

“What Sells? Gender in American Print Advertising in the 1950s”

Elana Kelber

Lamp L216

“Besides being about appearances, advertising is about gender. Gender is part of its social structure and its psychology. Gender conditions our response to what we see and helps us decide what to buy.”¹ The aforementioned quotation is from *Putting On Appearances: Gender and Advertising*, by Diane Barthel. At the end of her book, Barthel concludes: “It is too obvious, too easy, a matter of killing the messenger instead of dealing with the bad news. The people who have created modern advertising are not hidden persuaders pushing our buttons in the service of some malevolent purpose. They are just producing an especially visible manifestation, good and bad, of the American way of life.”² This essay attempts to delve further into such claims. The first claim is investigated by examining constructs of gender, both masculine and feminine, within magazine print advertising, specifically in *Playboy*, *Gentleman’s Quarterly (GQ)*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Ebony*. To consider the second, the scope of the advertisements studied is limited to the era of the 1950s in order to study the extent to which the constructs portrayed reflected American cultural norms at the time, perpetuated such norms, or created new perceptions and norms. Choosing the 1950s as the era in which to study at first came out of a desire for convenience in finding a wide range of advertisements across class, age, and race. However, this proved quite inconvenient (though interesting) when, upon research, the complexities of the decade gradually unfolded. If one can imagine America as a playground, it becomes evident that the see-saw best represents the complications of defining gender in the 1950s, for the era was tensely divided over what constituted masculinity and femininity. Positioned at the fulcrum, advertisements often reflected such tensions by portraying the

perceptions and realities of gender constructs on both sides of the see-saw; reflecting both, yet more often perpetuating the traditional ideologies.

Grey Flannel Suits vs. Playboy Bunnies: Understanding Gender in a Conflicted Era

Defying stereotyped conceptions of the 1950s as placid³, calm, and entirely hegemonic, it becomes clear through reading contemporary historians and writers of the decade that the era was one of “conflict and contradiction⁴” and “significant social and cultural transformation⁵”. First, understanding some of the economic, political, and social changes in the era helps illuminate how the period came to be, as the historian James L Baughman describes, “characterized by shifts from production to consumption, from saving to spending, from city to suburb, from blue-to white-collar employment, and from an adult to youth culture”⁶.

To some degree, this depiction is certainly accurate. After World War II, there was a considerable rise in income and discretionary allowance for many Americans. Between 1946 and 1961, national income rose sixty percent, the total amount of discretionary spending increased from 160 million to 350 million, and the number of Americans with discretionary income doubled.⁷ In addition, the postwar baby-boom created a demand for products and home-related consumer durables.⁸ With the return of the soldiers there was considerable social pressure to marry⁹ because, not only was there a low number of males in the population compared to females,¹⁰ but also because forming a strong family nucleus was protection for America against fears of evils from abroad, namely Communism and the atomic bomb.¹¹

And move to the suburbs they did. Following World War II, 15 million Americans became first time home-owners and economist Harold Vatter estimated that in this time period a fourth of the nation’s housing stock was constructed.¹² Despite the fact that many women

entered the workforce (and were encouraged to do so) during the war, afterwards, a politically conservative environment pressured them to return to their traditional sphere in the home, and raise children¹³. Other paradoxes existed as well. Despite the fact that the Kinsey reports (published in 1948 and 1953) uncovered that 85 percent of males and 50 percent of females engaged in premarital sex,¹⁴ and that explicitly sexual references in the mass media doubled during the decade¹⁵, the public attitude toward sex was repressive. Discussion of the topic was discouraged, and young women were supposed to be good, pure, and the enforcers of sexual innocence in teen relationships.¹⁶ This exemplifies one aspect of the aforementioned 1950s seesaw, for “...the civil rights movement, the emancipation of teenagers from excessive adult control, and the women’s movement”¹⁷ existed in conflux with those that followed repressive attitudes and acted on conformist norms.

It may come as no surprise, then, that amidst a backdrop of the aforementioned complexities of the era, personal identity issues, particularly surrounding constructs of gender identity, flourished. Historian Wini Breines contends that womens’ entrance into the workforce during the war, and thus a change in the dynamic of traditionally separate spheres, produced considerable anxiety in the nation. Combating this unrest fostered “... a culture of containment, with women and black people as its objects. American politics and culture were structured by a defense of masculinity and whiteness,” and a “celebration of [...] traditional domestic femininity”.¹⁸ For instance, the war encouraged women to maintain their femininity through their appearance, even while performing traditionally male work. Young women of this time, in contrast to their mothers, came to view many types of cosmetics as necessities. As historian Kathy Peiss notes, “beautifying had evolved from an everyday grooming habit into an assertion of American national identity.”¹⁹

Yet while some women may have embraced (or pretended to) a seamless transition from home, to the work world, and back to home, for many women, the years following the war represent the other side of the “gender see-saw”.²⁰ According to Breines:

For young, white, middle class women, the era offered liberating possibilities masked by restrictive norms. These women grew up and came of age in a time when new lives beckoned while prohibitions against exploring them multiplied. The narrowness of the gender norms in the midst of boom times, and potentially more independent lives than their mothers; lives, led to girls’ exploration. Curiosity about race and sex flourished.²¹

Some women reflected their discontent and resistance to gender norms through participation in countercultural influences such as rock n’ roll (a prime example would be Elvis), working class style and behavior,²² the Beats, and interest in rhythm and blues.²³

Yet even if there had not been discontent among women over returning to traditionally feminine roles and behavior, it seems that masculinity would still inevitably have been threatened.

