Gender In ADs

Pyrex Ware, Life Magazine, Page 60

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Kitchen Ad, Life Magazine, Page 38

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"Happier Homemaking" Life Magazine, Page 144

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Gender Roles and Domesticity through Advertisements in the 1950s

Gia Valenzano

In 1950s America, advertisements and magazines didn't just show women at home. They placed women there, establishing their roles as caretakers. By examining selected advertisements from a 1952 issue of *Life Magazine*, the author explores how visual and textual rhetoric worked to constrain women, centering their lives in kitchens, living rooms, and caregiving spaces. By analyzing ads in connection with Doreen Massey's *Space, Place, and Gender*, we see how such media perpetuated the idea that femininity is rooted in the home, thus enforcing limited physical and social mobility for women.

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Introduction

A woman's role in the household has always been considered an important one. Women are often seen as the backbone and the glue. While this ideal stretches very far back, the 1950s brought new focus to it through advertisements that placed women firmly in domestic spaces. We can interpret the visualizations of 1950s home life to understand what the feminine ideal was–not just how women should behave but where they belong. Often, these advertisements positioned women in submissive roles. They argued for the significance of a household appliance to the thriving of a family. A fridge isn't just an upgrade; it is an upgrade to better serve the family. "Successful marriages start in the kitchen!" ("Successful") was more than a slogan. While selling products, these advertisements also sold a vision of ideal womanhood mapped onto the space of the home.

Using Doreen Massey's thesis that space is socially constructed and gendered, this project argues that advertising not only reflected established gender norms, but also constructed them. This essay makes the case that 1950s' ads spatially limited women to the home by turning spaces like the kitchen and dining room into gendered spaces, creating lasting boundaries for women.

Gender, Space, and Place

Doreen Massey's *Space, Place, and Gender* offers a way to see how gender roles are connected to the ways men and women move in or are confined by space. In her discussion of globalization, for example, Massey shows how space organizes relations of power and identity. Massey argues that globalization leads to a "global hierarchy" where all significant social and economic powers are centralized and accumulate to the benefit of the wealthy and powerful few at the expense of others (160). We can see globalization

working through advertisements and the representation of women, connecting women globally through shared domestic consumerism, as well as shared identification with a widespread repressive narrative tying women to domestic places. These narratives not only showed women working at home; they confined them there and erased them from public spaces.

Uniform assumption about household duties belonging to women limit physical and social mobility. Through advertisement representations, we see the positioning of women not as part of significant social standing, but arguably as objectified and resourceful to others. This global hierarchy, seen through advertisements, reinstates inequalities. Massey emphasizes that the domesticated "mom" figure is constructed not as an independent subject but as a "stale symbolic center," which is something to anchor others within the household (180).

Inequality shapes the experience of space differently for different people. Gender, class, and ethnicity define how one moves through space because of issues of mobility, safety, and access. Massey further illustrates that gender is certainly embedded in the way individuals dwell and experience space (164). A pattern of spatial control can be seen in 1950s advertisements, where women are overwhelmingly depicted in the home, tending to related housekeeping duties. This is an attempt to spatially position women rooted in the home while also excluding them from spaces perceived as masculine. The home becomes a controlled space with links to identity and subordination. In this way, Massey reveals her central argument: gender shapes space and space shapes gender.

Cookbooks and Other Guides for Living

In "The Way to A Man's Heart," Jessamyn Neuhaus argues that 1950s cookbooks were used as tools to instruct women on how to be good wives. She argues that often they were used as a guide for living, explaining that cookbooks aimed to "reassure the young wife that skills in the kitchen would ensure a happy married life" (529). Such an assertion promotes the same belief found in advertising that a woman's value and marital stability depend on how well she can perform her domestic role. In pushing a domestic ideal where

marital happiness depended on a woman's domestic labor in the home, Neuhaus says that "cookbooks were part of a larger discourse that sought to limit women's roles to those of wife, mother, and homemaker" (529). Both cookbooks and advertising pushed a rhetoric that women are socially and physically bound to the home and the role they play there. The home becomes a mechanism for reproducing social hierarchies. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre states, "symbolic representation serves to maintain these social relations in a state of coexistence and cohesion"(32). Symbolic representation, then, teaches people where they belong.

