

The American Housewife: Television and Magazine Images of Middle-Class Women,
1950-1955

Abby Rourke
History 499: Capstone
January 30, 2011

The 1950s was a decade of growth and change as well as contradictions. The end of World War II brought thousands of men home to pick up their lives where they left off and young couples across the nation moved to the suburbs to begin families. As these young couples set off to begin their new lives they were faced with an array of images depicting the correct lifestyle to follow. Popular magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal* and *Life*, as well as public service advertisements and commercials, guided the decisions young couples made in regards to their family, health and beauty, careers, and home goods. The role of women in particular was targeted by these mediums. Did the many images of women created by the media contradict themselves, or was there a general consensus of the image of women in 1950 and 1955? This paper will argue that despite the fact that alternative images were presented, overall, in magazines and television, the ideal 1950s American woman was still considered to be the stay-at-home wife and mother. Magazine advertisements, television public service announcements, and television commercials will be used to examine the images of American women in the media during this period.

Understanding Media in the 1950s

In order to understand the role of magazines and television in the lives of middle-class white women between 1950 and 1955, we must omit the modern understanding of the role of media in everyday life. The twenty-first century has become the digital age in regards to popular culture. Magazines influence the decisions that people make, the things that they do, and the way they dress, but now they are competing with a much

larger force: technology. As a result of the Internet, smart phones, television, the radio and many other forms of technology, printed periodicals have taken a backseat in the realm of popular culture. The majority of all major periodicals can be found online and some publications only provide their readers with web-based sources.¹ Contrary to this fast-paced society, in the 1950s, magazines and television were two of the most common ways to connect the home to the general culture. In 1949, 3.25 million homes had television sets out of approximately 42 million households and in 1954; 3.3 million homes had television sets out of approximately 47 million households.² In the early 1950s, televisions were expensive, therefore the initial consumer market was limited, but as prices lowered the popularity of televisions in middle-class homes increased. Popular periodicals and advertisements displayed the values, expectations, and obstacles for men and women in daily life, thus impacting decisions made by men and women every day.³ There were no cell phones or computers to spread concepts and trends in seconds. Suburban families relied on magazines for entertainment as well as a source of social and political information. Television allowed middle-class families to be connected with political and social events across the nation. As of 1954, the widest use of television by the public was during the hearings of the Senate subcommittee investigating the Army's

Notes

¹ *Encyclopedia of American Journalism*, 2008., s.v. "Women's Magazines."

² *World Almanac*, 1955, s.v. "radio and television."

³ Nancy A. Walker, ed., *Women's Magazines 1940-1960* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 1.

charges against Senator Joseph McCarthy from April 22nd to June 17th.⁴ The television allowed suburban families to become a part of a monumental historical event. Not only did television keep the public informed, but also united Americans in a new way. The day after a monumental event was publicized, Americans in and out of the home would be discussing the broadcast. Although not every American household had a television in the early 1950s, historical and social news was spread across the nation by a combination of broadcasting and the word of mouth. When examining media from the 1950s we must interpret all media from an informed standpoint to be sure to acknowledge intentions of both the producer and the consumer in regards to the material.

Ladies' Home Journal was one of the leading women's magazines in the world.⁵ It was the first magazine to reach one million subscribers, and until the 1950s, it had the largest circulation of any women's magazine.⁶ In 1949 alone, the journal had 4,389,287 subscriptions. In March of 1953 the journal reached 4,869,174 subscribers, followed by 4,950,472 in September of 1955, and 5,614,599 in September of 1958.⁷ This pattern of increased subscribers throughout the 1950s represents not only successful marketing but also more importantly, an increase of popular interest in this women's magazine. A possibility as to why *Ladies Home Journal* was no longer the leading women's magazine in the 1950s could be due to an increase in the production of competing periodicals, but it

⁴ World Almanac, 1955, s.v. "radio and television."

⁵ Nancy A. Walker, ed., *Women's Magazines 1940-1960* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 1.

⁶ *Encyclopedia of American Journalism*, 2008., s.v. "Women's Magazines."

⁷ World Almanac, 1955, s.v. "magazines and publications."

need be known that this does not take away from the prevalence of *Ladies Home Journal* in 1950s culture.

There are a variety of contradicting scholarly views on the role of popular culture and the way in which it affects the masses. Out of many of these variations emerges the importance of historical context. Throughout the twentieth century, cultural norms did not follow a gradual increase towards modernity. The 1950s was a post-war era, dominated by oppression and respect for an established authority as a result of national and international government affairs. Policies such as imperialism overseas and the acceptance of the United States policy of repression on the home front set the foundation for cultural norms on the home front. Traditional patterns and absolute authority defined the suburbs and as demonstrated by the media, traditional gender roles were evident. The role of the man as the head of the house could be traced back to the support for authority in the political sphere. The role of women as the housewife was a result of this conservative period.⁸ As Francesca M. Cancian and Steven L. Gordon stated in their piece on *Changing Emotion Norms in Marriage*, “Although people at the time might well have experienced and understood the constraining aspects of this domestic dream, the new suburban family idea was a consensus ideology, promising practical benefits like security and stability to people who had witnessed the shocks and social dislocations of the previous two decades.”⁹

⁸ Francesca M. Cancian and Steven L. Gordon, “Changing Emotion Norms in Marriage: Love and Anger in U.S. Women’s Magazines since 1900,” *Gender and Society* 2, no.3 (1988): 331, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/190359> (accessed October 21, 2010).