As historian David Shumway explains the male side of the issue:

There was a widely perceived crisis of gender roles, changes in the social relations of the genders doubtless produced this crisis. During the war a large number of women entered what had been a primarily male work force and thus threatened the definition of masculinity, as did the increasing number of men who found themselves in jobs and in a home life that did not permit them to exhibit such traditionally masculine qualities as power, dominance, aggression, and ambition.”²⁴

While many men played into the conformist culture, and perhaps enjoyed it, far more expressed a desire for something else, either through fantasy, or action. In *The Hearts of Men*, historian Barbara Ehrenreich writes that “in the fifties ‘conformity’ became the code word for male discontent – the masculine equivalent of what Betty Friedan would soon describe as ‘the problem without a name’.”²⁵ Men could escape from conformity through reading *Playboy* magazine, which made no secret as to its unconventional nature and ideas. Or, men could actually express a different

masculinity through more than just reading the magazine, but through action. Ehrenreich elaborates:

Not every would-be male rebel had the intellectual reserves to gray gracefully with the passage of the decade. They drank beyond excess, titrating gin with coffee in their lunch hours, gin with Alka-seltzer on the weekends. They had their stealthy affairs with secretaries, and tried to feel up their neighbors' wives at parties. Some of them began to discover an alternative, or at least an entirely new style of male rebel who hinted, seductively, that there *was* an alternative. The new rebel was the playboy.²⁶

Bolstered by an economically favorable environment, and discontent over their gender identities, Americans turned to consumption as a form of adopting and portraying their chosen gender identities. Barthel notes, “a wide range of products promise that their gender identities will help us achieve gender identities, however complex they may be.”²⁷

Hook, Line, and Sinker: Magazine Advertising in a Decade of Consumption

Magazine advertisements offer a unique mode in which to examine a 1950s discourse over gender constructs. Certain aspects make magazine advertising a powerful medium for reflecting and perpetuating gender construct perceptions and realities. For example, the format includes copy, images, and photographs, which allows a venue in which gender can be shown in both a blatant and symbolic way. In addition, wide circulation (at least among the magazines chosen for this essay²⁸) means that they reach a sizeable portion of the population, and presumably cater to the attitudes of a large number of people. Magazines advertisements may also be a particularly effective way to perpetuate ideas. According to James E. Littlefield (an associate professor of business administration) and C.A. Kirkpatrick (a professor of marketing) in their book *Advertising: Mass Communication in Marketing*, “...the consumer can choose his time of reading, his frame of mind can be relaxed and receptive; he can be attracted and

“What Sells? Gender in American Print Advertising in the 1950s”

Elana Kelber

Prof. Lamp

L216

2008 Burgess Award

interested by advertising; he will read longer advertisements [in magazines] than when he is reading newspapers”.²⁹ However, other facets of magazine print advertising limit it as a mode that accurately reflects prevailing perceptions of gender constructs in its time period. First, one must never forget that there is always a consistent motive behind the creation of the ads: to get consumers to buy the product. Second, magazines only reach certain demographics, thus circulating the ads unevenly throughout the population. This was particularly true in the 1950s because, generally, only the affluent purchased magazines,³⁰ and because the late 1950s introduced a new innovation – certain magazines offered advertisers the opportunity to buy only regional coverage.³¹ *Playboy* was one such magazine, though it is impossible to know which ads reached which regions. Furthermore, though it may be helpful that one knows the type of readership for any given magazine in which an ad is placed (and thus to which it presumably tries to appeal), another problem is that, at least in the 1950s, “magazines screened the advertisements offered to them, and some go so far as to vouch for the products whose advertising they accept”.³² So, armed with a brief overview of the 1950s environment, the gender identity issues within the era, and some knowledge of magazine advertising in the decade, it is time to move forward: what sorts of masculine and feminine constructs did these ads portray?

The “Ideal” Man: Masculinities in 1950s Advertising

In first examining masculine constructs, it should be stressed that advertisements presented several types of masculinities. This essay, however, mainly attempts to identify the myriad qualities (shown through product, text, or symbolism) that consistently run through all four magazines to show what exactly constituted an *ideal* masculinity. One advertisement, in fact, beautifully depicts this point. An ad for Bell Telephone System, which ran in a 1959 issue

of *Cosmopolitan*, shows three distinct types of men who might need to use the telephone (Appendix A, page 1). These men seemingly represent three understood masculinities of the time. One is a farmer, who holds a traditionally a male job, and reinforces stereotypes regarding physical strength and the outdoors. The second, to the far right, is a soldier, protector of the country and also physically strong. The third, in the middle, seems to represent the more modern masculinity, depicting an executive in a business suit (alluding to the shift in masculine occupations from blue-collar to white-collar jobs), in front of a plane, tank, and factory (symbols of industry). These different, but blatant, pictorial images of masculinity, are interestingly tied together by one symbolic element: their position in the ad above the female, alluding to her subordinate role to men in society.

