

Branding the American Family: A Strategic Study of the Culture, Composition, and Consumer Behavior of Families in the New Millennium

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Introduction

FOR MOST AMERICANS, FAMILY MEANS THE INFRASTRUCTURE SHAPING their life's journey in one way or another from the cradle to the grave. Whatever form it takes, family provides the earliest experiences of nurturing, security, and socialization. It provides a springboard for entry into the broader community and a roadmap for navigating the vast network of interpersonal and institutional relations comprising society. For the cultural anthropologist, the family provides a window onto trends, innovations, conflicts, and aspirations of society at large. If a trend is observed in families, it will most likely surface at some other level of the social order. Knowing the state of the American family is therefore crucial to understanding consumers at every stage of their lives, and potentially how they use brands to form an identity, participate in community, and engage in social organizations.

This article summarizes findings from a trend study of families at the beginning of the millennium, cast against the state of the family in 1960. This perspective puts in stark relief demographic and qualitative characteristics of families today that influence market segmentation and advertising strategies. The size, composition, and interpersonal dynamic of families has changed, as has the way families are represented in popular culture. Marketers face the challenge of developing advertising that transcends the divisions within and among

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FIGURE 1: A Norman Rockwell Christmas.

today's families and speaks to fundamental family values and experiences.

In 1960, the stereotypical American family could still be summed up in Norman Rockwell's vignettes of a small New England village (Rockwell 217; see Figure 1). It is white, middle class, homogeneous, and patriarchal. Families gathered together to eat, pray, and watch television.

Over the years, the Norman Rockwell myth has given way to a more realistic and heterogeneous view of the family. Today, "family" includes a vast array of configurations, such as households formed of two or more "blended" families of divorce, unmarried couples, childless households, and even gay parents. John Logan and Glenna Spitze write, "We believe that families have retained their role as the central core of social support through midlife and old age, despite speculation to the contrary" (34).

Market Segmentation and the Decline of Patriarchy

It could be argued that the current state of the American family is not merely reflected in popular culture and advertising, but is the end

product of a dialectical interplay of influences between social institutions and marketing communication. To some extent, the segmentation of the family into discrete markets has contributed to the fragmentation of the family as social group and the deconstruction of kinship-based society. The segmentation of the family by consumer targets with separate needs, wants, and even lifestyles has undercut the “we” experience of the family unit. Second, as the number of family configurations flourishes, the very notion of family has been broken down into a plurality of meanings. Such changes reflect nothing less than the breakdown of patriarchy: the organization of the social order by the name and rule of the father.

By comparing the structure and flow of power relations in the family between 1960 and 2000, the profound implications of these changes for society at large will be evident. The traditional family circa 1960 had a pyramidal power structure where decision-making tended to flow from Dad on down to the Kids, although feedback from the bottom up may be considered in the decision (see Figure 2). The family unit was more or less a centralized hierarchy of relationships. Today’s family forms a decentralized network of relationships where decision-making tends to flow in all directions.

Moreover, today each family member also identifies with a consumer segment outside of the family (see Figure 3).

Their allegiances, to some extent, are thus divided between the family unit and their peer groups. In other words, their taste in TV or Internet sites, for instance, would link them to their consumer segment rather

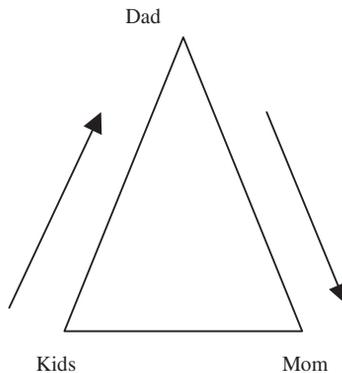


FIGURE 2: The Traditional Family Hierarchy.

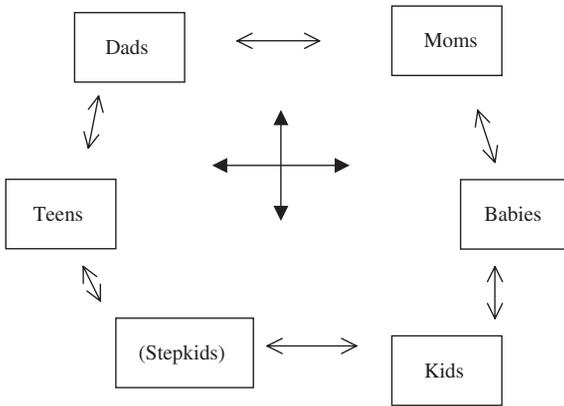


FIGURE 3: The Current Segmented Family Network.

than to their family. They may eat dinner as a member of the family, but not necessarily. Today, some families actually order separate take-out meals for different family members, once again dividing up the family by individualized consumer behavior (Haran 1998) (see Figure 4).

Another consequence of the segmented family order is the redistribution of disposable income. Not only do the children control more purchase decisions for themselves, but they also may be more responsible for family purchases. Leah Rickard emphasizes that “As the family structure changes, so do buying responsibilities, especially among teens, who are doing more of the shopping for groceries and other major purchases” (S17).

