Cult of True Womanhood

A Report of a Senior Study

by

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Major: Design

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ABSTRACT
This senior study takes a critical view of the portrayal of women in advertisement, particularly women’s magazines of the 1950’s by simulating a 1950’s magazine based on stereotypes and gender roles. It looks at the historical context, sociological impact, and gender roles in the media as it relates and perpetuates gender roles and stereotypes.
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CHAPTER 1

Proposal

I’ve been intrigued by gender roles and more specifically, the stereotypes of women’s roles depicted in magazines for a while now, because it perfectly marries my major of design and my minor of sociology. I’d like to explore these stereotypes through images of women performing typically “feminine” roles such as house cleaning, cooking, raising children etc. I’m most interested in portraying the contrast of societal expectations of today’s woman to the typical 1950’s woman via a rendition of 1950’s advertisements combined with contemporary gender research in a magazine format. The main premise of my paper will be the progress, or lack there of, of women’s roles compared to how gender roles are portrayed in the 50’s. I will examine the most commonly pictured female roles in 1950’s magazines then pose props, models, and sets to replicate the photos, advertisements, and other pieces of magazines specific to the 1950’s. Included in the magazine will be patterns, recipes, advertisements, and articles that would appeal to women in the 1950’s. The images will be shot with a 35-millimeter film camera as well as darkroom processed. I will compile these references to replicate the appearance of a typical 1950’s magazine and display spreads from the magazine framed as separate pieces (18” by 24”) for gallery viewing. I also want to include display objects typical of the time period to create a setting for the audience at the exhibition, such as a kitchen aid mixer and/or vacuum from the 50’s juxtaposed to a collection of take out menus from the 2000’s. I also want to use the magazine as a medium to house my paper as the modern research element and main narrative. I plan to print 5 special edition copies to be 9” by 12” inches as well as smaller postcards of the cover and key pages, which will be 5” by 4” inches.
The goal of the exhibition is for the viewer to observe the fine differences of gender roles over the past decades to formulate how they feel about them, and how effective (and affective) stereotypes might be.

In order to understand the works the title is the most important. *The Cult of True Womanhood* is a term used in the 1900’s to judge women based on piety, domesticity, purity, and submissiveness. It is now used in sociology to explain gender roles, and the pervasiveness of stereotypes. I will use the Cult of True Womanhood idea to judge advertisements and images of women in order to form my own magazine. I hope the title further helps the audience question the meaning and purpose behind the exhibition.
CHAPTER 2
Research Questions

1. How did gender roles originate? Why are they still prevalent?

2. What are the most common stereotypes of women’s gender roles in the 1950’s as portrayed via advertising and publication media?

3. What are the most common stereotypes of women’s gender roles today, as portrayed via advertising, publication, and digital media?

4. How are the portrayals of women’s gender roles the same and different?

5. How can I use gender roles to judge women’s stereotype portrayal in order to convey certain roles?

Background

First a definition of sex and gender must be established. Sex is the biological differences between male and female. Gender is a bit more complex. Marini explains gender as “...the social construction of differences between women and men,” which includes behaviors, attitudes, and expectations there of (95). Gender roles, therefore, are the expectations of an individual based on biological sex. For example, men should know how to maintain a car and women should know how to bake cookies.

When looking through a selection of 10 older magazines ranging from 1953-1974, including Ladies’ Home Journal, Woman’s Day, and Better Homes and Garden, I found a nearly unchanging view of women’s roles in society. The majority of these magazines featured articles and advertisements showing the “ideal” mother and wife. She is a white, middle class, stay-at-home mother, and exhibits all of the important qualities: piety,
domesticity, purity, and submissiveness. Many of the advertisements featured a woman with a child, presumably her own, performing gendered tasks, such as laundry. The covers highlighted articles about new apron patterns, new hairstyles, and new fashions as opposed to the latest conflict in Israel or a political election.

After reviewing 10 sociological articles relating to feminism, women’s roles in the workforce, and the family dynamics of women’s roles, they all took a different route but, came to the same conclusion: we can make an egalitarian society, but we’re not there yet. Women in the 1970’s made great progress, but progress has slowed down since 1996 (Brewster & Padvaic 480). Women continued to be portrayed as housekeepers, although today we’re not shocked when a woman has a successful career outside the home. More and more women are juggling successful careers outside the home and domestic duties inside the home.

