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## Shaping the American Woman: Feminism and Advertising in the 1950s

### Abstract

This article is a critique of the feminist assertion that 1950s advertising was degrading to women. It shows that in several advertisements from the time period, women were portrayed as being competent and successful, both in working in the home and outside of it as well.

## Shaping the American Woman: Feminism and Advertising in the 1950s

Christina Catalano

The 1950s proved to be an important era for American women. With the end of World War II, men returned to the United States and to their jobs, which had temporarily been assumed by women. Women now out of work turned toward the home and domestic activity. Advanced industrialization and the beginnings of suburbs further separated the environments of women and men. "The commercial world, where goods were produced, and the home, where they were consumed, grew geographically and culturally farther apart."<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the Cold War placed an added emphasis on family unity as a defense against communism, making the role of women as wives and mothers crucial to the preservation of the United States and its democratic ideals.

Since the feminist movement that took place in the late 1960s, there have been many debates concerning the rights and roles of women. Often feminists, due to their biases and personal/political agendas, identify the 1950s as the pinnacle of gender inequality. Furthermore, they claim that mass media, especially advertising in women's magazines, perpetuated the denigration of women. According to them, ads during this time period portrayed women as stupid, submissive, purely domestic creatures; they claim this is historical truth. However, through re-examining original advertisements in a variety of magazines from the 1950s while keeping in mind the culture of the time, it becomes increasingly evident that often these ads were neither belittling to women nor antifeminist. In fact, the historical truth is that they were sometimes just the opposite, picturing women in varied roles and positions of power.

In 1973, Alice Courtney and Sarah Lockeretz did a large-scale study of eight general interest magazines from the 1950s. After analyzing the advertisements in them, they came to several conclusions about the role and portrayal of women in the ads. These generalizations have been widely accepted and are often cited among feminist writers. Yet, in my examination of the same magazines (namely *Life*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*) and their advertisements, I found such conclusions to be premature at best, if not false.

Courtney and Lockeretz first stated that, according to magazine ads, "a woman's place is in the home."<sup>2</sup> My findings were quite to the contrary. While it is true that some ads pictured women in a domestic environment, women were often pictured in other settings as well. For example, Figure 1 (attached) contains an ad from *Newsweek* magazine in 1952. The woman pictured is using power tools to repair an airplane. (Note that the man in the ad is doing basic secretarial duties, filling out forms and handling paperwork.) Not only is this woman pictured outside of her supposed "place," but she is engaging in difficult

mechanical labor in a job that is crucial to the safety and well-being of airplane passengers. *Life* magazine ran an ad in 1950 showing a young girl graduating from college, as depicted in Figure 2. Furthermore, ads from another magazine (though not one studied by Courtney and Lockeretz), *National Geographic*, quite often picture women travelling. Note Figures 3 and 4, (from 1950 and 1952, respectively), which both picture what appear to be professional women travelling alone. Obviously their environment, similar to the environment of most women in magazines, was not limited to the home either.

Courtney and Lockeretz went on to conclude that "women do not make important decisions or do important things." Yet Figure 1, as mentioned above, pictured a woman fixing an airplane, a job that could potentially save hundreds of lives. Additionally, Figure 5 consists of a 1952 advertisement from *National Geographic* magazine. A woman telephone operator is pictured with the caption "The Call that Saved a Plane." It proceeded to tell of how "the alert, cool-thinking operator, Mrs. Lucille Wilson" took heroic action that enabled a plane to have a safe emergency landing. Though subtle, this ad also showed that married women, such as Mrs. Wilson, were capable of working outside the home and making crucial decisions that save lives at that. Additionally, women were often pictured buying large-ticket items. "In 1976 Belkaoui and Belkaoui did a similar study...[and] found that in 1958, 'With the exclusion of small-ticket items...the important buying decisions (for such items as cars, stocks and bonds, machinery) were left entirely to men.'" Figures 6 and 7 (from *Newsweek* and *Good Housekeeping*, respectively) depict women buying stocks and cars independent of a man's opinion or assistance.

Furthermore, looking more deeply into Courtney and Lockeretz's assertions reveals the hidden assumptions underlying their conclusions. Note that the first conclusion drawn was "a woman's place is in the home," while the second states that "women do not make important decisions or do important things." These two statements, especially when made together, logically imply that the home is not a place where "important" decisions are made or "important" things are done.

