

# Gay Consumers as a nich market: Changing representations of male homosexuality in German advertisements from 2000 to the present

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## Keywords

Homosexuality, advertisement, stereotypes, gender, gay advertisement, gay marketing, perception and reproduction of stereotypes, German advertisement, gender stereotypes

## Abstract

Over the last twenty years, advertising has recognized a new market segment: gay consumers now constitute a *niche market* which is large and affluent enough to deserve more media and marketing attention. Drawing on gender and queer studies, the article will analyse the representation of male homosexuality in German advertisements will identify socioeconomic reasons for the changing representations of homosexuality in German society – bearing in mind that advertisements featuring homosexuality still tend to provoke controversial reactions in Germany, even though gay marriage was permitted in October 2017. While at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, homosexuality was still represented in a covert way in subsequent years these media portrayals changed considerably: the representation of male homosexuality is now openly supported by well-known brands. Moreover, in recent advertising, signs and symbols are used which openly identify the portrayed men as homosexuals, while at the same highlighting the ‘naturalness’ of homosexuality and gay relationships.

## Introduction: Homosexuality in advertising

Although gay marriage has been part of the political diversity discourse in Germany for some time now and was eventually legalized in 2017 in Germany, the topic of homosexuality continues to be surrounded by stereotyping and prejudices, be it in everyday life or in public discourses. One reason for this is the widespread social dominance of heterosexuality. As social theorist Judith Butler pointed out in *Gender Trouble* (1990), in a patriarchal gender order which is based on heterosexual hegemony, sex, gender and gender identities are connected to social norms which do not allow for the existence of "incoherent" and "discontinuous" sexed/gendered beings. Bodies, gender identities and forms of desire outside the "heterosexual matrix" and thus outside intelligibility, i.e. the realm of thinking and understanding, are consequently constructed as "unnatural" (Butler 1990:35). Irony, laughter and negative stereotyping of gays are particularly common strategies of containment and an attempt to return what is perceived as devious and "discontinuous" behaviour to the binary gender system.

A study published by Germany's Anti-Discrimination Agency in 2017 to gauge the support for legal equality for homosexual marriage revealed that a majority (83% of those surveyed) supports equality in same-sex marriages, but prejudices remain. Homosexuals still face discrimination in Germany although the country's General Law on Equal Treatment prohibits it. Even as late as 1994, "homosexual acts" were legally considered to be criminal. In 2001, same-sex couples were able to enter a "registered life partnership", which,

however, was perceived as a second-class marriage because same-sex couples were not allowed to adopt children. In comparison with other countries from Europe and the rest of the world, Germany was lagging behind with regard to marriage for all, which eventually became a law in Germany as late as October 2017. 1

As a public media space, advertising has the power to influence the way we think and behave. As a channel of social ideologies, it also has the power to articulate changing attitudes towards social and gender identities: The representation of homosexuality in advertising is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Not until 1994, when the Swedish furniture store IKEA produced the first gay-friendly commercial with a same-sex couple, did homosexuality feature in advertising at all. Since then, many global mainstream companies are more interested than ever in embracing the purchasing power of the gay market.

In international comparison, mainstream advertising with a gay-themed content tends to appear more frequently in the USA. An estimated 35% of the top 100 USA companies directly target the gay community. This fact can be explained by the very specific consumption patterns of the US gay community: According to research, half of the homosexuals living in the USA do not consume gay media and over 90% of gay men admit to reading generic mainstream magazines. Reportedly, only 3% of gay media outlets and platforms reach their intended audience (Mcnamara/Descubes 2016).

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1 - For further information see a study conducted by the German Federal Government in 2014 at: [http://sozialministerium.baden-wuerttemberg.de/fileadmin/redaktion/m-sm/intern/downloads/Downloads\\_Offenheit\\_und\\_Akzeptanz/Onlinebefragung\\_Aktionsplan\\_Akzeptanz\\_2014.pdf](http://sozialministerium.baden-wuerttemberg.de/fileadmin/redaktion/m-sm/intern/downloads/Downloads_Offenheit_und_Akzeptanz/Onlinebefragung_Aktionsplan_Akzeptanz_2014.pdf) (Accessed 30 January 2018).

In Europe, by contrast, companies reveal a greater reluctance to targeting the gay market directly via mainstream media as they fear that gay-themed advertising might result in image loss for their brand. On the other hand, given the high level of market saturation, companies are seeking to open up new and more specialist consumers. Hence – larger and recognized – brands have started engaging in LGBT-marketing. Companies which participate in targeted marketing have a higher visibility and consumers who are accepting of homosexuality will be attracted and remain loyal towards a brand which depicts homosexuals and a homosexual lifestyle in a positive manner (Krauß 2008: 1).