Historical Context

It wasn’t too long ago, beginning in the 1960’s, to be exact, when women were fighting for equal rights. Many people disapproved of women trying to balance a working professional role with the unquestionable role of mother and wife. Women worked for every inch of equal. By the early 1990’s the public was open to and a proponent of the idea of dual roles for women (Brewster & Padvaic 480). In Figure 1 below (Brewster & Padvaic 480), the graph shows the changing ideologies of responses to women’s roles from 1975 to 2000. From 1975 to 1985, you see a drastic decline in all four measures, reassuring women that they could be in the workforce while balancing a life at home, which is probably related to the second wave of the feminist movement in the 1970’s. From 1985 to 2000 the
decline is slower, but on the move. The overall trend shows the ideals moving toward more egalitarian roles.

![Figure 1. Percent Conservative Responses.](image)

Sex-based gender roles first began out of necessity in hunter-gathering societies to keep up with the home, children, and food gathering. While men assumed the dominant role hunting for food, women fell into the subordinate role caring for the children and the home. Men were generally more muscular and stronger and therefore, more adapted to physically demanding jobs like hunting and traveling. Women were physically more adapted to caring for the offspring, while they were still infants, so it made sense they would take care of the home. Unfortunately, these roles haven’t evolved with our highly technologically
advanced society. The more complex societies became, the more gender stratification intensified.

As the industrial age rolled around, women were moving into the labor force, but in appropriate “female” positions, subordinate and physically less demanding jobs, such as secretaries or seamstresses. As Marini explains it, “the employment of married women outside the home began to increase after World War II, little change occurred in the division of household labor in the United States prior to the 1970s” (Marini 107). Women were gaining independence outside the home, but were still obligated to care for children and household duties. These traditional roles have remained dominant ideologies.

Although women were moving into the workforce, they were still expected to keep up the work at home, this phenomenon is known as the “second shift.” After working a hard day at the office, women come home to a list of chores to do around the house, where as men come home from a long day to relax. In recent years men have begun to help out around the house, but not a significant amount. In 1965 men did 4.4% of the total housework and by 1999 they did 11.2% of the total housework, which means women are not just doing to majority of the housework, but 88.8% of the housework (Zinn et all 204). According to the National Science Foundation, a study of 8,000 men and women found that men completed six hours of housework a week in 1976, compared to about 13 hours in 2005. Men are slowly picking up more of the housework, as women entered the workforce, leaving more chores to do at home. Similarly, Marini found “employed wives spent only about half as much time on housework as non-employed wives, but even employed wives spent, on the average, almost three times as much time on household work as their husbands” (Marini 108). The phrase “women want to have it all” comes to mind when
thinking about women who work the second shift. Women want a family at home as well as a fantastic career to fulfill them outside the home.

Sociological Impact

One study, completed in 1992-1993, showed in the top 15 occupations of working women, behind secretaries and receptionists, the third most popular was housekeeping, followed by 12 similar female dominated professions like nursing and teaching (Cohen 247). While females have made it into the workforce, they are still funneled toward feminine jobs. In 2010 the same phenomenon was studied by the Department of Labor. They found the same sexism was still true. Women have continued to overwhelmingly dominate traditionally female careers.

Most of the studies reviewed showed biological sex linked to gender roles, and the subsequent stereotypes of gender. Lipman-Bluman referenced the sad truth of the Freudian dictum "anatomy is destiny" (302). Not only does biology play a role, but also cultural socialization (the lifelong process of learning how to interact in society) as a child. Socialization occurs through magazines, parental expectations, bullying, commercials, games, clothing, and pretty much anything assigned to gender differentiation to help children learn their gender and to accept their gender roles in order to be considered a functional member of society.

“Individuals born into a society at a particular time come to fill gender-specific roles via processes of socialization and allocation that operate throughout life. They also internalize attitudes and beliefs, including gender stereotypes that buttress existing gender differentiation and stratification. Because institutionalized practices and the beliefs that justify and reinforce their existence perpetuate the status quo,
identifying the practices and beliefs that perpetuate gender inequality makes it possible for us to intervene to bring about change” (Marini 114).

