

**The American Housewife in 1955**  
**and Advertising in issues of *Better Homes & Gardens***

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I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Abstract**

Does advertising in publications like *Better Homes & Gardens* simply reflect social norms or does it go a step beyond and perpetuate unrealistic expectations for American housewives? To answer this question, four advertisements from issues of *Better Homes & Gardens* published in 1955 are described and analyzed to not only identify what qualities make a good housewife but find also how the overall message reflects the expectations for American housewives' roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers. The advertisements are also used to analyze the role that consumer culture in American society played in defining and perpetuating these ideals. They demonstrate that while the expectations for women were rooted in both social and economic developments in American, advertising used unrealistic standards to market consumer goods at the expense of the real American woman.

The American housewife is an icon in American society and culture. She's a woman happily staying at home tending to her chores, her children, and her husband. This traditional ideal for American women is both desired by the American public today but also widely contested in the latter half of the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. Advertising in 1950s magazines like *Better Homes & Gardens* characterized and reflected this stereotype of the American housewife but these stereotypes, while although based in reality in terms of social expectations, were an unrealistic depiction of real American women. This unrealistic standard is fueled by consumerism as well as social standards for American women.

Standards in American society regarding middle-class women and the roles and functions they play in society point to them staying home, taking care of their children, and tending to household chores, but this was not a new development in the 1950s. Women have been expected to be homemakers since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Despite this, the stereotype of the American housewife is commonly associated with the 1950s. Much of the current scholarly debate points to industrialization as a reason for this modern definition. As stated by Associate Professor of History and The State of University of New York, Jessamyn Neuhaus, industrialization “dramatically altered . . . the physical tasks and the cultural meaning of tasks undertaken in the home.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the technological innovation of home consumer products (things like washing machines and vacuums) changed the expectations for women in terms of taking care of the home.

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<sup>1</sup> Jessamyn Neuhaus. *Housework and Housewives in Modern American Advertising: Married to the Mop* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 2.

An example of this is before the mass production of items like vacuums, cleaning rugs required taking them out of the house and beating them outside.<sup>2</sup> This was a task mainly dedicated to the children or husband, but with the electric vacuum, this task could be completed much more easily and quickly. It then became a task for the woman, but in addition to this, the task was also expected to be done every day to keep up with rising standards for cleanliness as well as the ease and efficiency of the technology making the task doable. Additionally, with the mass manufacturing of goods like dishware and clothing, this lessened the labor load for every member of the family by no longer having to be at home making these things.<sup>3</sup> However, this in turn added to the laundry list of tasks for the housewife. Having more clothing thanks to manufacturing meant that there was more clothing to be cleaned. As will be discussed later, the development of “time-saving” products like washing machines and vacuums were marketed towards housewives as a way to more easily and quickly take care of the home, but in terms of how this defined the housewife, it altered and added to the list of jobs expected of women in the home.

During World War II in the United States (1941-1945), many women took jobs working in factories or as teachers, secretaries, or nurses. Having this freedom starkly contrasts the regression back to the housewife being the ideal for women. After the war, women experienced immense social pressure to return or stay in the home.<sup>4</sup> As Ruth Schwartz Cowan suggests, “working mothers were blamed for the rise in juvenile delinquency in the 1950s, for the soaring

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<sup>2</sup> Neuhaus, *Housework and Housewives in Modern American Advertising*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan. *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*. (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 63-68.

<sup>4</sup> Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 203.

divorce rates in the 1960s....”<sup>5</sup> The social pressure to stay home in order for the children and the husband to function fell onto the shoulders of women and made being the housewife the ideal role of a woman in American Society.

Additionally, after World War II, there was a boom in manufacturing and purchasing of consumer products. Prior to the 1950s, American manufacturing was largely dedicated to creating supplies to support the war effort. By the mid-century Americans were antsy to spend their money and enjoy consumer goods again, especially after the economic depression of the 1930s. Advertising agencies knew this and marketed their goods with the promise of innovation and saving time for the American people.<sup>6</sup> It’s no secret that Americans subscribe to a culture of consumerism, which in short means that having more things equates to having a better life.<sup>7</sup> In other words, having the ability to buy products, especially ones that are not necessarily needs, equates oneself with goodness, superiority, and/or success.

