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American Ideals Reinforced Through Advertisements

The economic and housing boom that followed World War II paved the way for America to become the consumer-driven economy that it is today. These booms also created competition among companies, therefore leading to the aggressive use of advertisements which reinforced certain “American” ideals in order to sell products. The Civil Rights Movement and Cold War tensions led Americans to question the characteristics that embodied the term “American,” while events such as the passing of the G.I. Bill and the start of the Baby Boom enforced certain societal ideals. Advertisements during the mid-twentieth century preyed upon the uncertainty among citizens pertaining to their American citizenship, and illustrated companies’ desire to appeal to a specifically white, middle-class audience. They emphasized the “American” ideals of happily married couples, healthy families and babies, and cleanliness. The “scientific” claims that many companies, such as Listerine, used in their advertisements have since been proven by modern science as false, however, the ads share an overarching theme of only targeting and portraying white, happy people. Ideals embedded by advertisements during the mid-twentieth century heavily influenced American stereotypes and served as distractions from difficult times. By using the uncertainty regarding the definition of “Americanism,” companies relied on images and the psychological aspects of their advertisements to sell their products. In the process, they defined the stereotypical qualities that embodied the term “American,” many of which still exist today.

The signing of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, or the G.I. Bill, by President Roosevelt in 1944 offered opportunities to veterans returning home from World War II, and its features paved the way for a major boom in the American economy. The bill provided low-cost

mortgages in addition to affordable college degrees and other financially appealing opportunities to veterans, and it made it easy for them to obtain a career upon returning home from the war. The G.I. Bill allowed millions of veterans to purchase homes and get an education, and it caused the American economy to thrive. Although the effects of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act allowed for economic prosperity in America, its effects also shifted American ideals. The stark differences between the famous "Rosie the Riveter" propaganda poster by J. Howard Miller in 1943 portraying a tough, masculine looking woman exhibiting her bicep with the caption "We Can Do It!," and the Listerine advertisement, "Often a Bridesmaid...Never a Bride" from 1952 portraying a sulking, lonely looking woman, clearly demonstrate the shift in women's assumed role in society.¹ Although Miller's poster pertained to a propaganda campaign rather than as an advertisement for a certain product, the differences in the portrayal of women demonstrates a clear shift in American women's role in society after the passing of the G.I. Bill.

Lambert Pharmaceutical Company's advertisement for Listerine Antiseptic also demonstrates the effects of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act on ideals portrayed by advertisements. The ad for Listerine depicts a dejected-looking man reaching out with his business card with the title, "The Job Hunter With Two Strikes Against Him" written beneath his illustration.² The ad used the competitive job market and the man's failure to obtain a job as the basis for their claim that the purchase and use of Listerine Antiseptic would result in being considered as an appealing employee. Ads such as the Listerine Antiseptic advertisement

¹ J. Howard Miller, "We Can Do It!," 1943, In: World War II: America on the Homefront, National Archives, http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/its_a_womans_war_too/its_a_womans_war_too.html. Lambert Pharmacal Company, "Often a bridesmaid...never a bride!," 1956. In: Medicine, Advertising, and Consumerism: The Case of Listerine. Duke University Libraries. http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/mma_MM0700/.

² Lambert Pharmacal Company, "The Job Hunter with Two Strikes Against Him," from *Time* (1946). In: Medicine, Advertising, and Consumerism: The Case of Listerine. Duke University Libraries. http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/mma_MM0185/.

demonstrate many companies' reliance on ideals in order to appeal to their target audience in order to sell their products. Both the audience, veterans searching for a job, and the results promised from use of the product, were common themes in advertisements throughout the mid-twentieth century, and the consistency of these ads further established stereotypes introduced by the Servicemen's Readjustment Act. Men returning home from the war in the late 1940s pursued higher education, careers to support their families, and home mortgages with ease due to the G.I. Bill, the bill's effect began to push men's assumed role in society toward being the breadwinner while women's role in society moved toward the roles of a homemaker, mother, and wife. These roles were further reinforced through advertisements that attempted to appeal and relate to common situations which citizens faced.