Changes in the formal structure of families have entailed a deconstruction of the myth of “The Family.” Myths are stories that society tells itself in order to smooth out the conflicts, ambiguities, and uncertainties of reality on the level of the imaginary, or wish fulfillment. In 1960, Americans paid lip service to the myth of “The Family,” with capital letters, symbolized in popular culture as the white, suburban, married, two-parent couple with children. The myth of “The Family” fostered a binary relationship of inclusion and exclusion among families: either one belonged in the nuclear family ideal viewed in the mass media, or one was excluded. Families that were different because of race, sexual preference, divorce, or some other factor were simply not represented; they were *outside* the dominant ideal of family (see Figure 5).



FIGURE 4: Guess Kids.

The ideal of a single cultural identity, an orderly though autocratic chain of command, and a simple binary system of inclusion and exclusion in the social mainstream has given way to a realistic accounting of the diversity of the American social landscape. At the beginning of the millennium, the monolithic order of “The Family” has been supplanted by a pluralistic order of “families” (see Figure 6). The dialectical understanding of the family as the opposition of the mainstream and its margins has shifted to a pluralistic understanding of families in a multicultural constellation, including single-parent households, gay and lesbian households, and mixed ethnicity households (see Figure 6).

Binary Model

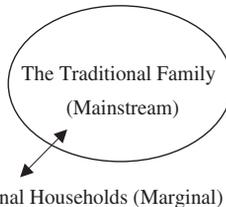


FIGURE 5: The Family Myth circa 1960.

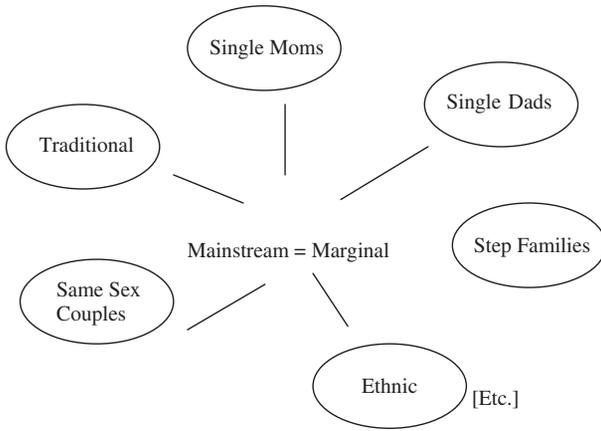
Constellation Model

FIGURE 6: Deconstructing the Family Myth circa 2000.

Such changes in the family are linked to changes in society at large. Margaret Talbot describes an emerging paradigm of culture as a constellation of subcultures existing within the larger social order. “The strategies that might be thought of as counter-cultural—home-schooling, building up a self-contained pop culture—are flourishing” (34–41). This phenomenon has been visible for some time in organizations. Michael Lewis claims that the “new capitalism” constitutes a breakdown of the rigid organizational model of the corporation (45). In place of a pyramidal flow of power, there has emerged an entrepreneurial model in which power is distributed more evenly among temporary teams of individuals formed around projects. The urban/suburban dialectic that divided the world of work from the world of domesticity—the public and private spheres of social life—has also been deconstructed as businesses move their headquarters out to the suburbs. G. Scott Thomas points out that the steady flow of the population away from urban centers to the suburbs has also contributed to a decentralization of social and political power, causing a breakdown of reliable political apparatuses concentrated in the cities.

In conclusion, the decentralization of business organizations, the recognition of America as a confederation of multicultural identities rather than a “melting pot,” the inclusion of women’s voices in public

policy, and consumer segmentation of the traditional family, are all examples of the deconstruction of patriarchy in our time.

The following sections provide a look at the social and market forces that shaped the American family at the end of the millennium.

1960: The Way We Were

When John F. Kennedy was elected president of the United States in 1960, Jackie Kennedy made her mark by redecorating the White House. No one expected her to cross the line from wife to policymaker as Hillary Clinton did during the Clinton presidency. Gender roles, as well as roles within the family, were much more rigidly defined than today. Generally, men worked outside of the home, women kept house and raised the kids. Until leaving high school, children were under the aegis of their parents and were expected to defer to parents on decisions ranging from food consumption and clothing to choice of friends and leisure activities. Decision-making, including purchase decisions, was hierarchical, beginning with the head of household and working down to the children.

Women looked to TV icons such as Donna Reed and Harriet Nelson for role models: "We all wanted our families to be just like these," says an anonymous author on a fifties Web site (see <http://www.fiftiesweb.com/families.htm>). "Perfect. Nobody ever raised their voice and all problems were resolved equitably—in less than half an hour! Women gladly cooked and cleaned, dressed in pearls and high heels, no less, while awaiting the arrival home of the all-knowing husband." If women worked before getting married, they worked in traditionally female jobs as secretaries, teachers, or airline hostesses.