Consequently, in Germany as in other countries, advertisers are becoming aware of the economic potential of the gay community. Gay consumers now constitute what marketers describe a *niche market* which is large and affluent enough to deserve more media and marketing attention (Sender 2004: 1): Gay consumers often live in single or two people households, are childless and have, therefore, more disposable income than heterosexual consumers. Surveys have shown that 7,4% of the German population identify as LGBT (Dalia Research 2016), with an average salary of about 16€/h (Kroh et al. 2017) and an estimated worth of 50 to 100 billion Euro to the German economy (*Der Tagesspiegel* 2016). Moreover, gay male consumers are perceived as having a high degree of brand loyalty and a strong interest in exclusive products (Krauß 2008: 6; Neumann 2016). These facts illustrate the community's value to marketers – or, as one German marketer puts it: "First get the gays, then get the girls and then comes the rest" (Wahl, quoted in Neumann 2016). It is, therefore, surprising that only little empirical research has so far been

conducted on consumers' responses to implicit or explicit gay-themed advertising in gay vs. mainstream media. A notable exception are McNamara and Descubes (2016), who provide a comprehensive overview of recent empirical research on gay and lesbian consumer behaviour. According to their overview, it would appear that gay consumers are receptive to and appreciative of gay-themed advertising and therefore show more interest in brands and products which are targeted specifically at them, allowing them to self-identify and feel represented.

The following analysis focuses on how marketing professionals in Germany have approached this valuable, dynamic and by no means homogeneous segment over the last 20 years: What representational strategies have been employed in recent German advertising to depict male homosexuality and how and to what extent have they changed? What values, ideologies and myths are being transported and (re-) produced? To what extent is homosexuality overtly addressed? The advertising examples discussed here were published in German-speaking countries and were selected because of their visibility, with a distinction being made between poster advertising and commercials.

## Homosexuality in German poster advertising

In 2000 and 2007, the German coffee manufacturer *Jacobs* published two advertisements for the light version of the coffee brand, showing a young man drinking a cup of Jacobs Krönung Light coffee. There are two versions of the 2000 poster. In one poster, he is casually sitting on a chair (Fig. 1a), in the other one, he is sitting on the floor (Fig. 1b). In both

versions, he is barefoot and wearing an unbuttoned, white shirt and blue jeans. He is holding a turquoise coffee mug in his hand and is smiling into the camera. While the background is a simple white, allowing the recipient to focus on the male protagonist, the turquoise colour of the slightly inclined frame, mug and lettering are reminiscent of the classic Jacobs design in green-black and combine to emphasize the light version with a paler tone. The only difference between the two versions is

that in Fig. 1b the model looks even more directly and closely towards the camera, which is positioned at a slightly higher angle in order to create a more intimate perspective and to make the viewer feel more engaged with the subject.

Figure 1a: Jacobs Krönung (2000)

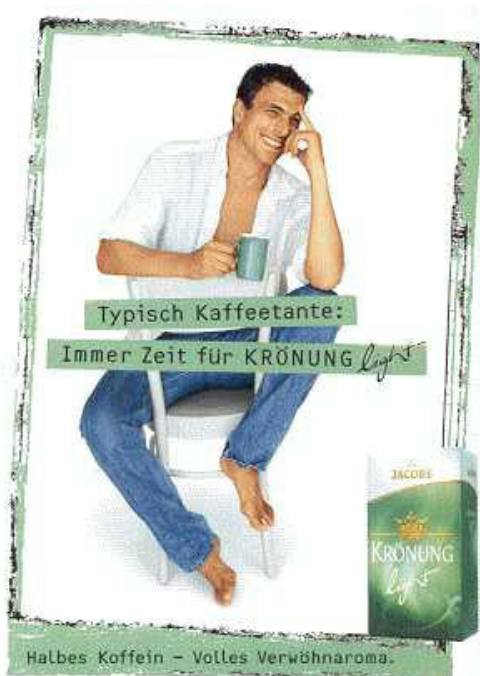


Figure 1b: Jacobs Krönung (2000)



Although the 2000 advertisements were placed in the German gay press, they avoid explicit gay imagery. The visual signs do not unambiguously mark the protagonist as homosexual. – he could be all things to all people – hetero-, homo-, or metrosexual.<sup>2</sup> The male body in the advert can therefore be interpreted with the concept of Roland Barthes’ “sliding signifier”, shifting and changing meaning depending on who is decoding (Barthes 2006:67). In its largely stereotype-free representation of a male person whose sexual orientation remains vague and who favours a healthy life-style and a sensible diet the company has decided for a *coded marketing strategy* (Krauß 2008:15f). In a coded or implicit gay-themed marketing strategy, advertisers use special cues, hidden signs, and linguistic codes which allow their advertisements to be specifically recognized by gay consumers, but which pass largely unnoticed by consumers in general.

