

merism:

THE MARKETING OF CONSUMERISM

The Use of Photography in American Advertising During the Late 1930s

A contrast and comparison of the use of photography in the advertisements of two popular magazines from 1939: *Ladies Home Journal* and *LIFE*

The Development and Success of Magazine Advertising in the Early Part of the Twentieth Century

Advertising began to appear regularly in magazines during the 1890s as manufacturers needed to find ways to introduce their products to potential buyers.

Initially publishers feared a lowering of standards if advertising was to be run in their magazines, but by 1900, the partnership between publisher and advertiser was cemented as benefits for both were realized.

Advertising permitted publishers to decrease the cost of their magazines, enabling a larger segment of the population to purchase them. Larger circulation in turn guaranteed a larger market for the advertised products. Publisher, advertiser and consumer benefitted.

The Priming of the American Housewife as the Ultimate Consumer

Initially ads were concentrated in the backs of magazines, but throughout the Twentieth Century this gradually changed as it was observed that rather than simply reflect the popular culture, advertising held the power to actually shape desire. In an article entitled "The Graphic Ordering of Desire," Sally Stein carefully chronicles the placement of advertising in *Ladies Home Journal* between 1919 and 1939. Her observations conclude that the careful interspersing of advertising with editorial material increased significantly over this 20-year span in direct correlation with industry's increased push towards technological improvements for the home. In other words, women were being seduced by advertisers in a very well-thought-out and manipulative manner. In order to read through the 'important' editorial sections, it was inevitable to concurrently peruse the ads. Over time, Stein found that smaller and smaller editorial blocks were interspersed with more and more ads.

The overwhelming success of Ladies Home Journal as The Womens' Magazine

Ladies Home Journal was an overwhelmingly successful magazine, and held by far the largest circulation of magazines of this type in 1939. Women respected the editorial policy of the magazine and referred to it as a major guide to help them become happy homemakers, good wives and successful mothers.

Ladies Home Journal clearly placed itself up on this trustworthy pedestal. The cover byline, "The magazine women believe in" engendered trust, as did the *Ladies Home Journal* ads within each issue. Often these 'self-ads' overtly heralded the benefits of advertising and endorsed their advertisers, claiming much-coveted family and homemaking success as rewards for purchasing advertised products.

The success of *Ladies Home Journal* was due in part to the trust gained from subscribers, the majority of whom were middle-class housewives.

The General Interest Magazine: Life and its immediate success

In 1936 *LIFE* magazine hit the newsstands as a general interest magazine, positioning itself as a news magazine. *LIFE* included other sections such as the arts, fashion and technology to round out the publication, to attract a broad audience and, being acutely aware of the role played by advertising within the publication, to develop a forum within which the growing spectrum of advertisers would be encouraged to participate.

The American public quickly applauded *LIFE* and the magazine grew significantly within its first few years of publication.

Immigration, Technology and American Public Morale in the Aftermath of the Great Depression

I suggest three very important circumstances within the American culture that I believe provided the impetus for the success of *Ladies Home Journal* and *LIFE* as well-subscribed magazines, while fostering the success of the advertising within *Ladies Home Journal* and *LIFE*.

The three circumstances are the rising success of the 'new Americans,' the major technological innovations which were becoming a strong feature of American society during the 1930s and the social and cultural climate in America during the final years of the Great Depression.

The Children of Immigrants and the American Dream

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, a huge wave of European immigrants came to America in search of a better life, especially for their children. In the largest population centers along the eastern seaboard, the majority of the population were immigrant families. In *The Distant Magnet: European Emigration to the U.S.A.*, Philip Taylor states that in New York City in 1890 80% of the population (1.2 million people) were children of immigrants. Although gradually subsiding in the Twentieth Century, European immigration was still moderate through the teens and into the early 1920s. Taylor indicates that the immigrants themselves tended to hold onto old world values and customs while encouraging their children to assimilate into the American culture. They wanted their children to know the better life that America promised. 'The American Dream' was the most accurate way of describing the hoped-for reality these people wanted for their children.

Photographs of immigrants entering Ellis Island show many in the colorful dress of their native countries. In contrast, photographs of newly-arrived immigrants in American classrooms show them all dressed and groomed virtually identically—with captions beneath stating such boasts of assimilation as "There are 44 nations represented by the people in this room—can you tell them apart?" Why, no—the impetus to assimilate was strong. All were attempting to look like Americans—to challenge the disparity between the possibilities of America and the old hard facts of life (Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image*).

While first-generation immigrants tended to remain with their own ethnic groups, successive generations assimilated into the American culture, moving from the ghetto neighborhoods, adopting the American style in raising their standards of living—aiding the establishment of a solid American middle class and positioning themselves within it.

