

The Representation of Domestication and Oppression of Women in 1950s  
America Compared to Today

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Submitted to the Faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technologies in candidacy  
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## **Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Darnell". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and slightly larger than the rest of the letters.

Rebecca Darnell

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my gratitude to my thesis lecturer Dr Sorchá O' Brien for her guidance and positive encouragement throughout my research and writing. I am also grateful to my family for their support in this project and my education. Finally, I would like to extend my deepest thanks to the generations of women before me who fought for the rights I have today.

## **Abstract**

The object of my thesis is to impose on the domestication of women during 1950s America looking at their role, expectations and position in the home, opening a challenging world of oppression and inequality. I begin my research in a woman's life cycle, starting as a school-goer only allowed to study certain subjects and then moving into the working world, until she has met a partner for marriage and becomes a homemaker full time. I mention the American Dream and visuals in terms of household decoration and the kitchen then delving into the modernistic futurism of the technological advances in gadgets and cars and the influence these products had on the social pressure of American families to keep up with each other. Along with this social progress was the discrimination of their counterparts of black Americans as conforming second-class citizens with minimal rights. With this battle of representation out of magazines focus, people of colour were only represented as working class.

There were expected beauty standards for women along with the sexualization of the feminine for the male gaze in magazine covers and advertisements. Then looking at advertising as a form of consumerism and overconsumption along with the role of television. Then lastly concluding the change from the past to now, in terms of women's rights, along with advertising and America's newly changed congress, analyzing how much has changed in terms of women's work and home life, and how some stereotypes persist today in an enlightened world. My methods of research involved reading and analyzing books, magazines and journal articles on topics related to my statement and each chapter. My sampling strategy for content analysis was stratified with sampling from subgroups within data. I used content analysis as a compositional interpretation of images related to the sexualization of women on magazines covers, the representation of people of colour on magazine covers and to conclude my point I analysis women on magazine covers in the present to compare.

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## **Introduction:**

The aim of my thesis is to study the American stereotype of the feminine as a homemaker and analyze their daily experiences, progressing from education to work, to marriage. A perfect image of a gorgeous wife always dolled up with a clean house and happy attitude, a suited-up husband happy in his working world and well-behaved children, created a norm for women, both domestic and beauty. The explanation of this topic is that being a housewife is only oppressive if you have no other option. Not being able to vote or have a bank account was the choice women didn't have.

My research considers how magazines created a standard for these women and contributed to their sexualization as a selling point for the consumer, considering overconsumption along with advertising and television along with the lack of representation of working class and American people of colour. I remake these points in the present, as I compare the world of the 1950s to the 2020s touching on all these topics within women's rights developments, magazines and advertising to see how this has changed and if at all.

My structure consists of Chapter 1 discussing the societal structure of the 1950s with subsections on the feminine, civilization and position, visual representation and the American Dream and the injustice century. I talk about a woman's lifecycle along with the visuals of this decade and the racial prejudice of the time. My Chapter 2 reflects media's effect on gender, class and race on the subsections of female influence, sexualising and nakedness, representation and consumerism and television advertising where I protest on past physical media specifically with women as a selling point of advertising in terms of body and how this is a creator of conscious consumerism. My Chapter 3 compares today's world of social issues and digital takeover with subsections on the gender pay gap, changing parental roles, America's issues with race, overconsumption and a physical world of advertising where I digress the growth of 1950s issues into a world of money

and subjection to selling. I selected qualitative images that are relative to my discussion points throughout, pulling from magazine advertisements and covers which were references for my content analysis. I analyzed the representation of black Americans on 1950s *Life* magazine covers, female models appearing naked on 1950s *Life* magazines covers and female representation in 2010s *Good Housekeeping* covers. I used a stratified sampling strategy to sample from subgroups of years that exist in the archives between 1950 to 1959 with 52 publications per year.

## **Chapter One: The societal structure of the 1950s**

Inequality has always existed in some form; with women experiencing daily struggles in 1950s America. Men and women were separated as almost two different species in a social structure with different lifestyles and rights to be expected. This era was seen as the 'American Dream' with its colourful visuals and technological advances but had otherwise underlying issues.

### **The feminine, civilization and position:**

Suppression started early for the feminine, at this time school girls didn't have the same access to education as boys did. Girls learned basic at-home skills such as sewing and bedmaking while boy's learnt science and mathematics (Hardy, 2012, p. 68). Most girls received domestic science lessons at school with practical instruction on how to make pastry for pies, batter for pancakes and basic cake making (Hardy, 2012, p. 68). A further contributor to girls' cooking skills was the Girl Guides, where they were expected to take turns to provide daily meals for the patrol and during the year they were encouraged to study for cookery, laundress, homemaker and hostess badges (Hardy, 2012, p. 68). So, domestication and expectation began early for these girls, preparing them for their expected future.

Many bright young ladies were denied the opportunity to go further along with their studies, as it was seen as a waste of time as they would only get married, and it was easy to make friends with a colleague who might one day become one's husband (Hardy, 2012, p. 24). Many chances to find a good husband arose at the workplace, church or social dances, where a man

would pick his wife based on how pretty she was and would offer her the last dance and a walk home at the end of the night (Hardy, 2012, p. 24).

Women traversed life as a sole survivor when unmarried, becoming a working woman to occupy herself. Appropriate formal candidate jobs open for middle-class women were limited to typists, clerks, receptionists (Schwartz Cowan, 1983, p. 202). These were simple and more 'feminine' jobs, as women weren't as well educated as men. Men were expected to work in high end jobs and women were not, conforming girls to naturally be boring and similar for an easy marriage as they can't outstand their man. Once a woman marries, she is expected to leave her job in pursuit of a being a full-time housewife and homemaker. Women wishing to have a job after marriage-were referred to as unlovely lost women suffering from penis envy, ridden with guilt complexes or man hating (Schwartz Cowan, 1983, p. 203). Marriage was a full expectation and dedication to the husband and the life created with him, or rather for him, that there should be no need and no time for a low paying job. It was very much assumed and normalised to get married, a girl would be ostracized at the idea of living in poverty as a spinster, especially by the family, so the sooner she's married the better (Hardy, 2012, p. 24). There was great pressure for a girl to find herself a husband and it was least accepted that he would be a fine young man, married in their early 20s and have children and be a grandmother by her 40s (Hardy, 2012, p. 21).



**Figure 1-** Pictograph of the life cycle of an American marriage from *Life*, 1950 (Boucher, 2013, p. 42)

The ideal nuclear family structure consisted of the breadwinning father, who attended work each day and expected a dinner and wife waiting for him upon return. The children, and then the housewife, whose stereotypical role was one of domestication. She would design the house with perfect furnishings, she would clean, and she would cook to make her children and importantly her husband happy, as his needs were seen to be more important than her wellbeing. The domestic means more than housekeeping tasks and physical structure in the home, it included child rearing practices, food preferences and personal appearance (Walker, 2000, p. viii). A housewife was expected to keep on top of her tasks, filling her days with mindless repetitive housework.

The day starts with her preparing breakfast for her husband, cereal and something cooked like bacon and eggs. She makes a packed lunch for him if there is no canteen provided at his workplace. After he leaves, our young housewife would wash up, tidy the kitchen and make the bed. If they had one, she would lay the fire ready for the evening before dusting the living room.

She might put washing to soak and even begin preparations for the evening meal (Hardy, 2012, p. 67).

There was an assumption that women were purely wives to complete tasks and to look visually beautiful, expected to talk only when spoken to and to put a man's needs before her own. The feminine were merely expected to be an object for male desire, a replacement of a man's mother. Women spent decades meeting the needs of capital and men, filling jobs then after the war soothing fragile male egos and doing housework (Walker, 2000, p. 69). A husband wanted it from his wife and assumed it from his daughter.

