDonalds USA	21.0%	19.3%	28.9%	17.6%
<b>AVG USA</b>	<b>26.4%</b>	<b>7.2%</b>	<b>24.3%</b>	<b>13.5%</b>

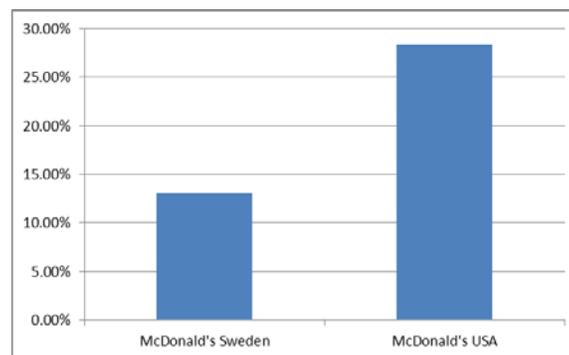
Second, the results of the gender comparison showed that Swedish advertisements displays

- Men 17.2% less.
- Women 1.1% more.
- Men and women together 7.8% less.

The three multinational companies - McDonald's, Burger King, and Subway – seem to feature men and women differently based on location. As shown in figure 2, McDonald's display males in 13% of total advertisement time in Sweden. Men are used more to promote products in American advertisements where males are displayed in 28.3% of the total advertisement time. American McDonald's devotes 13.8% less time to females than Swedish McDonald's. Also significant is that men and women are never featured together in the selected American McDonald's advertisements. Burger King and Subway are showing the same trend as McDonald's. Burger King features 17.7% more men, and 25.8% less women in American advertisements. American Subway features 19.3% more men, and 8.3% more women than its Swedish counterpart.

The complete results for the gender comparison are summarized in the table 4 below.

**FIGURE 2  
TIME DEVOTED TO MALES BY MCDONALD'S**



**TABLE 4  
GENDER COMPARISON**

Company Name	Male %	Female %	Men and Women %
MAX Hamburgare	51.8%	24.9%	17.5%
Burger King Sweden	25.6%	28.3%	6.0%
McDonald's Sweden	13.0%	28.1%	6.5%
Sibylla	22.9%	14.6%	0.0%
Subway Sweden	34.8%	15.1%	0.9%
<b>AVG Sweden</b>	<b>29.6%</b>	<b>22.2%</b>	<b>6.2%</b>
Wendy's	43.8%	33.8%	18.2%
Burger King USA	43.3%	2.5%	2.5%
Taco Bell	64.6%	31.5%	29.2%
Subway USA	54.1%	23.4%	20.1%
McDonalds USA	28.3%	14.3%	0.0%
<b>AVG USA</b>	<b>46.9%</b>	<b>21.1%</b>	<b>14.0%</b>

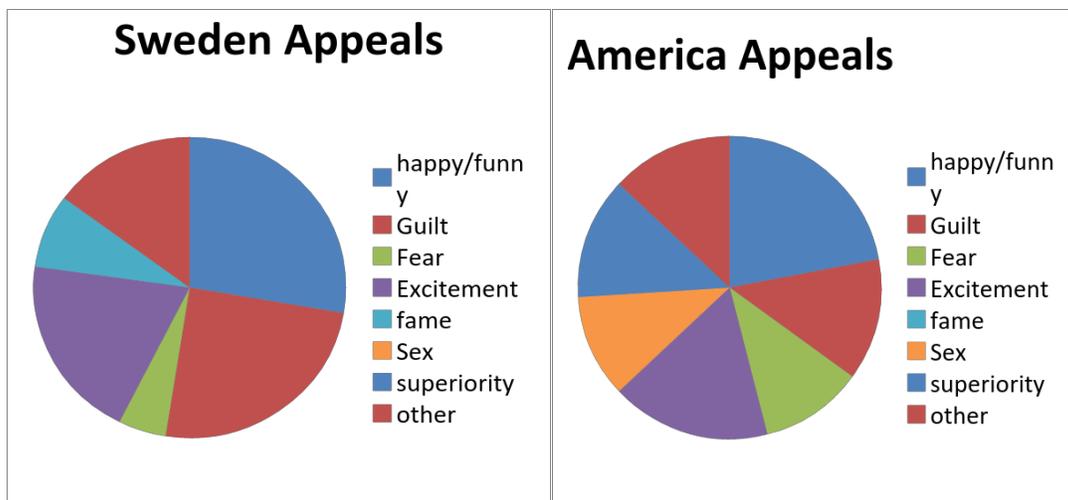
Third, the results of the appeal comparison show that the majority of advertisements in both countries use happiness and humor as the main appeal. Advertisements were considered happy or funny when they attempted to associate their product to laughter or happiness. McDonald's in particular used this appeal to make its brand and products seem fun. The biggest differences between the countries are in the guilt appeal, fame appeal, sex appeal, and superiority appeal. The guilt appeal was more commonly used in Sweden. When advertisements are classified in this category they are telling the audience to use their product to avoid unwanted consequences. The guilt appeal is most commonly used to promote healthy food. The fame appeal suggests that using the promoted product will somehow help you enter a higher social class. Overall, the fame appeal was used in 8% of Swedish advertisements compared to 0% in America. Advertisements using attractive people to get the audience's attention were classified as using a sex appeal. The sex appeal is used in 11% of American advertisements compared to 0% in Sweden. Lastly, a superiority appeal was more commonly used in America, especially by American Burger King. Advertisements that wanted to portray the company image simply as better without really promoting anything was classified with the superiority appeal. People with higher class were often featured in these advertisements. The goal of the advertisements was for the audience to think of the company as generally better and having higher class. A summary of the used appeals can be found in figure 3.

