



5-22-2006

# Suds and Selfhood: Marketing the Modern Woman in the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's

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## Recommended Citation

Tichnor, Ariel, "Suds and Selfhood: Marketing the Modern Woman in the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's" 22 May 2006. *CUREJ: College Undergraduate Research Electronic Journal*, University of Pennsylvania, <http://repository.upenn.edu/curej/13>.

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# Suds and Selfhood: Marketing the Modern Woman in the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's

## **Abstract**

When the consumer culture grew out of America's mass market economy beginning in the 1920's, advertisements have played a pivotal role in reflecting both the needs of industry to sell products and why consumers covet particular products. With the birth of this consumer culture came the entrance of women into the public sphere. Yet instead of joining men who held powerful positions in businesses, women became the primary consumers in the new economy with the job of buying up the mass influx of goods industries churned out and, thought to make up over eighty-percent of consumers, the main target of marketers. 1920's, 1930's and 1940's Ivory Soap advertisements produced by Procter and Gamble, one successful industry during the first decades of the new consumer culture, tracked the social realities that American women faced as society changed with the fluxing economy. The ads reflected how industry needed women to perform different roles when the luxury economy was introduced in the 1920's, the Great Depression marred the American landscape in the 1930's, and World War Two drafted men overseas and women to their husband's vacant jobs. Although industries needed women to play an ever-increasing part in the public realm of business, the Ivory ads also revealed that American society, including male-dominated industries and the masses of female consumers, still believed that women should pursue the traditional feminine ideal of a white domestic housewife who finds fulfillment solely by tending to her looks, husband, and children. While these Ivory Soap advertisements have long since been out of print, the effects of the expectations that these ads illuminated continue to linger in American society to this day.

## **Keywords**

History, Sarah Igo, Sarah, Igo

## **Disciplines**

Women's History

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Self and Society in the US  
Professor Igo  
4/27/06

**Suds and Selfhood:**  
**Marketing the Modern Woman in the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's**

In bar, liquid, or flake form, soap has one principle purpose: to clean. Its distinct function belies its diverse clientele: men, women, infants, grandparents, movie-stars, and garbage collectors alike all use soap to wash their hands, faces, bodies, dishes, clothes, and cars. Soap advertisements, however, suggest that suds are more valuable as beautifiers than cleansers. Dove soap recently launched a new ad campaign that embraces how everyday women define beauty - not cleanliness - by incorporating "normal-looking" models in their new campaign with the hope of establishing a "broader, healthier, democratic view of beauty" that accurately reflects their consumers' beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Yet beauty is only skin deep. Looking past the complexions of models, one finds that soap advertisements embody ideals beyond looks: they emphasize the societal roles and personal aspirations of women in America's consumer society. Ivory Soap advertisements printed as the United States' consumer culture shakily took off during the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's represent both the social realities and personal ideals of middle class American women, suggesting that despite sweeping societal changes taking place the feminine ideal remained the same: a white domestic housewife who finds fulfillment tending to her looks, husband, and children.

In viewing how Ivory Soap ads from the early decades of the twentieth century portray women, it is important to understand that these ads were neither mirrors that completely reflected society nor mirrors of corporate propaganda that brainwashed

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<sup>1</sup> The Dove Self Esteem Fund. Unilever. 2006 <[www.campaignforrealbeauty.com](http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com)>

individuals into believing they must look and act a certain way to gain social acceptance. Rather, advertisers viewed the consumer audience as both “a foolish beast and the voice of God”.<sup>2</sup> Advertisements during this time period certainly did not capture the full scope of American society. According to Roland Marchand, “advertising’s mirror not only distorted but selected,” and tended to select the affluent middle and upper classes because this group could afford to buy novel consumer products.<sup>3</sup> In targeting the financially comfortable, the soap ads distorted America’s actual diverse socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial landscape. The Ivory advertisement collection excluded non-white women, depicting only white-skinned women and defining beauty as having a “*fair face*” and “*white hands*”. Ivory Soap could make a woman’s hands smooth and complexion clear but could not wash away her color, implying that minorities were excluded from the middle class market and idealized vision of American society.