### **Visual Representation and the American Dream:**

The 'American Dream' is considered this picturesque idyllic time of perfection and beauty rooted in 1950s America, particularly from films and advertising. Magazine advertisements and television were particularly good at selling this dream of prosperity. The appeal of suburban life was that the suburbs provided a safe pleasant place to rear children at affordable prices (Boucher, 2013, p. 10). These areas were away from the bustle of city life, a place to live more comfortably in a quiet clean area that was within commuting distance for husbands on their way to work (Boucher, 2013, p. 10). We associate the American Dream with 1950s suburbia because of how simple life seemed, with an aesthetic in everything we see, from housing to clothing to the magazines and advertising. It was a decade of change and innovation, with the steady release of new technology and design making the 1950s a sort of 'futuristic modernism', a time known for its bright colours and unique styles. With white picket fences, low gabled infrastructure and a wood or metal like panelling exteriors, this was an archetype of post-war suburbia (Boucher, 2013, p. 13). These homes were well designed for this post war generation, they had basic layouts consisting of a kitchen, living room, bedrooms and bathrooms, a room for every member of the family.



**Figure 2-** A 1950s father returning home after work (Boucher, 2013, p. 9)

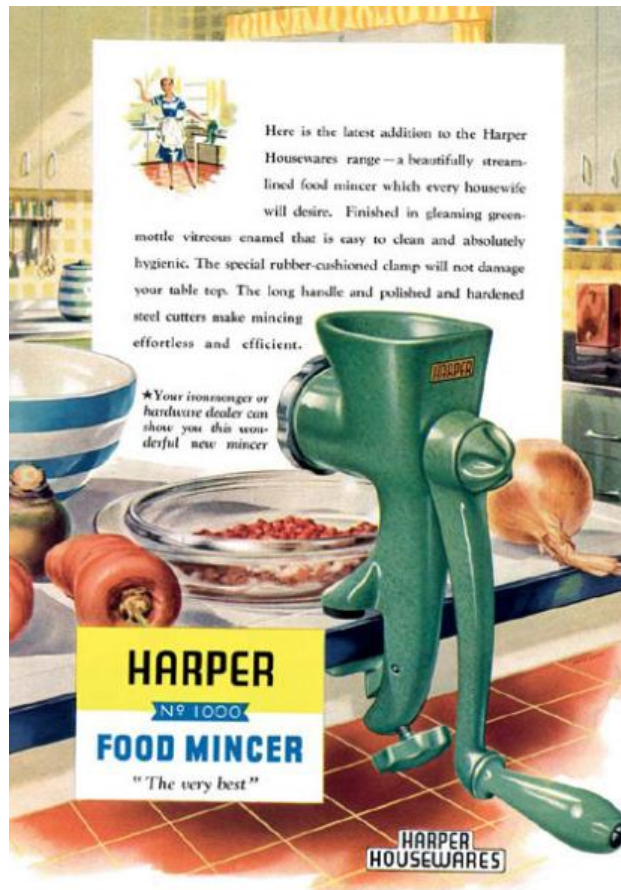


**Figure 3-** Third prize interior design competition for “a smart big city interior right in the centre of the development” (Boucher, 2013, p. 2)



**Figure 4-** Stonorov's interior, had a room dedicated to formal dining and a discrete living room, created to ensure some privacy for the adult family members. Spread in *Life*, 1950 (Boucher, 2013, p. 39)

There were developments within household appliances making women's work easier, with lots of products seen selling in magazines such as a food mincer, food mixer with multiple attachments and cleaner scales (Ferry, 2011, p. 74) (See figure 5).



**Figure 5-** Streamlined Harper No. 1000 had a rubber cushioned clamp and hardened steel cutters to make mincing ‘effortless and efficient’ (Ferry, 2011, p. 74)

Kitchens now had adjustable counters and innovative designs like hidden cupboards. The look became sleeker and more glamorous as the decade came, making kitchens subject to changing fashions as the women with the pinched in waists who inhabited the American style advertisements selling the dream (See figure 6) (Ferry, 2011, p.16). The kitchen was seen as the heart of the home, the heart of where housewife’s struggles begin. Society encouraged these housewives to take satisfaction in perfecting their domestic skills, despite the potentially endless routine that came from combining the role of cook, dish-washer, laundress, cleaner, nurse and hostess (Ferry, 2011, p. 6). These housewives’ daily tasks were used to

advertise these labour-saving appliances and modern utensils. The prestige eggbeater 'does all the beating jobs in the kitchen, quicker, and without effort.... Thanks to smooth, easy running gears and eight stainless steel blades that beat faster! It's the perfect gift for a busy housewife' (Ferry, 2011, p. 75).

Easy as ABC to Own a Beautiful

# American Kitchen

Easy as ABC to Cut  
Your Kitchen Work in Half!



IT'S easy as ABC—when you have an American Kitchen—to give yourself up to 2 hours of freedom every day... time to enjoy your family, your friends. For no other kitchen gives you all the step, time, work-saving features. Notice the gleaming, easy-to-clean, beauty—the smooth, rounded contours for easiest working—the absence of dirt-catching handles—rounded drawers that clean so easily as wiping out a bowl.

See the new Brunch-Bar, a handy serving center as well as extra work surface... the new revolving shelf Blending Pantry with sliding door that opens with a flick of your finger... the generous storage space in money wall and base cabinets. Take your choice of tape in red, blue, black, green or tan lifetime vinyl.

And American Kitchens are priced amazingly low on easy FHA terms... only 10% down, 3 years to pay. Why don't you see your American Kitchens dealer today.

**American Kitchens**  
"Just How Simple & Easy!"

\*FHA terms subject to change without notice.

American Control Etc. AVCO Mfg. Corp.,  
Cincinnati, Ind. Dept. MK-C  
Here's 200—rush me full color catalog showing kitchen layouts and new planning book with miniature model kitchen cut-outs.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ Zone \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

**Easy**



**TO GET**—Place your order, and full menu to your home, plus your delivery up to your door.

**Easy**



**TO INSTALL**—No need of all kitchen tools. An American Kitchen will set in the value of your home.

**Easy**



**TO GET FOR**—American Kitchens are priced amazingly low on easy FHA terms—only 10% down—3 years to pay!

**Figure 6-** This American advertisement shows the sort of kitchens available in the USA in 1952 (Ferry, 2011, p. 19)



**Figure 7-** A refrigerator with green and gold interior (Boucher, 2013, p.66)

This was an introduction into 'retro futurism' that we associate with the 1950s now, with big cars and metal tin like houses. The giant cars of the 1950s came with all sorts of extraneous chrome decoration like fins and plated bumpers known as "gorp", and often these cars were so big they couldn't fit into suburban garages or under car porches (Boucher, 2013, p. 1884). As families became more affluent, purchasing second cars creating more independence for women, which was a planned increase consumption (Boucher, 2013, p. 86).