Men were equally tied to stereotype. In 1960, male heads of household were expected to pledge undying loyalty to the corporation-as-family. In "The Artist in the Grey Flannel Pajamas," Michael Lewis points out that the terms "organization man" and "the man in the gray flannel suit" aptly described businessmen who became cogs in the wheels of corporate America in exchange for lifelong job security (4–5). Because corporate men were frequently relocated wherever the corporation needed them, families were uprooted. Moving reinforced the isolation of the nuclear family, who had to constantly "burn bridges" with friends and neighbors and start over somewhere else.

Children lived in the orbit of their parents. They had little personal money to spend and rarely shopped for the family as they do today. They

shopped with mom and dad at department stores rather than cruising the malls with their peers. The current “cult of the child,” the almost obsessive preoccupation of parents and specialists with the child’s every movement, whim, and consumer indulgence, was in its embryonic stages.

Families still gathered together at home, eating dinner and watching television. Eating out was for special occasions and ordering take-out was unusual. Betty Crocker was required reading for new wives. Meat and potatoes were the standard. No one expected the range of ethnic dishes available today. Dress codes reflected the more formal, predictable social roles of individuals. Men wore suits, ties, and white shirts for work, unless they wore a uniform; women wore skirts or dresses and high heels. Children’s clothing was not tailored to children’s tastes and trends so much as it was an extension of adult clothing. Girls wore skirts and blouses or dresses; boys wore pants and shirts, with or without ties.

Families were moving to the suburbs in record numbers. G. Scott Thomas reports, “The post-war exodus to suburbia was of a proportion unprecedented in two decades—growing 31 percent in the 1940’s and then another 47 percent in the 1960’s” (38). This trend was enabled by the construction of super highways and would change the way Americans shopped, traveled to the store, participated in the community, and raised children. Malls and supermarkets were designed to serve consumers who no longer walked down city streets to shop. Dad commuted to work in the city, spending a good part of every day far from home. As goods and services were spaced farther apart in the suburbs, cars became indispensable for day-to-day activities such as shopping, going to the doctor, and getting children to and from school.

Forty years ago, the television was emerging as an important gauge of our collective identity. Regardless of whether programs like *Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver*, or *The Donna Reed Show* represented the reality of most families, they mirrored an unspoken ideal of white middle-class contentment, based on rather limited roles and expectations of family members and society (see Figure 7).

Ethnicity, homosexuality, and “the dysfunctional family” were not yet admitted or discussed openly, and no one was expected to question tradition.

Television ads from the period reflect a relatively homogeneous market, usually white, middle class, and educated. The expression of



FIGURE 7: Father knows best.

ethnic diversity was limited to stereotypes. Minorities, including immigrants and African Americans, strove to blend in with the mainstream rather than stand out. Market segmentation was more or less driven by reductive demographic variables such as skin color, age, and income, rather than cultural or behavioral variables such as ethnicity, nontraditional partnerships, or lifestyle (Solomon).

By the late 1960s and the Johnson era, an emerging critique of the status quo is observable in popular satires such as *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1967). In that Broadway hit, songs such as “A Secretary is not a Toy” and “Happy to Keep His Dinner Warm” suggest an emerging unrest in suburbia. Unrest turned into rebellion when the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War raised the consciousness of a booming generation of young people who had both the voice and the buying power to be heard.

Social Revolution

Changes in the modern family have their origins in the social and political struggles of the 1960s. The growth of the “baby boom” generation, economic affluence (Galbraith), and the increasing influence of television on the popular imagination prompted a social revolution on many fronts. Television news brought home the civil

rights movement, outer space exploration, and the Vietnam War. Social and political struggles that had been brewing since the beginning of the Johnson presidency culminated in 1968, in campus protests and street demonstrations. The Tet Offensive that was supposed to bring an end to the war, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, and the emerging Black Power movement brought the country to the edge of revolution. Furthermore, the live reportage of the Vietnam conflict brought home in a personal way the human price of war. The Tet Offensive, which was supposed to bring an end to the war, only brought home to Americans the futility of the conflict. Daniel Hallin recalls, "Tet was one of those events in which it is plausible that what was seen was more important than what was said, and what was seen was a war that was out of control. Some have argued that the dramatic character of Tet coverage gave the public a mistaken impression that it was a military disaster for the United States. If so, however, it also gave the public—in images of grueling fighting—a more realistic view of how long the war might actually last" (5).

Perhaps it took such social and military violence to set in motion changes touching every level of society, from fashion to food to the way people worked and related to one another. Not only did young people shun the conservative dress of their parents, but adults also grew their hair and dropped the corporate uniform of the gray flannel suit and the white shirt of the past. Even archconservative IBM Corporation allowed employees to wear colors to work.

The focus on personal expression, the breakdown of rigid social roles, and the questioning of traditional institutions such as government, big business, and the university contributed to a new individualism. Sexual liberation, unisex clothing, ethnic awareness, and radical politics prepared the ground for enduring social change. These trends gave shape to the cultural landscape at the end of the millennium.

The antiwar and civil rights movements of the 1960s gave impetus to the women's liberation movement. Women, given voice through writers such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, were challenging the status quo in many areas of their lives. In 1967, Katherine Switzer had to run the Boston Marathon, an all-male event, under a false name, but managed to turn the tide of women's sports. Women agitated for changes in the division of labor in the home, the role of women in the workplace, and the composition of the American household. As a result

of the introduction of the birth control pill, this was the first generation of women able to decide when, how, and if they would have children.

