"To Wives and Mothers: Let's Go Shopping!": Consumerism and Middle-Class Women in Ladies' Home Journal, 1890-1929

Whitney Hampson
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
"TO WIVES AND MOTHERS: LET'S GO SHOPPING!"
CONSUMERISM AND MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN IN
LADIES' HOME JOURNAL, 1890-1929

2005

WHITNEY HAMPSON
"To Wives and Mothers: Let's Go Shopping!"
Consumerism and Middle-Class Women in
*Ladies' Home Journal, 1890-1929*

A Thesis
Submitted to the History Department
And the Robert E. Cook Honors College
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Bachelor of Arts (Honors)

Whitney Hampson
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
December 2005
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
The Robert E. Cook Honors College and
The Department of History

We hereby approve the honors thesis of

Whitney Hampson

Candidate for the degree Bachelor of Arts

December 13, 2005  Elizabeth A. Ricketts
Date  Elizabeth A. Ricketts, Ph.D.
       Assistant Professor of History, Thesis Director

1. 3 Dec. 2005  Charles Cashdollar, Ph.D.
Date  Professor of History

December 13, 2005  Irwin M. Marcus
Date  Irwin M. Marcus, Ph.D.
       Professor of History

April 20, 2006  Janet E. Goebel
Date  Janet E. Goebel, Ph.D.
       Director, Robert E. Cook Honors College
I. Introduction: Women, Consumerism, and Magazines

"The great majority of women nowadays find pleasure in 'doing their own work,' but there are still some who make this work a drudgery. Roughly the latter may be divided into two classes: one the woman who looks with suspicion at labor-saving devices no matter how practical; the other forever buying all sorts of useless gimcracks from back-door peddlers."¹

In May of 1914, Ladies’ Home Journal printed an article about the virtues of labor-saving devices. In it, the author assessed the problem of a small minority of women who were not enjoying their own housework, rooting the problem in their aptitude as consumers. Women who were unsatisfied were either suspicious of consumer goods and did not avail themselves of the convenience of modern technology, or they were spendthrifts with no sense of moderation who frittered away money on worthless trinkets that did nothing to decrease their workload. The article directly connected women’s consumption with the fulfillment of their female responsibilities. Women could not spend frivolously, but neither could they forego purchasing altogether at the risk of missing practical advancements. Whether they did not buy enough or bought too recklessly, poor consumption engendered unhappy women.

The assumptions and messages of this statement, presented in a popular women’s magazine, typify the time period. Between 1890 and 1930, a cultural dialogue in America shaped the basic assumptions about white, middle-class, female consumption. The image of the domestic Victorian woman with no place in the public market gradually transformed into the new modern woman whose self-determination was rooted in

¹ Ladies’ Home Journal (hereafter referred to as LHJ), May 1914, 91.
independent consumption. During this transformation, there emerged a transitional image of the selfless consumer. The duties of women as wives, mothers and housekeepers changed and shifted as consumerism colored national culture. Should women be consumers? For whom? Why? These questions were asked and answered, among other places, in popular women’s magazines, which provided one battlefield for the cultural war between the traditional and the emerging value systems in America.

The rise of consumer culture greatly changed the way that Americans experienced and measured their lives. Though its roots reach back to the early nineteenth century, the “rapid transformation” of manufacturing, distributing, advertising, and selling goods started after 1880. Professional and managerial positions created by an expanding corporate world produced a large “new middle class” with considerable expendable income, the main participants in the consumer revolution. These changes had a profound impact on American culture and values. Susan Strasser argues that, by the turn of the century, popular culture was “increasingly organized around the mass production and marketing of consumer goods.” Traditional definitions of freedom relied on property ownership and independence of employment; during a time when increasingly fewer people could identify with this definition, argues William Leach, consumerism offered liberty through the personal satisfaction and comfort that came from buying goods. How people interacted with goods changed dramatically. People developed relationships with

---


4 Strasser, 17.

mass-produced branded products as older relationships with local goods (and the merchants who sold them) declined. Marketers set out to change customers into consumers, by both researching and shaping their material desires, and, as Jackson Lears argues, “advertising collaborated with other institutions in promoting what became the dominant aspirations, anxieties, even notions of personal identity” in America. Consumerism usurped Victorian institutions and values, ushering in what Lynn Dumenil describes as a period emphasizing “leisure, purchasing, sociability, expressiveness, and personal pleasure.”

This change did not come without observation and reaction, both by the participants in the change and by historians looking back on it. In the early years of consumerism, there was conflict over consumer values among American social critics. Daniel Horowitz has found that while some saw consumption as a key ingredient in a new middle-class identity, others called for a “restrained style of living” that rejected elements of consumer culture. Historians like Susan Matt and John Brooks argue that until the 1910s, there was a strong message coming from religious leaders, social critics, and reformers across the country: resist the trappings of materialism and find contentment through less worldly avenues. This message was countered by advertisers, social scientists, and consumers themselves who proclaimed even louder that “envy and

---

6 Strasser, 15-25.
emulation were normal and widespread social instincts rather than sinful and dangerous passions."\(^{10}\)

What and whom to credit or blame for consumer society's hold on American values is a subject of great historical debate. Gary Cross in *Time and Money* explains consumerism as a complex social decision whereby Western societies chose to value money over leisure time.\(^{11}\) Stuart Ewen argues conversely that consumer values were directed at specific populations, and "in the process much of the American populace was ignored." Consumerism, he writes, was a form of "human management" propagated by the advertising industry, which filled modern capitalism's need for both "social control and... goods distribution" at the expense of class consciousness and true democracy.\(^{12}\)

This new ethos of consumerism was designed to destroy old patterns of non-consumption and replace them with the values of a commodity society, a process Rosemary Hennessey describes as "displac[ing] unmet needs into new desires."\(^{13}\) Some, though, dispute this interpretation of business owners as "captains of consciousness"; Michael Schudson argues in "Historical Roots of Consumer Culture" that advertisers were not consciously exploiting their medium's impact, and Strasser agrees that corporations "did not necessarily set out to create needs," but were simply trying to sell their products.\(^{14}\)

This discussion on consumerism has occurred in a climate of increasing historical awareness

---


\(^{12}\) Ewen, 19, 31-40.


importance of female consumption is underscored by Elaine Abelson's discovery that
many department store owners often failed to prosecute habitual female shoplifters "just
because they were recognized as good customers."\(^1\)

The influential role of consumerism and advertising in magazines, and those
magazines' impact on consumer values has also been studied. Popular magazines at the
end of the twentieth century enjoyed a period of unmatched influence.\(^2\) Richard Ohman
argues that popular magazines constitute the earliest expression of national mass
culture.\(^3\) In an era when corporate expansion was pushing the new middle class to
national dominance in size and influence, periodicals were the voice of that class,
providing a national forum in which to discuss the rapidly changing times.\(^4\) The "ten
cent magazine revolution" of 1893 described by Frank Luther Mott brought monthly
magazines into the homes of thousands of new readers, the price having dropped low
enough to reach a wider middle class audience.\(^5\) Whereas there were four monthly
periodicals with circulations over 100,000 in 1885, that number had jumped to twenty by
1905.\(^6\) The heyday of magazines coincided with the rise of consumer culture, and these
journals, which seemed "more than any other medium" seemed to embody middle-class
American culture, "presided over" this shift towards consumerism.\(^7\) It was clear which

---

2 Matthew Schneirov, The Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America, 1893-1914
3 Richard Ohmann, "Where Did Mass Culture Come From? The Case of the Magazines," Berkshire
University Press, 1957), 46.
6 Ibid., 8.
7 Wilson, 11; Helen Damon-Moore, Magazines for the Millions: Gender and Commerce in the Ladies' Home
side of that shift they stood on; as Helen Damon-Moore puts it in *Magazines for the Millions*, magazines were commercial products, which "proclaimed and stood for the values of consuming."28 This complex relationship between consumerism and magazines is the subject of current historical exploration.