Advertisements did not completely mold their audience either. While they may have played a role in “self-fashioning” by projecting ways in which people are supposed to look and act in order to sell a product – such as Listerine’s invention of “halitosis” - advertisers have always been in touch with what appeals to the consumers. C.H. Sandage’s theory of advertising proposes that, “Advertising succeeds when it gives people what they want”, so in order for marketers to persuade consumers to buy a product, they had to sell and tell the masses the things they wanted to buy and hear. In discussing the period from 1922-1929, *The Printers Ink* reported that it was “imperative for the advertiser to...shape his distributing policies to the needs of the consumer”.<sup>4</sup> Even today, the impetus behind

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 84.

<sup>3</sup> Marchand, xvii.

<sup>4</sup> *50 Years 1888-1938: Printers Ink* (New York: Printer’s Ink Publishing Company) Vol. 184 No. 4, 1938, 326.

Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" was a response to surveys that revealed how women, Dove's target market, wanted to see a change in the advertising industries' stick-thin, flawless-face definition of beauty. Because the bottom-line of an advertisement is to sell a product to consumers and "produce an all-around atmosphere that encourages consumerism in toto" ads can best be defined as a mixture of consumers' desires and companies' need to sell a product.<sup>5</sup>

Selling products was the name of the game as World War I ended and the "Age of Distribution" began. The 1920's marked the rise of consumer culture in America as mass production created a flood of consumer goods and the need for mass advertising to drive the idea of mass consumption into the heads of the American public. The 1920's truly epitomized Schudson's definition of consumer culture as "a society with a lot of consumer goods".<sup>6</sup> Growing out of Fredrick Winslow Taylor's idea of scientific management, Ford's assembly line, and the shift from military to civilian production in the wake of World War I that boosted production efficiency, factories churned out consumer products faster than the masses could gobble them up. As industrial production doubled during the 1920's, businesses quickly realized that competition had shifted from who could produce more to who could better distribute the huge influx of merchandise piling up as the result of the increase in production efficiency.<sup>7</sup> In 1926, *The Printers Ink* emphasized the necessity for companies to devise efficient distribution methods in recording, "Struggling to move the enormous unending load of merchandise dumped upon it by the manufacturing end of the business, the sales department, panic-stricken, rushed into new and distant territories"<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Simone Weil Davis, *Living Up to the Ads* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000)

<sup>6</sup> Michael Shudson, *Advertising the Uneasy Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Marchand, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Printers Ink, 325.

Advertisers led this march to build the bridge between consumer goods and consumers' wallets, which bulged with credit lines and optimistic faith in the stock market, by navigating the masses through the piles of available products and educating them on how to adapt to the new consumer culture.

This shift from a producing to a consuming society ushered in the age of modernity and what Kathy Peiss describes as “the paradoxical effects of an urban, capitalist order – its rationalized work, bureaucracy, and efficiency on the one hand, its fleeting encounters, self-consciousness and continuous novelty, on the other”<sup>9</sup>. In this new societal order of the 1920's, women pushed open the door to the public capitalist world. After gaining access into politics with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 that guaranteed female suffrage, women now fought to have equal access to successful business careers. But unlike the government, the male-dominated industrial world was not willing to grant women this right. Compared to men, women had less access to credit, less education in business methods, and fewer established business networks, all which hindered their chances at success.<sup>10</sup> While women made significant contributions to a few industries - especially in beauty where they worked as entrepreneurs, inventors, manufactures, and distributors –these businesses were an aberration from the norm and by the end of the decade had succumbed to predominantly white male ownership with women comprising only a small percentage of employees.<sup>11</sup> Men even managed women magazines. The purpose of the *Ladies Home Journal*, a magazine designed for women readers and one of the “most popular of its kind in the world”, was to “give practical suggestions for daily living...and aim at the home in addition to the woman in it”. Yet throughout the 1920's

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<sup>9</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Peiss, 71.