A new openness about sexual conduct lifted taboos limiting sex to marriage and gave women more control over their bodies. In 1970, New York State passed a benchmark abortion rights act, and abortion rights soon became a national campaign issue. The sexual revolution contributed to an increasing number of children born out of wedlock, a statistic that would characterize over one-third of all single-parent households by 1998. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead states, "Between 1965 and 1975 the divorce rate doubled, peaking at twenty-two divorces per thousand married women in 1979 and then dropping slightly and stabilizing at the 1994 rate of twenty divorces per thousand of married women, the highest rate among all advanced Western societies" (44).

The radical political movements of the 1960s and 1970s did not threaten the centralized, patriarchal structure of American society so much as they called for replacing the heads of the patriarchal hierarchy with women and minorities: "Power to the People!" "Women Rule!" However, the current deconstruction of patriarchal society into a constellation of different but equal voices constitutes a radical departure from the old regime, which will have far-reaching implications in the coming years. As Richard Todd points out, "The great paradox of our country is that the society that looks like such a monolith from without, looks, from within, so fragmented." The main features of this phenomenon include:

- A plurivocal chain of command
- A cooperative organizational model
- A multicultural order of social identity
- Inclusive forms of cultural representation

Furthermore, such profound changes in social institutions and cultural systems in America can be traced to the evolution of consumer culture and the impact of marketing management on traditional social ties.

The Consumer Revolution

While the feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s challenged the way Americans traditionally perceived gender roles and

ethnicity, in the 1980s, the evolution of consumer culture placed in question the way Americans perceived the world. Juliet Schor associates the new consumerism with the “visible lifestyle,” or an emphasis on buying goods for social image and status (43–63). In consumer culture, a function of the individual’s participation in the marketplace, social identity is no longer tied necessarily to national or ethnic identity. We are what we buy. Moreover, the world got smaller during the 1980s and 1990s. As Benjamin Barber argues, the globalization of the marketplace, fueled by advances in communication technologies and by the end of the Cold War, strengthened the individual’s identification with the world community, perhaps at the expense of strong, unchallenged identification with family and country. Global branding reinforced this new sentiment of world citizenship. Brands such as Coke, McDonald’s, and Disney transcended the markets in which they were produced, forming points of collective identification with the symbols and icons of American consumption worldwide.

The consumer revolution produced two important trends that would shape values and family relationships through the end of the century: aggressive market segmentation practices and a new materialism.

The refinement of needs-based market segmentation methods such as VALS ultimately created a new paradigm for understanding social groups (see Solomon). While anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, for instance, traditionally articulate the organization of social groups in terms of kinship ties and social stratification, market segmentation methods tend to fragment traditional social systems and regroup them by such factors as consumer behavior, demographic markers, and personality. Targeting each individual as a separate consumer type could fragment even the most intimate social group, the family.

The evolution of consumer culture was abetted by a new materialism. Whitehead discusses a shift in social values in the past forty years from commitment to a higher good that transcended the individual, such as the good of the community or the family, to commitment to self-actualization and self-satisfaction. In other words, in the 1980s—aptly called the “me generation” (Tom Wolfe)—the needs and wants of the individual were increasingly put before the needs and wants of the group. Whitehead attributes the normalization of divorce to this trend, which she describes as “divorce culture.” She

claims, “More than in the past, [family relationships] came to be based on subjective judgments about the content and quality of individual happiness. . . . Once the domain of the obligated self, the family was increasingly viewed as yet another domain for the expression of the unfettered self” (4–5).

According to this argument, it has become increasingly acceptable for the individual to leave the family to satisfy personal needs and wants, rather than suppress one’s personal needs for the sake of the family. A two-page print ad for Oldsmobile reflects the new materialism (see Figure 8).

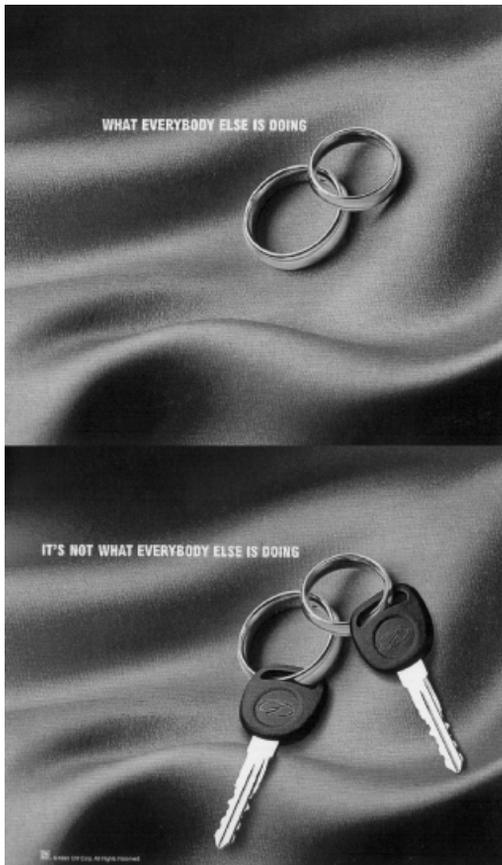


FIGURE 8: What everybody else is doing; It’s not what everybody else is doing . . .