The specific intersection of gender, consumer culture, and magazines, particularly around the turn of the twentieth century, is a dynamic field of historical inquiry. Helen Damon-Moore argues in *Magazines for the Millions* that *Ladies' Home Journal*, along with the *Saturday Evening Post*, were "prototypes that aided in the creation, development and sustaining of the commercializing of gender and the gendering of commerce."29 Looking at the same time period but at a wider range of magazines, Ellen Gruber Garvey in *The Adman in the Parlor* looks at the interplay between advertising and fiction in women's magazines, analyzing how magazines "address[ed] and construct[ed] women readers as consumers."30 And Jennifer Scanlon focused on just one magazine in the later decades when consumerism was solidifying; in *Inarticulate Longings*, she examines the messages of femininity presented by *Ladies' Home Journal* from 1910 to 1930, and argues that during this time "the magazine's definition of service increasingly focused on the training of skilled but ready consumers... with a woman consumer front and center."31

What has not been examined, however, is how consumption came to be portrayed in magazines as the definitive female activity by 1929, when women were not even

28 Damon-Moore, 4.
29 Ibid., 3.
trusted with their own purchasing power just forty years earlier. How did the magazines negotiate the country’s cultural transition between the Victorian world and modern consumer culture? This study traces the images of consuming women on the pages of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, from the emergence of consumer culture in the late nineteenth century through its materialization in the 1920s. Investigating the cultural messages about female consumption that one women’s magazine presented to its readers, and how those instructions changed dramatically between 1889 and 1929, reveals it to be a tumultuous period marked by three distinct images: the child-like Victorian, the independent modern woman, and the selfless emerging consumer who occupied the gap between them.

These three images were all present in different forms during this time. However, each constitutes what can be considered the “dominant image” at different points during the four decades. At the outset was an image that represented the Victorian understanding of female consumption: women were depicted as undisciplined, reckless children, at least when it came to money. While the Victorian woman was valued and respected in her domestic sphere, she was not able to properly engage in the very public activity of exchange. At the conclusion of the period, the image of the female consumer was altogether different. Women were portrayed shopping independently and with abundance. For this modern woman, consumption improved and defined her life. The middle period was dominated by a transitional image, which retained Victorian domestic responsibilities but eschewed its boundaries. During the transitional period, women were portrayed as selfless consumers, who actively participated in the consumer market in order to fulfill their traditional domestic duties. This emerging consumer bought goods
for her family’s benefit, not her personal satisfaction, but the increasing emphasis on consumption foreshadowed the emergence of the consumerist modern woman.

In the period between 1889 and 1929, the magazine underwent an extraordinary transformation. Tracing and analyzing the changes in these roles reveals what *Ladies’ Home Journal* told its readers about the importance of and motivation for their increasing participation in the American consumer revolution. Chapter 1 explores the early years of the magazine, when the Victorian flavor of the content and advertising was clear. The magazine presented information that was focused on production and women’s domestic and moral duties. Consumerism did not play a large part in the *Ladies’ Home Journal*: though the pages contained advertisements and made allusions to consumer goods, consumption was not a driving force behind the message the magazine presented. It was these early issues that most frequently portrayed consuming women as frivolous, childish, and untrustworthy with money; aside from the very rich, women shopped infrequently, or for specific items. Lacking their own source of money or an established presence in the public sphere of the market, women were presumably dependent on men for both an allowance and guidance on how to spend it.

This message was changing by the end of the 1890s. The first decades of the century saw a clash of values between Victorian ideals of temperance and female dependency and a new culture of gratification and female agency. As Chapter 2 discusses, during this period the pages of *Ladies’ Home Journal* presented the message that selfless consumption for others, primarily their children and husbands, was women’s proper function in the consumer world. The domestic functions of the Victorian wife were portrayed as extending outside of her home and into the market. Consumption,
according to ads and articles, was a necessary part of women's existing duties to her home, her husband, and her children. This coincided with an increasing awareness of cost and monetary value of the clothes and activities presented in the Journal. The magazine responded to women's presumed ignorance with paternalistic guidance instead of gentle chiding; its pages, reflecting the rising influence of scientific efficiency and expert opinions, contained detailed instructions for women on what, where, and how to consume. For the emerging consumer, engaging in the market was just a new way to fulfill her traditional responsibilities, and has little to do with personal consumer desires.

By the 1920s, the women in Ladies' Home Journal had graduated from their consumer adolescence. Chapter 3 examines the modern woman, who, according to the Journal, had her own car and was freed from much of her thankless work by the miracles of mass production. The magazine itself increasingly grew dependent on advertising revenues and advertisements commanded more attention, while consumption pervaded the content of the articles and stories. As consumerism shaped its structure as well as its content, Ladies' Home Journal embraced consumption as a legitimate, important part of women's lives. While the image of women as the primary purchasers of goods for their families persisted, women were also depicted consuming for themselves. Shopping as recreation signaled that consumption had become an end unto itself.

This study included a content analysis of select issues of Ladies' Home Journal from 1889 to 1929, as well as a statistical analysis of the advertising from those issues. I read alternately January and May issues at five year intervals, tracking all mentions of female consumption in the text as well as the advertising. I noted the pages as well as the
kind of article which contained the reference. In a few instances I looked at more than one magazine per year, because of possibilities that the months would differ significantly (such as in 1919, when war-time factors like the end of paper rationing mid-year dramatically changed the magazine's shape and content between January and May.)

For the advertising, I kept track of their number and placement in the magazine. I also coded them according to whether they were targeting women (W), men (M), or were gender neutral (GN), or if they targeted women but advertised products for others in her family (WF) or products specifically for men/husbands (MW). For some of the issues, I utilized an expanded coding system which further categorized the ads for women based on how the ad appealed to its audience. I marked each ad as targeting women as wives (WW), mothers (WM), housekeepers and cooks (WH), which involved women purchasing goods for others, and as appealing to women to beautify themselves (WB) or to buy non-food goods for themselves (W).
II. The Victorian Woman

In the late nineteenth century, Victorian respectability was still the cultural goal for much of the American middle class, and its influence reached "all other cultural groups in the nation."\(^{32}\) It was a world where the purity of the home existed as a counterbalance to the base world of public life and where spherical boundaries shaped the relationship between husband and wife. Each gender was confined to its own sphere, with its own skills, deficiencies, and responsibilities. Women, according to the "cult of true womanhood," were the family's virtuous moral guides and domestic authorities. They possessed not only a keen grasp of domestic "sensibility and refinement," but also a new moral vigor and drive to both domesticate their animal husbands and feminize their coarse society.\(^{33}\) Increasing reverence for the Victorian home elevated female domestic duties to a position of respect and importance.\(^{34}\) Furthermore, concerns about the "woman question" in the later half of the century led to the further glorification of women.\(^{35}\) Despite their significant cultural responsibilities, women were seen as fragile and prone to physical and psychological instability, often becoming overwhelmed to the point of hysteria.\(^{36}\) This rather ironic understanding of women – morally strong in their proper sphere but emotionally weak when they left it – colored the portrayals of women in the growing national American culture.\(^{37}\) (Rothman 26)

---


\(^{34}\) Glenna Matthews, "Just a Housewife": *The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 44.


