

The proposed paper will be asking how print advertisements in issues of *Better Homes and Gardens* from 1955 of home consumer products reflect American's beliefs on the role of the American housewife in modern society. During the period after the United States fought in World War II (1941-1945), American manufacturing would no longer be as dedicated to the war effort and thus have more time and resources to manufacture consumer goods. Specifically for women, this new era of consumerism promised "time and labor-saving technology," as noted by Tawnya J. Adkins Covert in *Manipulating Images: World War II Mobilization of Women through Magazine Advertising* (2012). Additionally, American wives were returning or continuing to work in the home after the men came back from WWII. The paper aims to see how this ideal of the wife in the home is reflected through advertising and the implications of this for American women.

What sets the proposed project apart from scholarly works published previously is that the paper primarily uses issues from *Better Homes and Gardens* to analyze the role advertising played in perpetuating ideals of the American housewife. This source is accessible to the public by going to the magazine archives tab on their website. In addition to its accessibility, *Better Homes and Gardens* is one of the Seven Sisters Magazines, a group of magazines that focus on women and homemaking in the twentieth century. For the purposes of the proposed project, using this magazine as the main primary source provides a lens into understanding how advertising was used to target female consumers knowing that the viewers of the ads were majority if not solely women. It also targets the specific kinds of ads this paper will discuss, which are advertisements of home consumer goods, such as washing machines, fridges, ovens, or cleaning products, that are targeted at housewives to make their work "easier" or "faster."

Additionally, the paper will be focusing on the year 1955. Only one year was chosen for time's sake in terms of looking through the issues but this also provides a narrow enough focus to analyze the advertisements in detail. Furthermore, being the midpoint of the decade, 1955 allows the paper to examine the issue of advertising and the expectations for the role of women without too much influence from being at the beginning or the end of the decade. For example, choosing 1950 for this project would mean that advertisements would reflect the excitement for the new decade, especially since it's still relatively soon after WWII. Choosing 1959 would mean having to analyze these advertisements through the lens of the beginnings of the resurgence of the feminist movement of the 1960s, which is not what the proposed project is focusing on.

The secondary works consulted in preparation for this paper delve into multiple aspects of the topic. For example, *Housework and Housewives in American Advertising: Married to the Mop* (2011) by Jessamyn Neuhaus breaks down advertising of common home appliances in the laundry room, kitchen, living room, and bathroom. Her book spans the second half of the twentieth century and provides arguments applicable to the paper such as that advertisements used housewife stereotypes to promote consumer products geared towards the home. This source targets the proposed project's goal of seeing how, what, and what impact advertisements had on perpetuating social and familial roles onto American women.

The significance of writing the paper on this topic specifically is that by looking at magazine advertisements to analyze the iconic figure of the 1950s American housewife and seeing how advertising was used to perpetuate these ideals. Ultimately, the paper aims to discuss American society's unrealistic and unattainable high expectations for women, wives, and mothers, which is an argument supported by many of the secondary works consulted for this

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project. To do this the paper must also ask questions about why was the housewife the ideal woman in the 1950s United States? What qualities must she possess? Moreover, the proposed paper will address how American advertising agencies and corporations exploited this iconography at the expense of real women's identities, an issue that has spanned centuries of American history and continues to be a problem today.

Annotated Bibliography

Articles:

Belk, Russell W. and Richard W. Pollay. "Images of Ourselves: The Good Life in Twentieth Century Advertising." *The Journal of Consumer Research* 11, no. 4 (1985): 887–97.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/209024>.

Belk and Pollay combine their research expertise on the social impacts of material possessions and advertising to argue that modern American advertising has shifted American culture into a "consumer culture" where to have the ideal life was to always have the newest and most luxurious products. They do this by analyzing home magazine ads from 1900 to 1975. The angle of consumer culture adds to the paper's discussion of why and how advertising and buying home products perpetuated the qualities of an ideal American housewife.

Lopate, Carol. "Selling to Ms. Consumer." *College English* 38, no. 8 (1977): 824–34.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/375955>.

Lopate, who has other publications about women's history, states that in the 1950s many women returned to the home rather than working as much as they did for the first half of the twentieth century. As a result, the advertising of consumer products reflects the changing expectations for the roles of women and help to sustain that ideal. This work will help my paper explain a key argument that advertisements from the 1950s were intentionally targeting women and perpetuating the housewife stereotype.