On the left side are two gold wedding bands with the text, *What everybody else is doing . . .* On the right are two key rings with Oldsmobile keys attached, with the text, *It's not what everybody else is doing.* The ad implies that it is now socially acceptable to defer marriage and enjoy the finer things in life.

The Changing Household Paradigm

Rather than spell the end of the family, critics such as Stephanie Coontz believe the high divorce rate has produced a new household paradigm involving multiple living arrangements. They are supported by statistical data from the US Census Bureau (1998, iii–19; 1999, CH-1, CH-2, AD-2, CH-5, ST1). The following findings provide a quick overview of the radical impact that divorce has had on household composition in the past forty years.

- The United States population doubled between 1960 and 1998, but the proportion of two-parent households has declined by almost three percent.
- The population of children under eighteen has increased by thirty-three percent since 1960; the number of children living in single-parent households has almost tripled.
- Fewer people are getting married, and over one-third of all single men and women heads of households were never married.
- In 1970, one-parent families with children accounted for thirteen percent of all families with children. By 1996, this figure increased to thirty-one percent. Thirteen percent of white households were headed by single women; forty-four percent of African American households were headed by single women.
- Fathers head more single-parent households than before: five percent in 1996, compared with one percent in 1970.
- A greater number of single-parent families are being formed through births to unmarried women than through divorce or widowhood. Births to unmarried women accounted for thirty-three percent of all births in 1994, compared with eleven percent in 1970.
- Step-families account for one-tenth of all two-parent households.

A cursory look at popular icons and media representations reveals that these statistics have far-reaching implications for American culture. For instance, women increasingly identify with roles outside of the home. Dads are becoming more involved with their children. Step-families face the challenge of merging two or more subcultures in one household. Family ties are extending outside bloodlines to include friends and coworkers. Tribes, gangs, intentional communities, and teams are alternative forms of family. Parents are increasingly stretched for time with their children. The role of fathers has changed dramatically since the days of the absent but all-powerful “father knows best” stereotype. Coontz claims, “Fathers in intact families are spending more time with their children than at any other point in the past 100 years” (*The Way We Never Were* 34).

Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg find that “Today the United States is a society without a clear, unitary set of family ideals and values. Many Americans are groping for a new paradigm of American family life, but in the meantime a profound sense of confusion and ambivalence reigns” (34). By the end of the millennium, Americans seemed to be yearning for the simplicity and intimacy of earlier times. In *The Overspent American*, for example, Schor claims that Americans are “dressing down,” simplifying their lives to reduce stress, and including more time for family and personal life. This trend seems to continue in the new millennium, as New Age spirituality, home schooling, and the home office reassert the importance of home and family life.

The changing family paradigm may not spell the end of civilization as we know it, as Dana Mack would claim, but it has placed in question the primacy of the nuclear family as the foundation of American society. Today, family configurations include traditional two-parent, one-career households; dual career households; single-parent households; gay and lesbian households; merged families; and a variety of extended kinship arrangements. Stephanie Coontz warns against placing value judgments on nontraditional families: “As we begin to understand the range of sizes, shapes and colors that today’s families come in, we find that the differences within family types are more important than the differences between them. No particular family form guarantees success, and no particular form is doomed to fail. How a family functions on the inside is more important than how it looks from the outside” (*The Way We Really Are* 90).

Forty years ago, digressions from the traditional nuclear family were omitted from popular culture. Such diversity, however, had become the norm in media representations by the end of the century. Same-sex parenting is an example. When popular singer David Crosby donated sperm to a surrogate mother and her same-sex partner, *Rolling Stone* magazine featured Crosby, his wife and two children, and the lesbian couple on the cover. And in the movie *The Next Best Thing* (2000), Madonna conceives a baby during a moment of madness with her gay friend, played by Rupert Everett. The two decide to live together and raise the baby for lack of a better alternative.

Judging from popular culture, it is now also acceptable and even stylish for women to marry men much younger than themselves (*How Stella Got Her Groove Back* [1998]), and for fathers to claim a nurturing role in the household (*The Education of Max Bickford* [1999], *Three Men and a Baby* [1987]) and even fight for legal custody of their children (Leving and Dachman). Surrogate dads and abortion rights are as controversial as ever (*Cider House Rules* [1999]), and Diane Keaton and Julia Roberts add glamour to single parenthood (*Baby Boom* [1987], *Erin Brockovich* [2000]). Families air their dirty laundry with Oprah, Jenny Jones, and Jerry Springer on television, while television characters such as Roseanne and the Simpsons, as well as films such as *American Beauty* (1999) and *In the Bedroom* (2001), delve into the dysfunctional side of families.