Strategically, companies which use implicit gay-themed advertising can be seen as taking advantage of the polysemic nature and quality of signs (cf. David Morley 1993, John Fiske 2010), due to which a variety of different interpretations can be inferred from any media message by the recipient. A coded strategy is, therefore, particularly suitable for reaching both the gay market and the general public. Using a coded strategy is also a way of avoiding controversy and of containing the risk of a negative reaction from the larger (and

therefore financially valuable) heterosexual mainstream segment. Not surprisingly, therefore, this is the earliest and also the most frequently used marketing strategy, be it in the gay press or in mainstream media (Krauß 2008:15f).

The only reference to homosexuality can be found at the linguistic level: In the middle of both advertisements, the slogan reads “Typical coffee aunt: always time for KRÖNUNG Light” (“Typisch Kaffeetante: Immer Zeit für Krönung Light”). The term “coffee aunt” suggests the notion of effeminacy since it refers linguistically to a female person. Besides, light products are often associated with female consumers and a health-conscious lifestyle. Even more importantly, while “Kaffeetante” is the German expression for a “coffee addict”, the German word “Tante” might evoke for a German readership in form of a pun the colloquially used term “Tunte”, meaning a “pansy” or “poofter”. Thus, the linguistic inference of homosexuality, but also its publication in a gay magazine, contribute in subtly framing the meaning of male homosexuality.

In 2007, a new version of the advertisement was produced that promoted the same product, but with a different male model and a more overt use of what can be identified as gay imagery. The advertisement is premised on stereotypes of gay men as especially knowledgeable in matters of fashion, style, personal grooming and interior design. There are also two versions of this advert: in the first version (Fig. 2a), the man is sitting in a comfortable position in an armchair, in the second poster (Fig. 2b), he is shown only from the chest upwards, lying on a wooden base, his arms and hands as a support for his head in a slightly angled, gentle-looking posture with the camera zoomed onto his face. In both posters, he openly smiles into the camera.

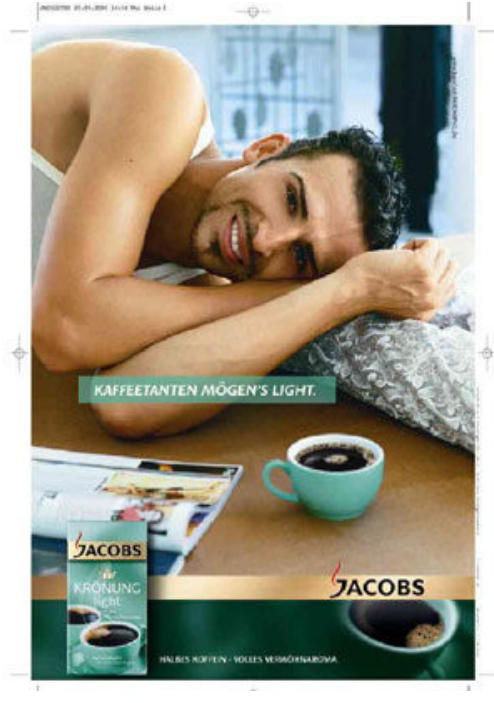
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2 - The first recorded use of the term metrosexual was by writer Mark Simpson in the UK national newspaper *The Independent* (15 November 1994). As a blend of “metropolitan” and “heterosexual”, the term refers to straight men who take on many of the attributes usually associated with women or gay men, such as interest in fashion, grooming, appearance. The Oxford English Dictionary now defines metrosexual as a “heterosexual urban man who enjoys shopping, fashion, and similar interests traditionally associated with women and homosexuals” (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/metrosexual>).

Figure 2a: Jacobs Krönung (2007)



Figure 2b: Jacobs Krönung (2007)



The portrayal of the man and his surroundings in the 2007 advertisements are much more clearly stereotyped than that of the earlier version and indicate that gay consumers were openly being addressed. The generously spaced and stylishly furnished apartment indicates a higher income and an interest in interior design. The dressmaker's dummy on wheels wearing a black dress and the magazines suggest that the man is active in the fashion or arts industry. The man's generally groomed appearance - gel-conditioned hair, dark trimmed beard, plucked eyebrows, fashionable sandals with striking toe loops and long, black trousers as well as a conspicuously elegant way of holding the small turquoise green semicircular coffee cup and matching saucer - further enhance the notion of effeminacy. At the same time, the white muscle shirt reveals a considerable amount of naked skin and helps to eroticise his

appearance. As in the earlier advertising, the connoted linguistic message "Coffee aunts like it light" ("Kaffeetanten mögen's Light") further establishes the meaning of homosexuality. Visual and linguistic signs combine to identify the man as a homosexual, ruling out the "both-as-you-go" option of the 2000 advert.