\(^{36}\) Rothman, 23-26.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 26.
One force driving this national culture was popular magazines, particularly women's magazines. According to historians John Tebel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman, late nineteenth century periodicals were "the only national communications medium," and the most popular general interest magazines spoke the words of the middle class. As Matthew Schneirov argues, these words grew into a national language as dropping prices culminating in the "ten-cent-magazine revolution" helped these new popular magazines achieve astounding circulation rates. New national women's magazines like *Good Housekeeping* and *McCall's* molded the existing "trade journals for the homemaker" into mass-circulating lifestyle guides that included fiction and social commentary as well as domestic advice. Magazines constituted a critical part of the national conversation of the middle class and a booming industry as total periodical circulation tripled in the years between 1890 and 1905.

*Ladies' Home Journal* was among those magazines that led the pack in the race of the women's periodicals to advertising and circulation success, described by Helen Damon-Moore as "a magazine of undisputed importance from its earliest days." The *Journal* grew out of a column in an agricultural journal called *Tribune and Farmer* written by *Tribune* editor Cyrus H. K. Curtis's wife Louisa Knapp. It evolved into a supplement and then its own eight-page magazine in 1884. In 1889, with circulation exceeding 400,000, Louisa Curtis stepped down as editor and Cyrus made the fateful decision to continue the magazine on his own.

---

40 Tebbel and Zuckerman, 93.
41 Schneirov, 5.
43 Tebbel and Zuckerman, 93.
decision to hire Edward W. Bok as her replacement. Bok’s innovative editorial ideas, from the integration of advertising to the development of an intimate relationship between reader and editor, not only transformed Ladies’ Home Journal but stretched and shaped the boundaries of the women’s magazine industry.\(^{44}\) In the last years of the nineteenth century, Bok cultivated his unique “editorial voice” and established Ladies’ Home Journal as a domestic and cultural authority.\(^{45}\)

Women’s magazines extolled the virtues of domesticity, while consumerism, though creeping ever nearer, stayed on the periphery of the social instruction disseminated by the editors of Ladies’ Home Journal. The pages of the Journal in Bok’s early years were filled with advice, instructions, and warnings about the proper way to run a household. Bok himself held domesticity in Victorian-style reverence, and encouraged women to elevate themselves from “housekeepers” to “homemakers.”\(^{46}\) Ladies’ Home Journal was “a powerful factor in influencing women to resist change,” and its messages of traditional domesticity fit with its subtle discouragement of deviation from the norm.\(^{47}\) The Journal brought fiction, news, and “questions related to gender” to its readers.\(^{48}\) Women were not presumed to make substantial independent purchases, and thus consumption was not accorded much space or discussion, despite the advertisements that peppered the periodical’s pages. It was on these pages that women who did consume were painted as reckless, spendthrift children whose purse strings needed to be carefully watched.

\(^{44}\) Tebbel and Zuckerman, 93-100; Schneirov, 119
\(^{45}\) Damon-Moore, 66-68. See Damon-Moore’s Chapter 3 for an in-depth discussion of the evolution and impact of Bok’s style.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 88.
\(^{47}\) Tebbel & Zuckerman, 106.
\(^{48}\) Damon-Moore, 37.
The home and family were unquestionably the main topic of conversation in *Ladies' Home Journal*, and domesticity's influence was keenly felt, influencing even subjects like travelogues – one May 1890 article looked at “Domestic Life in Egypt.”

Editors assumed a high degree of domestic knowledge among their readers. For example, an article about dresses “charming enough for a garden party” assured readers that the garments could be “simply made by any home dressmaker,” and proceeded to detail instructions on their production; it was clearly presumed that “the skirt is cut on the bias bringing each plaid block diamondwise, and hemmed” was instruction enough for the outfit’s production. Women, according to the *Journal*, were primarily domestic producers.

The focus on traditional female production overshadowed the undercurrent of discussion about women’s growth as consumers. At the end of the nineteenth century, women were presumed to be incapable of managing any sort of business transaction. Victorians envisioned women, as Virginia Scharff puts it, as “frail, timid, easily shocked, and quickly exhausted, physically and temperamentally incapable of mastering the demands of public life.” In the male world of the market, women were presumed to be reckless and undisciplined. Elaine S. Abelson writes in her study of middle-class shoplifters that these women were “often seen as irresponsible, more childlike than adult, unable to resist momentary temptation.” Whether they actually shoplifted or not, women were not to be trusted in the marketplace. Lacking both financial independence

---

49 *LHJ*, May 1890, 4.
50 *LHJ*, May 1890, 16.
and experience, women were presumably dependent on men to function in the consumer economy.

Although *Ladies' Home Journal* participated in the emerging American consumerism in the business world as one of the new periodicals that relied on advertising, not magazine sales, for its income, the women on its pages barely seemed impacted by this new piece of American culture. Ads were small – sometimes more than thirty fit on a page – and contained only a few lines of relatively unsophisticated text and the occasional graphic. Consumption was part of the middle-class woman's life, but it, like the advertisements, was not portrayed as occupying a position of importance.

“Women who shop,” according to one article in January 1890, were “women of leisure.” The value of homemade goods far exceeded that of purchased ones. As one columnist declared on the subject of fruit preserves in September 1890, “perfection of those articles are found only on the pantry shelves of those homes where such things are made and not bought.” Store-bought goods were the exception, not the rule; they presented options for those lacking a particular skill or proficiency. An ad in a 1890 *Journal* advised women, for example, that they might buy their underclothes “ready-made” – if they were not “dainty sewer[s] by hand and machine.” Ads often emphasized their products’ practical rather than sensational appeal; as one 1890 ad noted, “Sensible women all want Ferris’ Good Sense Corset Waists.”