Masculinity can be revealed through the various products featured in the magazine advertisements by identifying which are targeted more frequently (or only) to males. One product that appears to be more frequently targeted to males in the ads are cigarettes (Appendix A, 2-5)³³. As Barthel notes, “When Marlboro cigarettes first appeared in the early 1940s, they were aimed at a female market. They failed dismally. So they underwent a change in gender. In rode the Marlboro man, and his powerful, hustling figure has been with us ever since”.³⁴ While here Barthel only references Marlboro, there seems to be consistency among several different cigarette companies in employing a male targeted ad strategy. What is particularly intriguing is how these products could then come to function as a symbol of masculinity. For example, the action of smoking, or placement of a cigarette (or pipe) somewhere in an ad appeared frequently in advertisements for *other* male products, often entirely irrelevant to the product or situation depicted. For instance, an ad for outdoor sweaters in a 1957 issue of *Playboy*, features a pipe alongside the sweater (Appendix A, 6).³⁵ Similarly, an ad for cuff links placed in the March

1959 edition of *GQ*, features a hand in the many stages of applying cuff links to a shirt, all while holding a cigarette (Appendix A, 7).³⁶ The symbol (in this case, a cigarette) functions to denote that the product featured in the ad is masculine as well.³⁷ Other products that were decidedly masculine, at least in terms of who they targeted, are cars³⁸, and stereo equipment³⁹ (Appendix A, 10-12).

Sometimes the “ideal masculinity” represented itself in ads through the types of activities, hobbies, and lifestyles in which a man chose to partake; ads either referred to these blatantly through copy, or subtly, through imagery unrelated to the ad’s main product. The masculine lifestyle revolved around a white middle-class ideal of “the good life”. Breines explains, “that good life was defined by a well-equipped house in the suburbs, a new car or two, a good white-collar job for the husband, well adjusted and successful children taken care of, a full time wife and mother. Leisure time and consumer goods constituted its centerpieces [...]”⁴⁰. Refer first to an ad for easy “wash and wear” clothing that appeared in the 1959 March edition of *GQ* (Appendix A, 13). The copy at the bottom, “for your leisure-loving life”, explicitly states the importance of the “leisure” lifestyle, and the pictures at the top of the ad display different types of leisure activities. At the bottom right, the man is grilling on his bar-b-queue (the only type of cooking associated with men during the period, it seems, and acceptable only because it was “outdoorsy”). At the top left, the man is engaging in physical activity, specifically, golf. Other references to golf can be seen throughout other ads, as in the Kent Cigarettes ad which features a man smoking while golfing (Appendix A, 5).⁴¹ Ads consistently associated physical, outdoors, activity with men, though sometimes its form translated into different types of masculinity. For example, the ad for Canadian Club liquor depicts a more rugged, dangerous type of physical sport – bullfighting (Appendix A, 14).⁴² Some ads, however, displayed other types of acceptable

leisure activities, such as going to concerts (Appendix A, 11) or going to the beach⁴³ (12, 15).

This divergence in something as simple as leisure activity maintains the 1950s “see-saw” theme. The Canadian Club liquor ad is displaying a more classic, conformist 1950s masculinity, while the ads that depict concerts and the going to the beach provide a glimpse at the emergent, “sophisticated” playboy culture.

The ability to afford the leisure lifestyle seemed to put men at the head of the family, as leisure activities were often paired with images of a happy, nuclear family. Blatantly, a 1952 ad for Hammond Organs in *Ebony*, an African-American magazine, shows a man at the center of the living room, playing the organ, with his happy, engaged family surrounding him, and the copy below reads, “No room for tension in a home that has a Hammond Organ” (Appendix A, 16)⁴⁴. Yet inherent in this “leisure lifestyle” was the assumption that one had money available for it, and ads depicted specific masculine traits and physical qualities which would offer a path towards attaining that lifestyle.

Fifties advertisements portrayed masculinity as being educated or knowledgeable, modern, and precise; moreover, a man demonstrated these traits by choosing products or an appearance that conformed to what *other* “masculine” men liked. Education and knowledge appear in different forms. For example, an ad for Reis ties shows two men wearing ties in a collegiate setting, holding books (Appendix A, 17).⁴⁵ Other ads spelled things out more clearly through their copy. Looking to an ad for Imperial whiskey in *Playboy*, the tagline reads, “Knowledgeable people buy Imperial” - and by “people” the copywriters seem to mean men, given that only a man is featured in the ad (Appendix, 18).⁴⁶ Or, in another example, the Ivy Model company asks, “are you the man with enough savoir-faire to choose” its featured suit? (Appendix A, 19)⁴⁷ Or even still, an ad for Bacardi rum insinuates that choosing its brand means

being a drink *expert* (Appendix A, 20).⁴⁸ A masculine man will buy or wear products that are currently the trend. For instance, the copy in an ad for Plymouth Shoes reads, “I brought him up-to-date with...Plymouth Shoes” (Appendix A, 21).⁴⁹ Possessing knowledge of a great product and the current styles are important, because they portray the masculine trait of precision. In the ads, a man has made a precise choice if other men agree with it. Barthel offers an explanation: “Men’s products connect status and success; the right products show that you have the right stuff, that you’re one of them”.⁵⁰ Two ads for Lord Calvert support Barthel’s point (Appendix A, 22-23).⁵¹ The first hints that if a man serves Lord Calvert, then he has been, as the copy reads, “a successful host”. The second ad reads that successful men, “[...] choose the best for themselves...and for their friends.”

