The Representation of Women’s Roles in Women’s Magazines Over the Past 30 Years

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ABSTRACT. A thematic content analysis performed on a sample of articles published in the Ladies Home Journal and Good Housekeeping magazines over the period of 1954 to 1982 revealed a gradual decline in the number having themes of women as wives, mothers, and homemakers and an increase in articles with political, social and economic (i.e., career) themes. Traditional sex role models, however, still dominate the pages of most women’s magazines.

THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE, written by Betty Friedan (1963), marked the reawakening awareness of women in this country to the pervasive societal pressure to conform to a traditional female role. Friedan’s thesis was that magazines and other media most often depict women in traditional sex roles such as homemakers or models of attractiveness and in so doing have nurtured a narrow and servile image of women.

Evidence from studies of television, movies, books, and magazines has provided support for Friedan’s argument. The findings have been uniform in demonstrating the portrayal of women as passive, conforming, self-subordinating, and less competent than men (Dominick, 1979; Franza,
1975; Harris & Voorhees, 1981; Kaiser, 1979; Kalisch & Kalisch, 1982a, 1982b, 1982c; 1983; McDonald & Godfrey, 1982; McNeil, 1975; Seggar, 1975; Tuchman, 1978a). Seggar, for example, found that television dramas in the mid 1970s typically showed women in roles that focused on physical attractiveness and dependence on men, with plots set most frequently in and around the house. Harris and Voorhees concluded that television perpetuates traditional sex role stereotypes, and Dominick, in an analysis of 25 years of television programming from 1953 to 1978, found that women were almost always portrayed in traditional roles.

A review of 11 content-analytic studies of the image of women on commercial television (McDonald & Godfrey, 1982) revealed that women have most often been cast in the roles of mother, homemaker, and nurturer of men. Rarely were career women made part of the plot, and when they were (e.g., nurses), they were often portrayed as obedient, conforming, and subordinate to a man (Kalisch & Kalisch, 1982a).

Although most of the scholarly research on sex role images has centered on the depiction of women on television, the same conclusions can be drawn about the other media. For much of this century, books and movies have presented a picture of women defined chiefly by their economic and marital status (Kalisch & Kalisch, 1982b, 1982c). Film makers have repeatedly cast female characters as passive, docile homemakers and sweethearts, willing to live vicariously through the exploits of men. Only in times of national economic peril (e.g., World Wars I and II) have women been portrayed as strong and independent, and most of the time these same characters were returned to subordinate roles as soon as the crisis passed (e.g., Red Cross nurses and assembly line workers almost always quit work upon marriage).

Newspapers and magazines have apparently been more reflective of changing images of women (Cancian & Ross, 1981; Tuchman, 1978a). Cancian and Ross measured the change in the quantity of media coverage of women from 1900 to 1977 by the proportion of stories appearing in the New York Times subject index and the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature. They found a clear pattern of high media coverage of women during the women's suffrage movement and the current women's movement. They also found an increase in profeminist stories and stories concerned with careers for women. Tuchman concluded that magazines marketed explicitly for women have also been responsive to change, although the image they offer of women's roles is still limiting.

Franzwa (1975), however, came to a different conclusion. She examined 122 stories appearing in Ladies Home Journal, McCall's, and Good Housekeeping between 1940 and 1970 and found that the fictional accounts appearing in these magazines continued to reinforce traditional norms and attitudes about the proper role for women. Even some of the new women's magazines designed to satisfy the market created by the feminist movement (e.g., New
**Woman, Working Woman, Self** seem to be concerned more with physical appearance than with equality of the sexes (Kaiser, 1979). It seems that even magazines devoted explicitly to women have failed to respond significantly to the reality of women’s changing roles. The issue is still unclear, however, since most studies have not analyzed trends over protracted periods of time.

Another aspect of Friedan’s (1963) thesis that bears examining is the nature of the relationship between the media and societal change. Twenty years ago, she argued that the media fosters a stereotypical image of women. More recent studies suggest that media coverage of feminist issues varies with fluctuations in the strength of the women’s movement (e.g., Canzian & Ross, 1981; Weston & Ruggiero, 1986). The media, it seems, may be described as either an agent of social control that reinforces traditional sex roles, a mirror of society that reflects current attitudes and opinions about women’s roles, or a sluggish agent of social change.