---

54 Graphs 2 and 3 (see Appendix).
55 *LHJ*, January 1890, 8.
56 *LHJ*, September 1890, 21.
57 *LHJ*, May 1890, 11.
58 *LHJ*, May 1890, 22.
Women who consumed on the pages of the *Journal*, whether due to an emotional nature, impulsiveness, or a lack of self-restraint, were often depicted as ill-suited to the task. Women, according to one article, were always "losing their heads" in business matters. Whenever a girl deals with a man in business, the writer decreed, "she comes out decidedly second-best in the bargain." In the magazine's fiction, women were often portrayed as reckless in their purchases, a depiction which downplayed the legitimacy of their consumer wants. Such was the case of Mrs. Murray, who "impulsively bought" a large engraving upon viewing in a shop-window; the author points out that Mrs. Murray "had a very romantic heart," basing her decision to make the purchase in her emotional (irrational) temperament. That women would want to purchase goods for themselves was a rather dubious proposition. "Why [do] women buy these books?," puzzled in an article on women reading "trashy novels." The answer denied women both consumer desire and skills: "I will not say that they are doing it intentionally; most likely it is due to thoughtlessness." To the *Journal*, men as much as women were impacted by the profligacy of the fairer sex; it had become almost proverbial, in the mind of one writer, that "woman's love of dress and fine living" would result in "man's downfall." Women, therefore, had to be carefully controlled and guided by men who better understood the business world. "If I Were a Man," one woman wrote of her ideal marital relationship, "I would be patient with [my wife] and teach her to manage an allowance."

Through the 1890s, consumption by either gender was not of primary concern to the editors of Ladies' Home Journal. The magazine's pages were filled with domestic

---

59 *LHJ*, May 1890, 3.  
60 *LHJ*, May 1894, 6.  
61 *LHJ*, May 1890, 8.  
63 *LHJ*, January 1890, 4.
advice and tips for mothers and wives, and advertisements were physically small. When women were portrayed as consumers, it was not in a positive light. Women were too sensitive for business matters, or they spent too much on unnecessary goods, and whatever desires they may have had were carefully moderated. Only under the loving tutelage of her husband could a woman be expected to act responsibly with “her” money. Around the turn of the century, though, another woman consumer began to emerge on the pages of the Journal. She still espoused Victorian femininity, but she also participated actively in the marketplace. This clash of values led to the strange hybrid of the selfless consumer.
III. The Emerging Consumer

In his classic 1899 examination of the leisure class, Thorstein Veblen commented on the function of women in the new consumptive world. "[B]eing a chattel," he remarked caustically, a woman "should consume only what is necessary to her sustenance, - except so far as her further consumption contributes to the comfort or the good reputation of her master."64 Women did not have personal consumption desires; when they consumed, it was only for their husbands' benefit. Veblen was indeed an astute social observer, for around the time of the book's publication, the women on the pages of the Ladies' Home Journal were changing. While they continued to perform their duties to home, husband, and children, they increasingly moved outside of the home and into the marketplace to fulfill those duties.

The images of women presented in women's periodicals during the twenty-five years between the late 1890s and the late 1910s generally represented the Victorian model of female moral and domestic authority in the private home. But in the advertising, articles, and fiction of Ladies' Home Journal, women were also portrayed as participating in the very public world of exchange. They purchased goods, but they did so for others' fulfillment rather than their own. The image presented was that of a selfless consumer, a Victorian woman navigating through the stormy seas of the modern market. This representation, while less concrete than those of the Victorian and the Modern women that are her bookends, illuminates a period of uneasy transition and interchange between the two eras.

The Victorian world at the end of the century was a dynamic one. As George Cotkin states in *Reluctant Modernism*, urbanization and industrialization challenged individualism and with it "notions of causality and responsibility, of freedom and possibility." For white, middle-class women, modernizing forces pushed the boundaries of what was considered acceptable and respectable behavior: female participation in public life increased significantly in the decades surrounding the turn of the century. This disruption of gender roles was troubling to many; the "woman question" was the subject of numerous editorial debates. To justify what many saw as an exodus of women out of the home and into the public arenas of work and commerce, the concept of enlarged housekeeping emerged. Described by Peter Gabriel Filene as an attempt to "salvage at least part of the feminine sphere," its proponents argued that women were the guardians of society, the natural mothers and housekeepers who could "clean up" the mess of men's public world. Middle class women also turned to the Victorian model of "virtuous womanhood," which emphasized women's "morality, chastity and sensibility," to guide their interactions in this new and often "unusually open" environment. And as women became more involved outside the home, their role within it gained cultural esteem. "No charity in this world which any woman can do," admonished a 1899 article, "is an excuse for her to become a disabled head to her family; an inefficient housekeeper

---

in her home; a disappointing wife to her husband, or an insufficient mother to her children.  

One reason for women's changing social position was the increasing prevalence of consumerism. Market research and advertising targeted the increasing middle class (and its increasing expendable income) to translate the mass production of goods at the end of the nineteenth century into a boom in consumer desires and purchases in the twentieth. There was a "revolution in the economy of the middle-class household" at the end of the nineteenth century, starting with a rapid increase in retail sales of goods for the home. New nationally popular magazines, taking advantage of "new technologies and economies of scale," offered lively, illustrated issues that contrasted with the more subdued style of days past. The new consumer-oriented changes in price and design contributed to a surge in circulation, and in 1903 Ladies' Home Journal became the first periodical to reach one million subscribers. The impact of consumerism slowly became visible in not just the magazines' subscription rates, but also in their content. The 1900s saw an increasing awareness of cost and the monetary value of goods on the pages of periodicals; the growth of a national market meant that writers could reasonably estimate prices for all readers. Under the editorship of Edward Bok, the Ladies' Home Journal "became a more thoroughly commercial magazine." Stories about economic issues started appearing, like the May 1904 article entitled "What is in the Market." By 1909,

---

69 LHJ, January 1899, 14.
70 Wilson, 82.
73 Ibid., 62.
some articles dealt explicitly with the price of goods, such as a thrilling exposé on “What a Japanese Woman's Clothes Cost.”

It was specifically female consumption that peppered the pages of *Ladies' Home Journal*. As advertisers sought to expand into new consumer markets to turn mass production into mass profit, the increasing sophistication in the advertising industry meant that the new awareness of middle class America’s gendered consumption habits translated into innovation on how to directly target women. Accordingly, the number of ads aimed at women in *Ladies' Home Journal* increased markedly during this time. In January of 1890, there were 155 ads without any specific gender reference and seventy-eight explicitly for women. Even ads for products used almost exclusively by women, like sewing materials, were advertised without reference to them: “The braid that is known the world round. Goff's Braid is the Best Made.” Two decades later, the tables had turned: in January 1909, fifty-nine ads had no gender specifications and 110 directly mentioned female activities in their text or illustrations. Ads like this one for Utica and Mohawk Sheets and Pillowcases were aimed at a female audience and referenced both female experience and knowledge: “Most women know by experience or by the information passed down from their mothers that these are names of sheetings which have been standard for years.”

But while women were depicted as consumers, they were not portrayed as embracing consumer values. For around two decades, between 1899 and 1919, the

---

74 *LHJ*, January 1909, 2.
76 Graph 1.
77 *LHJ*, May 1890, 15.
78 Graph 1.
79 *LHJ*, January 1909, 56.
dominant image of female consumption in the *Ladies' Home Journal* was that of the selfless consumer, a woman without consumer desires who purchased goods for the satisfaction of others. Both the commercial and non-commercial content of the *Ladies' Home Journal* emphasized temperance and altruism in their depictions of female consumption, and denied the existence or legitimacy of female personal consumer desires. This ambiguous identity emerged because the increasing female consumption portrayed in the *Journal* was overlaid on the model of Victorian womanhood, which saw women in the public world as desireless and dependent and condemned female envy. Manufacturers, operating "on the new principle that demand could be created," saw in middle-class women a consumer gold mine. But in order to penetrate the feminine sphere, advertisers first had to integrate consumption into traditional female values and activities. Consumption was thus portrayed in the early 1900s as means for Victorian women to better fulfill their existing duties to their homes, husbands, and children in a new modern world, and information on buying goods and comparing prices displaced traditional domestic advice of earlier journals.