⁹ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV; Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2, <http://books.google.com/books> (accessed November 7, 2010).

In his piece on “The Folklore of Industrial Society,” Lawrence W. Levine introduces the reader to the idea that there is more behind the magazine than opening to a page and absorbing propaganda. He argues:

Recent literary theory sees neither the reader nor the text as necessarily controlling but rather places emphasis on the interaction between the two. It is precisely in this realm that we have to understand the process of popular culture: not as the imposition of texts on passive people who constitute a tabula rasa but as a process of interaction between complex texts that harbor more than monolithic meanings and audiences who embody more than monolithic assemblies of compliant people.¹⁰

According to this statement, women did have the choice to put down a magazine if they disagreed with an article, or to write a letter to the editor arguing with the perspective on women. The relationship between producer and consumer was a coherent relationship between two parties in the 1950s. So with this in mind, we must ask, if magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* ignored the intelligence and aspirations of women, why was it one of the leading women's magazines in the 1950s?

Women and Magazines

We cannot fully answer the question above from the magazines themselves, but we can make inferences about the forces driving women to spend 35 cents on a magazine that thrived off of the domestic image of women. The reactions of the public to the mass

¹⁰ Lawrence W. Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences,” *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (Dec., 1992): 1381.

media are how historians are able to learn about the popular culture of a period. It is true that women had the choice to not read magazines, just as with modern readers, but did women really have a choice? When we say that women had the option to put down a magazine or to shut off the television, we are ignoring the driving force behind society in the 1950s as well as the twenty-first century society: the relationship between the producer and the consumer. Editors and writers for women's magazines were aware of the diverse audience that they were hoping to appeal to, and shaped their campaigns around this division. "Managerial elites plan a menu calculated to offend the fewest people," argued Jackson Lears in his response to Lawrence W. Levine's piece on popular culture and folklore.¹¹ There were readers who disagreed with the columns that told women that their sole duty was to serve for her husband, but based on the articles produced in *Ladies' Home Journal*, these women were not the majority of women purchasing the magazine. Following the argument of Jackson Lears, if these women were the majority of consumers, we must wonder if these women's magazines would have been more directed at the career woman rather than the housewife. The contrasting articles in these periodicals are what lead historians to the conclusion that there were contrasting aspirations among women, as well as variety in the understanding of the role of women. As a result of this variety, editors of the nations leading magazines tailored their material to the majority of their audience, the middle-class white housewife, to achieve the highest outcome of their product. The majority of my research and evaluations will be based on the most prevalent articles found in periodicals and on the

¹¹ T.J. Jackson Lears, "Making Fun of Popular Culture," *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (Dec., 1992): 1424.

television. This is not to ignore the advertisements directed towards the career women of the 1950s; it is simply to focus on the general depiction of women by the media on a large scale.

In The Feminine Mystique (1963), Betty Freidan stated, “In the magazine image, women do no work except housework and work to keep their bodies beautiful and to get and keep a man.”¹² This statement represents one way that magazines portrayed women but it does not represent the way women were depicted by the media as a whole in the 1950s. In her 1994 response to Freidan’s argument, Joanne Meyerowitz stated,

Many historians today adopt a different approach in which mass culture is neither wholly monolithic nor unrelentingly repressive. In this view, mass culture is rife with contradictions, ambivalence, and competing voices. We no longer assume that any text has a single, fixed meaning for all readers, and we sometimes find within the mass media subversive, as well as repressive, potential.¹³

After observing *Ladies’ Home Journal*, it has become evident that contradictions exist within the media, even within the same periodical at times, just as Meyerowitz argued. Contrary to Freidan’s interpretation of the media, many publications, such as *Ladies’ Home Journal*, presented opposing perspectives of the role of a middle-class, white woman from 1950 to 1955. In the *Ladies’ Home Journal* January 1954 issue, one page depicted an ad for Jergens Lotion stating:

¹² Betty Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 1963), 36.

¹³ Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1994), 231.

For Jane, the best proof of Jergens Lotion care is the flattery her hands get from her husband. Detergents are here to stay. Make sure your hands stay pretty, too. Keep Jergens Lotion and use it regularly after each chore. You can do a housewife's job, but it's nice to have a sweetheart's hands.¹⁴

This advertisement supports Freidan's argument that women were primarily depicted as housewives by magazines. The primary reason for Jane to use Jergens Lotion was to raise her appeal to her husband after a typical day of performing household chores. However, on the next page, an advertisement for women's shoes and business dress acknowledge women in the workforce and their needs. Following this page there was an advertisement for Franco-American Spaghetti. The article was titled, "Still a Kid at Heart" and stated:

For good eating, man-style, there's nothing quite like this wonderful spaghetti with its famous tomato and Cheddar cheese sauce. Just watch your man pitch in and enjoy it with all of a youngster's healthy appetite. Franco-American Spaghetti takes him back to his happy boyhood! Every so often, give your family the real pleasure of digging into big plates of Franco-American Spaghetti. It's a boy's favorite food that the man still loves!