Canzian and Ross (1981) suggested that newspapers and magazines serve all three functions to varying degrees at one time or another but that a time lag is inherent in any journalistic reporting. If their view is correct, then we would expect that the revitalization of the feminist movement in the mid to late 1960s should have had an effect on the type of role models depicted in magazines devoted to women, perhaps after a lag in time. For example, the growing emphasis on political and social awareness in the 1960s and on career and personal development in the 1970s and 1980s ought to have influenced the image of women in the fictional stories published in these magazines during these decades or shortly thereafter.

In the present study, we tested the hypothesis that women's roles depicted in traditional, middle-class women's magazines have changed since the mid to late 1960s to reflect a greater proportion of nontraditional themes (e.g., career development, political and social awareness). The hypothesis was evaluated by subjecting a collection of articles from two women's magazines published over the past 30 years to a content analysis of the trend of the data over time. We expected that there would be a shift in the focus of the articles appearing after the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963) when compared with the articles published before this time.

**Method**

**Materials**

We selected the *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* because they have been in publication since at least 1950, they are monthly magazines with a wide circulation, and they are aimed at the middle-class housewife, the
primary audience in Friedan's (1963) media analysis.¹ The March issue of the 
Ladies Home Journal and the November issue of Good Housekeeping were 
examined for each even-numbered year beginning with 1954. These issues 
were selected on the basis of availability and to avoid seasonal biases in the 
themes of the articles. Five issues of each magazine were analyzed from the 
period of 1954 to 1962, the decade preceding the publication of The Feminine 
Mystique (Friedan, 1963). Five issues were analyzed from the period of 1964 
to 1972, and five issues were selected from the period of 1974 to 1982. In all, 
1,059 articles in 30 issues of the magazines were examined for this study.

Procedure

The magazines represent an archival collection of information and opinion 
that was subjected to a thematic content analysis. All the articles in each issue 
were categorized according to preselected themes based on a pilot review of 
two issues of Woman's Day from 1952 and 1967. Nine coding categories com-
prised the following themes:

1. marriage and family (e.g., marriage, love, child care, divorce);
2. efficient homemaker (e.g., home decorating, budgeting, do-it-
yourself, helpful cleaning hints, cooking and recipes, sewing);
3. personal health (e.g., exercise, diet, nutrition, breast cancer exami-
nation);
4. beauty and fashion (e.g., cosmetic application, wardrobe selection, 
hairstyles);
5. political and social awareness (e.g., legislative action, social pro-
grams, social issues);
6. career development (e.g., job interview techniques, resume writing, 
management style);
7. personal growth and development (other than career, fitness, or 
beauty);
8. travel and vacation;
9. a category labeled general interest, which included any other ar-
ticles.

Each article was coded according to these themes by two independent raters. 
Intercoder reliabilities were calculated for all articles in sample issues for all 
pairs of raters (N = 6). The values ranged from .71 to .96 (M = .84).

¹These magazines represent two of three publications (the third is McCall's) that have 
been continuously directed toward the female market from the turn of the century to 
the present time (Peterson, 1964, p. 165).
Results

The number of articles in each of the thematic categories was tabulated separately for each 10-year period since 1954. These three periods represent the decade preceding the revitalization of the feminist movement, the decade of growing awareness of and interest in the movement, and the decade of entrenchment of feminist ideas in the minds of many, if not most, American women. The tabulated frequencies were converted to percentages, and these data, contained in Table 1, show that most of the articles in each time period from 1954 to 1982 were in the categories of marriage and family and efficient homemaker. The categories least represented in the pages of the *Ladies Home Journal* were travel and career development. In *Good Housekeeping*, the least represented categories also included personal growth and development. Table 1 shows, however, that the relative percentage of articles in the most abundant categories diminished over the three time periods.