**Figure 8-** Car manufacturers designed cars to appeal to the lady driver  
(Boucher, 2013, p. 16)

As uniquely visual of an era it was, there were a lot of similarities in everyday life between those of the same class. All the houses looked the same, with similar interiors, the general public were using the same advertised appliances, utensils and furnishings. There seemed to be a stigma around what the expectations of life were. Society needed to be on the same level as their neighbours and friends even if it was buying an expensive new addition to the kitchen. Personal indebtedness more than doubled with much of the spending for bigger and newer household appliances purchased through “buy now, pay later” installment plans (Boucher, 2013, p. 86). There was a battle to be normalised, the dream family shown on television and in the magazines was the life they needed to achieve. They couldn’t be outcast or frowned upon if they lived like everyone else. This was fuelled by ubiquitous advertising campaigns on television and in the printed media, putting enormous pressure on families to keep up (Boucher, 2013, p. 86). Some women started suffering from housewife syndrome, realising the repetitiveness of everyday tasks was making them unhappy, they didn’t know

a name for it was just feeling of incompleteness, a desire for more meaning to their lives. Betty Friedan described this in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*:

I've tried everything a woman is supposed to do, but it doesn't leave you anything to think about- any feelings of who you are. I'm a server of food and a bed maker, somebody who can be called when you want something, but who am I? (Friedan, 1963, p. 3)

She describes the expectations of women's roles as purely caregivers: "I always had an idea we should do everything together, I wait for the children to wake, it's as if there's always been somebody to take care of your life, parents, husband, there's nothing to look forward to" (Friedan, 1963, p. 3)

### **The injustice century:**

We hold a sense of nostalgia for this time, but it's a hidden dystopia behind a happy facade of major issues like oppressed housewives and racism.

Inequality against women was almost unrecognised at the time, an unregistered issue that became realised. Was an American woman's pursuit of fulfilment as a wife and mother? What is missing from the image that mirrors and creates the identity of women in America today? (Friedan, 1963, p. 3). There should be shared labours between both genders, allowing the father to take a motherly role with household tasks and the woman of the house to be able to work, but they knew no different.

As we recall the mid-century of 1950s America, there was a strong presence of racism. This was a time of freedom struggle for black Americans, incarcerated and degraded for existing, who stood up against the prejudice of their skin colour, fighting against the odds. African-Americans were among the worst victims of this inequality (Boucher, 2013, p. 86). Areas became territorial rivalries with segregated schools, bathrooms, buses. These are

daily amenities for any person but made lesser for those, with a segregation of colour. Housing developers refused to rent or sell to black families, the only black people seen in the suburbs were domestic workers (Boucher, 2013, p. 88). It was not a period of conformity like we think. It would be a long struggle before African-Americans could attain any semblance of the American Dream (Boucher, 2013, p. 87). Fannie Lou Hamer's passion against racism forced those around her to acknowledge their own prejudices and societal ills, she challenged civil rights leaders wanting a change in American society securing black rights, helping reduce racial injustice in the USA (Blain, 2021, p. xii). America's ideals of liberty and justice weren't being followed if these unlawful situations were happening, allowing beatings and injustice against American citizens. A country should identify as equal regardless of race, as America is known as the land of the free. Equality among American citizens would carry equal living conditions, wages and jobs as they fought for this racial justice, social progress, against racism and they were able to create change for future.

The land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives are threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America. (Blain, 2021, p. xiv)

## **Chapter Two: Media's effect on gender, class and race**

The circulation of magazines has become a strong influence on personal being and living throughout decades. They were a medium of self-expression and circulation of ideas in different forms, appealing to a variety of audiences, enticing multiple generations with visual desires and particularly aspirational images of lifestyle. In the era of the 1950s magazines and television influenced home decorating, clothing, recipes, and naturally were a space to advertise products for purchase. Magazines gave a chance before television to colourise and use drawn and designed images to implement products. They were a first publication that targeted and had more focus on advertisements specifically, with newspapers only bearing a few advertisements in comparison. A lot of these magazines used this stereotypical image of the nuclear family in advertising cars, houses, furniture and food. These were universal products pointing towards families, the most common structure there is, using these as a tool to appeal to the consumer.

### **Female Influence, Sexualising and Nakedness:**

Magazines celebrated a women's traditional primary role as a homemaker, as magazines like *Good Housekeeping* focused on the practicalities of middle-class homemaking (Walker, 2000, p. viii). The domestic housewife in the kitchen was a classic advertisement especially for utensils or food products. This was a standard feature of the American diet: women's magazines contained advertisements for them on nearly every page, standard recipes routinely called for them (Schwartz Cowan, 1983, p. 73). Kitchen design found a popular culture in women's magazines, as it was seen as a lady's place in the home, so advertising grew on that, appealing to the homemaker and trying to sell products to ease her household burdens. Advertisements and magazine articles pictured fitted kitchens replete with

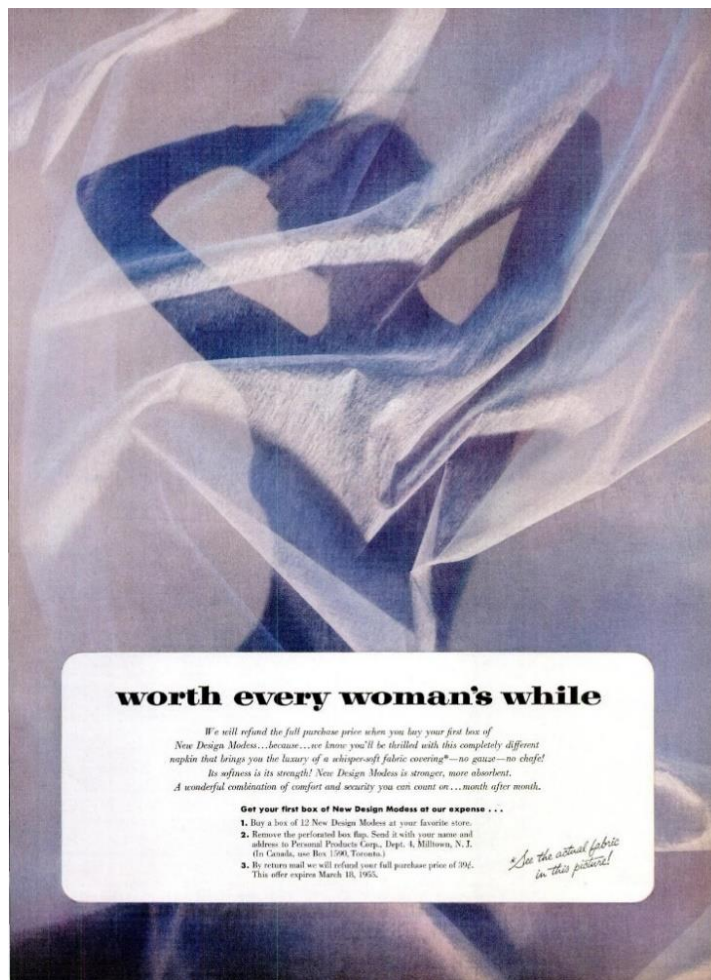
accessories reinforcing the idea that modern kitchens needed modern utensils (Ferry, 2011, p. 47). In December 1952 Kenwood ran an advertising campaign in women's magazines, claiming to divulge the secret of 'why American housewife look younger!' Their jeunesse was apparently down to widespread use of the electric food mixer (Ferry, 2011, p. 80) (See figure 9). This medium was selling an image of necessity consumption to women particularly, selling them an easier life if they purchased these expensive products.