This advertisement takes the female reader back into the home after an advertisement representing women in the workforce was just on the previous page. It places the happiness of the family and responsibility of feeding the family on the wife. The happiness of the men in her family is the focus, and the ad argues that if a woman feeds her husband and children this product, she will have fulfilled her duties.

¹⁴ "Use JERGENS LOTION-avoid detergent hands," *Ladies' Home Journal*, January 1954, 36.

Popular magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* introduced contrasting images of women but clearly identified women as the housewife through the organization of the magazine. Very seldom did two articles depicting the career woman appear together. Advertisements that depicted the career women still represented traditional gender roles. For example, *Ladies' Home Journal* had an advertisement for *Jell-O* instant pudding. The title of the advertisement was, "New Busy-Day Dessert—you can make and serve it at the very last minute!" The notes read, "Ready to eat in minutes! You can fix it just at dessert time. Now, no matter how busy your day, its never too late to make a real homemade dessert." The advertisement showed a mother in the kitchen making Jell-O pudding as her husband and two children were waiting anxiously at the dinner table. Although this article is aimed at the busy mother, implying that she has more priorities than cooking, the nuclear family and traditional gender roles are still depicted. The woman in the kitchen and the family waiting, seated at the table, highlights traditional gender roles. This advertisement may introduce a new lifestyle for some women, but it continues to enforce societal norms in regards to the roles of men and women in the home. So if there were two contrasting views of women within the same source, which image did readers accept? Did they accept either view?

Many of the readers of *Ladies' Home Journal* and other periodicals were receptive to ideas that the media provided them with. It is important to keep in mind that not all mass culture is popular culture. It is through this concept that consumer's choice emerges. If magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* were classified as popular culture of the 1950s, then essentially they can be classified as mass culture and copies printed in mass quantities because the targeted consumer submitted to the periodical by purchasing

it. How does this relationship between mass and popular culture only work one way?

Various definitions of popular culture exist, each introducing new angles, but it is important to keep in mind that popular culture includes every aspect of life. It can range from the duties of a housewife to the duties of a woman working for a magazine editor. To an extent, the subjects of a culture are what create the popular culture. Magazine companies and broadcasting stations are companies that are in business to make a profit, therefore they will provide the majority with the medium they desire. In reference to women's magazines, if periodicals such as *Ladies' Home Journal* are the leading circulating periodicals, by purchasing and reading these magazines, women are submitting themselves to the media, essentially supporting and creating popular culture. The success of *Ladies' Home Journal* therefore, represents the values and aspirations of women between 1950 and 1955.¹⁵

The motto for *Ladies' Home Journal* was: "The magazine women believe in."¹⁶ This subtitle may have been true for some women in the 1950s, but it does not mean that all readers believed every article in every issue. The important point to take away from this motto is that the message of the media in regards to the role of women was being depicted clearly. Through marriage articles, home appliance ads, advice columns, and much more, *Ladies' Home Journal* made it clear that the job of a woman was to provide for her home and family. A Tide advertisement in the *Ladies Home Journal* in the January 1954 issue included numerous pictures of women in aprons performing

¹⁵ Lawrence W. Levine, "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences," *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (Dec., 1992): 1372-1374.

¹⁶ Catherine Gourley, *Gidgets and Women Warriors: Perceptions of Women in the 1950s and 1960s* (Minneapolis, Lerner Publishing Group, Inc., 2008), 31.

household duties such as grocery shopping and laundry. The advertisement states, “Jane tried new soaps, detergents, too, and so did neighbor Jean. When all were tried, they turned to Tide to get clothes dazzling clean!” The same article also states, “More women by far use TIDE than any other washing product in the world.” Only women were used in this article and the women that were used represented middle-class white housewives. By saying that more women use Tide, the assumption that women are responsible for doing the laundry is made. The messages that national brands such as Tide and Jergens Lotion, sent to women through this magazine represented the way the media and in some cases, the government, were trying to shape the lives of women into the domestic sphere.

According to Betty Freidan, women were under constant pressure to make their marriage work and to fulfill the “feminine mystique”:

The Feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity. . . . Beneath the sophisticated trappings, it simply makes certain concrete, finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence—as it was lived by women whose lives were confined, by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children—into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity.¹⁷

By referring to the feminine mystique as a religion, Freidan implies that this was an ideology that had become naturalized. The success and value of a woman were to be measured only by the domestic aspects of feminine existence that society had created. These expectations of women were measured on a national basis by organizations such as

¹⁷ Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1963), 43.