From 1954 to 1962 the themes of marriage and family and efficient homemaker accounted for 70% of the articles in the *Ladies Home Journal* and 66% of the articles in *Good Housekeeping*. Between 1964 and 1972 this dropped to 61% in both magazines, and between 1974 and 1982 only 58% of the articles in each magazine reflected these themes. In contrast, themes related to political and social awareness increased from approximately 3% of

**TABLE 1**
The Percentage of Articles in Each Period of *Ladies Home Journal* (LHJ) and *Good Housekeeping* (GH) Categorized by Thematic Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Magazine and period of publication</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marriage &amp; family</td>
<td>34.5 21.6 21.4 19.9 29.7 20.0</td>
<td>27.5 125 20.5 124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficient homemaker</td>
<td>35.1 44.2 39.3 40.9 28.1 38.1</td>
<td>36.3 165 41.1 248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty &amp; fashion</td>
<td>6.8 15.9 10.1 15.1 7.0 11.0</td>
<td>7.9 36 13.9 84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal health</td>
<td>11.5 5.3 7.1 10.2 9.4 12.9</td>
<td>9.0 41 9.4 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political &amp; social</td>
<td>3.4 1.9 10.1 4.3 18.0 10.5</td>
<td>9.9 45 5.6 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career development</td>
<td>0.7 1.0 4.8 1.1 1.6 0</td>
<td>2.4 11 0.7 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth &amp;</td>
<td>7.4 0.5 3.6 1.1 2.3 0</td>
<td>4.4 20 0.5 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>0 1.0 0 0 0 0</td>
<td>0 0 0 0.3 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General interest</td>
<td>0.7 8.7 3.6 7.5 3.9 7.6</td>
<td>2.6 12 7.9 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of articles</td>
<td>148 208 179 186 128 210</td>
<td>455 604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>period</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, in *Good Housekeeping*, political and social awareness changed from 2% to 10.5% over this period. Articles on career development in the *Ladies Home Journal* also showed a sharp increase in the 1964–1972 time period, but this returned to the previous level in the period between 1974 and 1982. Few articles on career development ever appeared in *Good Housekeeping*.

These data are shown by year in Figure 1 for the combined categories of efficient homemaker plus marriage and family (i.e., traditional themes), and career development plus political and social awareness (i.e., nontraditional themes). Traditional themes (marriage and homemaking) steadily decreased over the years from about 75–80% of the articles appearing in the magazines in 1954 to about half this number in 1982. At the same time, articles related to feminist themes (economic and social equality) increased from 2% to 15% of *Good Housekeeping* and from less than 5% to 20% or more of the *Ladies Home Journal*.

Chi-square statistics were calculated for the data in Figure 1, categorized by decade. For the *Ladies Home Journal*, the proportion of traditional and nontraditional articles changed significantly from the first decade to the last, $\chi^2(2, N = 274) = 10.9$, $p < .01$. When analyzed over three decades, the data for *Good Housekeeping* approached but did not reach conventional levels of significance, $\chi^2(2, N = 410) = 5.2$, $p < .06$. However, a chi-square statistic on the data from 1954 to 1962 and from 1974 to 1982 did reveal a significant decrease in traditional themes, whereas nontraditional themes increased in frequency, $\chi^2(1, N = 287) = 4.8$, $p < .05$.

For comparison, we examined the types of products advertised in women’s magazines and found that they have not changed much over the past 30 years. The advertisements in the March 1956, 1966, and 1976 issues of the *Ladies Home Journal* are categorized by product type in Table 2. The number falling into each category vary somewhat from one decade to another, but the majority comprised cooking, cleaning, and personal hygiene products, and the absolute number of advertisements in these three categories remained relatively constant. The only new advertisements in the more recent issues were cigarette brands.

**Discussion**

The main question addressed in this research was whether the format of traditional women’s magazines would reflect the changing roles of women in our society. In general, it appears that the magazine industry has been responsive to societal change. Our results revealed a slow but steady increase in
FIGURE 1. The proportion of magazine articles in the *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* magazine concerned with traditional sex role themes (e.g., marriage, family and efficient homemaker) and nontraditional themes (e.g., career development, political and social awareness). Open symbols represent traditional themes and closed symbols represent nontraditional themes.

stories with feminist themes and an even more compelling decline in traditional themes of mother and homemaker. In several instances, feminist viewpoints were highlighted in the magazine, albeit with occasional pressure from women’s groups. For example, the August 1970 issue of *Ladies Home Journal* contained an entire section entitled “The New Feminism,” which appeared 6 months after an 11-hour occupation of their offices by a group of protesters.