**Figure 9-** Kenwood Chef food mixer (Ferry, 2011, p. 78)

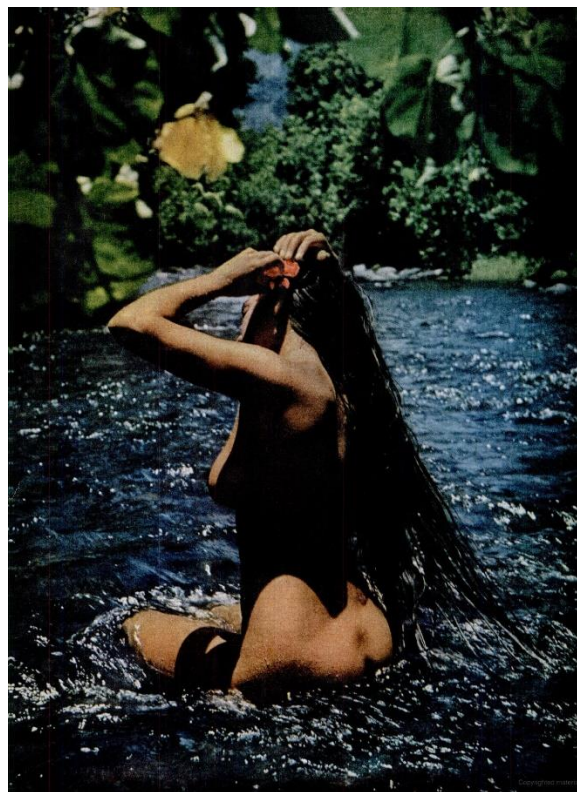
There was a strong female influence on both genders of men and women in advertising. The housewives dreamed to be like the archetype in the magazines, with a life so well put together and perfection in everything, her kitchen, her clothes even her hair. It was an envious longing to be this model image even with a beauty standard, but for her husband in mind. Magazines advertised the need for 'beauty' instead of social change, which made it easier for a woman to look to beauty as a form of self-expression, especially since it was so commonly represented in advertising across magazines and

television (Walker, 2000, p. ix). I was captured by an image of a woman's figure that fills the whole page (See figure 10), we can see her complete outline and looks to be not wearing clothes. As I looked to the small font below, reading a few lines in to wonder what product this actually is, it turns out it's for a box of sanitary napkins. It almost felt like baiting, it was discreet with the font so small, no logo to be seen- I didn't know what was being advertised, so the only way to know was to read the small text of the paragraph.

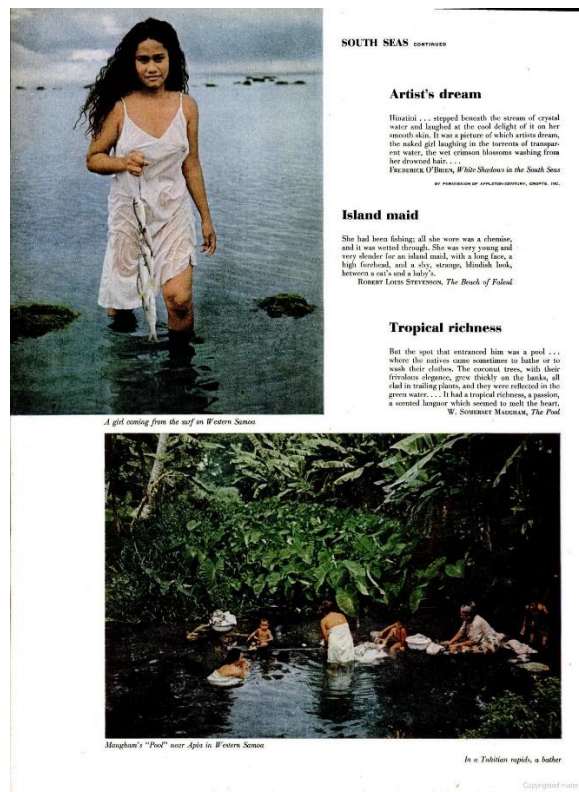


**Figure 10-** Magazine advertisement for Design Modess napkins, Life, 28 February 1955, Vol 38 No.4 (Sharpio, 1955, p. 35)

Then there is the side of magazines and advertising that sexualised women to grab attention, indefinitely for male pleasure. They were presented as this dreamy figure that a woman wanted to be, and the woman a man wanted. It was easy for the advertisers to grab male attention by using women's bodies for the male gaze. The person looking has the power compared to the person being looked at. Women want to be this perfectly created image, but men are possessive of this female body. The feminine were depicted as dependant on men and used femininity as a tool to persuade a man's purchase. Magazines channelled women's desires for such things as economic independence, sensuality, and self-worth into longings for material goods contributing to the feminine mystique but also encouraging insecurities and heightening gender stereotypes (Walker, 2000, p. ix). Magazines were very visual mediums, which is all about appealing to the consumer, leading to consumerism. If they can't grasp male audiences with beautiful women, what could they use? Clothes became a little more revealing, magazines got braver with the content they started to show with insinuations of the female body uncovered. As I was researching the content analysis for nakedness on magazine covers mentioned in my next point, I found one that showed a Tahitian girl bathing. I was even more shocked to see there were more illustrations of girls bathing with the most skin I have seen in the magazines I have analysed. These girls might not be knowledgeable on what their photos were being used for. They have this aspect of a different way of life, was sexualising them the only way to have an audience interested in these indigenous people?

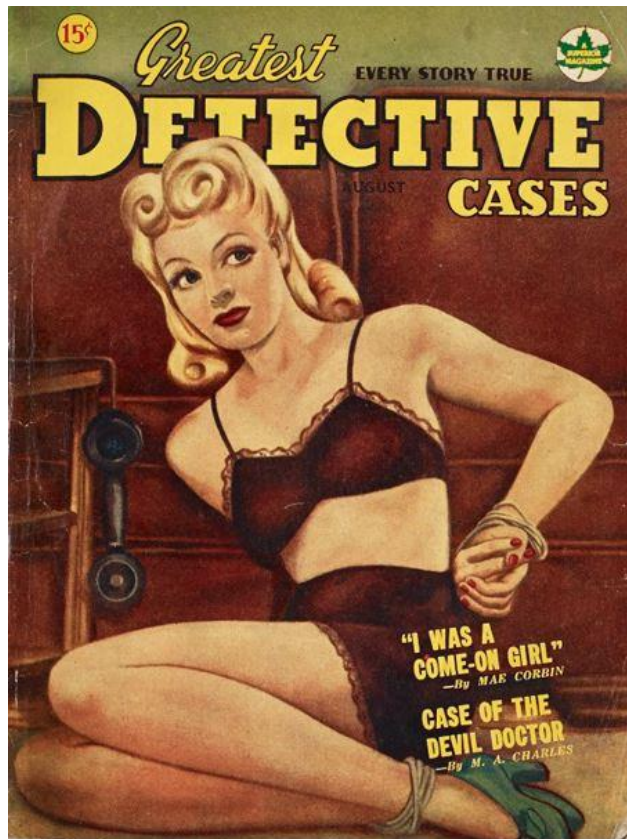


**Figure 11 & 12-** Tahitian girl bathing- *Life* magazine cover and page, 24  
January 1955, Vol. 38 No. 4 (Sharpio, 1955c, p. 63)



**Figure 13-** South Seas- *Life* page, 24 January 1955, Vol. 38 No. 4 (Sharpio, 1955d, p. 62)

There was a sense growing comfort in female nudity across the 1950s, as we can see through my content analysis. It's as if conservatism was fading away as advertisements changed throughout the upcoming century, getting misogynous about women's appearance and need for nakedness to appeal to male consumers. Magazines and even television advertisements were using females as commodities, exposing one half of gender, and using the classic 'damsel in distress' (See figure 14). The men represented in comics, magazines and television were always known as a 'ladies' man' but in a woman's case would be sexual discrimination. This is sexism, derogatory and objectifying.



**Figure 14-** Greatest Detective Cases August edition (Redmond, no date)

Using conceptual content analysis, I stratified a sample of front covers to analyse how often women appear naked, implications of covering a non-clothed body or a revealing chest appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine from 1950, 1955, 1959 to get an even spread of developing years. I choose *Life* magazine because it's a universal magazine with no specifically targeted gender, it has vivid photojournalism and appeals to the general public. In 1950, there were 8 implications of nakedness out of the 27 covers that had women on the cover, that is 30%. In 1955, there were 7 implications out of 26, that is 27%. In 1959 there were 4 implications out of 16, that is 25%. There was a 3% drop between 1950 to 1955 and a 2% drop between 1955 to 1959, making a total 5% decrease in women appearing naked or revealing through the decade of the 1950s on the cover of *Life* magazine cover showing that advertising could be achieved without sexualisation.