Paradoxically, the traits which lend a man the ability to successfully conform will also make him a “distinct” man, and this distinction aligns with a masculinity that emphasizes “power” and “individualism”. Barthel supports these claims, explaining that, “...this masculine model, these masculine virtues, are best reflected in the many car advertisements. There, the keywords are masculine terms: power, performance, precision. [T]hey also appear as selling points for products as diverse as shoes, stereos and sunglasses”.⁵² These traits of power, precision and individualism align more to a traditional, American masculinity, while the previously mentioned traits of being educated and modern seemed to be a somewhat different emerging masculinity. Desire to be the best and to be successful usually coexists in both forms of masculinity. Sometimes an ad expresses a man’s distinction obviously through its copy, such as in the Lord Calvert ads’ tagline, which reads, “For Men of Distinction” (Appendix A, 24).⁵³ This power, derived from being distinct, is illustrated by placing a man high above others, which some of the ads show symbolically through the use of steps. Two ads, one for Promenade, and

the other for Countess Mara, specifically employ this method (Appendix A, 25-26).⁵⁴ The ad for Promenade clothing shows a man ascending a flight of steps, and the Countess Mara ad features a man on the steps of (supposedly his) a grand mansion. To depict the masculine trait of individualism, ads often feature the man in a state of solitude, definitively apart from the rest of the world. Two ads, another one by Promenade, and one for The American Male, provide definitive illustrations of this (Appendix A, 27-28).⁵⁵

The final, finished, physical look of a masculine man is white, clean-shaven, and wearing a business suit. Almost every single advertisement previously shown in these ads features a white man, even some ads shown in *Ebony*, a magazine targeted towards a black audience (Appendix A, 23). Sometimes the emphasis on white for males appears symbolically, as in an ad for Pring Jgor clothing, which features a man dressed entirely in white clothing (Appendix A, 29).⁵⁶ This same ad also illustrates a very clean-shaven face, another physical feature consistent throughout the advertisements. Indeed, it appears that a clean look, both on the face, and with the style of hair on the head, was deemed important, as advertisements for products such as Contour Wax graced the pages of male magazines (Appendix A, 30).⁵⁷ Finally, most scenarios feature the man wearing a business suit, whether or not the environment shown in the ad is in an office or formal situation. Barthel lends some insight as to why this might be the case: “Other products similarly reflect the centrality of business competition to the male gender role. And at the center of this competition itself, the business suit.”⁵⁸

One source of proof that a man has achieved the masculine look through his masculine traits is that the masculine man always has female admirers around him; furthermore, the women featured in his advertisement life are subordinate to him. Admiring women are shown watching

the man enviously in the ad (Appendix A, 31)⁵⁹, or appear alongside him in any situation (Appendix A, 32, 33, 34).⁶⁰ Diane Barthel explains the rationale behind this:

He also wants to be loved, but he does not want to appear needy. Advertisements suggest the magic ability of products ranging from cars to hair creams to attract female attention. With the right products a man can have it all, with no strings attached: no boring marital ties, hefty mortgages, corporate compromises.⁶¹

What is particularly interesting in these ads where the woman is placed close to the man, doting on him, is that she always seems to be placed slightly *behind* him, possibly alluding to a subordinate role. While that is just a hypothesis, some ads make it quite clear through their copy that women and objects are the *man's* possessions, by commonly using the word “his” as a prefix. “If the man is a man, he will choose his woman as he would other objects/signs (HIS car, HIS woman, HIS eau de toilette.”⁶² An ad for *GQ*, placed in a 1959 issue of *GQ*, probably illustrates this best (Appendix A, 35).⁶³ The copy features a list that says, “His dog, His wife, His Tailor, *His Gentleman's Quarterly*”. This use of “his” is not limited to ads in male-targeted magazines. In the June 1959 issue of *Cosmopolitan*, an ad for an upcoming issue has a headline that reads, “Man and His Woman” (Appendix A, 36).⁶⁴ “Man’s woman” raises the question of how exactly constructs of femininity were displayed in these magazines.

The “Ideal” Woman: Femininities in 1950s Advertising

Products targeted specifically at women indicated that femininity meant to possess nurturing qualities as a hostess and a mother, and that a woman should exhibit these qualities in her proper place – the home – and most often, in the kitchen. An ad for Johnson’s Baby Oil, which appeared in 1959 in *Cosmopolitan*, insinuates that if the woman buys the product, she will be able to transform her baby from a sad child into a happy one (Appendix B, 1).⁶⁵ More

importantly, the ads in the male-oriented magazines studied never feature this product (or similar products). An advertisement for Coca-Cola has copy that tells the woman to “remember to take enough *home*,” seeming to mean that a proper woman does not just enjoy the beverage for herself, but as a great hostess, makes sure to bestow its qualities upon others (Appendix B, 2).⁶⁶ Ads that sold kitchen products focused on the feminine role as one which blatantly centered around the kitchen (Appendix B, 4-7). It is interesting to note that the models in these ads vary in race, seeming to allude to the fact that this was a core element to *all* femininities at the time. One should also take care to notice that the women featured near the kitchen products or in the kitchen always appear perfectly poised and beautiful (Appendix B, 4,6) . This leads directly into the next, and very important, element to 1950s femininity.