The description of homosexuality in both Jacobs Krönung- advertisements show that over the years companies have discovered the affluent "gay men" market segment and have made advertising more open and target-group-oriented. With growing equal rights and social acceptance of homosexuality, showing homosexual males and couples has also become more acceptable in advertising, as can be seen in the next example. In 2010, the Hornbach DIY superstore-chain openly addressed homosexuality with the depiction of a same-sex couple in close and intimate

body contact with one another. Two men can be seen in the centre of a kitchen which is being constructed, one of the two men is sitting on the worktop, the other is standing in front of him with his left arm around the other man's neck while his eyes are closed. His mouth forms a slight smile. These (public) displays of affection as signs for relationship were labelled by Desmond Morris as tie signs, that he defined as "any action which indicates the existence of a personal relationship" (Morris 1971: 86). So the body contact is not only an unintentional or friendly touch but states a closer intimacy between the two men.

With the representation of two gay men building a home and domestic space for

their relationship, the advert presents a positive alternative to heteronormativity. The advert pitches directly to gay couples, but departs at the same time from traditional stereotypes of effeminate homosexuals by showing two gays engaging in DIY and craftsmanship – an area traditionally considered to be a heterosexually male domain. The advert's slogan in large letters "You can be anything - but not clumsy" ("Du kannst alles sein – nur nicht ungeschickt") is an interesting play on the viewer's imagination. While the modifier "but clumsy" defines clumsiness in craftsmanship as unacceptable, the advert's slogan "You can be anything" can be read in the context of the advert as an overt allusion to sexual orientation, with

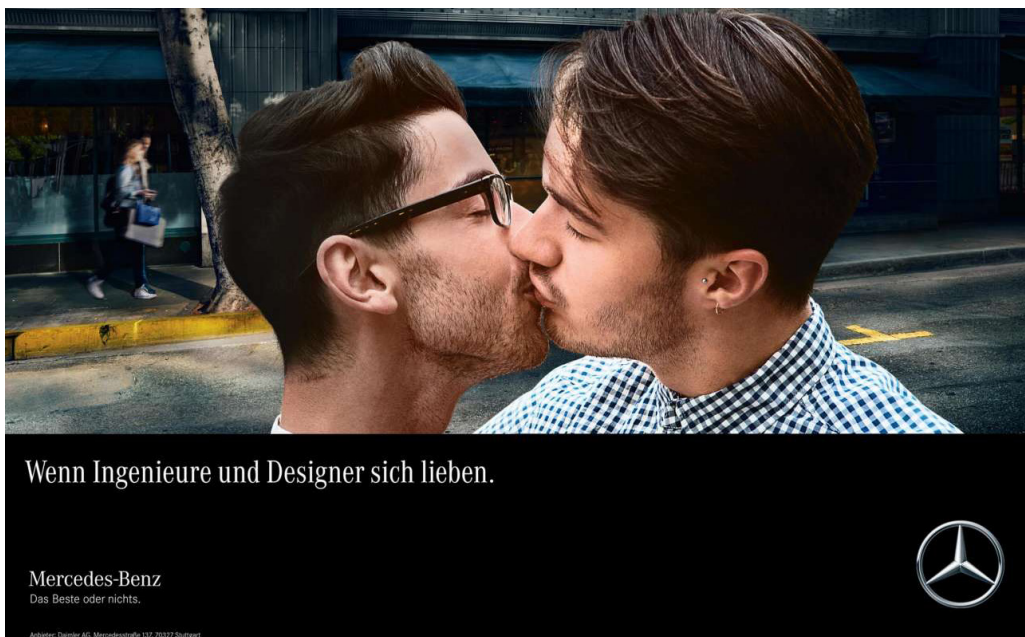
Figure 3: Hornbach (2010)



the company expressing its tolerance and support of sexual freedom. The company is thus trying to present their brand as progressive, inclusive and reaching out to the gay community. However, bearing in mind the important role of generational change and looked at from the perspective of a younger male gay, this advert might also be decoded in a slightly less enthusiastic manner: the use of a modal verb and its communicative function of formally asking for and granting permission can be construed as expressing condescending acceptance from a hegemonial heteronormative society: For this reason, especially a younger generation of gay consumers, the so-called "post-gays" (Savin-Williams 2006), who see their sexual orientation as 'normal' and part of mainstream society, might find a gay-themed advert which gives them "permission" to follow their sexual orientation as offensive and condescending.

A more daring and frank progression towards an open and stereotype-free depiction of male homosexuality can be seen in the poster advertising of the automobile group Mercedes-Benz, which appeared in 2016: it features two men openly kissing in public and watched by passers-by in the background. While the advertisement's slogan "When engineers and designers love each other" ("Wenn Ingenieure und Designer sich lieben") might refer to the effective cooperation of the technology and design departments at Daimler, the in-your-face representation of two men publicly displaying affection resolve any ambiguity and endorse gay relationships and lifestyles in an overt manner. The only stereotypical signifier of homosexuality is the neat and trendy appearance of the two men, both with a three-day beard as well as the small silver ear piercings of the model on the right. The German Daimler company is one of the most influential representatives of