It is reasonable to conclude from information about immigration that a high proportion of Americans in 1939—especially Americans in the industrialized cities of the northeast—were first- and second- generation Americans. It is my belief that these children of immigrants and their children were readily seduced by advertisers into the American way of life—they wanted more than ever to belong to the American culture, to hold the American Dream.

Technology: Who Will Buy?

It has been said that immigrants were lured into this country in part by Industry Giants who needed cheap labor for burgeoning factories along with a steady supply of consumers for the goods they produced.

Through the early part of the Twentieth Century, technological improvements were accelerating, and especially through the 1930s, a ready market was essential for the success of such new conveniences as electrical appliances, aluminum products, cellophane and a growing number of synthetics developed for use in the home.

If first- and second-generation Americans provided the audience eager to ingest the American culture, the makers of these new products were poised and ready to produce. The special interest magazine, *Ladies Home Journal*, along with the general interest magazine, *LIFE*, provided perfect vehicles within which advertisers would develop a bond with the publishers, and through their trust in these magazines, with the consumer. According to Stein, “before World War II, magazines served a central role in developing the visible materiality of consumer culture.”

Hope, Belief and Reaffirmation in the Aftermath of the Great Depression

In 1929, unemployment in the United States was approximately 8% of the population. In 1933 unemployment was close to 40% with ten million people out of work. Between 1932 and 1935, for the first time in the history of the United States, the federal government instituted programs to aid the needy, with a goal towards increasing annual income (which would increase expenditures, which would in turn increase production).

Between 1935 and 1937 the United States economy improved, and employment in manufacturing increased. A severe economic collapse occurred, however, in October 1937 with subsequent unemployment figures in 1938 again over ten million (one in five workers). Through 1939, unemployment averaged 9.5 million.

Although it would seem that magazine sales might have fallen during this period of severe economic recession, this did not appear to be the case with *Ladies Home Journal* and *LIFE*. Stein noticed a decrease in the overall number of pages per issue in *Ladies Home Journal* during the 1930s, however the magazine continued to grow in circulation. *LIFE* was not begun until 1936 and, as noted previously, circulation grew significantly over the next several years.

A look at cultural values during this period in American history may provide some clues as to why these magazines enjoyed increased success at the height of economic instability.

The twenties had been a time of excess. Workers were reaping the benefits of their labors, and the growing middle class was narrowing the disparity between the worker and the wealthy. People had more leisure time and more money. It seemed that the American Dream was a reality. In the aftermath of the stock market crash of 1929, Americans refused to give up hope—the ‘Dream’ was alive in their minds and it was kept alive in part by a sense of nostalgia combined with the desire to forge ahead.

In an essay entitled “The Historian and the Icon: Photography and the History of the American People in the 1930s and 1940s,” Lawrence W. Levine noted an “ambivalent yearning to combine the innocence of the past with the sophistication and technological complexity of the present that was particularly strong in the American culture of the 1930s.” Levine suggested that the success of the 1939 film, *Gone With the Wind*, for example, was due to the themes of reaffirmation and hope—after Scarlet encountered monumental social, cultural and personal changes, she emerged with the hopeful phrase, “Tomorrow is another day.” As Scarlet was redeemed, so Americans of the 1930s believed that they “had within themselves the qualities and traditions necessary to regenerate themselves and the American Dream” (Levine).

The continued success of *Ladies Home Journal* during the thirties may have been due in part to this same phenomenon. Short stories or 'novelettes' predominated the editorial pages of *Ladies Home Journal*. These stories devoted themselves to themes of love, trust and fidelity in settings of mystery, intrigue and suspense. The bright, witty, attractive protagonist, ever looking forward, outwitted danger and betrayal. The reward? Her dreams came true. The message, similar to Scarlet O'Hara's: you, too can attain 'The Dream.'

The presumed identification with Scarlet O'Hara appears also to be an offshoot of the identification Americans seemed to have with each other during the 1930s. Americans during this time propelled themselves toward unity and a sense of shared pride which would carry them through hard times together.

According to Martha A. Sandweiss in "The Way to Realism: 1930-1940," "an emphasis on recording the American scene dominated photography in thirties America." The United States government photographic section, led by Roy Stryker was "the grandest expression of the national penchant for photographing the American scene...and between 1935 and 1943 introduced Americans to America." Many of these photographs found their way into American homes via illustrated magazines, providing a connectedness that further strengthened Americans' emotional ties and beliefs in the American Dream.

The Use of the Photographic Image as an Advertising Element in the Late 1930s

In her study of *Ladies Home Journal* Stein noted a significant increase in the use of photography over illustration as well as an increase in the use of color advertising over black-and-white. These increases might be expected, due to the increased quality provided by technological advances both in the field of photography and in the printing industry regarding the reproduction of photography (for example, Kodachrome's invention in 1935, and Agfacolor's in 1936 heralded the advent of color advertising photography [from *The Art of Persuasion*, Robert A. Sobieszek]), and also to the increased societal 'approval' of commercial photography as a profession during this period.