<sup>11</sup> Peiss, 63.

male editors and contributors controlled the magazine even though men, as former editor Edward Bok confessed, typically had little understanding of women's needs.<sup>12</sup>

Instead of joining men in the traditionally patriarchal realm of business, women became consumers in the new capitalist order, with the role of buying the influx of goods that the rationalization and efficiency of labor produced. Thought to make up more than 80 percent of the consumer market, women became the primary targets of advertisers, who drew upon traditional conceptions of women as being a part of the domestic sphere and acting emotionally as opposed to rationally. As Jackson Lears stressed, "Advertising journals constantly emphasized the importance of reaching women, who (it was assumed) managed household purchasing...and proved especially vulnerable to emotional appeals".<sup>13</sup> *The Printers Ink* highlighted how markets relied on traditional views of women as emotional, vain, and subservient to husbands in reporting, "Emotional appeal became an important part of the advertiser's equipment. Copy began to deal with such things as health, happiness, comfort luxury, sentiment, social success and the arts of winning the favor of the opposite sex"<sup>14</sup>. Although the shift from production to consumption had given women the important role of consumer in the market system, marketers' continued to hold conventional perceptions of female interests and motivations.

However, the definition of the traditional domestic realm changed with the new consumer culture as it now included the public act of purchasing. The "fleeting encounters, self-consciousness, and continuous novelty" of modern consumerism increased women's need to focus on appearance, which created the beauty culture that began to define

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<sup>12</sup> John Mason Brown, *The Ladies Home Journal Treasury*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), xii.

<sup>13</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930." *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 27.

<sup>14</sup> *Printers Ink*, 362.

femininity<sup>15</sup>. The mass market - created by businesses to distribute their mass produced goods – made public life impersonal, which subsequently forced women to rely on their looks as a way of conveying status and prestige. This created the beauty culture upon which women built their personal identity and the proliferation of beauty products to help them do so. Advertisements helped women navigate through this new beauty culture and relieved the social anxieties produced alongside the flood of products, brands, and new technologies. Advertisers employed personal techniques to appeal to the consumer’s desire for guidance in the impersonal mass culture. Using editorial copy that blended in with the magazine print, they assumed “the role of friend and confidante” through testimonials of “ordinary people”, fictional “friends”, and celebrities that advised and coached the consumer on what products and brands to buy and how to use them.<sup>16</sup> Market research in 1925 showed that women were “impressed with ads that gave detailed instructions” and “frequently used the language of commercial beauty culture to discuss their skin-care and grooming habits”, exemplifying the role of advertisers as guides to the vast array of new beauty products in the marketplace.<sup>17</sup> As beauty culture underscored women’s entrance into the public realm as consumers, it also perpetuated the association of femininity with vanity by emphasizing appearance as the way to adapt to the modern consumer culture.

Ivory Soap advertisements fit right into the new consumer culture. Established in 1882 by Procter & Gamble, Ivory Soap’s slogan “It Floats” has had one of the most durable campaigns in the history of American advertising, in no small part because of the company’s ability to dress their advertisements to weather the market’s climate.<sup>18</sup> In the

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<sup>15</sup> Peiss

<sup>16</sup> Marchand, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Peiss, 173.

<sup>18</sup> Fox, 24.



1920's, they moved the "It Floats" slogan from the caption to the fine print to adjust their marketing techniques so that the ads appealed to women's anxieties surrounding the impersonal beauty culture. In an advertisement printed in 1924, the conversation between a woman and potential suitor, both dressed in Victorian clothing and black masks covering their eyes, illuminated how appearance now defined identity:

"But you don't know me, sir."

'Ah, but I do, Lady. Thy fair face betrays thy masked eyes. Thou'st none other than the charming Sally of my dreams!'"

In underscoring the importance of looks, this ad advised women that they should have a beautiful complexion that radiates "the natural glow of cleanliness" to correctly compose themselves in the public realm and gave a detailed step-by-step guide on how to achieve that desired complexion: "a face-bath with Ivory and warm water, followed by rinsing and a dash of cool or cold water."<sup>19</sup> Other Ivory ads further stressed the importance of appearance in the new consumer culture. The line "among all of the memories of her, the most vivid of all, perhaps, is the velvety beauty of her skin" guided women through the beauty culture marketplace by pointing to the use of Ivory as a way to ensure that her beauty would be remembered.<sup>20</sup> While soap is used to clean practically everything, the ad treated Ivory suds solely as a beauty product as a way to create a specific need for it in the crowded market.