At the end of the century, the rising influence of social sciences and the increasing cultural value of efficiency and scientific expertise over experiential knowledge supported consumerism and undermined traditional domestic skills, illustrated by the marked decline in assumed reader domestic knowledge in the *Journal*. Glenna Matthews argues that the devaluation of housework skills was due in part to the professionalization

---

80 Cf. Kathy Peiss, "Commercial Leisure and the 'Woman Question,'" in *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption*, ed. Richard Butsch (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 106: "Because women were economically dependent on men, "they could not be viewed as autonomous beings in the marketplace."

of housework and motherhood, where knowledge of domestic skills was moved outside
the home to the domain of the scientific and often elitist home economists who
“systematically disparaged housewives’ life experience and judgement.” 82 Women were
frequently exhorted to let “modern science... guide and define their motherly roles.” 83
The commodification of the home contributed to the deskilling of housework while
“serving the interests of corporate America.” The emphasis on efficiency and scientific
expertise over traditional domestic knowledge laid the groundwork for the values of
consumerism to take hold. 84

In 1899, the pages of the Journal questioned women’s traditional housekeeping
and mothering skills by casting doubt on women’s ability to care for their families
without consuming for them. One article about children’s crafts maintained that for the
project to properly work, “the beads, of course, must be bought, and so must the paper,”
and in fact, “so must all the other materials unless they can be furnished fresh, accurately
cut, correct and attractive in color, and precise in measurement.” 85 Ads reminded women
about their responsibilities to their families, equating the fulfillment of those duties with
buying consumer goods. “Nothing is more easily affected by irritation than the dainty,
delicate skin of a young child,” warned an ad for Ivory Soap; reminded another, for
Ralston Breakfast Food, “Little Minds Become Great Minds through what is fed to little
mouths.” 86 Advertisers blamed family strife on the lack of a particular consumer
product. “Don’t scold your husband or the children for being cross when perhaps their

82 Glenna Matthews, "Just a Housewife": The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America (New York: Oxford
University Press, 1987), 162, 171; for more on the professionalization of motherhood, see Filene, 46-48.
83 Stuart Ewen, Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture
84 Matthews, 193, 112, 171.
85 LHJ, January 1899, 16.
86 LHJ, January 1899, i; LHJ, Feb. 1899, 26.
ill-humor arises from an overdose of grease,” urged one. “Keep the family always event-
tempered and happy by using Cottolene for shortening and frying instead of greasy
animal fats.”

The knowledge Ladies’ Home Journal assumed of its readers declined steadily
into the twentieth century, and by 1909, consumer goods were regularly presented as
solutions to women’s inevitable domestic failings. In articles on current trends in dresses
and fashion, the simple written instructions of earlier decades were replaced by “Patterns
(including guide chart) for the designs shown on this page,” available “at fifteen cents for
each number.” Advertisers embraced the idea of deteriorating female domestic skills as
a way to market their products to women. “The old-fashioned hand chopper” – once a
kitchen staple – “is too hard for any woman!” declared a 1909 ad for a Steinfeld Food
Chopper. An ad for VanCamp’s Pork and Beans was even more explicit:

> Our point is this: It isn’t your fault that home-baked beans are mushy and broken
> – crisped in the top and half-baked in the middle. That they are neither nutty nor
> mealy – not even digestible. That they always ferment and form gas. It is simply
> your lack of facilities. The best way is to let us cook them for you... Think how
> unwise it is to bake your own beans when you can get VanCamp’s.

Advertisers as well as Journal writers advocated scientific standards of cleanliness and
hygiene for the home, attainable only by purchasing new goods. As a 1909 ad declared,
women should use Lifebuoy Soap to “protect yourself, your family, and your surroundings from dangerous germs.”

By 1914, consumption was portrayed as a critical component in the housewife’s duties. It was portrayed as middle class women’s explicit economic function, with a wife’s consumption as the complement to her husband’s production. An 1914 article titled “Is Any Man Easy to Live With?” examined the “the financial situation of women and men when they live together.” As the hypothetical woman in the article explained to her husband, “The division of our labor is that you are to earn the money and I am to expend it for your comfort and sustainment. This is one of the things you married me for.” Women “cannot go out and earn money,” nor can men “go out and spend it for the food... [and] adornment.” In this view, women purchased goods to complete the financial cycle of production and consumption necessary for a home to function properly. Shopping was portrayed as a chore, an extension of women’s domestic duties. A British sociologist wrote in one issue that “purchasing” food was a part of the litany of “perpetual demands” on women, which included “preparing and cooking... and washing the cooking implements.”

These depictions of female consumption denied any personal desires on the part of women, for in consuming they were merely fulfilling their familial and economic duties. Throughout the transitional period, women were rarely offered or shown as wanting anything for themselves; rather, women were sold goods that would provide

---

91 LHJ, January 1909, 43.
93 Elaine Tyler May discusses some of the economic and cultural implications of this division in Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 155: “As long as the economic system offered women satisfaction as consumers and frustration as producers, women would continue to look to the home for fulfillment and to men for support.”
94 LHJ, May 1919, 41.
satisfaction to others. In the January 1909 issue, for example, 70% of the ads for women presented goods for women to buy for their children, their husbands, or their households; only thirty-three of the 170 ads in this issue targeted women's personal needs. Advertisements and stories alike presented it the woman's job to fulfill the consumer desires of her family, but not her own. In May 1914, an ad for VanCamp's Pork and Beans extolled wives to "Have What HE Likes Tonight," whose explicit message that husbands preferred the company's pork and beans product was underscored by the subtle implication that the female reader should sacrifice her own desires for his satisfaction. The Journal's message was that consumption was only acceptable when used as a tool to perform one's duties as household manager and family caretaker. As a 1914 ad for knitting materials exclaimed, it was not women, but women acting in their familiar roles, who consumed: "To Wives and Mothers: Let's Go Shopping!"

Although the implication was that women should, and indeed needed, to consume, it was not assumed that they actually understood how to do so properly. "To be able to shop with economy, taste and prudence is a talent which not many women possess," noted an article in January 1899. Women were still assumed to be childlike and easily led astray. The Victorian understanding of women as irresponsible spenders meant that, as women entered the market, they were presumed to need instruction on how to consume properly. As Daniel Horowitz argues in The Morality of Spending, the turn of the century saw the rise of a new sociology responding to "the prospect of living with a lessened degree of self-restraint." Scientific experts, working under the same values as

95 Graph 4.
96 LHJ, May 1914, 63.
97 LHJ, May 1914, 73.
98 LHJ, January 1899, 24.
99 Rothman, 5.
home economists, set out to educate the middle class on the proper ways to budget and spend their money in a more consumer-friendly culture. This drive to teach was evident on the pages of *Ladies' Home Journal*. The need for female consumer education was "constantly emphasized" by advertisers and writers, though Helen Damon-Moore credits Edward Bok with developing the Journal's particularly "condescending tone."