Courtney and Lockeretz are not alone in their degradation of the housewife. This attitude is common to many feminists, most notably the famous author of *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan. As historian Joanne Meyerowitz explains, Friedan "presented domesticity as a problem," and she "demoted full-time domesticity to the lower status of a false consciousness."<sup>5</sup> Looking down on women's role in the home, Friedan complained that "the great majority of American women have no other ambition than to be housewives."<sup>6</sup> She proceeded not only to belittle housewives, but also to insult American society as a whole in her speculation that "Perhaps it is only a sick or immature society that chooses to make women housewives, not people."<sup>7</sup>

The assumption that domesticity was not "important" is quite ill-founded. Housewives were indeed *people* who were responsible for managing an entire

household. This included keeping a home beautiful and clean and making sure that functions within the household ran smoothly. While these tasks are often taken for granted, they were extremely important for the proper functioning of family life. Women in the domestic sphere were also responsible for raising children — for creating healthy, moral, and able members of society. On a larger scale, women had the awesome power and responsibility to shape the next generation of Americans and greatly influence the future of American society. To describe this task as anything but “important” would be a gross understatement.

Some advertisements imply that society in the 1950s recognized and appreciated the often difficult and tiring traditional tasks of women. Figure 8, an ad from *Better Homes and Gardens* in 1956, depicts a father attempting to feed two babies. Judging from the expression of both the father and one of the babies, he is experiencing little success in accomplishing a job that was quite common for a woman. Figure 9, which originated from the same magazine, goes even further to emphasize that men can not effectively perform the traditional domestic tasks of women. The man pictured is attempting to clean dishes and care for a small child, but he looks very uncomfortable in this traditional woman’s role. The woman, on the other hand, is pictured at her husband’s desk in the workplace. She is smiling and her posture is relaxed, showing that she is confident and at ease in her husband’s work environment.

Furthermore, feminist criticism of the roles of women as being *only* housewives and mothers undermines their overall message. Feminists aim at liberating the woman and increasing her sense of efficacy and self-worth. Conversely, by constantly encouraging women to take “real” jobs outside of the home, they have rendered all of the work that women do *within* the home menial. In all of their criticism of advertising denigrating women, it seems that the *feminists* have denigrated American women who choose to remain at home with the (false) implications that their work is unimportant and their roles as devoted wives and mothers are insignificant to society.

Another dubious conclusion reached by Courtney and Lockeretz was that magazine ads imply that “women are dependent and need men’s protection.”<sup>8</sup> However, many of the ads discussed show evidence to the contrary. Women were often pictured traveling, working, and purchasing independent of males or male influence. Ads that pictured women in the home further emphasized that their capability for domesticity was superior to that of men.

Finally, Courtney and Lockeretz concluded that “men regard women primarily as sex objects.”<sup>9</sup> In all of the ads included in my research, I did not notice any that seemed to use women’s sex or sex appeal to sell products. While women pictured were often beautiful, they did not seem to be “sexy” or look like “sex objects.” Perhaps, though unintentionally so, my own biases are

presenting themselves. Growing up in an era where brazen sexual connotations and partial nudity are the norm in advertising, the fifties were comparatively un-sexual, as suggestions and implications were much subtler. Therefore, admittedly it is nearly impossible for me to recognize sexuality in advertisements from the 1950s through the eyes of a young adult in the 1990s due to my previous experiences and biases.

Hence each of the conclusions reached by Courtney and Lockeretz in their studies of women in advertising in the 1950s have been disproved with evidence that suggests otherwise. It is important to note that their study was performed in the early 1970s, perhaps during the last few waves of the feminist movement. Therefore, Courtney and

Lockeretz may have developed biases from this era that caused them to go too far in their assumptions. Yet feminists in the 1990s continue to display the same obvious biases that lead to false conclusions about gender discrimination and the denigration of women in 1950s advertising.

In her book (published as recently as 1994), Susan Douglas makes assertions about the damaging effect that such ads had on women, especially young girls, of the time. In her exaggeration of the negative impact of advertising on women's self-esteem, she notes "it wasn't just our mothers who took in these messages. We daughters absorbed them as well, and they encouraged us to respect Dad and ridicule Mom."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Douglas's family situation was unique. However, nearly all media productions including advertisements, put a heavy focus on the family as a whole. Children were taught to love and respect *both* of their parents (perhaps even more so than today), as family unity was seen as a key factor in defending America from communism. If anything, children were emotionally closer to their mother, as most of a child's time was traditionally spent with her.

Despite contradictory evidence, the attitude persists that "no period of advertising denigrated women more... There were such reprehensible portrayals during those years that the advertising industry has yet to recover."<sup>11</sup> In fact, however, few women in the 1950s or the present view their portrayal as devoted wives and mothers as "denigrating." And if the advertising industry is truly attempting to "recover" from this period, its methods for doing so are questionable; women in advertising have gone from wholesome, moral, rational leaders of the home to the scantily-clad waifs that are frequently pictured today.

Obviously feminist generalizations about the historical portrayal of women in advertising are exaggerated at best and often false. The reason for their misrepresentation of historical topics, in this case advertising, lies in the biases that drive their conclusions. Feminist historians are constantly looking to prove that women were indeed denigrated, belittled, and restricted in the past in order to make women seem as though they are the victims of gender discrimination.