“American Mothers Inc.” “American Mothers Inc.” was officially organized in 1950 under the Golden Rule Foundation and still exists today as an interfaith, not-for-profit, non-political organization. The organization awarded one woman a year with the “Mother of the Year” award. According to the World Almanac of 1950:

The choice is based on these requirements: she must be a successful mother, as shown by the character and achievements of her children; she must embody those traits most highly regarded in mothers—courage, moral strength, patience, affection, kindness, understanding, homemaking ability; she must have a sense of social and world relationships and must have been active in her own community betterment or in some other service for public benefit.¹⁸

In the 1950s, popular magazines were filled with advertisements that focused on the primary role of women in the home. Beginning in 1950, Clifford R. Adams, a marriage counselor, created the column “Making Marriage Work.” “Making Marriage Work” was an advice column that allowed men and women to write in to the magazine, seeking advice for marital problems. It appeared in every issue of *Ladies’ Home Journal* through the 1950s. Regardless of the marital issue, Adams explained countless times that the fault was always on the woman. After all, it was her duty to make her marriage work. He provided women with advice such as, “Don’t disturb his belongings. Don’t open his wallet or read his mail without his approval. Don’t read over his shoulder, either.”¹⁹ It was articles like these that were aimed at making women believe that it was the woman’s

¹⁸ World Almanac, 1955. s.v. “magazines and publications.”

¹⁹ Clifford R. Adams, “Making Marriage Work,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, January 1950, 78, quoted in Catherine Gourley, *Gidgets and Women Warriors: Perceptions of Women in the 1950s and 1960s* (Minneapolis, Lerner Publishing Group, Inc., 2008), 31.

duty to make their marriage work and to fulfill the feminine mystique. “Making Marriage Work” and many other advice columns coincided with advertisements that constantly depicted women in the domestic setting.

To have a successful marriage a wife was expected to present herself as a woman physically and emotionally. Beauty products filled popular magazines and attempted to convince women that they would help them get a husband or make their husband happier. *White Rain*, a popular hair product line, had advertisements in *Ladies' Home Journal* that were entitled, “Your hair is romance,” with pictures of men and women in love. The article states: “For White Rain sprinkles your hair with dancing sunlight. And with sunshine all around you—love and laughter follow after, Love and laughter... the essence of romance.”²⁰ The marketing of this product was centered on the idea that women are seeking love. This marketing strategy represents the ways in which corporate America generalized the aspirations of women. The health and beauty of women was based on their domestic duties. Ranging from hair products to health care products, advertisements targeted the housewife. Ipana toothpaste advertisements stated, “Now . . . enjoy sweet foods and protect your teeth from cavities.” Initially, one may think that this advertisement is not directed towards a specific gender but the images depict the ideal, nuclear family. A family of four: husband, wife, son, and daughter, sharing a homemade cake at the dining table. Both males are wearing ties and both females are dressed formally with ribbons in their hair. In a side picture, the same mother is shown helping her daughter brush her teeth. The caption states, “Youngsters will love it too.” Through images, this advertisement places the responsibility of a family’s health on the mother. It

²⁰ “White Rain,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, January 1954, 78.

is assumed that she will be able to provide her family with homemade meals and desserts and still manage to keep her family healthy. As demonstrated by these pieces, there are a variety of ways in which gender roles can be displayed in advertisements. Regardless of the way these roles were represented, women were depicted as a housewife responsible for the health and happiness of her family.

Women and Televised Advertisements and Public Service Announcements in the 1950s

The 1950s was a period of crossroads within the television industry. In decades prior to the 1950s, Hollywood and the film industry dominated motion pictures. As audiences moved from the movie theatre to the private space of the home in the postwar period, ABC, CBS, NBC and DuMont emerged as the leading broadcasting networks.²¹ These networks took over audience share from the motion picture sphere as a result of low network costs. As American families shifted from wartime roles to traditional gender roles, the impact of the television in middle-class homes increased. The G. I. Bill supported veterans in the postwar era and provided many young families with a disposable income that could support the purchase of high price items such as black and white television sets. In the early 1950s the average price for a black and white television set was 300 dollars. Between 1948 and 1955 nearly two-thirds of American homes had

²¹ William Boddy, "The Studios Move into Prime Time: Hollywood and the Television Industry in the 1950s," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 4 (Summer, 1985): 28, <http://jstor.org/> (accessed November 2, 2010).

television sets installed.²² Contrary to the number of reported television sets in American homes, as a result of their high prices; there were still a number of American families that went without television sets. However, this does not take away from the influence that they had on the public. Friends would visit friends that had televisions when certain programs were broadcasted and if this was not an option, it was probable that the program would be the topic of discussion for days to follow.²³ The television was a new way for families to not only spend time together but to connect with their neighbors, as well as the rest of the nation.

Did television affect housewives in the same way that magazines did? Once again the question of consumer choice arises. A television set was an investment for families but does that mean that Americans believed everything they saw on television? Betty Friedan stated:

The public image, in the magazines and television commercials, is designed to see washing machines, cake mixes, deodorants, detergents, rejuvenating face creams, hair tints. But the power of that image, on which companies spend millions of dollars for television time and ad space, comes from this: American women no longer know who they are. They are sorely in need of a new image to help them find their identity. As the motivation researchers keep telling the advertisers, American women are so unsure of who they should be that

²² Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV; Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1, <http://books.google.com/books> (accessed November 7, 2010).