Books:

Adkins Covert, Tawnya J. *Manipulating Images: World War II Mobilization of Women through Magazine Advertising*. 1st pbk. ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012.

This book asserts that the United States government, businesses, and advertising worked in tandem to perpetuate the ideal roles and expectations for women during World War II. Adkins Covert, a sociology professor at Western Illinois University, analyzes print ads in magazines and breaks down how many ads had certain imagery or were advertising a certain product. While this book as a whole may not apply to the paper, the later chapters delve into the topic of the promises for consumers in the post war era, which will be of use when providing historical context for the paper's topic.

Berger, Arthur Asa. *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character and Society*. 3rd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.

Berger's research expertise is in media studies and popular culture, and his book reiterates a common understanding that advertising of any product will shape a society's values and social norms. He uses many statistics on advertising in the twentieth century and analyzes commercial ads to support his research. This book will be useful for the paper because it provides evidence of advertising influencing American culture.

Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. Revised and Updated, 2016. New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Book Group, 2016.

Coontz's main research focuses are on gender and family history, and she is the Director of Research and Public Education for the Council on Contemporary Families. The argument she made in this book that will be most useful to the paper is that the family structure and roles taken on by each member as portrayed in the media is unrealistic when compared to actual American families. Coontz looks at a 1950s television show, *Leave It to Beaver*, to portray this idea. Additionally, she discusses the division of labor in the household based on gender, which will be valuable information to support why certain products were targeted to women in advertisements.

Cowan, Ruth Schwartz. *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.

The main argument of this book is that the introduction of consumer products, such as washing machines and fridges, more dramatically impacted women's labor compared to men's because by men being able to find work away from the home, more of the household work fell onto the woman. Additionally, Cowan asserts that technology, something noted on her site as a professor at the University of Pennsylvania as one of her research interests, that was marketed as time saving products required more work to maintain a clean and organized home. Her work will help answer the question of how and if the promise of time saving appliances in the post war era was fulfilled by 1955.

Hill, Daniel Delis. *Advertising to the American Woman, 1900-1999*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002.

Hill has a background in history as well as retail advertising and creative direction. In this book, he argues that advertisements in American media portray idealistic expectations of women from 1900 to 1999. He analyzes print ads throughout the twentieth century for consumer products targeted for women as well as products that were not associated with women, like men's products. This book will provide information on how and why advertisements targeted women consumers and what expectations they set for women.

Neuhaus, Jessamyn. *Housework and Housewives in Modern American Advertising: Married to the Mop*. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

This book argues that despite the second wave feminist movement in the latter half of the twentieth century, the depiction of the housewife has not disappeared from American advertisements for home appliances. Neuhaus supports this argument by breaking down the book into four sections on key rooms in the home, the laundry room, living room, kitchen, and bathroom, to analyze advertisements of home goods, women's reactions to their depictions, and that despite the specific details of in the images of the women, such as race or dress, the central theme of homemaking has not gone away in modern advertisements.

Wells, David R. *Consumerism and the Movement of Housewives into Wage Work: The Interaction of Patriarchy, Class and Capitalism in Twentieth Century America*. First edition. Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2018.

Wells takes a unique perspective compared to the other authors and argues that consumerism provided motivation for women to go to work outside of the home. He looks at the intersection of class and gender in consumerism and the argues that there has been a decline in the expectation that the housewife is the ideal woman in the early twenty first century. Because this book was published in the 2010s, his argument may be biased towards the wave of feminism during the decade, and thus not as applicable to the 1950s. This work will challenge some of the arguments provided by the other authors influencing this paper but may lead to this paper providing some nuance to this existing debate.

The proposed paper will contribute to the current scholarly discourse around American consumerism, advertising, and the roles and expectations of women by combining these ideas and observing how they are reflected specifically during the 1955. Additionally, while a few of these sources look at print advertisements, this paper will look specifically at *Better Homes and Gardens* to see exactly how advertisements were targeting female audiences. Furthermore, the paper can introduce the debate between the sources by Wells and Neuhaus over whether the housewife is still a popular ideal for American. The proposed paper will be written during a time where conservatism and the traditional housewife have begun to trend again on social media in the United States, while a few of these publications, like Wells', were written at points in American history where feminism had a resurgence in popular culture.

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“I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.” – Grayson Donohoe