Advertising, whether it be in magazines, newspapers, or television commercials, feeds off this idea to sell products. In addition to this, consumerism and in turn the advertising of consumer goods draws on people’s desires to show off their status, their lifestyle, and their aesthetics.<sup>8</sup> Instilling this idea in the collective conscious of the American people that having the newest and most in fashion goods in order to be well perceived perpetuates the need and the

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<sup>5</sup> Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 203.

<sup>6</sup> Tawnya J. Adkins Covert *Manipulating Images: World War II Mobilization of Women through Magazine Advertising*. 1st pbk. ed. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 140-141.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Asa Berger. *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising’s Impact on American Character and Society*. 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 31.

<sup>8</sup> Russell W. Belk 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.

want to keep buying more and more. Advertising is simultaneously a reflection and a shaper of American culture.<sup>9</sup> This can be translated into analyzing the advertisements of home consumer goods in women's magazines. The depictions of housewives in advertisements reflect American ideals and expectations for women, but also an unrealistic standard that was not applicable to most American families.

The American magazine *Better Homes & Gardens* began publishing in 1922 and is categorized as one of the "Seven Sisters Magazines," a group of magazines written and published specifically for female audiences surrounding themes of homemaking, childcare, and roles traditionally associated with women. Advertising agencies know how to use imagery and messages to target certain audiences.<sup>10</sup> For example, magazines from the 1950s typically portrayed only the housewife in a positive light and associated working women with being barren or unfulfilled in life.<sup>11</sup> Analyzing advertisements from a magazine published for female audiences presents a lens in which one can see how the themes of consumerism and gender roles among the American family are reflected in the marketing of consumer goods.

The first example is an ad in the March 1955 issue of *Better Homes & Gardens* for a Hotpoint washing machine. This advertisement's title says, "World's First Pushbutton Washing For All Fabrics."<sup>12</sup> The image in the center is the washing machine in front of a red backdrop with a blonde, white woman standing to the left of it holding different articles of clothing. The

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<sup>9</sup> Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, 13-14.

<sup>10</sup> Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, 127-128.

<sup>11</sup> Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 203.

<sup>12</sup> Hotpoint, "World's First Pushbutton Washing for All Fabrics!" *Better Homes & Gardens*, March 1955, 151.

messages in this ad carry themes of easy use, simplicity, and being able to do many things with just one product. For example, in the sections of text on the right side of the page the words “. . . and treat yourself to a carefree holiday!” follows a section about how by pushing one button the entire washing job gets done with ease.

These kinds of messages reflect the fact that home consumer goods were marketed in a way that makes caring for things in the home simple and easy to do. It emphasizes the fact that the steps to getting clean clothes have never been easier than with this new technology. Stating that you can get every type of clothing material clean reflects not just how innovative and time-saving the product is, but the development of buying manufactured clothing as the norm, or the ideal, in American society. Furthermore, the message being that by using this machine, the housewife has enough leisurely time to enjoy a “carefree holiday” implies the expectation that by using these products women will have more time to do other things; however, this was not the case. As discussed earlier, the hope that by having these products means that the wife will be able to save time on her labor was simply wishful thinking. These products did entirely the opposite, adding to the list of tasks housewives must complete on a daily basis because now, they’re just so easy! Furthermore, this is only a possibility for women who did not have to work at all, a privilege available to primarily middle-class women.

The second advertisement also comes from the March 1955 issue of the magazine. This one is from the American Gas Association for a dryer.<sup>13</sup> It’s to the right of an article about managing responsibilities between your husband and home while caring for two children. The advertisement itself has an image with a black doctor’s bag and a cartoon baby climbing out

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<sup>13</sup> American Gas Association, "Something Else the Doctor Should Bring in His Little Black Bag," *Better Homes & Gardens*, March 1955, 190.

Below is another doctor's bag with a dryer sticking out. The text that separates these two images says, "Something else the doctor should bring in his little bag." In addition to this in addition to this, there's a section of text to the left of the dryer that reads "Heart of your new freedom." The messages in this advertisement show not only how advertising agencies were telling women that having a gas-powered dryer would save them time and energy because it can be done with such ease and efficiency, but that by using it they could be more attentive and caring mothers. It's important to note the article that this advertisement is next to because the message in the article reflects how many responsibilities the wife took on.<sup>14</sup> This advertisement tells women that buying a gas-powered dryer equals having freedom and being able to be a better wife, about her mother, and overall, more ideal American woman. Additionally, the magazine saying that managing these household tasks makes a woman good and successful further perpetuates the idea that American society finds the housewife to be the ideal role for women.