Figure 4: Mercedes Benz (2016)





what is considered to be a heterosexually male-dominated automotive sector. With this largely cliché-free representation of open gay commitment, the company unconditionally and very openly expresses a positive attitude towards homosexuality. Up until now, no well-known company in Germany has been prepared to go this far in addressing gay consumers, which is even more remarkable as negative attitudes surrounding the topic of homosexuality were still comparatively widespread in Germany in 2016: according to the earlier mentioned Anti-Discrimination's Study (2017), almost 20% of Germans who took part in the study considered homosexuality to be "unnatural" and almost 40% said they found it unpleasant to see men or women displaying public affection for each other, for example, by kissing. Given that overt representations of homosexual acts in public are still relatively rare in contemporary Germany, the Daimler company is not only reaching out to the gay community. Moreover, and even more importantly, the visual signs in conjunction with the linguistic ones clearly invite the viewer to engage with the topic of homosexuality and confront and (re-)consider their own emotions, reactions and prejudices. In this context, it is certainly not unimportant that the advert shows two passers-by in the background staring at the two men kissing. Are they maybe the afore-mentioned 20% and 40% who feel put out by public displays of homosexual emotions?

## **Homosexuality in German Commercials**

Poster advertisements address the topic of homosexuality, but tend to suffer from low target orientation. Gay-themed advertising, therefore, tends to appear more frequently in Internet commercials

and social media marketing, where companies can target their message to the specific group, without maybe alienating other consumers. Moreover, by combining several sensory impressions, images and sound track, a more realistic and comprehensive representation is possible.

The Swedish furniture store Ikea is a pioneer in designing advertising for homosexuals. Globally, with over 20 examples, the company has a long-standing history of including gay and transgender themes in its advertising campaigns. However, no IKEA ad has so far appeared in gay media which demonstrates the company's policy of not segmenting their advertising. In 1994, IKEA produced the first advertisement with a gay couple on US television. In 2010, a TV commercial was published in German-speaking countries which addressed the topic of sexual identity and orientation in a humorous manner: a woman and a man are shown kissing passionately in the stairwell of an old building. They enter the apartment and fall over the backrest of a sofa to finally end up on the kitchen table, ready for sexual intercourse. Having thus established the notion of heteronormality, the couple are interrupted by the surprise entrance of a man who addresses the male ("Florian") with the affectionate: "Darling". In the next scene, both men are seen sitting at the kitchen reaching across the table to touch tenderly, while the narrator comments that: "Florian sometimes has to store bigger things and Ikea has the right solution for it". At the same time – visually and ironically underlining the narrator's comment –, the camera pans into the frog's perspective under the table, where the female figure is secretively retrieving her ballerina shoe and, unnoticed by the men, retreating into the kitchen cupboard, thus disappearing from the scene of happy homosexual coupledness.

Figure 5: IKEA, "Florian" (2010)



This advertisement might be considered clichéd in its presentation of male homosexuality: the gay partner is dressed in a pink polo short, while Florian, the bisexual male, is about to commit adultery, evoking the stereotype of promiscuity in gay male relationships. However, in the comedic closing shot, the advert breaks with the heteronormative idea and (re-)establishes homosexuality as committed and devoted life-style. Besides, the advert cross-references the earlier 1994 IKEA advert: again the dining table has a high symbolic value as it signifies commitment and domesticity in the couple's relationship. This is a humorous depiction of open sexual identities and orientations, but the humour is not used at the expense of the gay couple. On the contrary: the advertisement's depiction of open, fluid sexual identities and orientations is in keeping with the well-known Ikea product image - furniture which is adaptable, can be moved around, reassembled and rearranged in order to create more space, freedom and comfort.

Although gay-themed, the advert manages to appeal to a wider heterosexual and non-heterosexual audience - and to connect a broad group of consumers to their products and the company's corporate philosophy.

An even stronger and more nuanced focus on inclusiveness and diversity can be observed in Ikea's 2016 Christmas commercial broadcast on private TV channels and online: To the background of relaxing swing music, the domestic scenario of a festively decorated home is set with its members preparing for Christmas. Children are looking out of the window watching the rain (not snow) pour down. In the next scene, the children are seen painting place cards and, accidentally also painting the tablecloth, laughing, dancing and decorating a gingerbread house with icing sugar, thus unwittingly recreating the impression of snow. A woman is preparing food in the kitchen, kneading a sticking dough and struggling with the recipe. The family's attempts at preparing for Christmas are

accompanied by the narrator asking: "Does it always have to snow at Christmas? Does everything have to succeed right away? Does everything have to be perfect in order to be perfect?" Then, the first guests, an elderly couple and two young men, arrive and everybody, including a disguised Santa Claus, gather around the Christmas

dinner table, eating, drinking, laughing and celebrating together. The final shot focuses on the two fashionably dressed young men (Fig. 6) and one of them kisses the other on the cheek which outs them as a couple, while an ending voice-over asks: "Or isn't it the most important thing that everybody feels at home?"

