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American Advertisement and the Revival of the Housewife, 1950-1969

"In the imagery of print, film, and airwave the typical American citizen is commonly depicted as an uncommonly shrewd person. He or she is dramatized as a thoughtful voter, rugged individualist, and, above all, as a careful, hardheaded consumer of the wondrous products of American enterprise."[1] This comment by American journalist Vance Packard in 1957 helps capture the realm Americans were living in during the 1950s and 1960s. Packard's statement not only explains how American citizens were depicted in the media, but also how Americans saw themselves. *The Hidden Persuaders*, a book published in 1957 by Packard, sent a fissure of change to how the public perceived advertisements that surrounded them in their everyday lives. *The Hidden Persuaders* focused on the psychological and motivational research that advertisers used in order to subliminally influence the public, whether by persuading them to buy a certain product or to vote for a particular politician at an election. Creating advertisements had become its own science.[2] Packard's exposure of this new science to the public altered the public's perception of advertisements from sound, cheerful pictures to mind-controlling, manipulative propagandas. The book also degraded the reputation of advertising men themselves by films portraying advertisers as "cool manipulators gifted with a sinister attractiveness" further emphasizing the book's influence on the public.[3]

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1 Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders*, ed. Mark Miller (1957; repr., New York: Ig Publishing, 2007), 34.
2 Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders*, 10-12.
3 Ibid., 13.

With America's economic expansion post-World War II, the 1950s and 1960s proved to be a time of economic prosperity allowing Americans to purchase more goods and new products. In the mid-1950s, food spending increased by 33 percent, clothing expenditures by 20 percent, and household furnishings and appliances by 240 percent.[4] With more people being involved in the consumer culture, American businesses undoubtedly needed to produce more advertisements in order for consumers to be aware of its products and, in the companies' case, sell them as well. The problem appeared when companies had to sell domestic and "feminine" products such as refrigerators, canned soups, and laundry detergents to a wave of women who have been working out their homes in the labor force. Advertisers had to find a way to revive the concept of a traditional housewife back into a new generation of women who have been working inside factories rather than their own homes. During the early stages of World War II in 1940, 12,000,000 women were in the labor force; by 1945, 19,000,000 women worked in the labor force, gaining new jobs and skills.[5] Simultaneously, women were also beginning to be seen culturally as independent, hardworking citizens breaking the image of the dependent, passive housewife. A housewife was not only a title given to women who spent most of their time in home. Rather, a housewife represented domestic life. She turned labors like cleaning, cooking, and childcare, into homemaking and sustained traditional principles of femininity.[6] In order for American businesses to market its "feminine" products to a new wave of American women, companies created advertisements that reinvigorated the image of the "housewife." Through this tactic, companies hoped to not only sell its feminine products, but also assure women that the products went hand-in-hand with their private sense that women should be the ones to fulfill the

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[4] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 25.

[5] Doris Weatherford, *American Women And World War II* (New York: Facts On File Publishing, 1990), 124.

[6] Jessamyn Neuhaus, *Housework and Housewives in American Advertising* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 2.

role of a housewife in the American culture. Of course, companies did not make an obvious ad stating that women should buy a certain product because it fit their gender identity, but instead many companies had to strategically create ads that would rekindle the idea of a modern housewife for women.

Scholars have explored the effects that advertisements have caused in gender roles for women in the United States. US historian Jessamyn Neuhaus states that advertisement from the 1890s through the 1950s not only vaunted what new soap products could clean, but also how they could help wives and mothers keep their families safe.[7] Neuhaus analyzes advertisements from the late 1800s to today and how certain household labors were attached to the definition of femininity. Neuhaus argues that advertisers influenced women to feel responsible for certain domestic labors that women once did not consider their responsibility. Mary Cross, an English professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University, writes that advertisements in the 1950s capitalized on the domestic reign of women.[8] What helped caused this was the outburst of baby boomers in the postwar 1950s that made women stay at home in order to take care of their children. With women now at home, companies used the opportunity to endorse its domestic and feminine products such as new kitchen appliances, cleaning detergents, and nursery items. The attention for these ads was on "domesticity, motherhood, and femininity."[9] Cross's writings *A Century of American Icons* divulges the history of how memorable ads were created and what advertisers were thinking when they designed a specific ad, not limiting her research to just ads that were tailored for women. The current scholarship appears to be attracted to how advertisements affected the idea of a housewife to women and how the term "housewife" has changed

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[7] Neuhaus, *Housework and Housewives in American Advertising*, 19.