The advertisements that showed women as perfectly put together and beautiful, no matter what role they currently inhabited, alluded to gender realities on both sides of the “see-saw.” On one hand, it was a more traditional view to expect and stress the importance of always appearing made-up no matter where one was or what one was doing. For example, an ad for a Formfit bra has a tag line which reads, “Playtime...Daytime...Gaytime...Anytime”, and then the copy below continues with, “Think of your many roles! You star in the kitchen and at your bridge club, Or you’re a golfer in the morning...a glamour girl in the evening. And, of course, wherever you go, whatever you do, you dress the part.” (Appendix B, 8).⁶⁷ This notion had gained favor during World War II when women continued to put on make-up as a sign of respect for the men “we try most to please”.⁶⁸ It seems that this was indeed the conformist view, for an ad for Sweetheart soap has copy that reads, “Beauty is every woman’s business” (Appendix B, 10).⁶⁹ Not only was it her business, it was her responsibility to keep up her appearance so that she could attract and keep a man. Ads ranged from stressing the importance of looking beautiful with make-up, to

staying hygienic through marketing products like Listerine, deodorant bath soaps, and “feminine hygiene” products (Appendix B, 39-45)⁷⁰. An ad for Fresh, a deodorant bath soap, claims “You can be lovely to love...how wonderful to be his love...keep his love, always. [...] That’s why smart girls use Fresh Cream Deoderant daily.” (Appendix B, 39). A humorous ad for Listerine reveals the same concept. In the ad, there are two pictures side by side. The first picture shows a scene in which a girl is standing by herself at a party, while other girls are dancing with men. The next picture shows the same girl happily dancing with a handsome man at the party, and the copy reads, “So much depends on you...sometimes a very small thing spells the difference between neglect and popularity.” (Appendix B, 45). Sometimes, however, an ad showed this conformity towards beauty and hygiene in a more subtle way, by alluding to beauty regimes as a ritual (Appendix B, 17).⁷¹ Yet on the other hand, the very fact that these ads even allude to the multifarious roles that woman had to take on, (especially the workforce role of the secretary-Appendix B, 9) shows evidence of the burgeoning movement towards non-traditional views of women in roles outside of the kitchen, and outside of the home. And though they were few and far between, there were even ads that explicitly used female sexuality to push their products, representing the counter-cultural, defiant side of the 1950s gender see-saw (Appendix B, 47-48). Yet while ads may have reflected some non-traditional feminine constructs, in terms of their womanly roles and sexuality, they almost always reflected a white upper-middle class beauty as *the* feminine beauty.

Ideal physical femininity, meant looking white (both in skin tone and hair type), thin, and young. To reflect the importance of whiteness as a color (for complexion) ads featured models who either had light, clear skin, or pushed products that could achieve such skin. The perpetuation of such ideals is particularly evident in the fact that even ads in *Ebony*, a magazine

specifically geared towards African-Americans, featured such products and models that looked like this physical form of femininity. For instance, some ads in *Ebony* magazine feature a light-skinned, black model who presumably achieved her lighter skin tone through the use of Nadinola bleaching creams (Appendix B, 18, 19, 37). To reinforce the importance of such whiteness, the copy in one ad reads, “The nicest things happen to girls with light, bright complexions!”⁷². While Caucasian women did not often need to focus on making their skin lighter, they did need products that reinforced their clear white skin. An ad for Pan-Stik make-up exemplifies this notion (Appendix B, 20). Notice in the ad that the model has very white skin, and that the importance of whiteness to her femininity seems reinforced not only by the product, but also by the symbolic use of an all-white dress⁷³. In fact, ads often used the color white for clothing or labeled products as white to symbolically allude to white femininity (Appendix B, pages 33-36). Perfume products seemed to especially employ this technique, with products named “White Shoulders” (35), or a man chasing a woman wearing the featured perfume, and, of course, a white dress (34).

Yet for black women, lightening their skin was not enough to achieve a white, female look, and so products that promoted a more Caucasian type of hair perpetuated notions of white femininity. The products featured in *Ebony* magazine seemed to stress long, soft, hair (Appendix B, 21-23, 38). As mentioned much earlier, the 1950s stressed a youthful culture, so it may come as no surprise that an ideal feminine appearance idealized a youthful look (Appendix B, pages 24-26). One ad, for Persulan hair product commands the reader: “don’t look older than you really are!”⁷⁴ (Appendix B, 26) Lastly, there seemed to be a large number of ads that pushed for “thin,” either through product, the use of thin models, blatant copy, or insinuating imagery (Appendix B, 27-31).

