

## ***Gated Communities: Selling the Good Life***

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### **Abstract**

This study examines online marketing material of Canadian gated communities to determine how gated developments are marketed and to gain a preliminary understanding of the appeal of gated communities to Canadian markets. The results show that security is the most common feature in the marketing material. Other social and lifestyle factors such as friendliness and community activities, as well as an active lifestyle, the good life, privacy and exclusivity are prominent marketing features. Homogeneity is indicated through pictures in the ads. Suggestions are made of how these findings can help planners reduce the demand for gated communities.

Gated communities, housing developments which restrict vehicle access, are becoming increasingly common in Canada. They seem to be particularly popular with new retirees in British Columbia and Ontario (Grant et al. 2004). Though some research addresses reasons for the popularity of gated communities in the United States (Blakely & Snyder 1997; Low 2003) and elsewhere (Caldeira 2000), this question has yet to be addressed in the Canadian context. Through exploration of online marketing material from Canadian gated communities, this research begins to address the question of their popularity in Canada. Though advertising material cannot provide definitive answers, it can increase our understanding of Canadians' attraction to gated developments.

In examining online marketing material for the purpose of compiling an inventory of gated developments, I noticed that social promises, such as an increased sense of community or friendliness were often made to potential buyers. I thought a systematic study of online marketing materials could shed light on the character and appeal of Canadian gated communities.

Though I chose online promotional material mainly for its availability, the Internet continues to grow as an important marketing and advertising medium (Berkowitz et al. 2000). Its use in the real estate market is increasing with sellers frequently advertising online and home buyers checking online listings to select properties appealing enough to visit (Zimmerman 2003; Ipsos 2003). An Ipsos Angus Reid poll found that 85% of those who bought a new home in the two years prior to October 2003 used the internet to examine home information (Ipsos 2003). Marketers of gated projects with multiple units cannot afford to ignore the internet as a marketing medium.

Vestergaard and Schrøder (1985: 121) argue that deconstructing advertising messages can provide "insight into the readers' consciousness, their ways of thinking, their ideology." This is possible because advertisers "have to please the readers, never disturb or offend them; and because adverts are under this obligation to reflect the attitudes, hopes and dreams of their readers as closely as possible" (Vestergaard & Schrøder 1985: 121). Caldeira (2000: 263) also argues this point: "advertisements and the people to whom they appeal must share a common repertoire. If the ads fail to articulate images people can understand and recognize as their own, they fail to seduce. Therefore, real estate advertisements constitute a good source of information about the lifestyles and values of the people whose desires they elaborate and help to shape."

This argument assumes that gated community developers are diligent in conducting market research. We interviewed three developer/builders in Ontario as part of the larger study<sup>1</sup>: all said that market research had led to decisions to gate. Developers, particularly of large projects, must be diligent in preparing marketing material and ensuring that it resonates with their intended target market. Marketing can mean the success or failure of a project.

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<sup>1</sup> The current project is part of a larger study of gated communities in Canada directed by Jill Grant and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Caldeira (2000: 263) hints at another perspective: advertisements “help to shape” values and desires. Though advertising has to reflect values and desires of the target market closely enough for them to identify with it, it can also direct and shape those values and desires, taking what exists, reinforcing it and perhaps reforming it. As long as most values and messages in the advertising resonate with consumers, others can persuade and create new desires. For instance, emphasis on gating and security could make people feel that their present house is not secure enough, when they previously felt quite secure.

Thus, the relationship between messages in advertising and a target market’s values, attitudes and ideology is most likely a reciprocal one. Advertising must resonate with the core values and beliefs held by consumers, and all the messages must appeal to them, but advertising can also influence. As such, my examination of gated community online marketing material provides some exploratory findings about the values, attitudes, ideology and motivations of prospective buyers of gated projects, enabling us to ask better and more focused questions in later research. However, we must take care to interpret cautiously. This research does not present evidence to enable comparisons between the marketing of gated and non-gated developments.