#### LIFE'S COVER

The young ladies frothily cooling themselves on the cover are participating in the bubble bath finale (pp. 63-67) of the Broadway hit, *Peep Show*, and offering pleasant proof that show business makes pretty bathfellows. At left is Rosemary Williamson, 23, who in other shows has played straight girl to Funnymen Ed Wynn and Bobby Clark ("With Wynn I made faces; with Clark I gurgled"). At center is Ronan York, 27, who once won a contest as "the dreamiest girl in show business"; at right is Kaja Sundsten, 19, who has danced in the New York City Ballet, is now in her third Broadway show.

**Figure 15 & 16-** Bubble Bath Girls- *Life* magazine cover and information, 21st August 1950, Vol. 29 No. 8 (Sharpio, 1950)



**COVER**  
SHELLEY WINTERS IN "THE WOMEN" (SEE PP. 48-50)

**Figure 17 & 18-** Shelley Winters in 'The Women'- *Life* magazine cover and information, 28 February 1955, Vol. 38 No. 9 (Sharpio, 1955a)



**COVER**

In their California home Actress Shirley MacLaine and her 2½-year-old daughter Sachie play their favorite game—Shirley makes a funny face and Sachie mimics it perfectly (see pp. 12–14)

**Figure 19 & 20-** The Saucy Mac-Laine's Shirley and Daughter- *Life* magazine cover and information, 9 February 1959, Vol. 46 No. 6 (Sharpio, 1959)

**Representation:**

There was very much a lack of representation for working class citizens in magazines such as *Life* and *Ladies Home Journal*, as the idea of selling a product needed perfection which was represented as middle or higher class. Mass circulation magazines almost never depicted a working wife, unless to paint her in derogatory terms (Schwartz Cowan, 1983, p. 203). The audience wanted to see a picturesque life they would dream of living, making them want to buy a product in order to achieve this lifestyle. If we see a beautiful woman advertising a face cream, we believe her looks come from that cream, therefore selling us the product. Whereas if it was with a working-class woman, no one would want to become like her even if she was the prettiest. Magazines were societal on a deeper level, believing that middle and higher class were the 'better' classes to be in. Women's magazine fiction of the day was populated by "glowing" pregnant women and "barren" working women, whose "hungers were not yet appeased, whose destinies were not yet fulfilled" (Schwartz Cowan, 1983, p. 203).

From my magazine research for content analysis there very much was a lack of representation for people of colour, those who appeared in magazine advertisements were white higher-class families. There was a lot of circulating issues at the time with this period being known for its segregation and racism against black Americans. There was some representation in brands like *Aunt Jemima* who is a woman of colour (See figure 21), so there were representation of women and POC as one, but she was depicted purely as a working-class person.

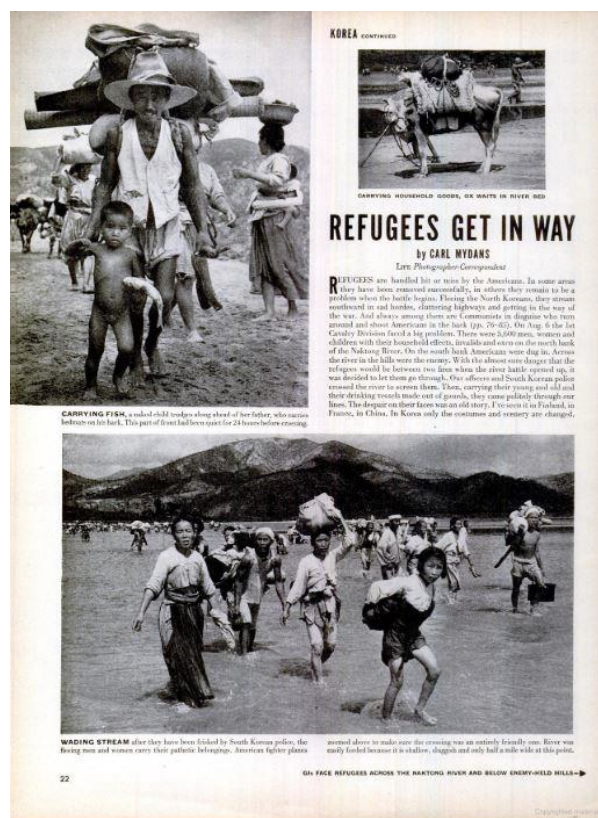


**Figure 21-** Magazine advertisement for Aunt Jemima's Buckwheat's- *Life*, 24 January 1955, Vol. 38 No. 4 (Sharpio, 1955a, p. 6)

The samples of front covers from *Life* 1950, 1955 and 1959 showed a total of 7 out of 156 people of colour decorating the cover, which I stratified with content analysis. There were 3 in 1950, 3 in 1955 and 1 in 1959, which is 4%, a decrease in representation over the period as it took many more years to achieve equal opportunity. As I mentioned earlier there were representation of tribal groups, shown rather indecently and exposed. The covers I reviewed would have a female tribe member on the cover not male. They were Asian, Indian or tribal people living in places such as Africa, as a part of tribes like the Shilluk (Sharpio, 1955b). These indigenous people were represented more than black Americans. Why were these tribal groups from different countries represented more in American magazines than American POC citizens?



**Figure 22-** Magazine story 'Cry from an Immigrant'- Life, 24 January 1955, Vol. 38 No. 4 (Sharpio, 1955b, p. 48)



**Figure 23-** Refugees Get in Way- Life, 21 August 1950, Vol. 29 No. 8 (Sharpio, 1950, p. 22)

## Consumerism and Television Advertising:

America moved from the gloom of the war in the 1940s to the colourful brightly dolled up future of the 1950s, with a large consumer boom as rationing left and a growth of prosperity arrived. There wasn't really a sense of overconsumption in 1950s, advertised products seem useful, especially moving from a war era. The competition between company products rose, taking advantage of the new times, with branding becoming essential. The consumption of goods creates a desired happiness for the consumer on obtaining these items or material possessions regardless of time period. Its ideals are to educate consumers on new products. Television affirmed itself as an affordable technology to everyone but was a medium of cheap advertising (Halliwell, 2007, p. 148). These advertisements were very simple and straight to the point, they had a slow pace, and they weren't too elaborate. One of television's advances was brands use of intentional messaging through iconic slogans to created memorable jingles. 'Snap, crackle and pop' was *Rice Krispies* slogan that was first advertised in the 1950s and is still used today (*Rice Krispies Snap Crackle & Pop Cereal Advert, 1950s-2010s*). Using sound is a way to subliminally advertise, without viewing a screen, it could be heard from the other room or on radio. As they replay, we recall the catchy slogans therefore advertising to ourselves, which I found myself doing with *Bab-O's* jingle which I discuss at the end of the chapter.

**"Fix-em-quick" Breakfasts!**

**STEP RIGHT UP! HEAR THE TALKING CEREAL!**  
Nourishing rice—so crisp it says SNAP! CRACKLE! POP!

**Quick and sticky!** Center a very half-cup in golden Rice Krispies. Heap up the bowl with sweet, sugar, bright and nutty Rice Krispies. Sprinkle with a generous handful more and watch Rice Krispies "crackle" the breakfast of champions in rice in rice, vitamins B<sub>1</sub> and B<sub>2</sub>, and niacin. Eat it daily, every day.