Figure 6: IKEA, "Zusammen wird's ein Fest" (2016)



The notion of 'home' - a place where family and friends convene to celebrate together - is, of course, in keeping with Ikea products and the company's philosophy. Although home interior elements set the scene for the narrative and can be directly connected to the brand, the message behind the advertising has an added layer: in a period, when the traditional nuclear family is slowly disintegrating, the value of family is emphasized and at the same redefined and opened up, including the young beside the old, same-sex persons beside heterosexuals - with the gay couple being represented as integrated members. This Ikea advert is thus an example of an inclusive approach directed

at wider general public (Krauß 2008:13). This integrative approach addresses consumers as individuals, not as a market segment, in order to develop a relationship with them on the basis of common values - such as inclusion, togetherness and sharing experiences across the borders of age, gender and sexual orientation. In its all-embracing, inclusive representation of diversity, the advert reflects social reality in Germany and is able to reach out to a large number of people.

The third selected commercial also advertises the Christmas theme, but this time comes from the mobile communications provider Vodafone. This

time a certain product is advertised, which is however only mentioned almost casually at the end of the advertising video. Therefore, one can assume that the advertising of the brand image is in the foreground, which can also be clearly interpreted from the topic of the commercial. Again, the focus is on the value of family and thus brings with it several parallels to the Ikea commercial. The commercial is introduced with the fade in of a girl and a calendar with encircling of the 24th day which sets the theme

In the second scene you see a young man at the train station with a big present under his arm and a smartphone in his hand. He moves hectically in the station hall filled

with Christmas decorations and many people, looks at his smartphone and sees that his train has been cancelled. The girl as narrator comments as an off-voice that at "Christmas no way is too far".

As in the Ikea commercial, in the following scene the narrator is shown in front of a window wet with rain, and she also notes with little euphoria that "it is no longer white Christmas", which is made clear by the recording of the heavy rain outside. Afterwards the house is shown from outside with coloured Christmas lighting, which is attached in arrangement of the rainbow flag at the building as well as at a Christmas tree.

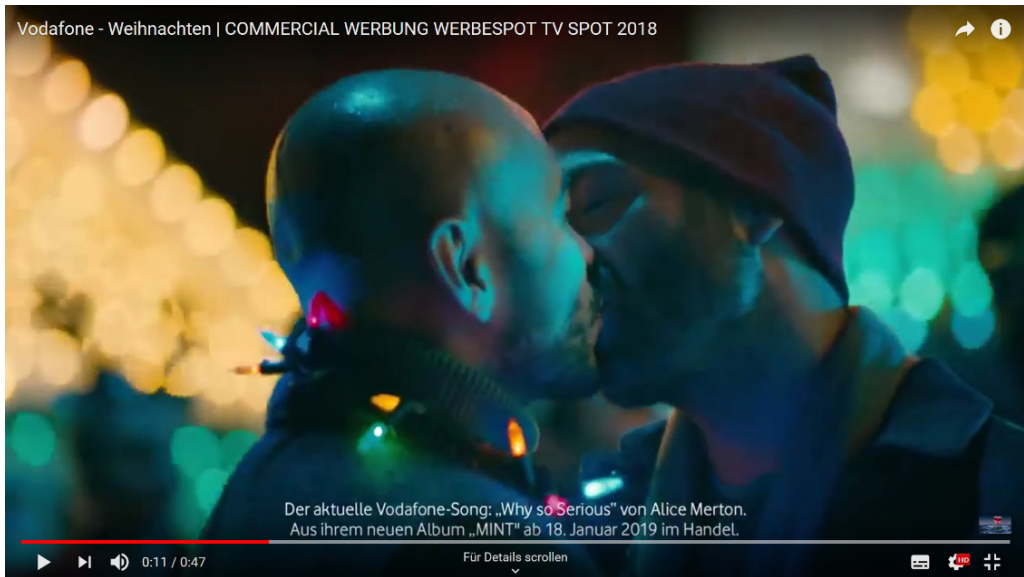
Figure 7: Vodafone, "Christmas Family-Card" (2016)



This is underlined by the narrator's statement "but it is colourful", which is both a pictorial contrast to the "white Christmas", but also a metaphorical one. In the shortly following fade-in of two kissing men in the centre of the picture in front of the colourfully illuminated house he statement

"colourful" gets a double meaning. On the one hand the colourful lighting is addressed, and on the other hand the representation of the two men, who obviously belong to the gay community, which is often represented as colourful.

Figure 8: Vodafone, "Christmas Family-Card" (2016)



In the next scene the focus lies on a goose being pushed into the oven by a woman who may be the narrator's mother, which is documented on video by the girl. She says that "Christmas is not a day off", whereupon a man with a smartphone in his hand in a fireman's uniform is shown sitting at the fire station. By recording his screen showing the girl with her mother in the kitchen and the girl saying "Hi Papa" (00:14), it becomes clear how he relates to the protagonist and why Christmas is not a day off for her.