This ad more importantly illuminated the realities of women in the new modern age: despite women's increased participation in the public arena, including educational

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<sup>19</sup> Ivory Soap. Advertisement. *Vogue*, 1924. Ad Access. 1999. Duke U. <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/adaccess/>

<sup>20</sup> Ivory Soap. Advertisement. *Good Housekeeping*, 1928.

attainment, jobs, and voting, female's foremost obligation was still expected to be the home. The quotes from classmates showed that the "ordinary" woman featured in the ad attended college, yet the heading "With *homekeeping* ahead" affirmed that the only "new duties" that her hands would face were the domestic tasks of cleaning dishes, bathrooms, and linens and the only empowerment she would experience in the public world was the power of the consumer to choose between "Guest Ivory", "Bath Ivory", "Household Ivory" and "Ivory Flakes".

Other Ivory ads intertwined women's expectations and desires towards domestic duties and vanities. An ad published in a 1929 edition of *McCalls*, another woman's home journal, emphasized women's desire for beauty in relation to household chores. Evoking the personal touch that guided women through the new consumer culture – it addressed the audience as a personalized "you" and treated the ad as a "suggestion" from one friend to another – directed women towards the traditional feminine role. It advertised that Ivory protected feminine beauty during the "busy hours" of performing household "soap-and-water tasks", implying that these women were expected to spend their day scrubbing "gleaming china, lacquered furniture, glossy woodwork, colored cotton, and linens." This ad also treated soap as a beauty product alongside a household cleanser, comparing it to "other beauty aids in the bathroom and upon dressing room tables" and emphasizing its effect on smoothing women's skin as opposed to its ability to clean dishes.

The ads also entwined beauty and domesticity with women's search for a husband. An ad from 1926 entitled "Beauty's truthful suitor" told the story of a princess who chooses her husband out of many suitors because he offered her Ivory soap and water as a beautifier. The successful suitor wooed her by saying, "Oh lovely Princess, nothing can

make you lovelier, but these will keep you lovely. Will you marry me?”<sup>21</sup> The 1924 ad similarly suggested that beauty attracts suitors, as the suitor in the conversation called the woman “the charming Sally of my dreams” on account of her “fair face”.

The ads’ emphasis on beauty suggested that vanity constituted a part of the feminine ideal since advertisers assumed that women would want to buy beauty items. This concept of consumers buying out of desire as opposed to necessity grew out of the luxury economy of the 1920’s. Mirroring the economy, the Ivory Soap ads adapted a luxurious tone. Lavish-sounding words such as “charm”, “dainty”, and “loveliness” filled up the copy while pearls, fine china, and dresses made of rich materials draped women in the pictures. The ads even treated the cheap price of Ivory as a deterrent, saying things along the lines of “the modest price...is not a measure of its value, for if we were to charge you a dollar, we could give you no finer, purer soap.”<sup>22</sup> A 1926 advertisement truly epitomized the expensive desires that the luxury economy evoked, saying “Dainty new guest Ivory very costly – 5 cents.”<sup>23</sup>

The luxury economy of the 1920’s creating what *Printers Ink* called “the dizzy levels of fictitious prosperity...with the accompanying obsessions of a new era of permanent prosperity.”<sup>24</sup> The economy seemed well-protected by the thick layer of products that factories efficiently churned out, yet this unbalanced abundance of products in relation to consumption contributed to the economy’s collapse in the 1930’s. *The Printers Ink* accused under-consumption of being the main culprit of the 1929 stock market crash and the ensuing Great Depression, yet the consumption culprit was also the life-

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<sup>21</sup> Ivory Soap Advertisement. *McCalls*, 1926.

<sup>22</sup> Ivory Soap Advertisement. *Vogue*, 1924.

<sup>23</sup> Ivory Soap Advertisement. *McCalls*, 1926.

<sup>24</sup> *Printers Ink*, 398.

support that ensured industry survival during the hard times. As the economy plummeted, the role of advertisements changed. Instead of using marketing to promote the new consumer culture, industries now relied on advertisements to keep consumption going. However, reduced incomes and drastically rising unemployment rates cut down the buying power of consumers. Retail sales dropped 47.7 percent from 1929 to 1933<sup>25</sup> and with one in four workers unemployed by 1934, Americans could no longer squander money on “unnecessary frills and gadgets” but needed “cheap, honest, durable products”<sup>26</sup> As a result, advertisers refocused their attention on economic benefits of products in order to appeal to the consumer’s new depression-induced realities.