## **Method<sup>2</sup>**

The study involved a discourse analysis of online marketing materials for gated communities in Canada. In January 2004, I had access to an existing list of most currently marketed gated communities and their websites, compiled from a variety of sources. I used this to begin my collection of materials for the present study. To ensure that all the gated developments with websites were captured, I conducted Google searches for “gated community” for each province. A community was included if the website specified that it was “gated,” if there was a picture of an entrance gate or some reference to security, or if sales or management personnel of the community confirmed that there was a gate at the main entrance.<sup>3</sup> I subjected the marketing material to a discourse analysis: compiled categories; assigned phrases, slogans and words to the categories; and tallied the number of communities whose marketing material made reference to each category. I then calculated percentages of each type of community to refer to each category.<sup>4</sup>

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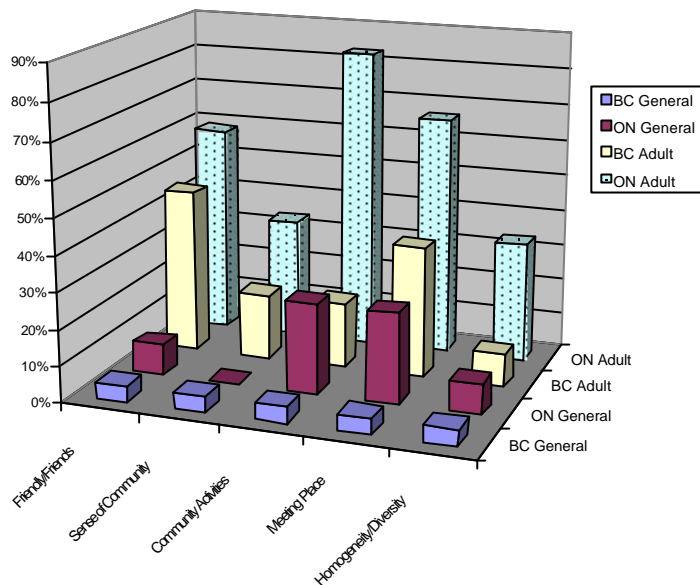
<sup>2</sup> Interested readers are referred to Maxwell (2004) for further detail.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that this procedure resulted in selection bias towards materials which were explicit in regard to security and gating.

<sup>4</sup> The categories were grouped into six broader categories: social factors, lifestyle factors, exclusivity/prestige/privacy/privilege/upscale, security made explicit, design factors, and “other” miscellaneous features such as nature and views. There were 73 sub-categories.

## Key Findings

**Chart 1: Social Factors in Marketing: Percentage of Each Type of Gated Community to Use Factor in Marketing - By Province**



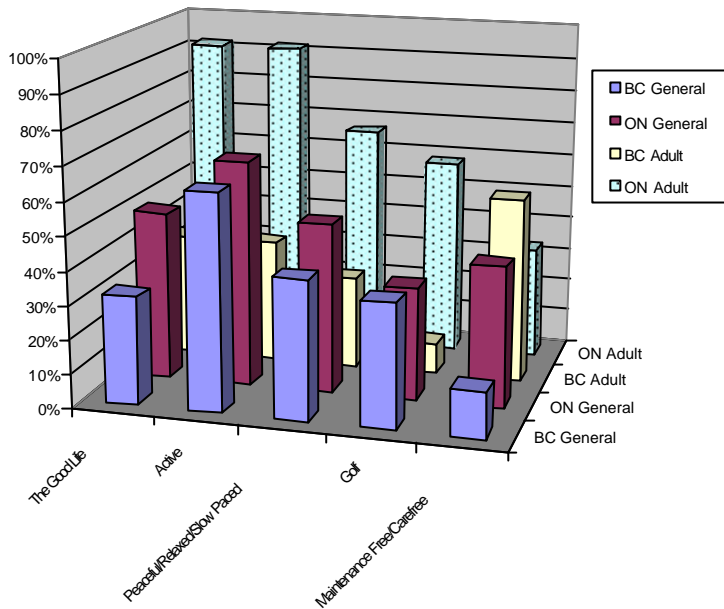
References to social factors and emotional appeals are common features of gated community marketing. In particular, much of the marketing material mentioned friendliness or the ease of making new friends. Community activities and the presence of a meeting place within the community were also popular in the advertising. This social concept marketing approach is more prevalent in Ontario (Chart 1 - dotted and dark bars) and in adult focused communities (Chart 1 - dotted and light bars). The marketing material portrays the image of gated communities, especially adult ones, as friendly welcoming places, where there is always something fun going on, and residents are never lonely. Some indicative phrases from the marketing material include:

“meet new friends,” “old town spirit of friendliness,” “larger group gatherings as well as small group activities, all of which are plentiful, and “People in gated communities tend to socialize together more.”