[8] Mary Cross, ed., *A Century of American Icons: 100 Products and Slogans from the 20th-Century Consumer Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 112.

[9] Cross, *A Century of American Icons: 100 Products and Slogans from the 20th-Century Consumer Culture*, 112.

throughout the late 1800s to the mid-1900s. This research paper will delve into interpreting specific tropes in advertisements, most notably the body language and attire, advertisers from 1950 to 1969 designed in order to help recover the belief that a housewife was a characteristic of being a woman.

Reviewing many magazines from 1950 to 1969, one of the prominent ways a company displayed its product was by having the image of the product enlarged and often in use, rather than having a description of the product itself. These ads were convincing eye catchers that would quickly engage customers to be aware about what companies were advertising without giving too much scrutiny. The alluring aspect for many of these ads for "feminine" products was that the images for the products were rarely ever shown with just an enlarged-sized image of the product itself. Advertisements for soups, toasters, soaps, and other house good products are repetitively seen with a person holding the object. Though the person's face is usually cropped out of the advertisement, consumers who are observing these eye catching ads unconsciously know which gender the product is for by seeing the product being held with a small, gentle, manicured hand.

In an ad by Ann Page Foods in *Good Housekeeping* magazine from the July issue of 1960, the company advertises its salad dressings by displaying five of its salad seasonings. The images of the products are largely displayed covering about half the page of the whole advertisement. For all five seasonings, the company shows women hands holding each of the salad dressings.[10] What is notable about the hands that are holding the salad dressings is that each hand is conspicuously different. Three out of the five hands are smooth, nail polished hands

[10] Ann Page Foods, "Salad Dressings," *Good Housekeeping*, Vol. 151, July 1960, accessed April 17, 2015, Reel 56, Microfilm, University of Maryland, 42. In addition to the image, the advertisement for the salad dressings has a quick description that ends with ". . . Ann Page proves fine foods needn't be expensive!" which further justifies my argument that the ad was reaching to housewives of all social and economic backgrounds.

that evidently represent women. The other two hands are not so polished and exhibit wrinkles. The former represents an economically upper class of housewives that are able to afford lavish manicures and ointments to keep their hands polished and wrinkle-free. Concurrently, this astride advertisement reaches out to the socially middle and lower class of housewives by advertising hands that many women had. This particular advertisement was used to tell women that Ann Page's salad dressings were good enough for housewives of all social classes to enjoy; and, that housewives should be the ones to choose food related products for themselves and their families. Being able to choose suitable cuisines and preparing meals was arguably the most crucial building block that constructed the concept of a housewife. Independent scholar Mary McFeely claims that home cooking during the twentieth century became one of the most important elements when it came to maintaining a family. She illustrates that this element has "acquired various new raisons d'être, demanding of women (whose traditional responsibility for this part of life did not fade) more complex knowledge, not only of cooking techniques but of the science of nutrition, the business of consumerism, and the uneasy art of creating a happy family."[11] A housewife was not only a woman who worked in the domestic household, but also a woman who represented domesticity itself and the values it held such as managing the house and maintaining a contented family. The glistening, manicured hands on the advertisement illustrates to women that being a housewife was not "work." Hands that have been used in hard labor would not be neatly polished. The manicured hands instead tell women that being a housewife is an inherent aspect of being a female. Ann Page Foods advertising salad dressings that are deliberately held by women hands entails that the company wanted to show women that their gender are the ones who are supposed to uphold family traditions in the kitchen as a housewife. This tactic can also

[11] Mary McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?: American Women and the Kitchen in the Twentieth Century* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001) 2.