Early *Ladies' Home Journal* appealed to outside authorities in helping women be proper consumers. Numerous advertisements contained the recommendation or seal of some doctor or scientist, like the enigmatic "Dr. Redwood, Ph.D., F.C.S., F.I.C." who graced a 1899 Pears' Soap ad. Articles emphasized the need for women to defer to experts at time; "Trust the salesman when buying underwear," one piece advised. Other articles addressed the need for men to help their wives navigate the perilous waters of the market. According to one article, any man "who is reasonable and conscientious" would begin early teaching his confused wife how to understand money matters, and would not "discourag[e] any improvement of her mind on that subject" of business. Don’t worry "[i]f the young wife is unaccustomed to an allowance, and so does waste money at first," said this article, the fourth in a series "About Men." "She will learn prudence after presenting [to her husband] an unbalanced account a few times." With the careful guidance of the experts and husbands, female readers could make the transition into the world of consumption.

---

101 Ewen, 169; Damon-Moore, 62.
102 LHJ, January 1899, i.
103 LHJ, January 1899, 24.
104 LHJ, January 1899, 15.
External guidance was increasingly supplemented by advice and instruction written directly for women. As early as 1899, the Journal began providing guides, such as "The Practical Side of Shopping," to help women "learn to distinguish good from bad, real from imitation, and also to discern whether they are getting articles of cotton or wool, or a skillfully prepared mixture that will appear well and wear badly."105 Stories and advertisements revealed the dangers of inattentive or excessive consumption, and despite the measure of paternalism were designed to help women learn to properly consume independently. Temperance and careful spending was emphasized in columns like "Dolly's Economical Ways" ("her motto: 'Think Before You Spend'"), and there were ready-made budgets and information for those who it was assumed would need the most financial guidance, like "The Girl Who Makes Her Own Clothes."106

Advertisers had a similarly educational tone, framing women's proper consumption in terms of the purchase of their particular products. As a Sun Bleach White Goods ad explained, "this label enables you to know what you are getting."107 Careful attention to brand names was especially important, for, as one 1919 ad cautioned, other less scrupulous manufactures were not to be trusted: "Thousands of women have been deceived by fabrics they thought were Skinner's, but were not Skinners,"108 instructing women to look for their particular brand was an important part of creating a relationship between consumers and goods that placed more value on brand recognition than cost, a relationship critical to the success of consumerism.109 And by teaching

105 LHJ, January 1899, 24.
106 LHJ, May 1904, 49; LHJ, January 1909, 60.
107 LHJ, January 1909, 60.
108 LHJ, January 1919, 78.
109 Strasser, 28. For in-depth discussion of how consumer relationships with brand names developed and supported the increasing influence of consumerism, see Strasser, 29-57.
women how to consume properly, advertisers and editorial writers sowed the seeds for the modern woman who was defined in a large part by her independent consumption.

It was a combination of many forces that led to the appearance of the paradoxical selfless consumer on the pages of *Ladies' Home Journal*. The amount of assumed female domestic knowledge declined, and women in *Ladies' Home Journal* were depicted as turning to consumption to fulfill their duties as wives, as mothers, and as household managers. Selfless consumption thus functioned like the concept of enlarged housekeeping, justifying troubling gender behavior by explaining it in terms of the traditional value system. Women's purchasing behaviors were structured around the needs of others, and instruction about consumption presented it as another domestic skill. The idea that women would have consumer desires, or indeed, any desires of their own, was not yet acceptable. *Ladies' Home Journal*, like many of the women who read it, did not “question the concept of a feminine sphere, only its limits.”

However, the emerging consumer existed in a world that was increasingly filled with appeals for self-gratification. Certainly, women's responsibilities to their families did not diminish. But consumer culture's insistence on immediate personal satisfaction conflicted with the selfless consumer's lack of individual desires. As consumerism became entrenched, portrayals of altruistic consumption declined. By the early 1920s, the transitional selfless consumer was herself consumed by the self-fulfilled, consumption-driven modern woman.

---

110 Filene, 15.
IV. The Modern Woman

In 1924, an advertisement in *Ladies' Home Journal* for the Girls' Club lamented the misfortune of a woman deprived of life's material pleasures. Its message, underneath its opportunity for women to earn money respectably, was that consumption was the ultimate arbiter of value. In the ad, a woman's joy over "an invitation from the 'right man'" is diminished by her lack of a particular dress, and the fact that her "clothes are just a bit shabby" compels a woman to deny herself the pleasure of a trip home. Even the consumerist act of buying a rug, which by the ad's logic should have fulfilled her, is devalued by her memory of a "prettier one we couldn't afford." This ad uses language that implies a very different set of values from those of the virtuous Victorian world, consumerist values that were increasingly accepted by white middle-class America.

By the 1920s, consumer culture had become a driving force behind much of American life, particularly the lives of middle class white women. Consumption, once an occasional and morally suspect female activity, was the unqualified province of women. Women's magazines quickly took up the banner of consumerism and heralded alongside their advertisers the coming of the "modern woman," whose independence and beauty was rooted in her ability to buy products for herself. No longer were the women on the magazines' pages confined to selfless purchasing to fulfill their feminine responsibilities; though women were was still portrayed as the family purchasers who bought goods for the entire household, more sophisticated ads appealed to women's personal image while selling them products to ease the burden of domestic work. For the modern woman, consumption was an end unto itself; portrayals of shopping as a fulfilling recreational and uniquely female activity dotted the consumerist landscape of *Ladies' Home Journal*.

---

111 *LHJ*, May 1924, 100.
America’s entry into World War I heavily impacted the shape of middle class consumerism. Production of many consumer goods was put on hold for the war effort; the primary breadwinners of thousands of homes went to Europe. Though the scope of this study did not include an examination of the impact of the war years on Ladies’ Home Journal, a cursory glance reveals some of its influence on the images of female consumption. The selfless, emerging consumer was the dominant interpretation going into the 1910s, but mentions of personal consumption by women started to appear as early as 1914. One May 1914 ad defined “dress” – “the big absorbing topic in the daily life of every woman.” – as not only “everything she must provide for others to wear” but also “everything she wears,” too. But during and in the months immediately following the war, the emphasis in ads and articles turned back to the selfless woman, who now had not just her family but the world to care for. One particularly revealing editorial in January 1919 reflected on this perceived role:

The Government must see to it that a hungry world does not take from us more than we can spare, while every American who claims to have a heart and some consideration for the sufferings of humanity must hold down to the very minimum his individual consumption of food. That part of the program rests largely, of course, with the American housewife, and neither Mr. Hoover nor anyone else has any doubt of her response, once the condition and need are understood by her.\footnote{LHJ, May 1914, 70, emphasis added.} \footnote{LHJ, January 1919, 12.}
But the end of the war also spelled the end of the selfless consumer. In January 1919, out of one hundred total ads, fifteen of them appealed to women to buy goods for their families; in May 1919, once the government “lifted restrictions on paper,” there were thirty-four such ads, but the number of pages in the magazine had tripled. The image of the selfless consumer had a renewed importance when the magazine’s message was self-sacrifice for the war effort, but without that message, her decline continued at an increased rate.