Of significance to this research is the use of the photographic image as an advertising element during the late 1930s. The photograph imbues realism and authenticity to the ad. More effectively than illustration, the photograph implies that real people actually use the advertised products.

It has been said that during this time photography in advertising included naturalism, human drama and the realism of color (Sobieszek). The photographic images within *Ladies Home Journal* and *LIFE* from 1939 support this to an extent, especially the 'human drama' component. Naturalism I found to be forced or contrived and the realism of color appeared in many ads as a gross exaggeration of color.

The use of illustration remains strong throughout 1939 in both *Ladies Home Journal* and *LIFE*. However in many ads in which it is used (in comparison to the highly stylized editorial illustration within the magazine), the illustration is so life-like that at times it is difficult to distinguish it from a photograph.

During the thirties the design of American advertising changed significantly as Americans were involved with the concept of modernization. In ads, consumers were seen using highly technological products. Perhaps the psychological stimulation implied by modernism permeated the vulnerable American public: cleanliness and hygiene, safeguarded by modern inventions, eliminated infections; product efficiency enabled more free time; canned and processed foods ensured health and vitality; automobiles empowered

with effortless mobility and speed. The users of the products of American technology were advancing towards 'The Dream.' In hard times, they were united with other Americans, they were righteous and good, therefore they would prosper.

Bold, hard-selling advertising methods developed during the mid-thirties after the Depression jolted advertisers into 'doing whatever it takes' to sell their wares. The deployment of shame, blame and guilt-inducing techniques were flagrant during the thirties. Ads were littered with characters whose exaggerated gestures indicated the pain of making the wrong choice or the jubilation over choosing the advertised products.

As sound replaced silence in film and the radio became a common fixture in the American home, speech balloons and storyboard-like serial strips (in preparation for television) permeated the ads. New and varied products vied for consumer attention. In a public that was rebuilding from a severe economic crisis while simultaneously watching the rest of the world at war, the guidance of advertisers and the acquisition of technologically advanced goods strengthened a sense of belonging, camaraderie and shared pride in an America that was propelling itself towards 'The Dream.'

Consumers actually looked to advertisers to instruct and guide. Beginning in the 1920s and an established fact by the late thirties, the testimonial provided eager consumers the necessary guidance with which to choose the proper product over another. Testimonials may have featured a luxurious movie star touting the benefits of a product, or a mere 'head shot' of an advertiser-created 'knowledgeable authority' such as Betty Crocker or nurse Ellen J. Buckland (from *Advertising The American Dream*, Roland Marchand).

The manner in which a photograph was used in advertising in the late thirties provides us with information about the importance attributed to different elements within the ad, and also to the structure of the ad itself. For example, automobile ads often pictured a large photograph of a beautiful woman, with a considerably smaller image—often an illustration rather than a photograph—of the car! Soup ads displayed beautiful color photographs of bowls of soup yet no one was pictured savoring the contents. Some ads relinquished the opportunity to display the product, positioning themselves as editorial with a photograph (of a glamorous couple, for example) pulling the reader into the ad.

Some advertisers (whose ads were seen in both *Ladies Home Journal* and *LIFE*) wished to appear different in the two different markets; some did not. The ads in the women's magazine contained a good deal more of shame, blame, guilt and reprimand than in the general interest magazine. Presumably, as Stein indicated, this tactic was designed to shape the housewife's desires towards the advertised goods.

However, the two different magazines did attract a somewhat different advertising mix, and in several of the ads—presumably geared to women—that appeared in *LIFE* we see a difference in style when compared to the style evident in *Ladies Home Journal*.

This research is by no means conclusive and has not attempted to provide statistical data in assessing information such as changes in the amount of advertising presented over time; percentage of color to black-and-white ads; comparison of the same product's advertising over time; study of sexual or racial biases; or even quantifiable data in the subjects chosen for discussion. It has engendered questions to

which I believe further research is necessary. Rather than arrive at conclusions, it has been my aim to present information and examples of advertising from a period in American history which I believe provides vital clues to not only the study of the use of photographic images in advertising, but to the shaping of the culture of which we are now a part. It is my hope that more questions will be asked, and that our thinking will be further stimulated. As we have been shaped by advertising, so too we shape by the choices we make in this society—a society in which, according to Barbara Kruger’s response towards advertisers, “We are the objects of your suave entrapments” (Sobieszek).

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The Use of Photography in American Advertising During the Late 1930s

A contrast and comparison of the use of photography in the advertisements of two popular magazines from 1939:
Ladies Home Journal and Life

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A Slide Lecture given by Donna Stanton, Assistant Professor

"A dream is a vision or aspiration to which we can compare reality. An illusion is an image we have mistaken for reality...We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so 'real' that they can live in them."

—Daniel J. Boorstin, from *The Image or What Happened to the American Dream*