**Super!** You eat "There I first served Rice Krispies to our two nephews, we've never without 'em. So snap!"

**Good thing...** the most of right!" writes Mrs. Robert E. Lister of Los Angeles, Cal.

**Hot fried chicken** "Rice's crisp and crunchy texture the outstanding flavor of Rice Krispies!" writes Mrs. Lee Moore, Bureau of Grandchildren, Miami. "My three children in sweetened butter egg, then still in their crusted Rice Krispies—about 5 cups! This step up the flavor—unparalleled!"

**Hidden hunger in your house?** It might be! The taste of missing an ingredient may lead to mental fatigue and even to depression, moodiness, and poor physical condition, as reported by Dr. H. J. Dyer. And you can't overcome this danger by just eating good food! There's a surprise breakfast—the meal that makes your morning!

**Just this is good!** "My husband and I like to have a bowl of Rice Krispies for breakfast. It's so good!" writes Mrs. E. J. Paffel, Houston, Tex. "It's just what we need for breakfast!"

**Eat it with you.** "I have a family of four. We eat Rice Krispies every day. It's so good!" writes Mrs. E. J. Paffel, Houston, Tex. "It's just what we need for breakfast!"

**Happy Combination.** "I'm a busy mother of four. I eat Rice Krispies every day. It's so good!" writes Mrs. E. J. Paffel, Houston, Tex. "It's just what we need for breakfast!"

**Variety always wins the prize.**  
Seven kinds to appetite.  
Fussy folks eat with zest,  
From 10 boxes of the best.

**Kellogg's VARIETY**  
CORN FLAKES, SHREDDED WHEAT, PEP CORN, SOYA, RICE KRISPIES

**Mother Knows Best!**

**Figure 24-** Rice Krispies magazine advertisement- *Life*, 21 August 1950, Vol. 29 No. 8 (Sharpio, 1950, p. 11)

Entertainment became easier to access with television becoming increasingly available in 1950's American homes as they mostly represented the natural every day. It had an impact on the sale of magazines and newspapers and attendance of cinemas and live events (Halliwell, 2007, p. 151). Television was very much similar to magazines in their pursuit for consumerism but was a video medium. It could display a lot more in a clip than an image, using sets, movements and language as communication to the watcher.



**Figure 25-** A family gathered around the television set (Boucher, 2013, p. 58)

Advertising companies knew how to attract and address their audience, feeding on lonely housewives spending their day at home while their husbands were at work, trying to pull her from her kitchen to the appealing television set. What could drive them from their real life, what could be their form of escape? It was television. There was a sense of femininity in the fact women were being represented in advertisements, and the fact housewives had a place in more mediums, especially in the spotlight of television advertisements. There was a sense of a bond between these women, the ones watching from home and the ones on the screen, with actresses or even celebrities recurring to advertise a product. It became like a paradoxical relationship with a sense of trust in this celebrity's opinion, as they sell off this item as something they use themselves creating this sense of familiarity. At this time recommendations from television, magazines and other sources were trusted. Animation played a part in some advertisements, used to appeal to children for products such as cereals but some were targeted at adults too, with cleaning products particularly, with Mr. Clean being a memorable mascot (See figure 26).



**Figure 26-** Mr Clean in 1950 vs 2020 advertisements ( 1950s *Mr.Clean* 2020s *Mr.Clean*, no date)

Although as fun as animated adverts might seem, one of *Bab-O's* ads depicts Pocahontas trying to clean a sink. A medicine man brings her *Bab-O* when sinks and running water didn't exist during her time, which is both very domesticating and racially insensitive (See figure 27).



**Figure 27-** Bab-O Cleaner Commercial from 1952 (*Vintage old 1950's Animated Bab O Cleaner Pocahontas Commercial 2* [Video], 1952)

To conclude my point, consumerism surrounds us and taunts us to purchase, purchase, purchase. These mediums of magazines and television carry this form to face people in everyday life, society used these form as an escape, but only found a hidden in a subjection of subliminal consumerism. I argue there are moral and ethical issues within advertising during the 1950s, with the sexualisation of women, the lack of representation of working class and people of colour and the general high ground of consumerism which is still an ongoing issue today that has only worsened, creating a world surrounded by advertising.

### **Chapter Three:** Today's world of social issues and digital takeover

There has been a lot of developments in recent decades with strong comparisons between today's world to the past world of the 1950s. In those 65 years, we have since seen improvements for women's equality, changing advertisements and magazines, but there are still more improvements yet to be made.

#### **Gender Pay gap, Changing Parental Roles:**

It is now standard in the United States for women to receive the same education as men, there is no segregation in women's education and jobs as we saw in the 1950s. They can study what was previously seen as 'masculine forms' like science and work in those fields. Women can now stay in the workforce after marriage, with both parents working as a form of dual income (Duxbury, Lyons, Higgins, 2007). As equal as this standard in working women seems, there is still the issue of gender pay gap between men and women. The gap in the United States is currently 16% according to the most recent available data, this means full-time female workers as a group, on average, earn 84% of what full-time males earn today (Eppard, 2024).

American fertility rates have declined suggesting an increase in childfree adults who comprise over one-fifth of the population (Neal, 2022). With earlier generations it was normal to rear children to ensure your future lifestyle. This decrease of population was a result of women entering the workforce and taking contraception, leading to the maternal age rising with increasing constraints on fertility. With daycare facilities for children growing as women's dreams of work are confirmed, we have moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are many of considerations to be had when deciding to rear

children, every aspect of financial wellbeing, stability in the home physically and mentally, emotional intelligence, moral standards, and longitudinal work has suggested that some adults switched from wanting to not wanting a child after delaying parenthood (Neal, 2022). Nuclear families are no longer the norm, with pregnancy before marriage becoming normalised, and children from different partners becoming a mixed family along with single parents, foster families and adoption being all growing ways of familyhood (Pearce, Hayward, 2018). We even have swapped gender roles in places, with some fathers becoming the stay-at-home parent, something that would have seemed impossible during the 1950s. Working mothers, compared with working fathers, are much more likely to drop out of the labour force for a period of time when they have a child, scale back their hours, and or deprioritize their careers to focus on caring for young children, impacting their earnings and career advancements (Eppard, 2024).

### **America's Issue with Race:**

In the recent American election campaign Kamala Harris would have been the first ever female president of America who lost against Donald Trump. Most of Trumps supporters are resistant to the idea of a woman in charge, they believe in the traditional role of a woman with a female interviewee discussing her belief that 'the role of president is a man's job and females have more hormones that would cause a war in seconds' the interviewer challenges her view with 'but haven't all wars been started by men?' leaving her speechless (*Putting Donald Trump Supporters Through an Ideology Test: The Daily Show*, 2016). Some of his female supporters even believe in this role, which is taking our developments in women's rights backwards. The Independent posted a new article recently titled '81-year-old woman goes viral after voting for the first time because her late husband wouldn't let her' (Werner, 2024). I think we sometimes feel conditioned to believe certainties,

like this woman who in today's progressive world believed she didn't have the right to vote because of what she was led to believe. In an electoral sense I think a lot of people can be easily swayed and opinions can be easily changed, hence Trumps supporters' traditional beliefs. It's easy to listen and follow a leader then to formulate your own opinion and go against these leaders like Trump.

Rights should provide equality for everyone, which is one change we hoped to have been resolved in the past six decades but is still an ongoing struggle, and one of the biggest is racism. America makes the rest of the world question how much they have actually changed from a time like the 1950s where segregation was the norm. We have seen many accounts of police brutality towards persons of colour, even children, creating the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 (Walker, 2021). This created such a large fight against racism, that was already ongoing since 2014 but opened to the world fighting for black rights in America. It was questioned by protesters whether these police officers should be taking a bias test, to see if true equality is recognised, Washington State University conducted a study on the impact of police implicit bias training (Schwartz, 2023). While on the topic of representation, I think people of colour are more represented in the advertising world with inclusivity becoming an important point for a lot of brands as it increases in demand. This creates challenges for brands either due to a perceived lack of authenticity in their diversity efforts or because not all consumer groups enthusiasm is universal or value diversity equally creating backlash against the brand (Campbell, 2023).