The next advertisement is from the November 1955 issue of *Better Homes & Gardens*, and it's from Revere Ware for not only copper pots and pans but for the smaller toy version of those pots and pans.<sup>15</sup> This advertisement spans two pages and includes depictions of an identical mother and daughter in red dresses with short brown hair sitting next to the sets of cookware. This advertisement supports the idea that homemaking jobs, like cooking, were a woman's job, or at least that is the expectation. This reflects the idea that being a homemaker is the ideal for women but also is an example of American consumerism. The messages in this advertisement talk about buying these either real or play sets of pots and pans at any point in the year for any

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<sup>14</sup> The article mentions that the wife did not know how to do housework before getting married, but since then she has learned how to cook, do laundry, and care for her children while balancing her relationship with her husband and friends.

<sup>15</sup> Revere Ware, "Revere Ware for Mom. . . Daughter, too!" *Better Homes & Gardens*, November 1955, 124-125.

reason such as birthdays or holidays. It reflects how having more or having the latest is an ideal in American culture.

The final advertisement to discuss comes also from the November issue, but this one is from the Weirton Steel Company. The format of this advertisement is a cartoon that tells the story of a husband and wife renovating their kitchen.<sup>16</sup> The title of the advertisement is, "The Adventures of a Home Owner: Remodeling the Kitchen." The wife, Susie, begins the story crying and upset about her old and outdated kitchen. She pleads to her husband to modernize their kitchen, so they go to "an expert." The expert tells them how steel is the best material for appliances, that it is easy to clean but also lasts long. The husband, Harry, appreciates the cost effectiveness of the steel appliances and foots the bill for the new kitchen.

This advertisement shows the duality between the roles for the ideal husband and the ideal housewife in American society in the 1950s. The husband takes on the job of providing the kitchen and considering cost. On the other hand, the woman is only shown as caring about the aesthetics of the kitchen and the way that modernizing the kitchen would mean that her "hardest chores are easy." This advertisement not only shows how the roles between men and women are delegated, but it reinforces the idea for the housewife her job is home making. It also reflects ideas of consumer culture because we see messages of modernizing and beauty associated with buying something new. And at the end of this story, we see both the husband and wife beaming with joy. The message is that by buying this new kitchen they can now be happy. This is the feeling advertising agencies use to market products and get more sales because in this reality, having this item equates to an easier life, which means more happiness.

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<sup>16</sup> Weirton Steel Company, "The Adventures of a Home Owner: Remodeling the Kitchen," *Better Homes & Gardens*, November 1955, 183.

Throughout the advertisements discussed above, characteristics of the ideal American housewife have been reflected in ways that make the roles and expectations that women are subject to seem effortless and enjoyable. While this can be true for some women, the reality is that for most this picture perfect and seemingly simple lifestyle was not and continues to not be attainable. They also prove the fact that magazines and advertising agencies were perpetuating the standard of being a housewife onto American women. It is arguably true that advertising reflects culture, of course where else would advertising agencies be getting these standards, characteristics, and qualities of American housewives other than from the norms in American society. However, it is also true that advertising is not fully based in reality. The goal of advertising is to sell a product, not to be a realistic depiction of what that product is or how it will impact the life of the consumer. Not all women in the 1950s were housewives. There were still many women who were working, some with no other option due to financial need. Advertising agencies feed off both the fears and the desires of the consumers, and as a result that leads to these unrealistic depictions of their target audience.

Advertising in magazines like *Better Homes & Gardens* perpetuate unrealistic and unobtainable standards for American housewives and women as a whole. While it is fair to say that the housewife is the most desirable standard for American women and that the housewife stereotype is something that, despite the unrealistic expectations, is a role that many women in American society do take on, advertising is not a true reflection of American women. The stereotype of the modern American housewife is a development from industrialization and economic innovation and, while shaped by the roles and expectations placed onto them by American culture, advertising of these new consumer products not only perpetuates these

existing ideals but uses them for further economic gain and development at the expense of real women.

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