be seen in ads showing new cooking technologies such as ovens, electric mixers, and toasters. In an ad by Sunbeam, the company shows off its state-of-the-art electric mixer mixing batter for a cake.[12] Again, a gentle, manicured hand is shown handling the equipment. These depictions of female hands handling kitchen items were approaches companies took in order to restore the image of the housewife to a new era of women who have been working in the labor force during World War II. These depictions try to bring women back into the domestic labor field rather than promoting them to work outside their homes. Manicured hands were not only used to show that food products were associated with women, but also with other "feminine" products that assisted in bringing women in the 1950s and 1960s back into believing that these commodities went with their gender. Furthermore, advertisers' inserted images where the product was in use reinforcing the idea that the product was to be managed by a particular gender.

Advertisements showing what an individual is wearing can be used to communicate messages to its audience. Clothes and accessories that cover the human body allow people to identify and categorize each other to a specific sub-culture or identity. An ad for Band-Aids by Johnson & Johnson depicts a zoomed in picture of a young child placing her head close to her knee as another beautified, manicured hand is nursing the child's injured knee.[13] As mentioned before, the hand evidently represents a woman judging from its manicured fingernails. What makes this hand contrast from the previous hands that were holding the salad dressings is

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[12] Sunbeam, "Electric Mixer," *Good Housekeeping*, Vol. 139, July 1954, accessed May 5, 2015, Reel 50, Microfilm, University of Maryland, 11.

[13] Johnson & Johnson, "Band-Aid," *LIFE*, Vol. 51, No. 5, August 4, 1961, accessed March 23, 2015, http://books.google.com/books?id=XFQEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false, 2.

Figure 1.1 Nursing a child's wound. Johnson & Johnson, "Band-Aid," *LIFE*, Vol. 51, No. 5, August 4, 1961.

that the hand tending the child's wound is also wearing a ring. The ring so happens to be placed on the woman's ring finger implying—from traditional Western practices—that the woman is married. This ad not only reigns on the traditional concept that women should be gentle to children and care for them; but, specifically that women who were married should be taking care of the children in their families. The ring is a portrayal of a married woman and a housewife who takes care of the children in her family.

In the 1950s, the amount of time women spent with their children doubled from the 1920s.[14] The ad uses this understanding by telling women that in addition to just being with their kids, caring and nursing them is also another important aspect of being a woman. Another clue the advertisement gives to its consumers of this concept is by having an image of a woman on the container the bandages are packed in. The image of the woman on the container can be exposed to not only people who see the advertisement in magazines, but also for everyday shoppers who may come across the product physically. An additional ad by Frigidaire advertises its new refrigerator. The ad shows the many benefits a family can have by owning a refrigerator. In the ad, the company shows an injured boy with a bruised eye secretly taking desert from the refrigerator. The image right beside it shows a hand placing an icepack on the child's head in order to treat his wound. The hand that is treating the boy's injury is shown having manicured hands along with two bracelets on the wrist.[15] The bracelets are an immediate indication to consumers that it is a woman who is treating the boy. Again, the company is trying to reinvigorate the image of a housewife by telling its consumers that women should be treating their children. Though an accessory, such as a ring or bracelet, can allow people to identify parts of who a person may be, full body attires and facial expression can also be strong signals used to get specific messages across.

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[14] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 27. Coontz also states that despite the increase in technology and new laborsaving appliances, housework actually increased during the 1950s. Surveys in the mid-1950s by advertisers also reported an increased tendency among women who found housework to be a "medium of expression for… [their] femininity and individuality." This report helps verify that post World War II women were beginning to buy back into the notion of being a housewife.

[15] Frigidaire, "Refrigerator," *Good Housekeeping*, Vol. 158, January 1964, accessed May 12, 2015, Reel 60, Microfilm, University of Maryland, 109. The ad also adds a caption that reads "what else consoles them so often… except mother?" further upholding my point that the company directed their advertisements towards housewives.

Figure 1.2 Woman struggling with domestic labors. Clorox, "Bleach," *Good Housekeeping*, Vol. 151, September 1960.