Not just in *Ladies' Home Journal* but throughout the country, consumerism rose to a fever pitch after the war. In this modern world, “suburban families became consuming units.” In their pioneering study *Middletown*, Robert and Helen Lynd noted that advertisements, popular magazines, and other “channels of increased cultural diffusion” were “rapidly changing habits of thought as to what things are essential to living and multiplying optional occasions for spending money.” Advertisers set out to expand Americans’ need for consumer goods in “an aggressive device of corporate survival,” creating desires that only consumption could sate. There was both an awareness and “acceptance of new patterns of spending” among middle class families in the 1920s. As buying goods became a requirement for personal happiness, consumption began to color the way Americans thought about themselves and each other. Asked a woman in one story in a May 1924 article, “what is deeper in a man than his

---

114 Graph 6; *LHJ*, May 1919, 2.  
118 Horowitz, 109.
tastes?" How and what a person bought became part of their identity and personality.

Middle-class women were a critical part of the consumer society that emerged in the 1920s. The increasing wealth of the new managers and professionals was channeled into the economy through their wives. Though many still held doubts about women's place in the market, social critics and advertisers came to accept that women had legitimate personal desires, persuaded in part by the recognition of women's vast potential as a consuming demographic. As Susan Matt argues, "women's envy came to be viewed as a valuable economic stimulant and a 'natural' part of modern American femininity." This was reflected in the increasing gender awareness of advertisers in *Ladies' Home Journal*: between 1889 and 1929, the percentage of ads per issue directed specifically at women rose from 34% to 87%. It was also reflected in the rise of images of the "modern woman" in the *Journal*, an ideal female who was independent, capable, and fully participating in American consumerism.

There was much discussion about the expansions in women's political, economic, and social roles in America by the 1920s. The modern woman in the *Journal*

---

119 *LHJ*, May 1924, 3.
120 For a discussion of how consumption became an aspect of identity, see Karen Halttunen, "From Parlor to Living Room: Domestic Space, Interior Decoration and the Culture of Personality," in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York: N. W. Norton and Co., 1989), which traces the transition from the Victorian parlor, which expressed a family's character, to the modern middle class living room, which revealed the homeowner's personality.
established her independence in many ways. She was no longer a slave to her domestic duties, "not content to have her life focus upon the home." The modern woman took an unspoken vow at marriage "to dedicate her life to something besides housework." As a January 1919 article observed, just as "no woman wants to be dependent[,] no woman feels comfortable with leisure time on her hands." The Ladies' Home Journal still depicted primarily women who were middle class and married, and the modern woman was depicted exercising her economic and physical independence not by earning her own money, but in a large part by buying goods that enhanced her personal freedom and physical beauty. This new control over consumption was portrayed as a new and liberating part of women's lives. An ad for Modess sanitary napkins observed this modernizing power of the market: "In a gloomier age, women were resigned to drudgery. Today, young womanhood does not permit drudgery to cloud her joy of living. She is the champion of every new device which adds to the pleasure and ease of her existence."

Popular women's magazines played a unique part in the expansion of consumer culture in America, particularly as they were part of the "ten-cent revolution" of low-priced periodicals that were funded by ad revenues rather than sales revenue. This shift, which was made by three magazines in 1893 and which reverberated to other existing magazines like Ladies' Home Journal, altered the whole economic orientation of magazines: from a sales point of view, the goal became selling readers to advertisers, rather than selling magazines to readers. As Elaine Gruber Garvey states, "magazines

125 LHJ, May 1929, 229.
126 LHJ, January 1919, 72.
127 Ewen, 171.
128 LHJ, May 1929, 97.
came to act in the interests of advertisers in the aggregate, and advertising came to shape magazines."¹³⁰ This was certainly true for *Ladies’ House Journal*. In sheer numbers, advertisement became the most prominent feature of the magazine. The size of the magazine itself increased significantly over the forty-year period, from around thirty pages in 1890 to nearly 250 in 1929.¹³¹ Much of that increased page space was taken up by larger advertisements, as the average number of ads per page dropped from around eight to just over one, and full or half page ads became common.¹³² By the 1920s *The Journal*, like other women’s magazines, was as much a vehicle for advertisers to peddle their wares as a forum for personal advice, domestic tips, and fiction.

Consumption shaped not only the structure but the content of the magazine as well. The magazine’s writers intermingled with its advertisement writers, both in their ideas and on the same physical pages, and each contributed to the whole package that was presented to the reader. Ellen Gruber Garvey argues that “through stories that were allegories of shopping” which showed women “choosing wisely between offered choices,” advertising often intersected with fiction as a means of encouraging women to consume.¹³³ Factual articles, too, supplemented the information presented by advertisements; articles like “This New Era in Foods” discussed “new food products appearing on the market” and included quizzes at the end to help readers test their contemporary culinary knowledge.¹³⁴ The May 1929 issue of the *Journal* even contained an “Index of Advertisers” in the back pages, to assist readers in finding their favorite

¹³¹ Graph 1.
¹³² Graphs 2 and 3.
¹³³ Garvey, 8.
¹³⁴ *LHJ*, May 1929, 118.
brands among the hundreds represented. This collusion between editors and advertisers legitimized locating consumerism at the center of women's magazines, which embraced the act of purchasing goods as a valid and defining part of women's lives.

The increasing acceptability of consumption meant that women who consumed on the pages of *Ladies' Home Journal* were depicted less as either hopeless or selfless. Beginning in the early 1920s, the dominant image was that of a modern woman who could and did consume independently. The savvy shopper became more prominent than the image of the vulnerable girl at the mercy of advertisers and merchants. An ad for A&P Food Stores gave women a high compliment: "Today, modern wives practice the same discerning judgement as their distinguished husbands, America's men of business" — when they patronized A&P, of course. Information about consumption ceased to be presented as instructions for uninformed young women and started being portrayed as quick reference guides for busy "home-makers [who] find it difficult to keep up with the new food products appearing on the market."

The modern woman presented in the later editions of *Ladies' Home Journal* consumed as much for her own sake as she did for the sake of others. Rather than being degraded by her own greed, she found both independence and satisfaction in her consumption. As one Cadillac advertisement explained simply, "It is the car she desires, and the car she possesses, and therein lies the secret of her enviable motoring contentment." The same was true for all of women's purchases for themselves. In 1914, during the transitional period, an ad for the Girls' Club listed the personal goal of

135 *LHJ*, May 1929, 254.
136 *LHJ*, May 1929, 77.
137 *LHJ*, May 1929, 118.
138 *LHJ*, May 1924, 64.
“dress better” alongside more traditionally acceptable endeavors like “educate your children” and “support a family” as reasons why women would want to earn more money. Just six years later, another Girls’ Club ad presented a much wider range of acceptable female material desires, including “[s]ilverware, trousseaus, talking machine records, ‘just spare change,’ an automobile fund, a trip home, payments on a little house, new bedroom furniture, pretty clothes galore.” By the end of the 1920s, the Journal proclaimed that modern women fulfilled their wants as well as their needs through acts of consumption.