By providing veterans with access to affordable mortgages and financially stable careers, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act gave way to the baby boom in America, and allowed for advertisements to transform the family unit into a stereotypical, American ideal. Magazines and newspaper advertisements such as Mead Johnson & Company's ad, "A new chapter begins in your baby's life," as well as H.J. Heinz Company's ad, "An Important Announcement On Baby Nutrition" depicted white families with young children. Mead Johnson Company's advertisement portrayed a mother tending to her children, a newborn and a toddler, while her husband, dressed in business attire, watches gleefully from a distance, and H.J. Heinz Company's ad represented a young, white mother holding her newborn.³ Although these ads may seem harmless at first glance, both companies promoted much more than just their cereal

³ Mead and Johnson Company, "A new chapter begins in your baby's life," from *Good Housekeeping* (1952). In: *Medicine, Advertising, and Consumerism: The Case of Listerine*. Duke University Libraries. http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/mma_MM0902/. H. J. Heinz Company, "Now Your Baby Can Get Energy-Building Active Iron In Heinz Four Pre-Cooked Cereals!", from *Women's Day* (1953). In: *Medicine, Advertising, and Consumerism: The Case of Listerine*. Duke University Libraries. http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/mma_MM0892/.

products through their images. Clearly, Mead Johnson & Co. and Heinz aimed to sell their cereals by reinforcing common American ideals rather than just the quality of their products alone. The concepts of family, marriage, and children are all present in both advertisements, however none of them relate to the products which the advertisements promote. By using what was considered an ideal and achievable situation during the mid-twentieth century, Mead Johnson and H.J. Heinz Company intrigued their audience through emotional appeals, and further cultivated the American ideal of a white, happy family, with the father as the breadwinner and mother as the homemaker—a concept made plausible by the effects of the G.I. Bill.

No matter the product that ads during the mid-twentieth century endorsed, the images and headlines followed a uniform theme, and appealed to a similar audience, consisting of the white, middle class American citizens. This consistent theme is apparent in Scott Paper Company's advertisement for bath tissue, "The sturdiest baby's skin needs gentlest care." The ad displays a mother playing with and caring for her baby with written descriptions about caring for children.⁴ While Scott Paper Company's product in the ad could appeal to and be used by audiences regardless of age, gender, or race, the ad continues to follow the theme of reaching out to the audience of middle class white citizens with children. This advertisement, in addition to the H.J. Heinz Company and Mead Johnson & Company advertisements, serve as prime examples of how companies embraced these ideals during the mid-twentieth century to sell their products, and enforced the same ideals until they became stereotypical. While the G.I. Bill heavily influenced the American ideals that advertisements during the mid-twentieth century depicted,

⁴ Scott Paper Company, "The sturdiest baby's skin needs gentlest care," from *Life* (1948). In: *Medicine, Advertising, and Consumerism: The Case of Listerine*. Duke University Libraries. http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/mma_MM0577/.

events such as the Cold War also shaped the concepts which companies manipulated in order to appeal to their audience.

The G.I. Bill's effect on the American economy helped to confirm assumed gender roles in society, and offered citizens a sense of security in terms of what it meant to be American through the encouragement of education, homeownership, and access to financially supportive careers, however, foreign tensions of the Cold War generated internal fear of communism and foreign ideals and created confusion over what characteristics a truly 'American' citizen possessed. The struggle to establish American characteristics resulted in the relating of American citizens to the white, happy families portrayed in advertisements during the 1940s and 1950s, although depiction only represented a portion of the American population. In Pennsalt Chemicals' advertisement, "How to Guard Your Home Against Bugs...with Knox Out," almost every stereotype portrayed in advertisements during the mid-twentieth century was present. The ad depicts a white, helpless-looking woman holding her child close to her as a fleet of mosquitos and bugs encroach upon them.⁵ The ad stresses the importance of protecting one's home from outsiders, and in 1952, the year the ad was published, Americans were also trying to protect their families from communist ideas and foreign concepts. By emphasizing the concept of protecting one's home from outsiders, the advertisement plays upon the desire of American citizens to keep foreigners and outsiders away from their country and families. This ad also clearly targeted men; by depicting only a woman and child, and by instructing consumers to protect their home, the advertisement clearly lacks the assumed third member of the family and home, the father, the breadwinner, and the protector of the home. Pennsalt Chemical's advertisement for pesticide