Her next comment is that "Christmas is not a skin colour, which is visually supported by a black person who laughingly puts on a Christmas cap and in the following sequence kisses a white woman who also wears a Christmas cap.

In the same short frequency pattern, a man in a mirror is seen shaving his hair with an electric shaver. One hears the narrator say that "Christmas is not hate", whereupon the association of skinhead could arise

in the viewer. But this is reversed in the scene following and in the antithesis "but love" (00:22) coming from the narrator. A child without hair is shown in a hospital bed, looking at a tablet together with the man both laughing. It can be assumed that the child is ill and that the man shaved his hair out of empathy, i.e. "love".

In the last scene, the different people are brought together to form the final frame of the spot. At first you can see how the woman takes the burnt goose out of the. The narrator says that "Christmas is NOT perfect". Two elderly people, man and woman, are also faded in, who could represent the girl's grandparents. The older woman is shaking her head in the kitchen next to the goose, while the older man, laughing, reaches for a tablet and opens an online order page for pizza. The entire family is then depicted with many of the previously shown actors gathered in the living room of the house. In the background you can hear laughter and cheering as well as the voice of the

protagonist summarizing her message: "Christmas is what brings us together" It also shows the kissing couple of the black man and the white woman, the young man from the train station who arrives at the house and the fireman and father who he sits on the sofa and is happy about the arrival. The young girl embraces the young man and thus closes the story behind the commercial, since at this moment the voice-over also changes and the otherwise well-known speaker of Vodafone commercials advertises the product with the subsequent "We bring you together" message (00:35-00:36).

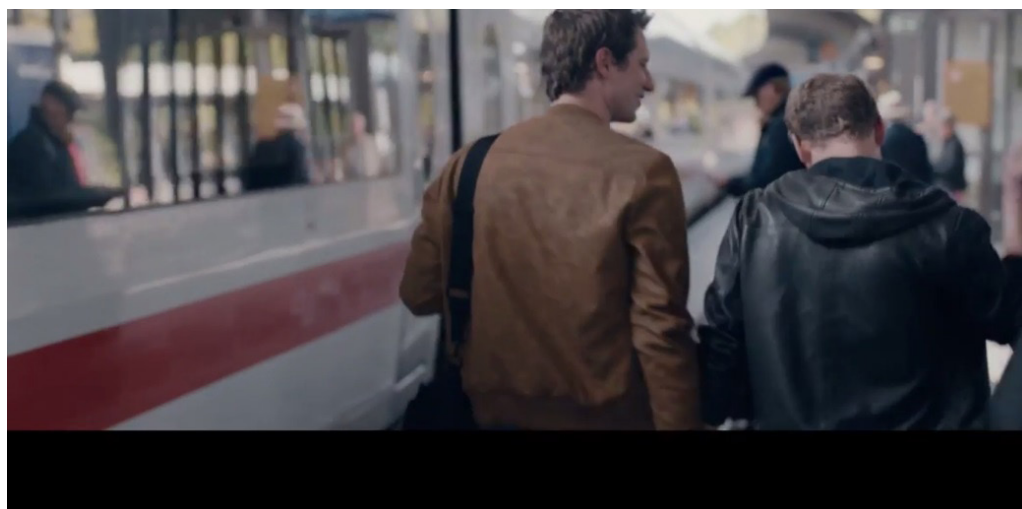
Similar to the Ikea commercial, this video picks up on the narrative of Christmas and thus links to existing connotations of family and home. It shows how important family cohesion is, but also how important it is to open up within the society.

The portrayal of homosexual couples or those of different origins and skin colours relaxes the once so strictly traditional image of Christmas, which is also underlined by the title song "Why so serious". Thus, this advertising is again an example for the integrative advertising style (Krauß 2008: 13), which tries to reach individuals on the basis of common values without addressing a certain market segment. In general, the values of openness, tolerance, humanity and charity are promoted and therefore the commercial is based on an emotional connection to the recipient. Though the part of homosexuality within this commercial is short, the depiction of the colourful house and the two men kissing in front of the camera are still highlighted scenes which are equally well integrated into the topic of family.