The New Deal imposed the threat of federal government intervention in the economy during this time. While consumers had voiced concern over advertisement’s claims before the depression hit, the economic turmoil in the early 1930’s increased the consumer movement’s search of truthful advertising because money had become too scarce to be squandered on a product that did not meet its promises. As the National Relief Administration passed laws signifying government regulation of agriculture, food, and drugs, government officials also sought to regulate advertisements to protect consumers’ wallets from misleading advertisements. However, it wasn’t until 1938 that the government succeeded in declaring “deceptive acts of commerce unlawful”, and demanded that companies stop advertising false claims.<sup>27</sup>

These new government stipulations helped the female consumer. A decade of experience had changed them from insecure to wise consumers who, given the economic direness of the time, were expected to make smart shopping decisions because of their

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<sup>25</sup> Printers Ink, 393.

<sup>26</sup> Fox, 120.

<sup>27</sup> Fox, 168.

households' meager incomes. Women did not consider beauty maintenance unnecessary during the depression and the beauty culture prevailed as females found ways to keep up their appearances despite pinches in their wallets. For example, in African American communities, women hit hard by the depression continued to flock to beauty salons, paying their hairdresser with food if they had run out of money.<sup>28</sup>

The Ivory Soap ads that ran during the 1930's reflected consumers' economic concerns during the decade of depression. Instead of minimizing Ivory's cheap cost and focusing exclusively on one particular function of the soap, the advertisements now underscored the soap's low price and multi-purpose uses. An advertisement from 1937 explicitly draws upon the economic woes of the everyday consumer in order to illustrate the sensibility of Ivory suds when strapped for cash. In a soapy comic strip story - a trend in advertising formatting that caught on after a Gallup poll revealed the widespread popularity of comic strips in newspapers - the comic strip husband had a small income, typical of most Americans during this time period if they had an income at all.<sup>29</sup> The last box of the comic strip focused entirely on Ivory's cheap cost, as the print stated "when pure gentle Ivory costs so little, it's folly to use washday soaps for dishes" and the comic strip wife exclaimed, "I figure it costs only about a cent to wash dishes with large-size Ivory!"<sup>30</sup> Another advertisement from 1933 - the year unemployment reached its all-time low - devoted itself entirely to accentuating the economic practicality of Ivory with the headline, "IVORY SOAP at the lowest prices in 17 years. Millions are using IVORY for everything". The pictures illustrated the soap's breadth. Ivory washed clothing and linens, cleaned dishes, furniture, and bathrooms, beatified complexions, hands, and hair, and all

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<sup>28</sup> Peiss, 237.

<sup>29</sup> Printers Ink, 342.

<sup>30</sup> Ivory Soap Advertisement. Saturday Evening Post, 1937.

members of the family – wife, husband, and baby – could use it. The ten testimonials stressed the soap’s multiple functions as well. For example, the testimony titled “Shampoo” stated, “In addition to using Ivory now for floors and woodwork, dishes and ‘to keep our dishes new’ Mrs. K.M. Rutherford, N.J. says, ‘We love Ivory for Shampoos – it rinses out so easily.’”<sup>31</sup> These testimonial personal touches, while still drawing upon the desire for intimacy in an impersonal consumer society, showed that women’s experience as consumers had made them wise. They no longer needed detailed guides on *how* to use the product, but advice on *what* products were the most economically practical to purchase.

Despite the sweeping economic changes that emerged from the rubble of the stock market crash, the ads carried on their portrayal of woman as a housewife confined to domestic chores, caring for her children, and pleasing her husband. Each of the testimonials in the 1933 ad came from women, reflecting that women’s domestic duties included venturing into the market to buy soaps and other household products. The ad’s depiction of women also drew upon the assumption that women were responsible for household chores, as the ad pictured them scrubbing dishes, wiping down furniture, and hanging laundry to dry. The illustrations also reflected a woman’s devotion to her family, picturing one woman holding her baby boy (whom she called “my most cherished possession”) and another woman helping her husband put on a tie.