The complete results for the appeal comparison are summarized in the table 5 below.

**TABLE 5  
RESULTS FOR APPEAL**

Appeal	Sweden %	America %
Happy/Funny	28%	22%
Guilt	25%	13%
Fear	5%	11%
Excitement	20%	17%
Fame	8%	0%
Sex	0%	11%
Superiority	0%	13%
Other	15%	13%

**FIGURE 3  
US AND SWEDISH APPEALS**



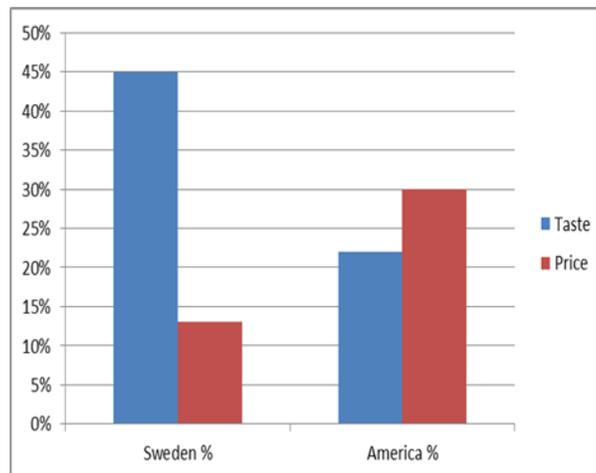
Finally, there were major differences in the objectives of the advertisements. Swedish advertisements promoted taste more than anything else. As displayed in figure 4, 45% of all Swedish advertisements had promoting the taste or quality of its product as the main objective. Only 22% of American advertisements had taste or quality as the main objective. Instead, American advertisements are more concerned with promoting price. 30% of American advertisements promotes price, compared to 13% of Swedish advertisements. Swedish advertisements tend to promote causes more than American advertisements. The difference between the countries in how often causes are promoted is 9%. The American companies promote their company name more than Swedish companies. Nothing specific is promoted in these advertisements, instead the purpose of the advertisements is to remind the audience that the company is still available. An example is McDonald's who would display a classic Big Mac and has a voice saying their slogan "I'm Lovin' It!" in the background. The company name is promoted in 9% of American advertisements and 0% in Swedish advertisements. Promoting health was the main objective of 23% of Swedish advertisements, and 17% of American advertisements. The majority of the advertisements where health was promoted were Subway commercials in both countries.

The complete results for the promotion comparison are summarized in the table 6 below.