The article emphasizes that "cookbooks are an example of how popular culture from the 1950s reflected a deep ambivalence Americans felt about gender roles in the postwar years" (Neuhaus 531). Although women proved they could work outside the home during the war, social forces pushed for them to return to the home. Politicians and media alike glorified stability and clearly defined roles for men and women. Neuhaus shows how nostalgia for this period continues to shape discourse: "conservative politicians regularly evoke the 1950s as a time of great stability, when men and women enjoyed the comfort of clearly marked gender roles" (531). This type of rhetoric defines roles spatially, with men enjoying freedom and mobility outside the home and women fixed and immobile at home. The article reminds readers that, while men were able to sustain their gender role by simply going to work, a woman's responsibility was to keep the whole household running smoothly.

Analysis

In the following analysis of advertisements in an issue of *Life Magazine*, published on May 5th, 1952, a pattern emerges: women are consistently positioned in enclosed settings, waiting in rooms that define their existence. The selected advertisements have to do with some type of homemaking, cooking, or caregiving. Using Massey's critique of gender and space, we will analyze how women are situated in the ad with a focus on the rhetorical fucntion of such placement.

According to Doreen Massey, space is socially constructed through power dynamics. Different genders, classes, and ethnicities

have different access to mobility and public presence. According to this theory, the house is a socially defined location that molds identity and belonging rather than just being a physical building. Advertisements that frequently feature women in dining rooms and kitchens normalize the connection between femininity and interior space. The home becomes a gendered barrier that restricts women's spatial mobility through repetition.

In the ad below, images of Pyrex Bakeware are accompanied by the caption "Be a better cook" with emphasis on the word "better." We see two women looking almost longingly at this kitchenware. Subheadings read "Beautify your table" and "Glorify your cooking." The sequence of three images show, consecutively, the lower half only of a woman's figure putting the food in the oven. The food is presented to a smiling man who sits with utensils in hand and a woman's arm and hand serving a spoonful of food.

In this sequence, the man is seated in a position of consumption rather than labor; the woman is so closely confined by the image frame that her body is reduced to her serving limbs. Massey argues that gender is embedded in ways individuals inhabit space (164). This is a visualization of the hierarchy in the home which is accomplished through spatial composition.

In this ad for Daystom

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Furniture, spaces are aggressively gendered. The kitchen is visually coded as an extension of feminine identity through the extensive use of pink hues and soft lighting, which feminizes the interior space. Daystrom is actively focusing on women and association to space in the home with these depictions, choice of color, and using adjectives such as "fun" to describe them. The caption reads, "Easy good looks–with easy care!," playing on the idea that homemaking and housekeeping are fun, feminine, and womanly. It is a woman's job to create an inviting, aesthetic space for the family. The woman is shown painting the wall, thus beautifying the home for her family.

What's interesting is that while the rooms shown are predominantly pink, the ad showcases paint colors at the bottom, which don't include shades of pink. This marketing image uses color to foreground the kitchen as a feminized space.

The last ad for Costco household items (below) does more than showcase the versatility of the product–it presents a detailed portrait of homemaking centered around chores in the home. Women are shown taking care of children, ironing, hosting, and cleaning or sorting. There is an emphasis on

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how the furniture will upgrade women's housekeeping, making them "happier." Three of the women depicted wear an apron, an item of clothing that solidifies their professional identites as caretakers, in same way a uniform or suit would define a man's profession

The ad's layout is dense, maximizing the women's labor within a single page. It also normalizes domestic confinement as a fate reserved for women, as no men are pictured.

Conclusion

Analysis of these 1950s' advertisements shows how American marketing sold identities rather than just goods. Through carefully constructed language, images, and domestic framing, advertisements linked femininity to domesticity. The social standards of postwar America prioritized stability and traditional family structures, which were mirrored and reinforced by advertisements.

Examining advertisements from the 1950s involves more than just looking back in time; it makes clear how media molds cultural assumptions and serves as a reminder that advertising contributes to the construction of society rather than just reflecting it. Acknowledging advertisements as an influence supports media literacy, and spatial awareness invites a reconsideration of how ads continue to shape gender expectations today. We are able to interact critically with the media that still shapes gender norms today when we understand the power present in old advertisements.

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