⁵ Pennsalt Chemicals, "How to Guard Your Home Against Bugs...with Knox Out," from *Saturday Evening Post* (1952). In: *Medicine, Advertising, and Consumerism: The Case of Listerine*. Duke University Libraries. http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/ mma_MM0811/.

capitalized on American citizens' desire for security as well as the negative perspective on communism in order to sell their product.

While many advertisements targeted and portrayed men as the head of the family, others such as Phillips Chemical Company's advertisement, "Back To School-Back To Work," targeted women, and clearly portrayed their roles as homemakers and mothers. The advertisement for Phillip's Milk of Magnesia, an antacid, portrays a woman, clearly the mother, waving goodbye to her husband as he leaves for work and her son as he leaves for school, claiming that the medicine allowed for them to feel well enough to do their daily tasks without being slowed by stomach pains.⁶ The text of the ad clearly addresses mothers, and assumes their role as caretakers for the husband and children. By enforcing these gender roles and pushing them upon consumers, advertisements such as Phillip Company's demonstrate the effect advertisements had on American citizens' impression of assumed gender roles, and established the idea of the mother as the homemaker and father as the breadwinner, a stereotype that Americans are still trying to overcome.

While Cold War tensions brought fear of foreign ideas into American homes during the mid-twentieth century, even greater confusion and violence over what it meant to be American accompanied the Civil Rights Movement. The end of legal segregation in public schools through the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* represented the possibility of the equality of all races in the U.S. Although the Civil Rights Movement brought equality to all citizens in the legal sense of the word, it also brought race riots and violence due to changes in long-established American ideals. Parke-Davis' advertisement titled, "This is what we work for at Parke-Davis," published

⁶ Chas. H. Phillips Chemical Co., "Back To School-Back To Work," from This Week (1946). In: Medicine, Advertising, and Consumerism: The Case of Listerine. Duke University Libraries. http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/mma_MM0237/.

in 1958 continued the pattern of depicting white, happy families despite U.S. progress toward equality people of all races. The ad portrays five white people: a nurse holding a new born baby, while an older couple and father gaze lovingly at them through a glass wall.⁷ While the ad portrays content similar to all the advertisements mentioned before, the time that the Parke-Miller published the ad sends a clear message that although blacks and whites were considered equal by law, whites were still more desirable to display in order to appeal to their target audience, which remained the white, middle class. The progression of the Civil Rights Movement allowed for more widespread equality between the races by law, however, through their advertisements, companies demonstrated the lack of real progress toward equal rights.

The end of World War II brought with it exciting opportunities as well as foreign and internal tensions in the United States, all of which led Americans to question their identity as citizens. While the Servicemen's Readjustment Act allowed for great economic prosperity and set a particular vision for the American life and dream, tensions between The United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, as well as racial tensions in the Civil Rights Movement raised questions over American characteristics. As tensions regarding American ideals heightened during the mid-twentieth century, Americans looked to the media to understand what characteristics embodied being the term "American." Advertisements in magazines and newspapers consistently reinforced of the same white, happy family portrait, no matter the product being advertised, and by targeting and portraying white families, companies during the mid-twentieth century created and reinforced American stereotypes that continue to affect citizens today.

⁷ Parke, Davis & Company, "This is what we work for at Parke-Davis," from *Life* (1958). In: *Medicine, Advertising, and Consumerism: The Case of Listerine*. Duke University Libraries. http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/mma_MM0454/.