In the same year, the German railway company *Deutsche Bahn* broadcast online and on information boards a video clip to

mark the 25th anniversary of its high-speed train, the InterCity Express (ICE). The advert caused a sensation in Germany because it dared to break with two taboos: On the one hand, it portrayed homosexual commitment in an entirely cliché-free way. On the other hand, it placed homosexuality in the context of football – a domain traditionally connected to male heterosexuality (Eggeling 2010). A male football fan is cheering on his favourite club in several spots: He is shown in the football stadium with jersey and fan scarf as well as watching football in his flat surrounded by club memorabilia, on the radio and laptop during a train journey. The fan seems to be particularly interested in one of the football players, who the camera often dwells on as he is taking a penalty and suffering fouls – everything keenly and emotionally watched by "the fan". He even travels to follow his club by bus and train. In the final scene, he is travelling on the ICE train as the team bus is passing his train window. He then smiles and types a message into his smartphone. In the next scene the acclaimed footballer is first shown in the previously shown club bus and later on the platform in the train station. The ICE pulls in and the footballer gets off. The two men face each other, laugh, rejoice and hug each other intimately and then walk away holding hands while the advertising text appears: "Connects more than A and B. 25 years ICE DB" ("Verbindet mehr als nur A und B. 25 Jahre ICE DB"). Throughout the commercial, there is no language spoken between the two males, the only background sounds are cheering fans and football commentaries. The last scene on the platform is framed by the iconic football anthem "You'll never walk alone", which serves to highlight the emotional connection and commitment between the two men. From a cinematic view, it clearly cross-references earlier classical romantic reunions of couples.

Figure 9: Deutsche Bahn, "The Football fan" (2016)



In this sensitive gay-themed advertising, both men are represented without stereotyping: wearing jersey and fan scarf, the football "fan" is well-integrated in the crowd of other male watchers, while his football-playing partner does not stand out from his fellow team players either. The decision to make a committed homosexual relationship in the context of football play the leading topic in their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary advertisement in 2016 makes *Deutsche Bahn* appear as an open and tolerant company aware of the political diversity discourse in Germany - a year before marriage for all was legalized.

## Conclusion

Representations of homosexuality have become increasingly visible in German mainstream advertising. While earlier advertising targeted to gay men was primarily published in specialized media, the growing economic potential of the gay community has made marketing professionals at global brands realize that

for a campaign to be successful, it has to be mainstream. The advertisements discussed here reflect a gradual movement from an implicit to a more explicit, open and increasingly cliché-free depiction with the respective representational strategies depending on what advertisers have found expedient at a given time. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, homosexuality was still represented in a covert way, avoiding stereotypes that would depict the portrayed man as unambiguously homosexual, thus allowing the company to target both gay consumers and the general public. In the *Jacobs Krönung light* advertisement of 2000 the homosexuality of the male actor was still left open as a "both-as-well" possibility and only hinted at by linguistic signs. In 2007, however, the representation of male homosexuality appeared in much more openly gay imagery. The ironic plot of the 2010 Ikea-advertising supported fluid sexual orientations, but also partially lost its serious appeal through the attempted fling with the female protagonist.

Shifting public opinions mean that supporting same sex relationships in advertisements is no longer a taboo. As more consumers take into consideration the ethics of the brands they consider buying, featuring gay relationships shows a company's awareness of market and social reality and has, therefore, become a viable marketing strategy – to reach both gay consumers and the general public. In fact, as more consumers support gay marriage than not, gay-friendly companies are able to boost their image among the general public and broaden their appeal. Consequently, in Germany, where the majority of people support gay rights and where sexual diversity is widely accepted, showing an open and tolerant attitude towards same-sex relationships makes financial sense and opens up new commercial opportunities. The *Mercedes Benz*-advertising, the IKEA and Vodafone Christmas commercials and the *Deutsche Bahn* anniversary spot all published in the same year (2016), can be classified as completely integrative. In their cliché-free depiction of close intimate relationships between male couples the recent these ads represent a flexibility of attitudes and an open acceptance and celebration of gay men and their relationships which reflect changing social attitudes in German society at large. From an entrepreneurial perspective, a sensitive and respectful approach concerning gay marketing is also evidence of good business sense, or in the words of Katherine Sender's book title, a matter of "business, not politics" (Sender 2004).

However, what the analysis has also shown is that ethnic variation does seem to play very little or no part at all in German gay advertising. Likewise, there was little variation among gay men's bodies in the advertising examples discussed here. Clearly, the ads were targeted towards a certain class of gays – notably white,

educated, young, athletic, affluent and fashionable, as opposed to working class and black gays. Bearing in mind that within the gay community there exist, as within any other subculture, differences in nationality, ethnicity, age, religion and social background, marketing professionals who intend to reach out to this dynamic consumer group should refrain from conceptualizing this "imagined group" as homogeneous market.

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**Fig. 5:** Commercial Ikea "Florian" (2010) [0:21]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ERajQLnOq8> (23 December 2017)

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**Fig 7:** Commercial Vodafone "Christmas Family Commercial" (2016) [0:10]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBTWFOq9pnk> (22 February 2019)

**Fig. 8:** Commercial Vodafone "Christmas Family Commercial" (2016) [0:11]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBTWFOq9pnk> (22 February 2019)

**Fig. 9:** Commercial Deutsche Bahn „Der Fan" (2016) [1:27]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhVTyEJePqQ> (23 December 2017)

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