Ads tended to perpetuate a perception that everyone sought white emulation as an essential ingredient to masculinity/femininity, yet in actuality this desire was only to some extent true. To be sure, it was indeed a reality that many who were not born naturally white tried to either physically change their appearance through their skin (for women, through bleaching creams) or their hair, but only because it was absolutely a reality that white gender constructs had a better chance of obtaining the “good life” in 1950s America. If one’s skin was too dark (especially for women), it could limit his or her job options as actresses, secretaries, waitress, or other “face-to-face” positions. Chandler Owen, editor of the *Messenger*, seemed to agree. He said, “If people of color ruled the world, white people would curl their hair and darken their skin⁷⁵”. So while bleaching powders and creams were sold, it does not necessarily mean that black men or women bought into the notion of “white beauty”. In an article that appeared in the August, 1954 issue of *Ebony* magazine, “Why I Like Dark Women: The Blacker the Berry, the Sweeter the Juice,” musician Louis Armstrong, author of the article, praised the darkness of black women’s skin and expressed his distaste for the more “yellow” shades. Furthermore, there were a few ads in *Ebony* for Madame C.J. Walker Cosmetics, made for African-American women, with copy that said, “...cosmetics especially designed to *bring out your own natural beauty...*” (Appendix B, 46). So while most ads may have been guilty for perpetuating the more traditional, cultural view of whiteness as the appropriate masculinity or femininity, the question remains as to what extent readers accepted these notions. Peiss puts it best, when she writes, “How most black consumers interpreted the ads and advice directed at them remains, however, an open question. No survey research tells us which women bought the controversial cosmetics, what their intentions were, or whether they were more influenced by political rhetoric or commercial appeals”.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Advertisements reflected and perpetuated both sides of the spectrum of 1950s ideologies, though perhaps not always in an equal manner. How much credit can be given to ads for moving consumer behavior towards one side of the spectrum or the other during the decade? In *The Other Fifties*, historian Joel Foreman seems to apportion the blame equally: “There is no question that capitalism and capitalist markets have enforced conservative codes of behavior. But it is equally true [...] that markets have aided and abetted the production and dissemination of the subversive ideologist”.⁷⁷ It does not, however, seem possible to point out examples in which ads successfully created new desires or realities. Perhaps if advertisers framed products in a certain way, then consumers buying those products expressed a desire to live that lifestyle. Maybe advertisements created new perceptions around already existent products, and thus perpetuated certain realities. Barthel reinforces this idea, saying, “I, for one, see advertising not simply as the shaper of men and women, but as shaped by men and women, the advertisers and the public.”⁷⁸ In returning to the image of the see-saw, it seems that ads could sit atop the fulcrum and sometimes tip one side up higher than the other. Ultimately, however, the two ends of the playground piece never changed in form.

¹ Barthel, Diane, *Putting on Appearances: Gender and Advertising*. 60

² Ibid. 186. This quote was by Stephen King, Barthel says she supports it.

³ Shumway, David R., in his essay “Watching Elvis: The Male Rock Star as Object of the Gaze” in Joel Foreman’s anthology, *The Other Fifties*, 124. Specifically the quote, “While the 1950s are usually understood by the general public as placid, even “tranquilized”, to quote Robert Lowell, much research suggests that the period was instead a time of significant social and cultural transformation.”

⁴ Foreman, Joel. *The Other Fifties*, 1.

⁵ Shumway, David R. *The Other Fifties*, 124.

⁶ Baughman, James L., in his essay “The Frustrated Persuader: Fairfax M. Cone and the Edsel Advertising Campaign, 1957-59”, in Joel Foreman’s novel, *The Other Fifties*, 55.

⁷ Ibid, 42-3.

⁸ Ibid, 43.

“What Sells? Gender in American Print Advertising in the 1950s”

Elana Kelber

Prof. Lamp

L216

2008 Burgess Award

⁹ Byars, Jackie, "The Prime of Miss Kim Novak: Struggling Over the Feminine in the Star Image", in Joel Forman's novel, *The Other Fifties*, 217.

¹⁰ Ibid, 199-200.

¹¹ Ibid. 203

¹² Baughman, James. *The Other Fifties*, 43.

¹³ This change is documented in many places, but one example is located in Chapter 10, "Democracy, Capitalism, and American Literature: The Cold War Construction of J.D. Salinger's Paperback Hero", by Leerom Medovi. Found in Joel Foreman's novel, *The Other Fifties*, 255-56.

¹⁴ Streitmatter, Rodger. *Sex Sells!: The Media's Journey from Repression to Obsession*, xiv.

¹⁵ Shumway, David R., *The Other Fifties*, 125.

¹⁶ Ibid., 125. Also see Streitmatter, Rodger, in *Sex Sells!*, xvi. In particular, this quote: "Consistent with the conventions of the time, *Facts of Life and Love for Teenagers* placed the burden of establishing amorous limits squarely on Mary's chaste shoulders-one heading in the book read "How to Stop: The Girl's responsibility"

¹⁷ Foreman, Joel, *The Other Fifties*, 7.

¹⁸ Breines, Wini, "Postwar White Girls' Dark Others" in Joel Foreman's novel, *The Other Fifties*, 58.

¹⁹ Peiss, Kathy, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*, 245. Note: a full discussion may be viewed from pages 240-45.

²⁰ Breines, Wini. *The Other Fifties*, 56.

²¹ Ibid, 58.

²² Byars, Jackie, *The Other Fifties*, 207.

²³ Ibid. 214 and 58.. "In the fifties, the beatnik was a powerful signifier for otherness; beatniks constructed themselves in opposition to dominant groups through their dress, their lifestyle, and their philosophies (214). Rhythm and blues discussed on page 58.

²⁴ Shumway, David R., *The Other Fifties*, 125.

²⁵ Ehrenreich, Barbara, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight From Commitment*, 30.

²⁶ Ibid, 41.

²⁷ Barthel, Diane, *Putting on Appearances*, 9.