While critics such as Dana Mack claim that the current breakdown in the traditional family is symptomatic of a sick society, Stephanie Coontz points out that things were even worse, not better, in the nineteenth century. She reports that at the end of the 1880s, illiteracy ran rampant, there was an epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, urban streets were littered with cocaine vials, and kids had liberal access to heroine, "happy dust." Drug abuse among middle-class housewives was skyrocketing. It was not unusual to see sixteen-year-old murderers, twelve-year-old prostitutes, and eleven-year-old gang members.

Groups such as the Million-Man March and the fundamentalist Christian movement would like to set back the clock on the current trends in household composition, gender roles, and ethnic diversity. However, judging from demographic trends published by the US Census Bureau, it appears that the working woman, the single-parent household, ethnic families, and a high divorce rate will be alive and well in the new century.

The Changing Paradigm of Work

In the past forty years, the women's movement has challenged the gender line separating breadwinners from homemakers. Working moms are here to stay, forcing changes in the division of labor in the home. According to Stephanie Coontz, the male breadwinner paradigm obscured the natural tendencies of women to seek meaningful work outside the home and of men to participate in raising their children. Increasingly, Coontz claims, men are turning down professional opportunities to spend more time with their families. Women who work, on the other hand, are "consistently found to be healthier, less depressed and less frustrated than women who do not" (*The Way We Really Are* 65). Men and women both report, however, that they would prefer to spend more time at home if they could afford to. Heath, Ciscel, and Sharp report, "It is increasingly being recognized that the work of families takes place within two arenas: the paid labor market and the unpaid sphere of household labor. The challenge currently facing families is that these two spheres of life are increasingly separate and disjointed, representing mutually exclusive alternatives for families struggling to earn a living wage and to fulfill their social reproduction functions" (501).

Families are stressed out because of the commitments of family members to activities out of the home. More and more families seek short cuts in homemaking to make room for more family time. Families are eating out or taking out food more than ever before in order to save time. Heath, Ciscel, and Sharp find that "The nation should see the promotion of balance between work and the rest of life not as simply a private choice between employers and employees, but as a matter of great importance to the public interest. . . . Whether or not they are actually working more than earlier generations, the majority of contemporary employed Americans feel overworked. Jobs that require long hours are not family friendly" (501).

In *The Second Stage*, Betty Friedan anticipated a crisis for the American family as women claimed their place in the world of work. As "biological clocks" ran out for the new generation of career women in the 1970s and 1980s, they had to come to grips with the questions of how to negotiate family and job, what role the husband and father would play at home, and who would mind the children when both parents were at work. Elizabeth Genovese-Fox reports, "Disagreements

TABLE 1
Percent of Americans working part-time and overtime (Logan and Spitze)

	Less than 30 Hrs/wk	50+ Hrs/wk
Men		
1997	9.6	25.2
1970	4.5	21.0
Women		
1997	20.5	10.8
1970	15.5	5.2

about the meaning of family have, if anything, become more heated during the 1990's as single motherhood has proliferated and the campaign for recognition of domestic partnerships has intensified, and they have fueled Americans' concerns about the relation between strong families and sexual freedom" (96).

Today there are almost as many solutions to such questions as there are different situations. Two of the most obvious changes in the work paradigm are that men are less inclined to work overtime, and are even more inclined to work part-time than they did thirty years ago (see Table 1). Women, on the other hand, are much more inclined to work overtime than they were thirty years ago. Jerry A. Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson point out that the number of men working part-time has more than doubled since 1970, while the number of women working overtime has more than doubled. John R. Logan and Glenna Spitze point out the implications of the two-job family: "The family is suspect: generations live further apart; divorce is common and some people never marry at all; adults have fewer children or none. Its traditional pillars, mothers and daughters, have taken on new roles. Today we hear especially about 'women in the middle'—people who have to juggle being a mother, a daughter, a wife, and a worker—and we wonder whether they can manage at all" (27).

Among the solutions to the overworked American is the home office, allowing parents to work either in part or entirely from their homes. Moreover, their work lives are less likely to be tied to rigid corporate schedules and agendas than in the past. Michael Lewis points out that the "new capitalism" involves a radical change in the way working is organized and in the attitudes of workers toward their jobs.

When companies downsized in early 1990s, employees were on their own. The “free agent” replaced the “organization man.” People found they could make a living on an individualistic model and still survive. Whether during the economic boom of the 1990s or the recession years of the early 2000s, employees are more or less “free agents” loyal only to themselves. The new capitalism is entrepreneurial rather than organizational in nature, and is built on nonhierarchical, temporary teams rather than loyalty (45).

As Diane Brady points out, technology has enabled families to stay connected across the divides created by the new social order (80–82). Cell phones and pagers enable working parents to keep in touch with their kids, while online shopping services such as Peapod save time at the grocery store. Computerized workstations enable Americans in increasing numbers to work from home, or to move between work and a home office if they are needed at home. In some ways, however, what has been gained in terms of time and convenience has been lost in terms of human contact. As Ryan Matthews asks, “Is the traditional grocery doomed?” (65). Will e-shopping eventually replace the leisurely stroll through the grocery store? Will cell phone communication replace the family dinner? Will individual Internet access replace family entertainment? In a recent ad for 3Com, the effect of technology on family fragmentation is chilling: everybody in the castle is isolated in a separate room working at a separate computer.