Claims of victimization in the *past* are intended to legitimize giving women more power *now*, and so advance the feminist agenda. Thus, feminists view advertisements in the 1950s with predetermined conclusions, and their examination of historical documents focuses on finding evidence to support their notions rather than discovering historical truth. Any material that could be interpreted (often *misinterpreted*) as discriminatory is called to attention, while evidence to the contrary is conveniently ignored.

Debates about the portrayal of women in magazine advertisements come as no surprise, as women were pictured in them more often than men. Ads frequently included women because it was specifically women that they were targeting. In fact, Betty Friedan noted years ago that "seventy-five percent of all consumer advertising budgets is spent to appeal to women."<sup>12</sup> Why? The answer lies in the fact that the decade placed an "overriding emphasis on consumption as a particularly female activity."<sup>13</sup> Advertising logically targeted women because, as Douglas herself acknowledged, "America's consumer culture was predicated on the notion that women were the major consumers of most goods."<sup>14</sup> While feminists noted such observations about advertising, they failed to recognize that the role of primary consumer was, in many ways, empowering to women.

Thus, in the 1950s advertising reflected the growing reality that "women had substantial and growing influence on purchasing decisions."<sup>15</sup> Women were not only the primary consumers of domestic goods (cleaning supplies, food items, beauty/personal care items), but they often had a significant influence over larger purchases as well. For example, Figure 7 pictures a woman who bought a car and is encouraging women readers to do the same. Additionally, Figure 10 shows a man upset because he made a wrong decision in choosing home insurance. After his home was destroyed in a fire, he "hated to tell *her*" (presumably his wife) of his mistake, implying that, although he made the decision to purchase the insurance, the husband ultimately had to answer to his wife. Furthermore, Figure 11 not only depicts a matriarchal household by picturing the mother at the center of the family, but it also tells of her purchasing power by stating "everybody looks to Mother when it comes to the final decision."

Indeed it was women who were the main consumers and buyers of goods and services, and with this buying came a great deal of power over family finances. Although men traditionally worked and *earned* the money, it was women who *controlled* it and therefore exerted dominant power and influence over countless aspects of family life.

The ability to shop and spend money also implies individual autonomy and personal freedom. Emily Rosenberg, a female historian who apparently does not have a feminist agenda to promote, noted the "strong identification between consumption (the ability to choose products, new images, new

locations, new identifiers) and freedom itself."<sup>16</sup> Thus, the consuming woman of the 1950s "had the power, through purchasing, to change her image and, by doing so, possibly change her life as well."<sup>17</sup>

Advertisers attempted to make it easy for women readers to relate to the women in ads in order to effectively market and sell their products. Because the majority of American women in the fifties did not have a paying job outside the home, it is logical that most advertisements pictured women in the domestic sphere. Most advertisers "had to emphasize their roles as wives and mothers, because it was in these capacities, not in their capacities as secretaries or nurses, that women bought."<sup>18</sup> This is especially true of traditional women's magazines (such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Good Housekeeping*, etc.), which were often "more likely to portray women in the home and less likely to portray women at work or outside the home."<sup>19</sup> Advertisers reasoned that women who read traditional women's magazines (which usually related to domesticity) were women who indeed took traditional women's roles. Therefore, women in the ads of traditional women's magazines were often pictured in the home so women readers could relate to them, thus effectively marketing and selling the product at hand.

Similarly, the same concept of encouraging the reader to relate to the ad subject was employed in nontraditional women's magazines as well. These magazines covered topics of general interest, including business, and were read mainly by working men and women. In order to allow working women to relate to their advertisements, such magazines often contained ads that "portrayed women in more employment roles than women's magazines,"<sup>20</sup> which usually targeted women in the home.

Thus, women, although mostly portrayed in the domestic sphere, were not limited to advertising images only of this nature; they were also pictured shopping, working, and even saving lives. Despite feminist views that picturing women in the home was a sexist and patriarchal attempt by male executives to restrict and denigrate women, the (historical) truth seems to lie in simple marketing logic: advertisers wanted to appeal to their audience. Through rational and logical marketing schemes, advertisers' goals in their portrayal of women (no matter what this portrayal may have been) were to generate profits through appealing to the largest percentage of their readers. In the 1950s, this often included picturing women in the home. If these portrayals were detrimental to women (and I would argue they were not), such was not the intention of advertisers, magazine editors, or society as a whole. Nevertheless, it has often been said that hindsight is always "twenty-twenty"; if any pejorative assumptions or prejudices did underlay the historical portrayal of women, they are far more obvious to later generations and even more so to feminist historians who are avidly seeking them.