As in an ad by Clorox advertising a bottle of bleach, the image of a classical housewife is shown by the character's outfit and her facial expression in the advertisement. The ad portrays a woman and a man who are both in two different scenarios with each scenario taking roughly half the page.[16] The man is having a drink from a teacup at a table and he is joyfully wiping his mouth with a serviette. In addition to his drink, the man is wearing a tidy, sleek suit and appears to be at ease. In contrast, the image of the woman depicts a woman who is bending down on her

[16] Clorox, "Bleach," *Good Housekeeping*, Vol. 151, September 1960, accessed April 17, 2015, Reel 56, Microfilm, University of Maryland, 20. This advertisement also displays a gentle, manicured hand holding a bottle of bleach at the bottom of the page. This advertisement, like the previous ads analyzed before, uses two different tactics in order to convince women that being a housewife was a part of being a woman.

knees with a poignant facial expression. The woman is depicted wearing tarnished pants with a button-up shirt that appears wrinkled and unkempt. These two distinct images were not placed to antagonize women by making them seem clumsy. Rather, this particular advertisement was created in order to show women that Clorox's bleach could help make their job easier. The advertisement was a reminder to women how difficult and tiresome their labor in the home could be. Showing a woman hard at work in the household rather than a factory is how Clorox is trying to reintegrate women back into household labors. In addition, Clorox is offering a solution to the difficulties women face in the homes. Clorox is merely assuming that it is women who will benefit from their product. This assumption by Clorox is rekindling the original concept and tradition that females should be the gender to wash dirty laundry. Laundry, and many other cleaning duties in the house, was another aspect of the traditional housewife. Clorox intents were to change the identity of laundry from being a disgusting, hardworking labor to an easy, stress-free responsibility for housewives with their detergent. An ad by S.O.S displays a woman showing how easy cleaning dishes is with the company's new soap pads.[17] What is interesting about this particular ad is that the woman is wearing a French maid outfit, which represents domesticity, along with having a big smile on her face while she is washing the dishes with soap pads. In addition, a halo is seen around the woman's head displaying the woman's innocence. Washing dishes, generally viewed upon as a tedious, rough labor is now being depicted by S.O.S as an easy, virtuous job for women. The ad sends a message to women that instead of working hard in factories, women should come back to their homes and carry out an easy job with the help of the company's product. Furthermore, the company is telling women that they should be cleaning the dishes anyways since they distinctly place a woman using its product. Tactics

[17] S.O.S, "Soap Pads," *LIFE*, Vol. 46, No. 10, March 9, 1959, accessed May 6, 2015, http://books.google.com/books?id=D1IEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false, 28.

similar to both Clorox and S.O.S's advertisement were used frequently throughout advertisements in the 1950s and 1960s. Showing an afflicted women having a problem with completing domestic work then presenting a solution to that particular problem or displaying how a difficult labor can be easy with a certain product were ways companies would repeatedly advertise its products. These tactics were ways companies reinvigorated the image of a housewife back to a new wave of women who have been out working in the labor force.

There may have been advertisers from the 1950s and 1960s that have unconsciously created ads reviving concepts of the traditional housewives. Seeing women, as future housewives could have been the cultural norm during the mid-1900s. But, it is accurate to say the least that advertisements that dominated in American society during the consumer culture reinvigorated the concept of a traditional housewife in many ads. Similar tropes and tactics were used to give consumers an idea about whom the product was meant for. This research paper only delved into a limited amount of advertisements, products, and tactics advertisers used in an ad. Further exploration could be acquired by specifically looking at advertisements for one particular role that helped create the concept of a traditional housewife. Researching psychological experiments that were tested in the 1950s and 1960s and how advertisers used those results to target women could also be further researched. In addition, how women responded to these ads and the behavior they showed is indeed critical to know the consequences of the advertisement itself. With new advancements in technology that rose during the 1960s and 1970s, advertisements were able to reach its audience through many new mediums. From magazines, radios, and films, each medium required a new approach to how companies presented its ads. The changes from a still image in a magazine to a rolling film transformed how American citizens received their access to entertainment and information. This transition could help women be more aware of the

reinvigoration of the housewife concept American society has been exposing them too; or, it could give advertisers and companies more opportunities to influence the consumers' perspective.