As in the 1920’s, the Ivory ads in the 1930’s portrayed women using appearance to attain and maintain a husband in a marriage where she domestically served his needs. The 1933 ad touched upon the assumed vanity women need to grab men’s attention as one testimonial stated, “my blond hair looks so glossy and bright that even my unobservant husband noticed its improvement.” The response of the female protagonist in the 1937 ad

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<sup>31</sup> Ivory Soap Advertisement. *Ladies Home Journal*, 1933.

to her finance's proposal epitomized the wife's selfless and subservient role as she exclaimed, "I'd just love to cook and wash dishes – for Wayne!" That same ad reflected the relationship between female vanity and domestic duty as it capitalized on women's fear of having rough hands from dishwashing. The female protagonist literally cried over her coarse red hands as she tearfully lamented, "Just wait 'till he sees how awful my hands look from dishwashing!" She then started using Ivory Soap, which as she washed the dishes washed away her tears. At the dinner table she happily said to her father, "After dinner you'll see why my hands are still pretty – I'm washing dishes with Ivory."<sup>32</sup>

The fear of "dishpan hands" that the Ivory advertisers created came from the company's own need for consumers to crave their product, as industries and advertisers faced financial troubles alongside consumers during the depression. Procter and Gamble also utilized a scientific strategy to create a need amongst consumers for soap was scientific. The advertisement supplemented the comic strip story with dubious scientific research that asserted Ivory Soap "agrees with more type of skins than any other soap tested." The vague language, "scientists from a leading university recently tested six leading soaps on every type of complexion" so "undoubtedly your type of skin was studied in these tests, too" begs the questions, what university, and, was *every* possible skin type actually tested? Even though Procter and Gamble often advertised Ivory Soap as a beauty product, as a primary cleansing agent it escaped the throes of the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938 that sought to protect consumers from unsafe cosmetic products peddled on the market. This kind of "pseudo-scientific scare campaign" that many companies adopted in the competitive atmosphere of the depressed economy was precisely the type of "vulgar" advertising that consumer organizations rallied against and the passage

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<sup>32</sup> Ivory Soap Advertisement. *Saturday Evening Post*, 1937.

of the 1938 Wheeler-Lea amendments to the Federal Trade Commission Act expunged in declaring “deceptive acts of commerce” illegal.<sup>33</sup>

While these ads were grounded in the anxieties surrounding the financial instability of the 1930’s, they also provided an escape from the depression’s dire realities. Marchand proposes that in the 1920’s and 1930’s people preferred “escapist fantasy” in their media outlets.<sup>34</sup> During the depression the Ivory ads drew upon this belief and continued to paint the comfortable lifestyle of the 1920’s in pictures next to print that focused on the economy. Wearing fine bathrobes and beautiful gowns, women painted in the 1930’s ads exhumed opulence, quite a contrast to the “slums, shacks and unemployment” overtaking the American landscape.<sup>35</sup>

The New Deal legislation of the 1930’s provided some relief, employment, and recovery, yet it was not until America’s entry into World War II in 1941 that production resurged and both the government and private marketers tackled the distribution problems that triggered the depression. While the New Deal administration’s various government regulation and protection acts introduced the concept of government intervention with private industry, World War II marked a fully cooperative merger between the two. To help ameliorate the distribution problems plaguing the marketplace, the Industrial Expansion Act was established to “spark a balance between production and consumption” and create guaranteed markets through raising production and income.<sup>36</sup> Along with the shared goal of fixing the economy, industries cooperated with the government under the pretense of the “urgent responsibility to win the war” and followed federal orders that

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<sup>33</sup> Marchand, 315, Fox, 168.

<sup>34</sup> Marchand, 115.

<sup>35</sup> Marchand.

<sup>36</sup> Anderson, 121.



stipulated the products factories would produce and what market – civilian consumers or the military - they would distribute them to.<sup>37</sup> The Office of Civilian Requirements, another federal government agency, controlled the rationing of consumer goods. It oversaw all industries in relation to the production of civilian goods, making sure that only “essential commodities” were produced for consumer needs while all other materials were allocated to the war.<sup>38</sup> The regimented wartime industry therefore changed the women’s role as consumers, for now they were not just buying to satisfy personal needs and wants, but their consumer choices significantly contributed to the war.