By the late 1960s, articles by Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir had become the central focus of specific issues. It also seemed that nontraditional themes such as political and social awareness and career development became more abundant shortly after major political and economic events were in the news. For example, stories like “Trespass” (*LHJ*, 1969, 86 (1), p. 157), about a confrontation between revolutionary Blacks and wealthy suburban Whites, appeared a year or so after the race riots that followed Martin Luther King’s assassination. “Death Story” (*LHJ*, 1970, 87 (10), p. 100), a biograph-
TABLE 2
The Number of Advertisements in the Ladies Home Journal in the 1956, 1966, and 1976 Issues Categorized by the Type of Product

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertisement</th>
<th>1956</th>
<th>1966</th>
<th>1976</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal hygiene</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medication</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furniture</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pet products</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Icical eulogy of Allison Krause, the Kent State University student killed by National Guardsmen at a campus protest, appeared just before the beginning of a new school year and shortly after the bombing of North Vietnam. In some cases, there was quite an extensive delay between the actual news event and the appearance of an article. "The Day J.F.K. Died" (LHJ, 1968, 85 (11), p. 151) was published on the fifth anniversary of Kennedy's assassination.

Changes in the female role depicted in Redbook from 1955 to 1976 revealed a similar parallel with changes in American society (Geise, 1979). Flora (1979), however, argued that the situation is actually more complex than this; the changing image of women in women's magazines has been class specific. Flora compared the images of women in working-class and middle-class magazines from 1970 to 1975 and found opposite trends. Magazines with middle-class audiences were more responsive to changes in women's roles, whereas women in working-class fiction became more passive and dependent over time. Our data were taken from magazines marketed for middle-class women and, as such, they provide partial support to Flora's hypothesis.

We did not compare our data with the portrayal of women in other media, but from the literature on television programming it would appear that the magazine industry has changed more rapidly. Network television continues to portray women as physically attractive subordinates of men (Harris & Vorhees, 1981; McNeil, 1975) and as nurturing homemakers and mothers (McDonald & Godfrey, 1982). Longitudinal surveys conducted in the early 1970s indicated that the image of women on TV has not changed much since the 1950s (Dominick, 1979; Seggar, 1975).

We believe the contrast between television and magazines can probably be traced to differences in the consumer power of the viewing versus the read-
ing audience. Tuchman (1978a) argued that magazines change to reflect the changing interests of their reading audience. Indeed, circulation statistics from both *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* dropped dramatically in the last few years (subscriptions to LHJ dropped from 6 million in 1981 to 5 million in 1983) just when the image of women in these magazines exhibited the most dramatic shifts. Kaiser (1979) suggested that nontraditional, career-minded women of the 1980s may no longer be reading the established publications in favor of the newer feminist magazines; consequently, the traditional magazines may have been forced to change their format in an attempt to retain these readers. Network television, in contrast, has had little competition for its viewing audience and is in less danger of a divided market. The result is programming that continues to depict women in the same stereotyped roles that have been successful in the past.

We also addressed the question of whether women's magazines have served as a hindrance to, reflection of, or agent for social change. The decline of articles with traditional themes of women as wives, mothers, and homemakers over the past 30 years, and the corresponding increase in articles with political, social, and economic (i.e., career) themes has been gradual and generally lagged behind changes in related societal conditions. This would seem to argue against the notion that women's magazines function as agents of social change. On the other hand, Carden (1974) and Freeman (1975) concluded that increased media coverage of issues and events concerning the women's movement has raised the awareness of many who had overlooked or were not knowledgeable about these issues. Thus the expansion of media coverage may have accelerated the growth of the movement, especially among the middle class (Flora, 1979).