²³ William Boddy, "The Studios Move into Prime Time: Hollywood and the Television Industry in the 1950s," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 4 (Summer, 1985): 28, <http://jstor.org/> (accessed November 2, 2010).

they look to this glossy public image to decide every detail of their lives. They look for the image they will no longer take from their mothers.²⁴

Friedan implies that housewives were perceptive of the domestic images the media created. In this statement Friedan homogenizes women in the 1950s and dismisses a population of women whom were not susceptible to the domestic images put forth by the media. We can examine popular media and make inferences in regards to the ways in which television influenced the daily life and decisions women made in the 1950s but it is important to understand popular culture as a whole. Popular culture is a generalization to an extent; therefore, when examining different aspects of popular culture we must keep in mind that we are typically discussing the majority. While I go on to examine a variety of television commercials and public service announcements, I plan to analyze them in regards to the positioning of the majority, rather than the entirety.

Advertisement companies used television as another form of promotion in conjunction with magazines and the radio. Popular television programs such as “I Love Lucy,” “The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet,” “Leave it to Beaver,” and many more, depicted exemplary American families in the 1950s. Programs such as these were interrupted by advertising commercials and public service announcements. The television programs introduced viewers to families that represented the “ideal” American family but the advertisements in these programs targeted traditional gender roles and the depiction of American women by society. As television became more popular in the latter part of the 1950s, more variations of programs emerged providing viewers with program choices. Regardless of the variations of television programs and their audiences,

²⁴ Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1963), 72.

advertisements continued to depict women primarily as housewives. A 1952 General Electric two-in-one refrigerator food freezer commercial aired during the popular comedy, “I Married Joan,” a show about an absentminded housewife and her husband, Bradley Stevens, a domestic court judge. The advertisement depicted a middle-class white couple in their kitchen discussing their new refrigerator with the audience. The husband was dressed in a formal suit and the wife in a dress. The wardrobe implies their roles as a workingman and a housewife, setting the stage for the ad. During the commercial, the husband discusses the financial aspects of their purchase such as trade-in allowances and down payments while the wife discusses the in-home benefits of the refrigerator such as the amount of storage space for frozen food and the lack of frost. The talking points in this commercial represent traditional gender roles. The wife focused on the benefits that she received from the purchase as a housewife and the ways in which the product made her life simpler while the husband paid no attention to the in-home benefits of the product and was depicted as the head of the house that controlled the finances of the family. Apart from the way the couple was portrayed and what they represented, the last line of the commercial provides modern viewers with an understanding of society in the 1950s that goes beyond an advertisement for an appliance. The husband in the commercial stated, “See your GE dealer about his liberal allowance of credit terms—you’ll be glad you did.”²⁵ Referring to the GE dealer as a male, the assumption can be made that the job of a dealer was to typically be filled by a man. The commercial enforces traditional gender roles on the audience but this statement could be used as a

²⁵ Ford Motor Company (1955-1956), 1 min.; 38 sec.; from Prelinger Archives, *Two Ford Freedom*, MPEG, <http://www.archive.org/details/TwoFordFreedom>.

model for the message that corporations attempted to send to men and women across America as to what their proper roles were. Advertisements such as these aired during a variety of popular programs and it is important to acknowledge the variety of audiences that popular programs had. It appears that this advertisement targeted middle-class families but regardless of the domestic roles of the audience, the image of women as housewives was depicted to represent the correct roles of men and women.

The television was greeted by praise as well as concern as it was launched into 1950s society. Some idealized the new medium and the societal modernization that it represented but others met those utopian ideals with pessimistic concerns of how television threatened the foundations of domestic ideals. Concerns of how the television would change the evolving family structure, medical hazards that it could cause to viewers, the way it would fit in with home décor, how it would affect the duties of the housewife, and many more filled debates about this new form of media technology. It is these contrasting reactions to technology and the media that emerged from it that was the driving force behind many middle-class American consumers.²⁶ Lynn Spigel stated in her book, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*:

We can thus explore popular media as a ground for cultural debate, which is a very different notion from mass medias propaganda or even as “consciousness industries.” While certain ideas might have been emphasized more often than

²⁶ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV; Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3, <http://books.google.com/books> (accessed November 7, 2010).

others, we should not forget that culture is a process that entails power struggles and negotiations among various social ideals.²⁷

Spigel points out the ways in which the cultural debate shaped the way televisions were introduced into the home. She addressed opposing views within society but placed an emphasis on the idea that out of these opposing views emerged a new understanding of popular culture. Although many Americans were apprehensive of televisions and the way they would impact daily life, network ratings soared and television sales increased throughout the 1950s. This supports Spigel's argument and reiterates the argument that out of popular culture emerges majority beliefs and ideals.

A 1950s Ford Victoria advertisement targeted the stay-at-home wife of the 1950s. The ad depicts a woman in the kitchen as she has just made plans with a friend over the phone. While she is washing dishes, she points out, "Like so many people these days, we live in the suburbs and Dave needs the car for work every day for business." She goes on to say, "When he was gone I was practically a prisoner in my own home. I couldn't get out to see my friends, I couldn't take part in PTA activities, why I couldn't even shop when I wanted to."²⁸ This advertisement represents the most common depiction of women displayed by the media: the stay-at-home wife who was reliant on her husband in every way. According to the media, the main concern of the average housewife was to please her family and to be involved in the community. PTA meetings were the ideal place for a woman to make a difference in the world, the world that did not go beyond the

²⁷ Spigel, *Make Room for TV; Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar 8*.