In representing the cooperation between business and government, the advertising industry also actively offered their services to the war cause.<sup>39</sup> World War II was not only a war for democracy, but a fight to preserve the free world market contingent upon private enterprises. As a consumer’s drive and guide to the marketplace, advertisers believed they had the responsibility to keep private enterprises, and therefore the free market, running. They took up the challenge to find solutions for past and potential problems of distribution, the cause of the system collapse in the early 1930’s and the root of the possible dilemma of turning production over from military to civilian purposes in the postwar future. Furthermore, since the success of advertisements rests in its ability to tell consumers what they want to hear, advertising benefited from linking up with the government. Research showed that consumers, still anxious about income and employment, placed more faith in the government than in business leaders to straighten out the postwar economy.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Anderson, 115.

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Fox, 169.

<sup>40</sup> Anderson, 116.

The war, in altering the market economy, shifted the role that women were expected to play in it. As marketers and government officials began planning to prevent a postwar economic catastrophe, women fought for a free market victory not just as carefully rationing consumers but as producers of essential war materials to replace American men drafted overseas. Richard Johnson, the director of the Consumers Goods Division of the wartime Office of Civilian Requirements, illustrated the shift in the role of women away from the domestic sphere and into the business realm in his example of essential civilian commodities. He pointed out that “women are needed more in war work away from home, and so we need more baby diapers than ever before in order to assist the women in their shifts from home to factory.”<sup>41</sup> For economists and companies looking to prevent another breakdown of the distribution system and economy crash in the postwar years, women’s new producing role posed a problem. Marketers understood maintaining a high level of employment was essential for raising the standard of living so citizens could afford to buy the heap of goods in the consumer market. Yet many predicted that employment would vex the postwar industry’s ability to effectively distribute products because industries would have to find jobs for the 25 to 30 million workers, including overseas soldiers overseas and women working on American soil, that the military and war cause currently employed.<sup>42</sup> In response to Johnson’s question, “How can civilian employment and civilian consumption be rapidly increased?” advertisers and the government would have to find a solution as they dealt with the current issues of balancing military and civilian production.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Johnson, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Anderson

<sup>43</sup> Johnson

Soap must have fallen under Johnson's definition of "essential" civilian commodities because Procter and Gamble continued to churn out Ivory Soap advertisements amidst the guns and bullets that overtook industrial assembly lines. In sync with Anderson's advice to "talk in terms of benefits that the individual's self-interest recognizes", Ivory ads shifted their message to fit with women's wartime demands. One ad entitled "Tick! Tick! Tick! I'll Tell You Quick!" appealed to the fact that women had less time for household chores now that the war required women to take on jobs outside of the home. A watch narrated the story of a woman who tested out Ivory's speed of washing dishes emphasizing Ivory's time efficiency with quips like "Time! Done already!" and "Watch your watch for proof that you don't lose a minute with 'velvet suds'."<sup>44</sup>

Ivory advertisements also reflected the cooperation between industry and government during the war and the marketing mentality that advertisers played an important role in winning the war. An ad from 1943 responded to the government-imposed rationing of civilian goods as it provided consumers with a list of three ways to save soaps under the heading, "Save Soaps! They Use Vital War Materials!"<sup>45</sup> Patriotism pervaded into Ivory ads in both pictures and language that suggested an "America victorious" ethos. Ads painted men and women in uniform, showing that both genders actively participated in the war. A headline of a 1943 ad played a triumphant war tune as it proclaimed, "How to win an engagement," followed by subtext that said "Here's sound *strategy* in complexion care that can help you *win* new beauty...and his heart" [italics added].<sup>46</sup>

The double-meaning behind the slogan "How to win an engagement" revealed that while World War II changed women's roles in the economy, their domestic aspirations and

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<sup>44</sup> Ivory Soap Advertisement. *Better Homes and Gardens*, 1942.

<sup>45</sup> Ivory Soap. Advertisement. *Woman's Home Companion*, 1943.

<sup>46</sup> Ivory Soap Advertisement. *Ladies Home Journal*, 1943.

fulfillments remained the same. Although the woman pictured in the ad dressed in military uniform, the engagement the ad gave advice on winning was that of marriage and the best way to secure a husband was through “beauty treatment.” In fact, the storyline of women finding fulfillment through beauty care and marriage seeped into nearly every advertisement. In an ad from 1943, when a girl Nora “who always looked sad and never had dates” started using Ivory Soap, she soon “came to class with a diamond ring on her hand” and “was now the happiest girl in the world.”<sup>47</sup> Another woman featured in a 1942 Ivory ad implicitly defined fulfillment in terms of getting attention from her husband, stating “He knows I love to have a fuss over me when I’m feeling punk” and “he takes me out like a heavy date and murmurs sweet nothings...about my smoother softer hands.”<sup>48</sup> This shows that while women worked the factories, they were still expected to find fulfillment in a husband and would best achieve this desire through vanity treatments.