## **Overconsumption and a Physical World of Advertising:**

We have transitioned into a world of overconsumption. We moved from the past of the 1950s with less consumption where technologies were only being introduced but now, with the introduction of digital technology and social media, we now live in a new time of advertising surrounding us everywhere in physical and digital forms. Websites have constant exposure to adverts especially with the increase in online shopping, it's a constant subjection. The potential paths of advertising is it has a positive effect on well-being by providing information that helps people make better choices about products, but in a stronger contrast, advertising may negatively affect consumer well-being by raising consumption aspirations and stimulating desires that are not feasible (Stafford and Pounders, 2021). Advertising has spawned criticism because of the questionable motivations behind its development and intent (Stafford, Pounders, 2021). Do we feel immune to advertising or conditioned to it? Because of its prevalence, advertising has an influential role in societal behaviours and has spawned criticism because of the questionable motivations, does it create materialism and gluttony? (Royne Stafford, Pounders, 2021). I think the future of advertising will only grow with advertisements surrounding us everywhere not much unlike dystopian films as we've grown into a world of scams, piracy and breached security (See figure 28, 29 & 30).





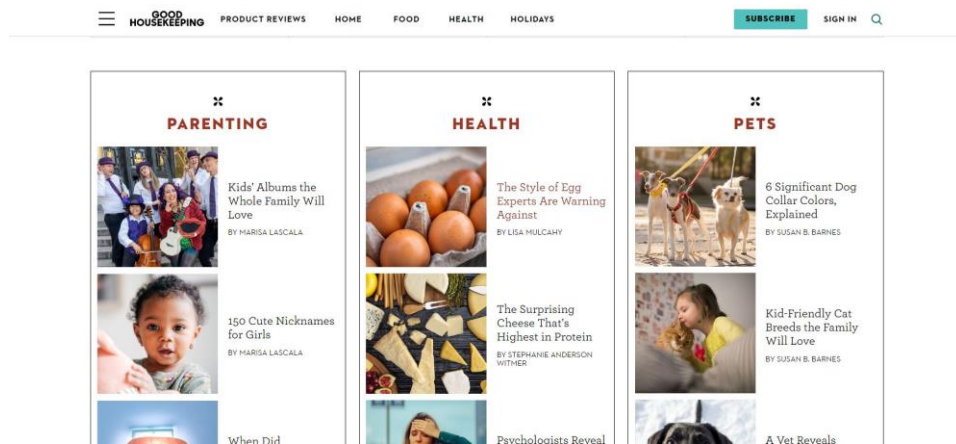
**Figure 28 & 29-** 'Chinatown' from the film *Blade Runner 2049* (*You Don't Like Real Girls* | *Blade Runner 2049* [Open Matte], 2017)



**Figure 30-** 'Night City' from video game *Cyberpunk 2077* (*Night City Feels Alive in 4K* | *Cyberpunk 2077 2.0 Phantom Liberty Cinematic RTX Overload*, 2023)

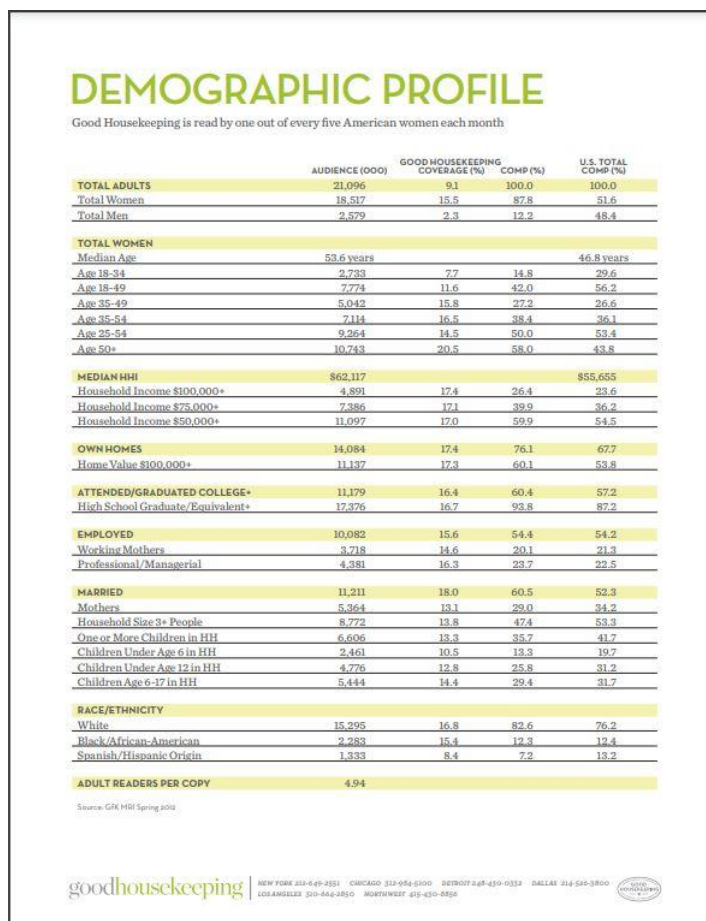
### **The Growing Digital Age and the Loss of Physical Media:**

In this growing digital age, I hoped to use archival research on current women's magazines from example to compare the similarities and differences to those of the past but finding archives proved difficult on any magazine titles after 2014. I wanted to focus on magazines like *Good Housekeeping*, which keeps a domestic emphasis and still contains traditional elements of magazines we saw in the 1950s: relationship advice, recipes, beauty advice. Magazines today still have traditional forms but with improved quality on imaging, colouring and brand image. They have become more professional and materialistic with posed models, expensive perfumes and celebrity stories. Individuals relate to and connect with models or spokespeople featured in an advertisement, concluding that this connection affects consumer response but women often compare themselves to female models in advertisements, pointing to the need for realistic imagery in these messages (Stafford and Pounders, 2021). The manner in which females are portrayed in advertisements is important since it both reflects and indicates the expected roles of females in society (Kordrostami, 2021). Magazines have become a dying form, growing old and out with the older generation as social media grows. The physicality of magazines has been at a loss, with email subscriptions and newsletters becoming an easier form of accessibility (Abrahamson, 2015). Upon observing the *Good Housekeeping* website, they had sections on product reviews, home, food, health, holidays, parenting and pets (See figure 31).



**Figure 31-** Good Housekeeping website home page ('Good Housekeeping', 2025)

*Good Housekeeping's* website says they have a target audience between 18-50+. It seems difficult for a magazine title to be able to target such a broad age range which are shown in the table below (see Figure 32).