But socialization of gender roles doesn’t stop at childhood or adolescents, it continues into adulthood and the workforce. Gender becomes more of a label with certain tasks and jobs associated with it (Lindsey 57). Our social norms, just as holding a door open for a lady, have become ingrained into our public and private institutions. Institutions, like schools and churches, that we’ve created, have perpetuated some of these hurtful stereotypes. Ridgeway and Correl explain how socialization is not simply teaching children how to behave, but how to judge themselves against their peers as well as how to correct deviate behavior. They say the “interaction implicitly evokes gender beliefs will shape not only the way the individuals enact their roles but also how they evaluate each other’s performance in that situation” (512). If in the back of our minds we question the female role in the workplace, we may even judge their performance as a mother because of their dedication to have a career or vice versa. Would those children be better off if their mother were home rather than at work? Or would her career be more fruitful if she weren't preoccupied with her family? Due to the price tag on family and rearing children, women struggle attaining and maintaining professional careers in the workforce. Even today the majority of women that are employed (only 47.2% of the female population in 2010, United States Department of Labor) still work in female-dominated sectors. Note that housework or stay-at-home mother is still not listed as an occupation by the United States Department of Labor.

Gender Roles & Media

These gender stereotypes and gender roles have permeated our culture into mass media outlets categorizing women into two main categories: the home keepers, and the sex
objects. Even today, these categories not only exist, but also are prevalent in all media. Gaye Tuchman wrote *Women’s Depiction by the Mass Media* in 1979 contending the depiction of women was grossly underrepresented and misrepresented the reality of women’s roles. In 2011 Rebecca Collins wrote an analysis of the progression of gender roles in mass media particularly in advertisement. Think of the last time you saw a male featured in an advertisement for laundry detergent or bathing suits.

These stereotypes of women performing female roles have perpetuated through mass media, particularly in women’s magazines. Through the featured articles, “photoshopped” models, and lack of substance, magazines are setting the bar for portraying traditional roles for women. For the most part women are now viewed as sex objects rather than virtuous mothers, but still they are associated with emotions and dependency. In 1979 Tuchman contended, “contemporary media do not properly reflect the position of women” and her statement is still true three decades later (532-33). She also noted in 1950 media, particularly in women’s magazines, women are “defined in terms of men-husbands, lovers, or the chasm of male absence” (532). Women are seen as needing support from a man who can take care of her and provide her with a home. Tuchman continues on to say “the maintenance of stereotypes derives from the culture” (535). So first we must change our culture, which will change the media and our perceptions or we must change our perceptions, which will then change the media and our culture? It’s a vicious cycle with no clear-cut way to improve the image of females in media. So why not start at both ends? Ridgewary and Correl argue “cultural beliefs about what gender is and what it means at any given point in a society are potentially subject to redefinition or change” (Ridgewary & Correl 523). So by that notion we, as a society, need to redefine what gender means and
stereotypes of gender roles. Women need good role models from media sources, which will help everyone to change their perceptions. In 2012 only 20 companies on the Fortune 500 list had women as CEO's, that’s only 4%, and only one female reached the top 10 at number 10, Meg Whitman of Hewlett-Packard (Leahey 1).

In the media, women are underrepresented. Men appear in television ads, newspapers, and magazines twice as much as women do. And of those appearances, women are portrayed at housewives, mothers, or sex objects. In one study of 627 television characters, 43% were female and 57% male, but of those female characters the majority were depicts as housewives, relationship roles, or represented products for body products, while the male characters were shown with electronics and cars (Collins 295). A feminist art group known as the Guerrilla Girls continually questioned women’s roles in media. They protest exclusivity in the art world, particularly for women. One of my favorite pieces asks: “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” accompanied by the fact stating: “less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.” The Guerilla Girls contend that female artists should be equally represented in the community and museums without the label of female or feminine art. A leading psychologist, Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory shows “similarity to those portrayed in media is important to learning from their behaviors” (Collins 292). Young girls watching television are learning they have to be a housewife, mother, or some kind of sex icon because of the overly sexual nature of media. Sociologists have found “women’s and girls’ self-esteem, body image, and emotional well-being may be adversely affected by exposure to media that are sexually objectifying” (Collins 294). Different social theories and studies suggest that these kinds of “portrayals may also affect viewers’ sexual attitudes
and behavior, particularly during adolescence when youth are actively coming to terms with their identities and their sexuality" (Collins 294). As we said before, socialization begins at a young age and the more we push stereotypes in advertisement, the more our young females are going to compare themselves to and learn from those stereotypes. Ehreneich says the modern woman is “the Cosmo Girl with her shirt buttoned and the heavy black eye liner tastefully removed. Unlike the Cosmo Girl, she doesn't want to work for the boss, date the boss, or even marry the boss: she wants to be the boss” (Tuchman 237). We have to show young women the diverse options of careers and opportunities in the world rather than limit them to female dominated sectors. By opening the workforce to empowered females, we could build the image of strong female role models and there by break the stereotypes of women.
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CHAPTER 4

Artist Statement

My first interest in graphic design started in my junior art class in high school. We had a guest teacher from the local college guiding us in the process of designing logos with our own made up companies. Naturally, I choose to create a flower company named Bloomers. I was so obsessed with the project. I worked on it not just the week we were given for the assignment, but for months afterwards in order to make it something I still think it a pretty good logo.