The data are clearer in suggesting that women's magazines have served to mirror societal change rather than cause it. We found that the increased frequency of articles with themes of political and social awareness corresponded with prominent episodes in our country's history. Articles with political and social themes tended to appear shortly after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, at the peak of the Vietnam War, and during the Watergate conspiracy. Stories about work options for women (Ruggiero & Weston, 1985; Wilson, 1981) and reproductive themes (Weston & Ruggiero, 1986) also mirrored the rise in employment opportunities and problems confronting women who delayed childbearing until their 30s and 40s. Similar results have been reported by Geise (1979).

Cancian and Ross (1981) argued that news coverage of women has been strongly correlated with the strength of the women's movement, being highest when the movement was growing most rapidly. When the movement was weak, news coverage focused more on traditional social concerns. They also reported a time lag in media coverage of the women's movement similar to what we found. They attributed this, in part, to difficulties that journalists
have had in defining the movement and finding informative spokespersons (cf. Tuchman, 1978b). A comparable delay characterized reporting the issues at the beginning of the civil rights movement and probably reflects a fundamental constraint inherent in all journalistic coverage, which can be extended to include fictionalized stories in magazines.

However, even if we accept the argument that established women's magazines have served to inform about and sometimes promote social change, these magazines, like most other media, tend to be conservative and to maintain traditional social norms. Despite the fact that the *Ladies Home Journal* has increased the number of articles with political and social themes at least threefold since the 1950s, the focus continues to reinforce traditional stereotypical female modes of behavior. This should not come as a surprise to those who read these magazines. From their very inception their purpose has been to provide information on homemaking and child care (Franzwa, 1975; Peterson, 1964).

Some people have taken this traditional focus to mean that the media functions to control the spread of new and possibly radical ideas (Morris, 1973a, 1973b). According to this viewpoint, established magazines and other media attempt to control the changing image of women by ignoring it, or giving it frivolous coverage aimed to destroy its serious intent, or, if the movement persists, by publicizing its least offensive goals and de-emphasizing its revolutionary aims.

Wilson (1981) has argued, however, that it is naive to believe in a simple, one-dimensional relationship between the mass media and society since both fictional and nonfictional publications are the combined products of "writers, editors, and advertisers, in an atmosphere constrained by economic necessity . . ." (p. 232). The absence of a radical change in the types of stories we found appearing in the *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* is what might be expected in a magazine devoted to middle-class women and subsidized largely by the manufacturers of products for the home.

The fact that the types of products advertised in these magazines have not changed much since the 1950s leads one to speculate that, in order to keep these accounts, the magazines are forced to limit deviation from traditional sex-role themes. Even a cursory examination of the ads appearing in women's magazines reveals a heavy emphasis on cooking, cleaning, and child care products. As a result, magazine editors are unlikely to publish articles antagonistic to their advertising revenue (Guyon, 1982; Weston & Ruggiero, 1986). Compromise of this sort is typical of social change where conflicting opinion is the norm and a new value system is at odds with existing economic stability (Krasner, 1977).

There are now many publications devoted to career women and women with feminist interests. Most of these new magazines are marketed with a particular social class in mind, and many do contain more nontraditional
themes. Most of the established magazines continue to profile middle-class women in traditional occupations as powerless and less competent than men (Ruggiero & Weston, 1985; Wilson, 1981), although our results show that changes are taking place. From a feminist perspective, it is still evident that the established magazines function largely to reflect and reinforce traditional sex role stereotypes, in which youth and good looks are emphasized and women are defined by the children and men in their lives (Flora, 1971; Weston & Ruggiero, 1986).

Women’s magazines seem to be sensitive to changes in society, but they are also slow to change, perhaps because of their own economic constraints. The new magazines, while giving greater coverage to nontraditional issues and lifestyles, still devote a lot of space to women’s appearance. Kaiser (1979) argues that it is the same old story with the new magazines. “Their concerns are more with physical appearance than social equity; with individual adaptation than social action and change” (p. 14). Thus, it would seem that, despite 25 years of awareness of “the feminine mystique,” the image and the reality of women’s roles as depicted in women’s magazines are still far apart (Reische, 1972).

REFERENCES


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