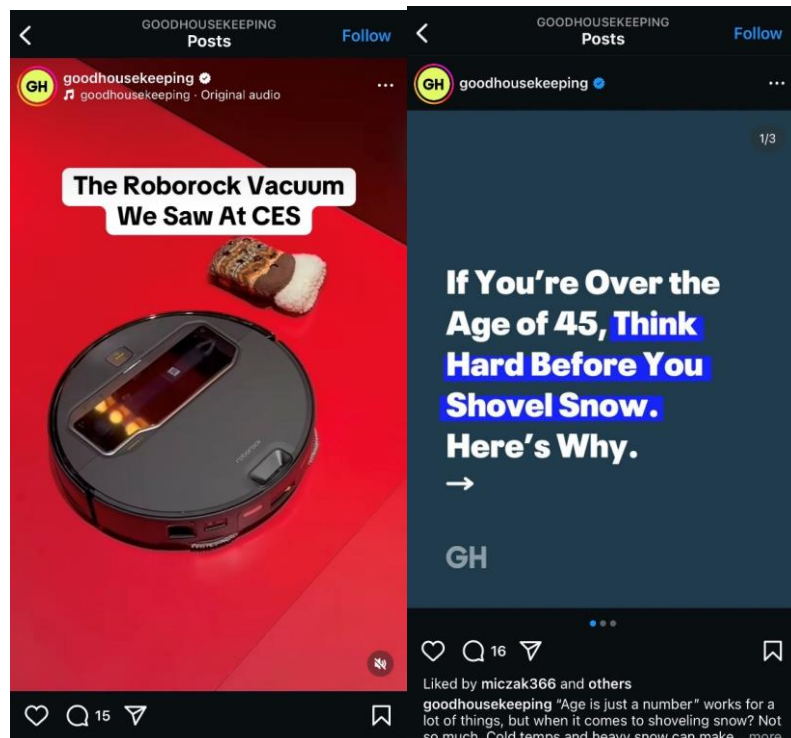
**Figure 32-** Demographic Profile Spring 2012 ('Demographic Profile of Good Housekeeping', 2012)

This demographic profile of age data makes it clear that magazines audience reaches older women than young with their topics. Upon reviewing their Instagram page (See figure 33), they have a following of 1.1M with story highlights on topics like product testing, expert advice and healthy living. I noticed their Instagram is mostly advertising products and life hacks.



**Figure 33-** Good Housekeeping's home page ('Good Housekeeping', 2024)

I stratified with content analysis how often a product is advertised per their 50 most recent posts on their Instagram. It was 21 out of the 50 posts which is 42%. The other posts were hacks and recipes much like their website. They also posted general debates as a way to engage their audience. Even with the progress of *Good Housekeeping* having an Instagram to appeal to more viewers, I feel I am not the target audience for these posts, they feel generated for older users' women in their 30s and above. As I observed their posts, I noticed all the advertisements were household products and even some of their advice segments had mentioned age (see Figure 35). Looking through the posts I didn't see any posts about their actual magazine. If I had come across this Instagram page, it wouldn't be clear that they had a physical medium.



**Figure 34 & 35-** Roborock Vacuum and Snow Shovelling advice ('Good Housekeeping', 2024)



**Figure 36-** Tidy Cats Tidy Feet ad on Good Housekeeping's Instagram page ('Good Housekeeping', 2024)

Media has found a new form with social media becoming a rising visual with apps that focus on imagery with one such app being Instagram, a platform known for putting out aesthetics and personality. Instagram has the potential to showcase a wider diversity of femininities, which can help to broaden the scope of who can be deemed photographable – an idea echoed by women's magazines' adoption of a popular feminist tone (Caldeira, Van Bauwel, De Ridder, 2021). Both Instagram and women's magazines link gendered beauty to aesthetic values and the ability to look good in photographs, both formats can also highlight the everyday political potential of aestheticized representations (Caldeira, Van Bauwel, De Ridder, 2021).

The depiction of women hasn't changed much over the decades, their stereotypical role still remains but in a more subtle way (See figure 37). All of *Good Housekeeping's* covers are very similar with a female celebrity and introductions to the articles inside. The articles mentioned are still very traditional with 'Can separate bedrooms improve a marriage?', 'Got belly fat? We'll convince you to lose it' and 'Set a pretty table at Thanksgiving'. This magazine issue states: Over 16 million women turn to Ladies Home Journal each month for advice, smart, comprehensive and cutting-edge editorial on major social issues. Food & Nutrition, Family & Home, Beauty & Fashion, Health & Fitness and more. Helping women deal with the complexities of living today's world (*Dotdash Meredith*, 2013).



**Figure 37-** Ladies Home Journal November 2013 (*Dotdash Meredith*, 2013)

## Conclusion

The ideal of this thesis was to impose on women's lifestyle in 1950s America, about how girls learnt a traditional role early on in life and played that part throughout their lifetime, being dismissed better opportunities because of their gender. They were schooled and had hobbies within domestication learning basic home skills, made lesser to men throughout their life. They were denied further education with work seen as a form of occupation until marriage with simple task jobs to eventually play the role of housewife. Women had to take pride in basic tasks like cooking and home decorating, they were seen as delicate roles purely for the feminine, while men tackled physical labour jobs, but women filled the roles and task of men at war and then were expected to resort back domestication. It was a woman's stereotype to be a homemaker to please her husband, they were banished to kitchens to clean and cook like a slave in her own home, expected to wait on a man and do all the household tasks, each day, every day all while juggling children and herself. It gave this sense of housewife syndrome that Betty Friedan discusses in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, these women had a desire for meaning but they were told all they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing (Friedan, 1963, p. 1). They didn't receive the same education, jobs or rights, it was oppression.

Women were sexualised in the 1950s as magazines had to pull men's interest into feminine topics or even general news by sexualising women's bodies for consumerist appeal and creating a terrible standard for women, both unrealistic in beauty standards and general being. Magazine advertised to lonely housewives to try soothe their chore filled days attracting to their lifestyle as a weakness to use as a advantage for expensive products. I protest that advertising used women's bodies as a selling point, the dream figure for a woman and the wife a man wanted. The male gaze was about a woman's beauty and visuals, how she looked but also how she made him feel. Men celebrated women's traditional role as the carer, the husband gets

fed and has someone waiting on him to make his life more comfortable and easier. I conducted content analysis which in turn showed that the nakedness or the revealing of a women's body actually decreased throughout the decade building us to a more modest time now as I stratified covers from Good Housekeeping in the present, representing women fully clothed as first-class citizens and not as sexual objects.

These women of the 1950s learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights, the independence and the opportunities that previous women fought for (Friedan, 1963, p. 1). This was oppression because they had no other choice, it would have been frowned upon by society to be an unmarried working woman which now is completely regular, moving into an time where marriage and giving birth is increasing as women get a chance in the working world, although still suffering from inequality with the unequal pay between men and women but good development has been made from the past 60 years with reversed parental roles and dual income becoming normal ways of life in this decade.

From the 1950s to the 2020s we have since moved from a physical world to a digital takeover of social media and online shopping, with advertising surrounding us everywhere. Consumerism and overconsumption grow as we become a society relying on digital forms. With more openness in conversation especially in an open digital world, more societal issues with comments on body or looks can be extended to social media, women will still compare themselves to celebrities or models, creating a growth for media comparison. The rise of digital media is now contributing to so many insecurities in young girls and the cause of many mental health issues, with comparison being a killer on photoshopped images. This has opened up a future of concern. I used content analysis to divulge how much advertising happens on platforms like Instagram, 42% of Good Housekeeping Instagram page were advertised products, it feels like a constant, in physical and digital worlds. Age always grows and things always change, whether that's

magazines, advertising, beauty expectations to houses or utensils. As a society we are still influenced by everything we see and others.

Women's circumstances have improved but America has many issues ongoing and to newly exist now with Trump presidency, as he wishes to dissolve the constitutional right of birthplace citizenship showing how discriminatory even a country's congress can be especially by their president. Selling the American Dream was this utopic nostalgia we associate with films but in reality, is a country with no healthcare and trying to deny refuge in their free country. A country that still suffers from racism and discrimination, a problem that hasn't been solved over the past few decades. We moved into a generation where representation is almost an expectation.

To conclude my thesis, inequality will always exist, whether that's within women's rights or racial injustice. Even though the 1950s were an oppressive time for women and we have progressed since then, some stereotypical roles persist and attach to gender naturally, such as women being assumed to care for children as the birth giver and give up their jobs to do so. But the working world and current social structure have introduced new lifestyles for women. It's about changing this assumption and perspective of gender roles in which we can create equality in all forms, not just for women.

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