²⁸ Ford Motor Company (1955-1956), 1 min.; 38 sec.; from Prelinger Archives, *Two Ford Freedom*, MPEG, <http://www.archive.org/details/TwoFordFreedom>.

walls of suburbia. Ford uses this notion to convince suburban families that they needed a Ford vehicle, in this case, the Ford Victoria, in order to achieve freedom. By saying she was a prisoner in her own home, this housewife implies freedom when she is at social events such as PTA meetings and friends' homes.²⁹ If this is the housewives' ideal freedom, has she fallen submissive to the feminine mystique that Betty Friedan speaks of?

Friedan argues that women fall victim to domestic ideals and lose all sense of individual identity and personal aspirations as a result of the traditional gender roles depicted by the media.³⁰ The media emphasized that the purpose of a woman's education was to help her husband advance his career, not to advance her own career. At Smith College in Massachusetts, an all-girls' college, the presidential candidate told the 1955 graduates, "This assignment for you, as wives and mothers, you can do in the living room with a baby in your lap or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hand."³¹ The Ford commercial mentioned above represents a woman whose aspirations are based on pursuing the media generated domestic ideal. A popular educational public service announcement titled, "Are You Ready for Marriage?" depicts a young woman who has lost her identity and fallen submissive to the feminine mystique. The young couple, Larry and Sue, has just gotten engaged at the ages of 19 and 18, without the support of their parents. The

²⁹ Ford Motor Company, *Two Ford Freedom*.

³⁰ Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1963), 43.

³¹ Catherine Gourley, *Gidgets and Women Warriors: Perceptions of Women in the 1950s and 1960s* (Minneapolis, Lerner Publishing Group, Inc., 2008), 13.

young boy, Larry, discusses his recent engagement with a friend and is asked what he is going to do about money. Larry's response is, "Well Sue's folks were going to pay something to put her in Junior College here in town for two years so we'll have that. But instead of going to college she will get a full-time job in campus town and she doesn't care about education anymore."³² This public service announcement represents the decision that young women across America came face to face with as they graduated from High School. The median age of marriages for both men and women reached a historically low rate in the 1950s. In 1950, the median age for women's first marriage was 20.³³ For many, the role of a mother and wife took precedence over her education and career. Sue, who had planned to attend college until she had the opportunity to fulfill her destiny of being a housewife and mother, represented this model of women. It is not to say that all women choose the path of domesticity, but it is through the media that young women were encouraged to become housewives. This public service announcement targets the majority of young couples that were in Larry and Sue's situation, and goes on to encourage Larry and Sue to think twice about their decision and to not fall submissive of the trap of the feminine mystique. This announcement was created to inform young women that there were more choices than fulfilling traditional gender roles. Larry and Sue spoke with a marriage counselor who provided them with

³² Coronet Instructional Films (1950). 9min 09 sec; from Prelinger Archives, *Are You Ready for Marriage?*, MPEG, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkLBhNblBas&playnext=1&list=PL0D8A20AAAC27F10F&index=13>

³³ The United States Census Bureau, *Estimated Median Age at First Marriage, by Sex: 1890-Present*, September 15, 2004, <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/tabMS-2.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2010).

educational and psychological options, which resulted in their decision to postpone their engagement. Public service announcements such as these were created in response to the overwhelming public reaction to domestic ideals put forth by the media.³⁴

Another public service announcement that was on television in the 1950s was a family etiquette announcement. The purpose of this announcement was not to inform young couples of their opportunities but to inform families of the proper way to act at a family dinner. The announcement places an emphasis on the idea of a family dinner and setting time aside to spend time together by depicting a white middle-class family, a nuclear family, during dinnertime. While the women are changing into formal dress, the narrator states, “The women of this family seem to feel that they owe it to the men of the family to look relaxed, rested, and attractive at dinner time.”³⁵ This statement represents the dominance of the male figure in a family and the way women are submissive to the needs and desires of males. The children go on to say, “Is it that late? Dad will be here any minute. Better tell mother she is needed in the kitchen.”³⁶ The children imply that the proper place for their mother to be when their father arrives is in the kitchen preparing for his arrival. Once the family sits down to eat, the narrator discusses some basic family

³⁴ Coronet Instructional Films (1950). 9min 09 sec; from Prelinger Archives, *Are You Ready for Marriage?*, MPEG, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkLBhNblBas&playnext=1&list=PL0D8A20AAAC27F10F&index=13>

³⁵ Coronet Instructional Films (1950). 9min 09 sec; from Prelinger Archives, *Are You Ready for Marriage?*, MPEG, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkLBhNblBas&playnext=1&list=PL0D8A20AAAC27F10F&index=13>

³⁶ Public Service Announcement (1950). 9min 03 sec; from Prelinger Archives, *Family Etiquette*, MPEG, <http://www.archive.org/details/1950sAnd60sTvCommercials-Part2Of3>.

dinner etiquette rules. “Always wait for the hostess, in this case mother, to begin eating until you start . . . Tell mother how good the food is –it makes them want to continue pleasing you . . . Most families don’t have maids, so mother needs help with the serving from the kitchen.”³⁷ All of these guidelines place the responsibility on the mother.