One's position about the portrayal of women in advertisements is partially contingent upon his/her perception of the role of advertising in society. Do

ads imitate life or does life imitate ads? Most feminists give so much attention to advertising and its supposedly detrimental effects on the female persona in part because they believe the latter to be true. Friedan herself asserts that "This image — created by women's magazines, by advertisements... — shapes women's lives today and mirrors their dreams."<sup>21</sup> Thus, the belief that advertising has a great deal of power and influence over society causes feminists to (over)analyze ads of the past and be excessively critical or even unfair in their scrutiny.

To the contrary, other historians seem to be in agreement that life imitates advertising. As Kurtz noted, "Advertising has unintentionally served as a recorder of the century's cultural revolution and the external and internal lives of women."<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Diane Barthel made the keen observation that "advertisements are...*about* society. Moreover, they are totally embedded within it. Understood as such, advertisements are not a pack of lies as their adversaries would have it. Rather, they reflect shared understandings [within society]...."<sup>23</sup> Hence, according to such views, advertisements simply mirrored the society (or audience) that they targeted. Advertising, then, did not harm or denigrate women; rather, it portrayed reality. And in examining *reality*, not the product of unbridled biases, I indeed found (at least some semblance) of historical truth.

Historical truth is an elusive topic. The best way to decipher truth is to examine sources as close to the original event or happening as possible. In this case, through studying advertisements of the 1950s, I attempted to discover the truth about their portrayal of women. In the past, various feminist authors who have studied similar magazines have pronounced historical "truth" about 1950s advertisements. Yet, in my analysis of the original sources and the feminist conclusions about their content and purpose, I discovered blatant and obvious biases. It seems that feminists went about searching for historical truth backwards in that they first formed conclusions and then searched for historical evidence to effectively prove them. And this reductionist approach produced nothing more than political propaganda.

Historical truth must be *discovered*, not *proven*, for proof implies previously-drawn conclusions based on biases. Today Postmodernism encourages such reprehensible methodology in the search for historical truth, producing "personal histories" designed to advance personal/political agendas instead of historical truth. To indeed find historical truth one must approach primary sources with an open and objective mind; admittedly, biases nearly always exist, but every attempt should be made to minimize them. Even with proper methodology, the exact and complete truth may never be found about the past. Therefore, critics of truth are welcome to the discipline, as it is through critical and analytical minds that history is constantly improving upon itself, inching closer and closer to the ultimate goal of historical truth.

## Appendix



Figure 1 *Newsweek*, 14 January 1952, 35.



Figure 2 *Life*, 2 May 1950, 26.



Figure 3 *National Geographic*, March 1950, 18.



*National Geographic*, April 1952, 22.

Figure 4 *National Geographic*, April 1952, 22.



Figure 5 *National Geographic*, April 1952, 104.



Figure 6 *Newsweek*, 18 April 1955, 89.



Figure 7 *Good Housekeeping*, July 1955, 26.



Figure 8 *Better Homes and Gardens*, February 1956, 6.



Figure 9 *Better Homes and Gardens*, April 1956, 27.



Figure 10 *National Geographic*, March 1952, 34.



Figure 11 *Time*, 29 July 1957, 49.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Jan Kurtz, "Dream Girls: Women in Advertising," *USA Today*, January 1997, 5c.
- <sup>2</sup> Alice Courtney and Sarah Lockeretz, "A Woman's Place: An Analysis of the Roles Portrayed by Women in Magazine Advertisements," *Journal of Marketing Research* 8 (February 1971): 93.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Linda J. Busby and Greg Leichy, "Feminism and Advertising in Traditional and Nontraditional Women's Magazines, 1950s-1980s," *Journalism Quarterly* 70 (Summer 1993): 249.
- <sup>5</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 252.
- <sup>6</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963), 219.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 223.
- <sup>8</sup> Courtney and Lockeretz, "A Woman's Place," 94.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 95.
- <sup>10</sup> Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Random House, 1994), 54-55.
- <sup>11</sup> Adrienne Ward Fawcett, "Narrowcast in the Past, Women Earn Revised Role in Advertising," *Advertising Age*, 4 October 1993, S1.
- <sup>12</sup> Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 202.
- <sup>13</sup> Emily S. Rosenberg, "Consuming Women: Images of Americanization in the 'American Century,'" *Diplomatic History* 23 (September 1999): 482.
- <sup>14</sup> Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 56.
- <sup>15</sup> Rosenberg, "Consuming Women," 485.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 496.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 482.
- <sup>18</sup> Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 56.
- <sup>19</sup> Busby, "Feminism and Advertising," 255.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 257.
- <sup>21</sup> Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 29.
- <sup>22</sup> Kurtz, "Dream Girls," 9c.
- <sup>23</sup> Diane Barthel, *Putting on Appearances: Gender and Advertising* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 12.