Though not one of the most prevalent factors, some sites, particularly those of Ontario adult projects, made explicit reference to homogeneity in the text of the marketing material (Chart 1 - dotted bars). Phrases in the materials include “comfort of folks who are at the same place in life as you are” and “meet others just like you.”

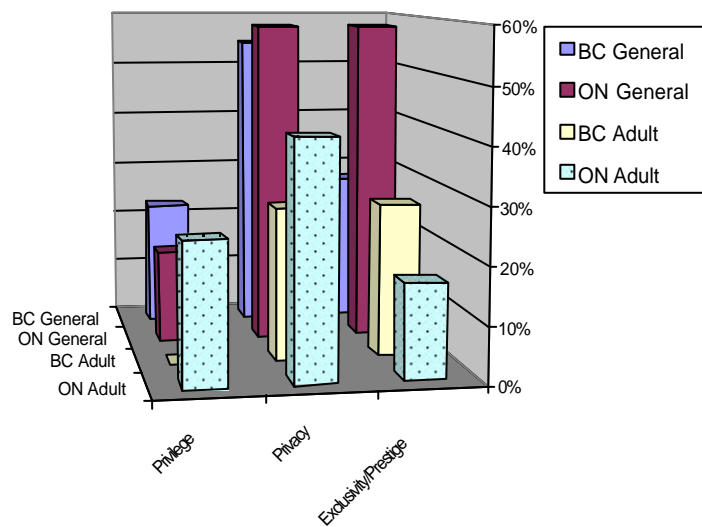
Though homogeneity was not prominent in the text, it was powerfully portrayed through images: race, ethnicity, affluence, health, vigor, age, sexual orientation, and even values were uniformly portrayed. The people in the pictures were almost invariably white and traditionally or conservatively dressed and styled. Only four communities included pictures of people of colour. People looked wealthy, healthy and able. Heterosexual couples were most frequently shown and seemed to be in love and happy. Though this homogeneity was not exclusive to adult project marketing, the websites for adult communities made greater use of pictures than gated developments aimed at wider audiences.

**Chart 2: Lifestyle Factors in Marketing: Percentage of Each Type of Gated Community to Use Factor in Marketing - By Province**



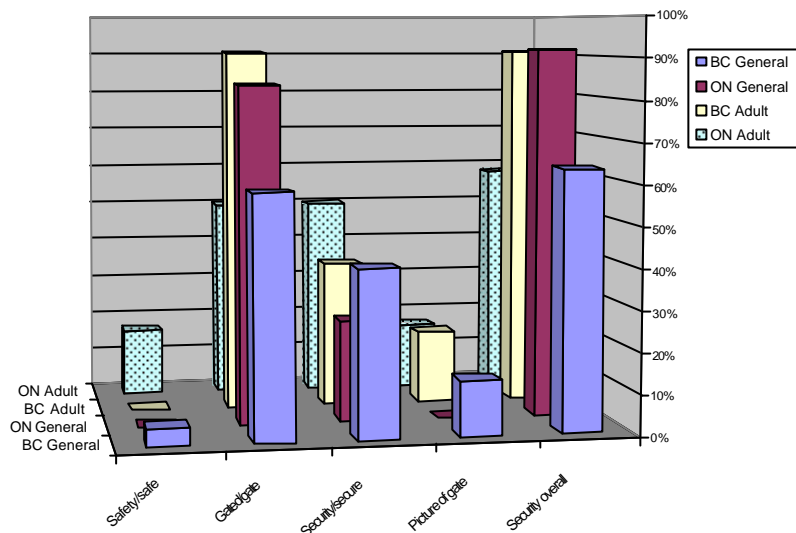
A prevalent marketing feature in all of the material studied is lifestyle, especially an active lifestyle, references to the good life and a peaceful/relaxed/quiet/slow paced lifestyle. Chart 2 indicates the most prominent lifestyle references found in the material. Climate is also often mentioned for BC adult projects, with 64% making some reference to a pleasant climate. Though lifestyle marketing is most common in Ontario adult communities (Chart 2 – dotted bars), it is also a major component of marketing to the general population (Chart 2 – dark and medium bars). The *active lifestyle* can be seen in the phrases “vibrant life” and “new lifestyle of total convenience, vitality and recreation.” Exemplary phrases of the “good life” include: “how good a life [here] can be,” “living well,” and “life here is a celebration.” A peaceful, quiet, relaxed and slow paced lifestyle is indicated in phrases such as “get away from it all,” “relaxed country living,” and “unwind and learn a new lifestyle.”