Whether an advertisement or public service announcement depicts a man or woman, traditional gender roles are implied. Some public service announcements were created to advocate for people to move away from domesticity but even through these efforts, traditional gender roles were depicted.

Newly found freedoms of the modern women were represented by events and items such as a second family car, female social gatherings such as PTA meetings, and women driving themselves to events. Advertisements such as the previously mentioned Ford commercial and many more depict women with a variety of freedoms but the limit of these freedoms lies within the boundaries of the domestic sphere. A 1950s commercial for the new Goodyear Double Eagle tire displayed a woman driving alone when she gets a flat tire. The woman gets out of her car in high heels and a dress coat and appears to be stranded because she is unaware of how to change a tire. The narrator states, “This flat tire needs a man, but when there’s no man around . . . When there’s no man around, Goodyear should be.”³⁸ The advertisement makes it clear that a woman is unable to tend to a flat tire and would be stranded without the help of a man. Goodyear argues that because women have new freedoms, men cannot always be around. When a man is not

³⁷ Public Service Announcement, *Family Etiquette*.

³⁸ Goodyear Tires (1950-1955).; from Prelinger Archives, *Goodyear Double Eagle Tire*, MPEG, <http://www.archive.org/details/Televisi1960>.

around Goodyear will keep the woman safe because she is unable to do so on her own. Advertisements like these generalize the intelligence and abilities of women but depict the domestic roles of men and women in and out of the home despite their newly found freedoms. Changing a tire is a man's job, not a woman's. This ad depicted the role of a man in the 1950s but other ads such as the Swiss Crème Sandwich commercial depicted the roles of women. The commercial for Swiss Crème Sandwiches portrays a nuclear family within a utopian lifestyle. A mother is shown in a dress with a pearl necklace on wearing an apron and calling for her children to come in from outside. The daughter is playing on a swing in an elegant dress while the son is in a collared shirt peering over the fence when he hears the mother call. The children come into the kitchen when they realize the mother has Swiss Crème Sandwiches for them. Together the three sing the theme song for the snack with smiles on their faces. While the mother is preparing the snack for the children, the father, dressed in a business suit, peers his head in the window from the outside and joins in with the singing. He sings, "As the man around here you can quote me on this: yooo-whooh you who, its Swiss Crème Sandwich for you wahoooo whooh who . . ." ³⁹ Although this advertisement does not mention of gender roles or responsibilities, it is implied through wardrobe and actions. The mother is taking the responsibility of feeding the family. She is dressed elegantly to be presentable for her husband but still wears her apron to represent her role as a housewife. The husband on the other hand, appears in a business suit depicting his role as the head of the house and a workingman. As he enters the song, he mentions that he is the "man of the house"

³⁹ Swiss Crème Sandwich (1950-1955), 4 min. 57 sec.-6 min. 03 sec.; from Prelinger Archives, *Swiss Crème Sandwich*, MPEG, <http://www.archive.org/details/1950sAnd60sTvCommercials-Part1Of3>.

showing control. Advertisements targeted middle-class white suburban families in areas such as home goods, health and beauty, marriage roles, and many more. A diverse audience with a variety of roles made up the audience of publicized media. The domestic ideals that the media displayed were not accepted by all, but as television became more dominant in suburban homes, more people viewed these programs. The viewers had the choice to accept or deny the concepts that advertisements put forth but as a result of the loss of individuality and personal aspirations housewives turned to the catchy advertisements for answers.

The 21st Century Understanding of the 1950s

In the early 1950s, magazines and television were two of the most important connections that American housewives had with cultural ideals. In response to Lawrence W. Levine's piece on popular culture and its audiences, Jackson Lears points out that, ". . . the fundamental fact of cultural power: not its capacity to manipulate consciousness but its existence as a set of givens that form the boundaries of what the less powerful can do or can even (sometimes) imagine doing. Legitimation, not manipulation is the key to cultural hegemony." This concept of the way popular culture is created is true in both the 1950s as well as the twenty-first century. When attempting to understand the role of the media in 1950s from a modern perspective, it is a challenge because much of modern society is rooted in communication technologies. The same forms of media that influenced the ways women were viewed in the 1950s, influence the way the 1950s are viewed through a modern lens. Communication technologies were a large portion of popular culture in the 1950s, but a diverse population perceived it in a variety of ways. Although examinations of popular magazines and advertisements have proven that there

were a variety of images of women in the media, the majority revealed the role of a woman as the stay-at-home wife. It is this image that has represented women in the 1950s well into the twenty-first century. Popular 1950s sitcom reruns such as “Leave it to Beaver” and “I Love Lucy” depict the era as a utopian time when traditional gender roles were at their peak. Although these sitcoms were not representative of the majority of families, the ideals and beliefs that rooted these families are what represented the ethos of the 1950s. Political and Hollywood superstars Mamie Eisenhower and Marilyn Monroe, embody the 1950s woman. Pearl necklaces, elegant dresses, household chores, PTA meetings, and much more filled the 1950s. The variety of images of women in the 1950s has been filtered through political culture over the past 60 decades. The images of the career woman have been lost and the primary image of the housewife has surfaced.