**TABLE 6  
RESULTS FOR PROMOTION**

Promoted	Sweden %	America %
Taste and Quality	45%	22%
Price	13%	30%
Health	23%	17%
Causes	13%	4%
Company Name	0%	9%
Other	8%	17%

**FIGURE 4  
US AND SWEDISH COMPARISON FOR PRICE AND TASTE**



## DISCUSSION

Mattson and Helmersson (2007) stated that eating fast food in Sweden is not connected to poverty. The fact that taste is promoted more heavily in Sweden, while price is more important American

customers, certainly backs that statement up. The differences in the nutritional comparison suggest that it is necessary to advertise products differently in the two countries. McDonald's and Burger King are forced to alter their advertising approach in Sweden to feature more vegetables and fruits to stay competitive with the local brands. Subway, however struggle to differentiate themselves based on promoting themselves as healthy in Sweden, since the approach has become too common to be profitable. As a result, Subway advertises less vegetables and fruit than its American counterpart. It is possible that Burger King, and McDonald's are using a localized marketing approach since they advertise different objectives, in different ways, in Sweden and America. It seems like Swedish McDonald's and Burger King attempts to copy what the major Swedish companies are doing. Max Hamburgare and Sibylla advertises more vegetables and fruit on average than the American companies do, so Swedish McDonald's and Burger King alter their approach to fit the Swedish market. Research by Melewar and Vemmervik (2004) shows that standardization of advertising means that an advertisement must be identical across markets. The study also claims that the most justifiable school-of-thought of international advertising is the compromise school that not only recognizes local differences but also some degree of advertising standardization. The standardization approach does not fit the results of this study for McDonald's and Burger King. However, there are elements suggesting that a complete localized approach is not used either. The fact that companies want to stay consistent with their brand image is supported by the small differences in the appeal comparison. Although some differences exist, the happy/funny appeal along with the guilt appeal and excitement appeal were the most commonly used appeals in both countries. The most fitting school-of-thought to describe the advertising is, therefore, the compromise school-of-thought. The results of a study by Kanso and Nelson (2006) showed that this is not all that surprising since about 80% of American multinational companies use a localized advertising approach.

It is safe to assume that Swedish fast food restaurants target a different market segment than American restaurants based on this study. The restaurants in Sweden target anybody who wants a high quality meal at a decent price. American restaurants however, targets people who are looking to eat for a cheap price, without regard for what the food contains. Higher child obesity rates could be a result of cheaper, lower quality products in America. A study by OECD (2013) shows that 17% of children were obese in 2013 in Sweden, compared to 30% of American Children. Chou, Rashad, and Grossman (2008) stated that a ban on fast food TV advertisements would reduce the number of overweight children ages 3–11 in a fixed population by 18 percent and would reduce the number of overweight adolescents ages 12–18 by 14 percent. It is known that children have an influence on their parents purchasing decisions, and that children are easily influenced by TV advertisements. In fact, Young, De Bruin, and Eagle (2003) states that parents in Sweden agree that (1) advertising makes children put pressure on their parents to buy things, (2) the more advertising children watch, the more they will want products advertised, (3) Children are deceived by adverts more easily than adults, (4) Children are exposed to too much TV advertising and (5) advertising persuades people to buy products they do not really need. However, Sweden has a ban on TV advertising to children under the age of twelve, according to Tylee (2003). As a result, American children are conditioned by TV advertisements to enjoy the low quality food at an early age. The Swedish ban prevents this process from happening which could explain why child obesity rates are lower in Sweden. This idea is supported by Goris, Petersen, Stamatakis, and Veerman (2010), who says there is a direct correlation between fast food advertising exposure and child obesity rates. In the multicountry comparison Sweden had the lowest exposure, as well as the lowest child obesity rates. America, however, had the highest exposure and the highest child obesity rates. A second explanation is that American fast food is advertised as more affordable and is, therefore, more frequently consumed. A combination of the two ideas likely has a major influence on American obesity rates.

The differences in the gender comparison suggest that Americans view males as more of an authority. The American advertisements display 17.2% more men on average and all multinational companies display more men in the American market than they do in the Swedish market. The World Economic Forum (2013) ranks Sweden number four in the world in overall gender equality and number five in equality in political empowerment. America ranks number twenty in overall equality and number 54 in

equality in political empowerment. The report suggests gender stereotypes are stronger in America than they are in Sweden. America does not elect females in leader within government possessions which indicate that Americans are less likely to respond to messages presented by females. Sweden, however, have more women in leader positions within the government which indicates that gender stereotypes does not play a big part in society. This explains why American advertisements feature more men than Swedish advertisements.

American TV advertisements are 11% more likely to use a sex appeal to sell its product than Swedish advertisement. The majority of the advertisements using a sex appeal used attractive women to do so. Research by Grove and Hundal (2014) shows that sex appeal negatively affects sales in the majority of cases and advertisers should not focus on representing women model with an unrelated product. Fast food is certainly an unrelated product to sex which should cause problems for the American restaurants.

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