**Chart 3: Exclusivity & Privacy: Percentage of Each Type of Gated Community to Use Factor in Marketing - By Province**



Exclusivity/prestige and privacy are prominently featured in the marketing material with a trend toward greater use for general than adult focused communities. Though residents, developers and builders of gated communities may argue that the gates are not about exclusivity, this seems belied by the present evidence. Though prestige was of necessity included with the idea of exclusivity, it is still clear that exclusivity in all its varied meanings is part of the gated community allure. Privacy may be the most marketed factor, but the others are certainly part of the marketing message.

**Chart 4: Security Made Explicit: Percentage of Each Type of Gated Community to Use Factor in Marketing - By Province**



Gating and security seem to be appealing features, with no consistent differences between adult and general projects, or between those in BC or Ontario. The prevalence of references to security is particularly notable because Canadian projects are not as secure as their American counterparts, yet Blakely and Snyder (1997) report that American gated community marketing uses implicit rather than explicit references to gates and security. The Canadian ads are explicit about gates and security features, contrary to expectations.

Some type of reference to security or gating was overall the most prominent marketing feature, more than other common factors (*social factors, the active lifestyle, and the good life*) in most of the community types. Clearly, gates help sell homes to at least a segment of the Canadian population.

Thus, as the literature indicates, older Canadian adults seem to be attracted by a ready-made social life with people similar to themselves. Further, the presence of the concept of homogeneity in the marketing material indicates that charges of exclusion against gated communities may be accurate. This study provides no evidence that diversity is valued.

#### *The Idealization and Commodification of Place*

The marketing material idealizes and commodifies place, community and lifestyle. Places are presented as problem free and protected from the troublesome or unattractive aspects of life and the wider world. Communities are portrayed as friendly and welcoming. Luxurious active and healthy lifestyles are attainable by simply buying a home in a particular gated project. In these ways the marketing material idealizes place, community and lifestyle, creating a fantasy world which draws us toward the gated community and allows us to escape the troubles in our lives or daydream for a time. Though we may know rationally that the fantasy cannot be true, it still makes us feel good and thus attracted to the development. We are drawn to the idea that our lives might be just a little more like the fantasy if we were to purchase a home in a particular gated community. The marketing material tells us that we can buy good places: community, friends and acquaintances, lifestyle, health, exclusivity, prestige, privacy and security. According to the marketing materials, these features are not created by civic action, careful relationship building or self-discipline, but commodities purchased with the price of a home.

#### *Implications for Planning*

It is useful for planners to understand the appeal of gated communities' for prospective residents. Marketing may indicate characteristics which residents feel are lacking in other residential forms. By seeking to provide these features in public residential developments, it may be possible to dissuade

some citizens from the decision to live behind gates or in private exclusive, segregated enclaves.

The factors most commonly used to market gated communities, and thus appealing to prospective residents, are: security and gates, friendliness and the ease of making new friends, social interaction, homogeneity, lifestyle (active lifestyle, the good life, peaceful/relaxed/slow paced, maintenance free), privacy and exclusivity. Some of these match the values of planners as a profession, while others contradict the types of communities planners wish to create. Planners tend to promote communities with diversity, mixed uses, public open space, and connected street systems. We also promote security through design and “eyes on the street. Planners do not generally support gates because they exclude citizens from previously public spaces or their ability to fragment the urban fabric and transportation network. Planners also balk at segregation, particularly when it becomes physically embodied in the form of walls, fences and gates. Segregation is also a practical planning issue in regard to its influence on the distribution of services and amenities. Further, gated communities are often less affordable than their non-gated counterparts.

Is it possible for planners to reduce the desire for gated communities by better providing for some of the desires indicated in the marketing material? For instance, by promoting more publicly acceptable types of security such as better design, “eyes on the street,” and neighbourhood watch programs, it may be possible to reduce the demand for gating. Providing local community meeting places and other “active lifestyle” amenities in public neighbourhoods could also reduce the demand for private gated communities with these amenities. Managing the demand for gated developments will require careful planning to ensure that we produce the kinds of communities that make people feel secure and fulfilled without barriers.

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