Conclusion

To answer the question, “Did the many images of women created by the media contradict themselves, or was there a general consensus of the image of women in 1950 and 1955?” is nearly impossible. To homogenize the images of women in the media in the 1950s would not do justice to the era. Contrary to popular modern images and beliefs, the 1950s was an era of variation and growth. Popular culture is a generalization that omits the wants and desires of a group, in this situation, the wants and desires of a group of women. The media was dominated by images depicting traditional gender roles and the do’s and don’ts of marriage and family life but one can only identify dominant trends by examining the media. As demonstrated in this paper, popular magazine articles, public service announcements, and television commercials portrayed a variety of images of

women. Out of these images emerged the dominant image of women in the domestic setting. The influence of women on the media in the 1950s is represented on the following statement by Francesca M. Cancian and Steven L. Gordon:

Consistency between culture and experience is enhanced by mutual causal effects. Insofar as the mass media cater to popular interest and values and try to reflect changes in public views with minimum time lag, norms in magazines will quickly follow changes in visible publics. The policy of catering to readers may also lead magazines to be trendsetters.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Francesca M. Cancian and Steven L. Gordon, "Changing Emotion Norms in Marriage: Love and Anger in U.S. Women's Magazines since 1900," *Gender and Society* 2, no.3 (1988): 336. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/190359> (accessed November 1, 2010).

Bibliography

Adams, Clifford R., "Making Marriage Work," *Ladies' Home Journal*, January 1950, 78, quoted in Catherine Gourley, *Gidgets and Women Warriors: Perceptions of Women in the 1950s and 1960s* (Minneapolis, Lerner Publishing Group, Inc., 2008).

Boddy, William. "The Studios Move into Prime Time: Hollywood and the Television Industry in the 1950s." *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 4. Summer, 1985: 28, <http://jstor.org/> (accessed November 2, 2010).

Cancian, Francesca M. and Steven L. Gordon, "Changing Emotion Norms in Marriage: Love and Anger in U.S. Women's Magazines since 1900." *Gender and Society* 2, no.3, 1988: 308-342. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/190359> accessed October 21, 2010.

Coronet Instructional Films 1950.9min 09 sec; From Prelinger Archives, *Are You Ready for Marriage?*. MPEG. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkLBhNblBas&playnext=1&list=PL0D8A20AAAC27F10F&index=13>

Encyclopedia of American Journalism, 2008., s.v. "Women's Magazines."

Ford Motor Company. 1955-1956. 1 min.; 38 sec. From Prelinger Archives, *Two Ford Freedom*, MPEG, <http://www.archive.org/details/TwoFordFreedom> (accessed November 18, 2010).

Freidan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1963.

Gourley, Catherine. *Gidgets and Women Warriors: Perceptions of Women in the 1950s and 1960s*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, Inc., 2008.

Goodyear Tires 1950-1955. 6 min 20 sec-7min 05 sec; From Prelinger Archives, *Goodyear Double Eagle Tire*, MPEG, <http://www.archive.org/details/Televisi1960>. (Accessed October 15 2010).

Lears, T.J. Jackson. "Making Fun of Popular Culture." *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (Dec., 1992): 1417-1426.

Levine, Lawrence W. "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences." *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (Dec., 1992): 1369-1399.

Meyerowitz, Joanne. "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958." In *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, edited by Joanne Meyerowitz, 229-262. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1994.

Public Service Announcement 1950. 9min 03 sec; From Prelinger Archives, *Family Etiquette*, MPEG, <http://www.archive.org/details/1950sAnd60sTvCommercials-Part2Of3>.

Spigel, Lynn. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992. <http://books.google.com/books> (accessed November 7, 2010).

Swiss Crème Sandwich 1950-1955. 4 min. 57 sec.-6 min. 03 sec.; From Prelinger Archives, *Swiss Crème Sandwich*, MPEG, <http://www.archive.org/details/1950sAnd60sTvCommercials-Part1Of3>. (accessed April 1, 2010).

The United States Census Bureau. *Estimated Median Age at First Marriage, by Sex: 1890-Present*. September 15, 2004. <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/tabMS-2.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2010).

"Use Jergens Lotion-Avoid Detergent Hands." *Ladies' Home Journal*, January 1954, 36.

Walker, Nancy A., ed. *Women's Magazines 1940-1960*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998.

The relationship between the media industry and the consumer is highly unique. In studying popular culture, for resources such as magazines and advertisements to be useful and reliable they need to be observed from an objective standpoint. Advertising companies are in business to make a profit therefore, they produce what will sell. The inference can be made that the images in popular culture are popular images because they appear in these pieces. However, this does not go to omit other images in popular culture; variation needs to be acknowledged. Images of women appeared on television, on the radio, in magazines, and at the shopping center in the 1950s. As a result of the majority of these images depicting women as housewives, traditional gender roles were reinforced. The ethos of the 1950s were rooted in the sphere of domesticity created by the media as a reaction to the post war era.

“White Rain.” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, January 1954.

World Almanac, 1955, s.v. “radio and television.”