Alternative Families

The two trends identified in this study—the consumer segmentation of the household and the deconstruction of the family myth—would suggest that families and social groups in America today are fragmented, uncommunicative, and broken. However, there is equally strong evidence that as the old order breaks down, a new one is forming in its place, an order built upon a strong sense of family support both within and without blood relationship (see Alan Wolfe). People are creating family and community by means of deep emotional and symbolic ties with home, society, and tradition.

Shere Hite finds that “There is a positive new diversity springing up in families and relationships today in Western society. This pluralism should be valued and encouraged: far from being a sign of the

breakdown of society, it is a sign of new, more open and tolerant society springing up, a new world is being born out of the clutter of the old" (2).

There appears to be an emerging interest in the homemaking traditions of older generations. The success of the Martha Stewart brand is testimony to a popular aspiration to nurture hearth and home. Cheryl Mendelson says that we need to celebrate the domestic arts that were devalued as women fought for equality in the workplace. Herself a professor and then a lawyer, she reminisces about the importance of home as a place of retreat, renewal, and support for the individual. "The act of taking care of our homes brings comfort and consolation both in the enjoyment of the fruits of our labors and in the increasingly rare freedom to engage in worthwhile, unalienated, honorable work" (15).

Moreover, refugees from the fragmented family are finding new connections in planned community living developments. They are satisfying what Daniel Bell would call a deep human need for community: "Neither human existence nor individual liberty can be sustained for long outside the interdependent and overlapping communities to which we all belong. Nor can any community long survive unless its members dedicate some of their attention, energy, and resources to shared projects. The exclusive pursuit of private interest erodes the network of social environments on which we all depend, and is destructive to our shared experiment in democratic self-government" (7). The intentional communities and cooperative living movements form another way individuals without strong family ties seek the support of a community of like-minded people. Most communities include families as well, those seeking ties to a community broader than just the nuclear family. Currently, over eight thousand adults and two thousand children live in 186 of the more established intentional communities in North America (see Graham). The movement began in Denmark after the World War II and became popular in the United States during the 1960s, when young people were experimenting with communal living arrangements.

As families become more isolated and fragmented on the one hand, they are also being encouraged to reach out and participate in the broader community on the other. In her controversial book *It Takes a Village*, Hillary Clinton effectively calls for the community, and perhaps the government, to take on the tasks of parenting and family

support that used to be the domain of the nuclear family: “To many, this brave new world seems dehumanizing and inhospitable. It is not surprising, then, that there is a yearning for the ‘good old days’ as a refuge from the problems of the present. However, by turning away, we blind ourselves to the continuing, evolving presence of the village in our lives, and its critical importance for how we live together. The village can no longer be defined as a place on a map, or a list of people or organizations, but its essence remains the same: it is the network of values and relationships that support and affect our lives” (13). In other words, the essence of family can be found in many different kinds of relationships.

Representing Family: Marketing Implications

The breakdown of the old social order is represented in popular culture in the ways gender, ethnicity, and power relations are represented in word and image. To begin with, current media representations such as ads and TV no longer perpetuate the myth of the white, suburban nuclear family without problems. Not only do they show a variety of family configurations, but they air the family’s problems with issues that used to be moved off-screen and out of sight, such as spousal abuse, divorce, racism, and homosexuality. For instance, *Queer as Folk* brings homosexuality into prime time television, and *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), a movie about a transgender youth struggling with sexual identity, earned an Oscar for actress Hilary Swank and a nomination for Best Picture. The marginalized people of society have definitely entered the mainstream.

Much of the advertising reviewed for this study failed to respond to the current need for connections, communication, and shared goals. Even ads targeted directly to families focused on individuals rather than family relationships. It is as if the current trend to segment markets by individuals has overshadowed the role of relationships in consumer culture. A recent ad for the Chevy Express Conversion van (see Figure 9) communicates that Chevy makes family travel easier by keeping family members busy on their own.

Each family member is “doing his or her own thing.” Dad is driving the car, mom is talking to him, though her left hand signals connection to the children in back. One boy is playing an electronic game on the



FIGURE 9: Family car trip.

TV screen, his sister in back is drawing. The other brother lifts up one of his headphones to listen to something the second girl in back is saying. Although it would be difficult to imagine a long trip of ceaseless, intense family interaction, in this ad, there is dissonance between the meaning of the “family van” and the isolation of family members in the vehicle.

Building a Family Brand: The Disney Legacy

Given the fragmentation of family life today, many people set aside family vacations to shut out work and other obligations and focus on their families. In fact, our travel expert said that family vacations constitute most of all money spent on vacations (Kitzes). Because Disney World in Orlando, Florida is the number one family vacation spot in America, our team spent two days immersing ourselves in Disney World.