²⁸ Regarding Playboy's circulation, see *Sex Sells!* By Rodger Streitmatter, 16, and 20. Regarding *Gentleman's Quarterly's* circulation, ("Perhaps the best known male fashion magazine is GQ, founded in 1957" –Barthel) see Diane Barthel's *Putting on Appearances*, 169. Regarding Cosmopolitan, see Barthel's *Putting on Appearances*, 37.

²⁹ Littlefield, James E., and Kirkpatrick, C.A., *Advertising: Mass Communication in Marketing* (1964; rpt. 1970), 238.

³⁰ Edwards, Charles M. Jr., *Retail Advertising and Sales Promotion: Third Edition* (1959) , 333.

³¹ Littlefield, James E., and Kirkpatrick, C.A., *Advertising: Mass Communication in Marketing*, 243

³² Ibid, 238.

³³ See Appendix A, pages 2-5. They appeared in *Playboy*, March 1958, in *Playboy*, February 1957, in *Ebony*, 1955, and in *Ebony* 1959 (respectively).

³⁴ Barthel, Diane, *Putting on Appearances*, 130-31.

³⁵ Appendix A, page 6. *Playboy*, October 1957

³⁶ Appendix A, page 7. *GQ*, March, 1959.

³⁷ See also Appendix A, pages 8 and 9 (both in *GQ*, 1959)

³⁸ See Appendix A, page 12. *Ebony*, 1952.

³⁹ See Appendix A, page 10: The ad appeared in October 1957 in *Playboy*. See also page 11, which appeared in *Playboy* in January, 1959.

⁴⁰ Breines, Wini, *The Other Fifties*, 55. Confers with Byars, Jackie, 203.

⁴¹ Appendix A, page 5. *Ebony*, 1959.

⁴² Appendix A, page 14. *Ebony* 1955.

⁴³ See Appendix A, page 12 (*Ebony*, 1952) and page 15 (*Playboy*, May 1954).

⁴⁴ See Appendix A, page 16. Also look at Appendix A, page 15, which also features the entire family engaging in leisure activities together.

⁴⁵ Appendix A, page 17, *GQ*, March 1959

⁴⁶ Appendix A, page 18, *Playboy*, March 1958

⁴⁷ Appendix A, page 19. *Playboy*, August 1959

⁴⁸ Appendix A, page 20. *Playboy*, February 1959

"What Sells? Gender in American Print Advertising in the 1950s"

Elana Kelber

Prof. Lamp

L216

2008 Burgess Award

⁴⁹Appendix A, page 21. *Ebony*, 1952. On another note, I later noticed the ad for Adam hats, which is placed above the ad for Plymouth shoes. Interestingly, this ad proves many of the same points as well. The copy below the Adams ad emphasizes “the masculine style”, and that “you never had it so smart”.

⁵⁰Barthel, Diane, *Putting on Appearances*, 177.

⁵¹Appendix A, page 22 (*Ebony*, 1952) and page 23 (*Ebony* 1952)

⁵²Barthel, Diane, *Putting on Appearances*, 171-4.

⁵³Appendix page 24, *Cosmopolitan*, 1959. This tagline can also be seen on pages 22 and 23.

⁵⁴Appendix A, page 25 and 26 both in, *GQ*, March, 1959.

⁵⁵Appendix A, page 27 (*GQ*, May 1959) and page 28 (*GQ*, March 1959). Also, it should be noted that pages 25 and 26 also provide supporting evidence of the masculine trait of individualism through solitude. As another side note, the aforementioned idea of cigarettes used a symbol of masculinity can be seen on page 28 as well.

⁵⁶Appendix A, page 29, *GQ*, March 1959

⁵⁷Appendix A, page 30, *Playboy*, December 1955

⁵⁸Barthel, Diane, *Putting on Appearances*, 176-77

⁵⁹Appendix A, page 31, *Playboy*, March 1959

⁶⁰Appendix A, pages 32,33, 34. Their sources (respectively) are: *GQ*, March 1959, *Playboy*, April 1959, and *GQ*, May 1959.

⁶¹Barthel, Diane, *Putting on Appearances*, 182. Also read further on page 179.

⁶²*Ibid*, 171.

⁶³Appendix A, page 35. *GQ*, March 1959.

⁶⁴Appendix A, page 36. *Cosmopolitan*, June 1959. See also page 37 for After Six attire, *Playboy*, January 1958, and also see page 38, featured in a 1955 issue of *Cosmopolitan*. The ad shows women’s subordination by telling the woman to first ask her husband about the sewing machine, and *then* she can note the machine’s great features.

⁶⁵Appendix B, page 1, *Cosmopolitan*, 1959.

⁶⁶Appendix B, page 2 *Cosmopolitan*, 1955. See Also page 3, “-and my guests do, too”, found in the same issue.

⁶⁷Appendix B, page 8, *Cosmopolitan*, 1955. Also see page 9, (same source) which alludes to the idea that a secretary at work should stay very conscious of how her nails look while typewriting.

⁶⁸Peiss, Kathy, *Hope in a Jar*, 239.

⁶⁹Appendix B, page 10. *Cosmopolitan*, 1955.