After deciding to pursue my love of art, I’ve become influenced by a variety of artists and styles. Milton Glaser was the first designer I recognized and appreciated. I had already connected with his famous I “heart” NY logo, which made me interested to know more about Glaser and his process. I’m intrigued by his philosophies about art and design.

Although Glaser may be my favorite designer, my favorite logo is the FedEx logo, because every time I look at it I see innovation. In my first design class, the professor was showing a few different examples of simple logos. When we reached the FedEx logo, I wasn’t really impressed until she said something about the implied arrow. I thought “what arrow?” And that’s the first time I experienced negative space. At that moment I immediately understood
the job of designers is to communicate a message without using words but by manipulating space.

The Glasgow School and the Bauhaus are periods I could look at for days. I don’t think my work explicitly reflects the principles of either, but I gravitate toward compositions that are geometric and asymmetrical. The following postcard for Kandinsky’s birthday highlights grid structure, typography, color, and asymmetry and all that I love about the Bauhaus school.

My work most resembles the Swiss national poster movement. For each project I have a specific inspiration, but my personal preferences are clean compositions focusing on typography and organization. I’m drawn to san serifs, specifically Helvetica Neue Ultra
Light, which was a product of the Bauhaus period. As far as organization, my designs usually have an asymmetrical grid structure with emphasis on the right side. The following poster, on the right side, is an example of a poster I made for Southeast Regional Symposium on African Studies (SERSAS). It was a great project to work on because I wasn’t too familiar with the subject matter, so I got to engage in more research than I usually do. The finished poster exemplifies all the elements of the Swiss poster movement; such as the cleanliness of the asymmetrical composition, grid structure, and use of Helvetica type.

Gender roles and stereotypes have played a large role in my work. I was really influenced by my introduction to the Guerrilla Girls. They are a collectivist group who protest exclusivity in the art world, particularly for women. One of my favorite pieces is the image below asking: “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” accompanied by
the fact stating: “less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.”

One of my favorite pieces with an overtly feminine subject was a mock book cover of Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. The project was to redesign a book cover and I immediately though of my favorite classic novel. In order to make the book feel older yet relevant, I played on muted hues of pink and an ornate border, which also gave the feeling of femininity. Another element I thought was important was original images from a first edition copy for the cover. As soon as I finished the cover I was so pleased!

How we interpret different meanings based on how words and images are presented to us, particularly in regards to gender stereotypes. My first sociology class in college made me
question how much of the media’s portrayal of women is unconsciously done and how much is purposely done. In the process researching and writing a few papers on gender studies for different classes, I realized there was a reason I seemed to resonate with Jane Austen novels and references to prince charming, as I was indoctrinated with the traditional ideals of womanhood. I struggled with this realization for a while because I had always wanted to be a strong independent woman, but I felt myself drawn to the idea of becoming a “Julia Child” housewife. Last semester I found that it doesn’t matter if you’re a CEO or a “soccer mom;” but that it is your choice. Women in the 50’s may not have had the luxury of choosing, but modern day women have more or less “won the war” on choice because strong women have paved the path for us. Now we can be what ever we want.

My work is about women. My work is for women. I believe women are always going to have a strong presence in my work. I want women to react to the stereotypes and question how they relate to those roles. I ultimately want women to make conscious decisions about how they interact with their gender role, whether that be a traditional or progressive path. I also want to encourage men to realize how they are affecting or promoting the stereotype of women and join in the movement for the equality of all people.
CHAPTER 5

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Woman’s Day. September 1965.

Woman’s Day. September 1964.


APPENDIX A

Please sign the slips that outline your preferences for confidentiality and participation.

I choose to participate but request my name be deleted from all publications or display of this project.

[Signature] 03/09/13

I choose to participate and release all photographs for future use.

[Signature] 03/09/13

I choose to participate but only for the purpose of the Senior Project. I request the photographs and negatives be appropriately disposed of following your project.

[Signature] Date

Your signature will record your consent and release for confidentiality, to be kept in the private records of the artist.

Thank you,
Shane David Fortier
Photographer

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