The Magic Kingdom, one of a half dozen theme parks in the Disney World Complex, is the family getaway *par excellence* (Michigan Family Interview). When the visitors park their car and hop on the ferry over to the Magic Kingdom, they leave behind the real world, with all its distractions and stresses, and enter the fictional world of Disney. The only reminder of reality is the sea of baby strollers parked in front of the rides and restaurants.

At every point of contact with the Disney brand, visitors are met with the telltale signs of the Disney legacy—safe, innocent, and clean

fun. Staff members are referred to as “Cast,” since they are costumed to suit the event they are working, such as the Wilderness Lodge, the Steamboat, or the Haunted Mansion (Joy’s Interview). They produce a seamless illusion for visitors by remaining in character at all times—when they serve meals or conduct rides. For example, visitors are warned not to take pictures in the Haunted Mansion in order not to disturb the eternal rest of the ghosts.

Visual and audio cues smooth out transitions from site to site, facilitating the passage from fantasy to fantasy by leaving little room for thoughts about the elaborate production being staged before our eyes. Susan Willis also examines the role of the Mickey Mouse logo to ease transitions between points in the visitor’s exploration of the park, joining consumer, spectacle, and the Disney brand in a closed narrative and performative event. Even in the bathrooms, themed music reminds the visitors that they have entered another world, as if they had jumped into a movie and could get back out.

Nostalgia is the dominant mindset in the Magic Kingdom, and the “soundtrack” that follows the visitor throughout the park includes familiar musical themes from old movies near and dear to the heart. At the entrance to the park, one could be greeted with the familiar sounds of Jiminy Cricket singing “When You Wish Upon a Star” or “It’s a Small World.” Going to the Magic Castle via “Main Street USA,” the visitor walks through an old-fashioned, nineteenth-century town, complete with trolley cars, ragtime music, and even a jolly mayor. Like a fond memory, a stroll through the Magic Kingdom is unfettered by work, material worries, or even litter. An invisible crew removes litter the moment it is dropped.

The seamless movement of the visitor’s imagination from old-time America to the Magic Castle of fairy tales is lined with baby strollers, powerful reminders of the most important visitors to the park, the kids. Disney family entertainment at its best is about being a kid as much as it is about entertaining kids. Parents are allowed to play alongside their kids, teens can enjoy the fun alongside their younger siblings, grandparents can enjoy their grandchildren in this atmosphere of safe, clean, and innocent fun and fantasy.

Disney succeeds in marketing to families by creating a space and a story truly targeted to the family as a unit, not a group of divided segments. A plaque on a large statue of Walt Disney and his “partner,” Mickey Mouse, welcomes the visitor to the Magic Kingdom. It reads,

"We believe in our idea: a family park where parents and children could have fun together. Walt Disney." The Disney magic brings family members together by smoothing out differences that normally separate individuals by age, interests, and lifestyle around the theme of childlike fun. This entertainment strategy effectively deconstructs the alienating boundaries segmenting families in consumer culture, not only generating good feelings and goodwill toward the Disney brand, but satisfying unmet needs in the individual to feel the warm, fuzzy, secure feelings associated with the earliest memories of a nurturing parent.

Conclusions

There are those who believe that the changing configuration of family spells the demise of "western civilization as we know it," while others are hopeful that such change has contributed to the democratization of family life (see Fagan). Instead of measuring families against a universal family myth, experts such as Linda Rubinowitz, professor and counselor at the Family Institute at Northwestern University, measure family health in terms of intangibles. Rubinowitz, who counsels traditional families as well as gay parents, stepfamilies, racially mixed families, and divorced families, said, "Today there are more ways to define family than the traditional two-parent married couple. . . . I like to think of family in terms of intangibles such as commitment, mutual support, personal growth and health."

Within this great diversity, all families, whether tied by blood or not, share a common need to provide mutual support, opportunity for growth, and nurturing for the individuals involved. Stephanie Coontz says, "The biggest problem is not that our families have changed too much, but that our institutions have changed too little" ("The American Family" 79).

Findings from the research point to a pull between two strong tendencies in families today: a pull toward fragmentation, due to the segmentation of the household by consumer groups and the satisfaction of individual needs, and a pull toward community, connections, and family togetherness. Community, connections, and family togetherness mean not simply a return to the insular, hierarchical social group that the family was forty years ago, nor are they constructed simply by appeals to nostalgia about a Norman Rockwell past, or the warm and fuzzy feelings generated by fantasies of the ideal family.

Successful family branding would satisfy the consumer need for a supportive and nurturing respite from the fast-paced, fragmented, and transient world of the twenty-first century. Families are discovering that creating “family” today involves facing reality—the reality of one’s difference from the traditional ideal and the reality of one’s own internal family conflicts. Success is a function of working hard to negotiate these differences and conflicts in ways that work for each family individually. This might entail celebrating the holidays at a restaurant rather than making a turkey at home, celebrating both Christmas and Kwanzaa, staying in touch via e-mail and pagers, eating take-out every night of the week, or working from a home office until the children get older. However we manage to do it, we are constantly seeking ways to ground ourselves in a stable, nurturing space in spite of our frantic, technology-enabled lives.

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