The college setting of the 1943 ad illustrated that the domestic ideal followed women even as they publicly participated in education. Starting in the 1920’s women had increasingly enrolled in colleges and universities, much like the women who entered the man’s realm when they took over men’s jobs during World War II. The new realities of woman’s education and traditional expectations of domesticity caused women to question their futures. Betty Friedan, author of the *Feminine Mystique*, recalled that in 1942, “I had no image of myself, stretching beyond college...I could not go home again to the life of my mother and the women of our town, bound to home, bridge, shopping, children, husband, charity, clothes.”<sup>49</sup> As the Ivory ad reflected, the education system itself provided one way for women to balance their educational attainment and household obligations as

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<sup>47</sup> Ivory Soap. Advertisement. *Woman’s Home Companion*, 1943.

<sup>48</sup> Ivory Soap Advertisement. *Good Housekeeping*, 1942.

<sup>49</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: Laurel, 1983, orig. 1963), 69.

much of the higher education women received consisted of traditionally feminine subjects that perpetuated the domestic ideal such as beauty and the childcare.<sup>50</sup> As the ad stated, “Nora enrolled in the University’s summer session on *baby care*. What a popular course!” A 1942 ad further emphasized that education for women was geared more towards domesticity as opposed to math and economics by saying, “He knows my arithmetic’s so bad that I’m bound to bungle up the budget.”<sup>51</sup>

Other ads focused entirely on the domestic housewife ideal. The woman featured in an ad entitled “My Husband’s wise to me,” intentionally fabricated for female consumers to relate to, portrayed childcare and domestic chores as her duty. She admitted that “children, the meals and other things make me feel older than I am” and contended that her hands used to be “red ‘n’ rough” from cleaning dishes with washday soap. The implications of these advertisements that continued to represent women as domestic housewives despite their increased involvement in the public workforce suggests one way in which marketers sought to preemptively implement a solution for postwar distribution. If after the war working women returned to their homes and let the returning soldiers resume jobs in the business world, then employment and the standard of living would rise and create a market for rapidly produced consumer goods. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* tells us, this theory prevailed. The suburban housewife came to symbolize the American Dream, or at least Ivory Soap marketer’s ideal consumer: “healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, and her home...free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever

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<sup>50</sup> Peiss, 194.

<sup>51</sup> Ivory Soap Advertisement. *Good Housekeeping*, 1942.

dreamed of.”<sup>52</sup> As veterans triumphantly returned to America, white middle-class American women retreated back into their domestic, beauty-driven bubbles, resuming the role as primary consumer in the economic cycle.

The jobs of women in America’s consumer society may have oscillated as the economy flowed and ebbed and flowed again from the 1920’s through the 1940’s. Ivory Soap ads, however, did not alter their picture of the idealized white domestic housewife as they adapted their marketing tactics to the economic environment. Even in the second half of the twentieth century with the feminist movement, sexual revolution, and the advancement of women in public sectors of universities, sports, and professions, these same expectations of femininity and domesticity linger. Yet it would be wrong to accuse advertisers of perpetuating gender norms, for in our country’s free market system consumers tell the system what to produce.<sup>53</sup> Today, advertisements do not just jump out from the pages of magazines, but bombard us from television sets, radio-waves, internet pop-ups, and billboards. The Dove campaign, in stating that many of these advertisements create low self-esteem amongst girls and woman because they portray an unrealistic definition of beauty, carries on the assumption that beauty defines a woman’s worth.<sup>54</sup> Yet marketing reflects gender expectations, not realities. As consumers, women hold the power to buy into it or not.

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<sup>52</sup> Friedan, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Sandage, 35.

<sup>54</sup> The Dove Self Esteem Fund. Unilever. 2006 <[www.campaignforrealbeauty.com](http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com)>

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