⁷⁰Regarding feminine hygiene products: there is a sleu of fascinating historical research and writing done on the shift of the responsibility to women for taking care of birth control, labeled in ads as “feminine hygiene”, in the 1950s. This topic was too vast to expound upon in this paper, but for those who are interested, here are a few particularly interesting and relevant sources: “The Importance of Being Orgasmic: Sexuality, Gender, and Marital Sex Manuals in the United States, 1920-1963,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (October 2000): 447-74. (Specifically within that article, look to pages 464 and 473). Or, Andrea Tone’s article, “Contraceptive Consumers: Gender and the Political Economy of Birth Control in the 1930s.” *Journal of Social History* 29 (March 1996): 485-506. <http://jstor.org/>. Or, “Chapter 9: *The Politics of Reproduction*” in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, ed. Kathy Peiss, 308-319.

⁷¹*Ibid*. Appendix B, page 17. NOTE: the page numbers 11-16 have been pulled, so there is a jump from page 10 to 17

⁷²Interestingly, Peiss has noted, “For every tirade against bleaching and emulation, many tubes of Black and White ointment were sold.” – *Hope in a Jar*, 225.

⁷³It is interesting to return to the previously mentioned ad in Appendix B, page 45, for Listerine mouthwash. Notice that the girl is a light, white Caucasion with blonde hair, and wearing a white dress. Furthermore, it is important to consider some other implications in this ad. While the “whiteness” of the ad and the stress on beauty as a woman’s duty are, as has already been pointed out, symbollic of the conformist culture of the 1950s, one should also note that the very content of the scene (a woman at a dance, trying to entice a man, unattended by any parental figure) is somewhat counter-cultural, and this is further reinforced by the black straps on her dress, the black sache around her dress, and her sexy, black stiletto shoes.

⁷⁴Appendix B, page 26, *Ebony*, 1952.

⁷⁵Peiss, Kathy, *Hope in a Jar*, 203.

⁷⁶*Ibid*, 225.

⁷⁷Foreman, Joel, *The Other Fifties*, 7

⁷⁸Barthel, Diane, *Putting on Appearances*, 191.

“What Sells? Gender in American Print Advertising in the 1950s”

Elana Kelber

Prof. Lamp

L216

2008 Burgess Award

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Edwards, Charles Jr., and Russel A. Brown. *Retail Advertising and Sales Promotion*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1959.

Cosmopolitan Magazine. Selected Issues from 1955-1959.

Ebony Magazine. Selected Issues from 1951-1959.

Gentleman's Quarterly. All Issues from 1959.

Olsen, Lester (Editor). *Advertising Work: Told With Pictures*. New York: Printer's Ink Publishing Company, Inc., 1950.

Playboy Magazine. Selected Issues from 1953-1959

Swan, Carroll J. *Which Ad Pulled Best: Tests, Results, Conclusions, Sales, Inquiries, Readership*. New York: Printers' Ink Publishing Company, INC., 1951.

Secondary Sources

Barthel, Diane. *Putting on Appearances: Gender and Advertising*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. *The Hearts of Men : American Dreams and the Flight From Commitment*. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.

Foreman, Joel. *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997.

Jones, John Phillip. *When Ads Work: New Proof that Advertising Triggers Sales*. New York: Lexington Books, 1995.

Littlefield, James, and Kirkpatrick, C.A., *Advertising: Mass Communication in Marketing*, 3rd Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964: rpt., 1970.

Mierau, Christina. *Accept No Substitutes: The History of American Advertising*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 2000.

Peiss, Kathy. *Hope In A Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1998.

Streitmatter, Rodger. *Sex Sells! :The Media's Journey From Repression to Obsession*. Cambridge: Westview Press, 2004.

Young, William H., and Nancy Young. *The 1950s*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004.

Ikuta, Yasutoshi. *Cruise-o-Matic: Automobile Advertising of the 1950s*. San Francisco: Chronicle, 2000.

Michael S. Kimmel and Amy Aronson, ed., *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia* (ABC Clio, 2004), "Introduction," xv-xxiv, and "Masculinities," 503-507.

Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Incorporating Women: A History of Women and Business in the United States* (Twayne, 1998), chapter 1, "Incorporating Others: The Social Categories of Business History," 1-12

Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," bottom, p. 1072 ("These examples are of explicit connections between gender and power . . .") -1075

Elana Kelber
Lamp L216
10/30/2007

Research Paper Topic Summary

The title of my research paper is: “What Sells? Gender in American Print Advertising in the 1950s”. I plan to investigate blatant and symbolic constructs of gender in American print marketing and advertising in the 1950s. The limitations for print advertising will be newspaper, magazine, and billboard, though primarily I will be looking at advertising in magazines, specifically *Playboy Magazine*, *Gentleman’s Quarterly*, and *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. Within the magazine, I am looking primarily at the advertisements, but also perusing the articles as well, for they provide a wealth of primary source information. My other primary sources are books about advertising, written by people in the advertising field at the time.

Combined with secondary sources on marketing and advertising, as well as books with a historical look at the 1950s, I will investigate the answers to a few questions. Specifically, I want to answer how constructions of masculinity were portrayed in the advertisements, and also how these differed from constructions of femininity. I plan to take into account the fact that the constructs are mostly masculinities of white, middle to upper-middle class Americans for both genders. I will investigate what these masculine/feminine constructs entail about the historical context of the time, and whether or not they fit realistically into their time period. Most importantly, my paper will attempt to answer to what extent the constructs are perceptions

(versus realities), and to what extent these companies/advertisers created or perpetuated various gender constructs in order to push their product.