Sometimes women were portrayed as master manipulators of the system. Women knew how to convince their husbands to help them with purchases. A Sellers Kitchen Cabinets ad told the story of “the hungry husband and chiffon frock,” in which a clever wife used a delicious meal to convince the former to let her buy the latter (with the help of her Sellers cabinet, of course). And an article on manufactured food extolled the power of the female consumer: “Thus, if a tapioca manufacturer wants me to choose tapioca for dessert today, he has to make a darn good tapioca, not something that cooks up to a gooey glue; otherwise I will vote for cornstarch pudding.” The cleverness of those who had only recently been seen as ignorant of the whole process of consumption reveals just how differently female consumption had come to be viewed.

Women’s acts of personal consumption frequently involved fashion and beauty products. It was both important and natural for women to desire to improve their appearance, declared the magazine, and that improvement was dependent on consumer

139 LHJ, May 1914, 70.
140 LHJ, January 1920, 62.
141 LHJ, May 1924, 167.
142 LHJ, May 1929, 156.
goods. "No woman wears cheap or unbecoming clothes from choice," stated one writer, "The desire to be well-gowned is in her heart, a natural female instinct." Instinctive or not, readers' desires were clearly influenced by the barrage of advertisements and articles included in every issue. The number of ads for beauty products increased rapidly through the 1910s and 20s, though they experienced a slight drop around the war years. In 1899, there were nineteen ads for female beauty products out of 139 ads total, less than 14%; that had doubled by 1924, with beauty ads taking up nearly 30% of all ad space. Seasonal fashions were often given large sections and included purchasing information, for patterns if not for the clothes themselves. The importance of conforming to common standards of beauty underscored these messages. As one beauty ad remarked, "most lovely people are lovely because they know the rules." Fashion articles discussed the mandates of the current trends, pointing out fashion faux pas to avoid and giving general advice on beauty and fashion purchases, such as "Every Wardrobe Should Include a Sweater." Stuart Ewen argues that this was a systematic effort by the marketing industry to commodify beauty just as housekeeping skills were commercialized in the decades before.

That the focus on women's consumption for themselves increased is not to say that their role as "family purchasers" had disappeared. The percentage of advertising geared towards women that promoted purchasing goods for others, such as food for children or clothes for husbands, increased into the 1910s and then dropped only slightly

142 LHJ, May 1920, 65.
143 Graphs 4 and 5.
144 LHJ, May 1920, 44.
145 LHJ, May 1924, 137.
146 LHJ, May 1924, 187.
147 Ewen, 178.
148 LHJ, May 1920, 62.
during in the 1920s. But the needs of others ceased to be the primary motivation for female consumption, and self-interest became a more legitimate reason for a woman to buy even goods that benefited her whole family. This can be seen in the shift in advertising messages: rather than framing housekeeping products as critical to women’s fulfillment of their duties to others, ads in the 1920s emphasized the efficiency of their labor-saving products. Advertisers promoted freedom from domestic toil through the miracles of modern manufacture - “Heinz is freedom from the remorseless demand of the family!” a typical ad exclaimed. A Campbell’s soup ad pointed out how much effort one would into “selecting, purchasing and preparing all these different vegetables – 15 of them – in your own kitchen!” Buying the soup saved “time and expense.”

It also saved women from having to know how to cook soup. Complementing the emphasis on efficiency was the further decline of the value of domestic production. Much of the domestic knowledge that Ladies’ Home Journal had taken for granted at the end of the nineteenth century was no longer assumed of Journal readers by the end of the 1920s. One writer observed that “greatness in social and domestic activities” seemed to require powers “unknown among the great mass of women.” Traditional domestic skills were replaced by consumer knowledge and purchasing skills. This was a “major shift from housekeeping as production to housework as consumption,” in which “homemaking skills [were] reconstituted into a process of accumulating mass-produced

149 Graph 5.
150 Stuart Ewen discusses how domestic goods were more accurately “labor-changing” than “labor-saving.” Ewen, 163.
151 LHJ, May 1924, 78.
152 LHJ, May 1929, 41.
153 LHJ, May 1924, 180.
Journal issues in the late 1920s had fashion pages that featured only illustrations, purchasing information and the statement, “no patterns are offered.” One article on advances in the food industry summed up the ways in which cooking had been deskilled by science:

The domestic science expert in the food plant tries to get every recipe down to the simplest terms, eliminate all unnecessary steps. ‘First catch your hare,’ said an old recipe for rabbit stew. Now nowadays. Your rabbit will be furnished to you skinned, cleaned, cut in pieces of the right size, and attractively garnished; you pop it into the oven and Nature and the gas company do the rest.

Far from lamenting the loss of domestic skill, the magazine heralded the new consumer goods as modern marvels. “Ingredients for bread go in at one end, and wrapped sealed loaves, perfectly baked, come out at the other without a finger having touched them,” lauded one writer; “small wonder the woman who bakes bread in her own kitchen in almost as extinct as the ichthyosaurus.”

Another was advertisements in the journal appealed to women’s personal gratification in order to sell them products that benefited others was by emphasizing the beautifying qualities of the products. As one ad stated sagely, “beauty is the handmaiden of utility.” These ads emphasized the fulfillment of a new female ideal of beauty over

---

155 LHJ, May 1924, 35.
156 LHJ, May 1929, 157.
157 LHJ, May 1929, 120.
158 LHJ, May 1929, 154.
Victorian ideals of domesticity. New advances also held the key to skin-friendly cleaning products. “Cooking, washing, sewing – housework generally – [could] dry out the natural oils, make your hands rough and red and stuff,” but new laundry and dish detergents promised “no more ruined manicures, or reddened hands.”

Ads also associated personal beauty with the beauty of the home. Interior decoration was seen as an extension of one’s personality and thus a woman’s desire to gown herself well extended to the dressing of her home. Inevitably, “...the day [would] come when [a woman] simply longed for some new fixings for [her] house far more than for any new clothes.” Ads in the later part of the 1920s connected a woman’s personal fashion sense with her taste in home and dining accoutrement. The “hostess” portrayed in many ads combined the Victorian demand for domestic management and the modern requirement of social entertainment. A woman may “[wear] the smartest clothes [and have] the smartest things,” claimed an ad for table settings, but “[w]atch her when guests are invited... She sets the table in five, six, seven clashing patters of silverware,” much to her social disgrace. Unlike their bodies, women could only show off their homes by entertaining, and need to host a good party in order to exhibit their domestic style became a major theme for advertisers. “If only she had enough silverware to entertain at home,” lamented another ad for table settings. A Victrola ad gave a testimonial from a wife with an active social life; the machine, she

---

159 LHJ, May 1929, 156.
160 Halttunen, 78.
161 LHJ, May 1919, 62.
162 LHJ, May 1929, 105.
163 LHJ, May 1924, 103.
exclaimed, was useful “[f]or bridge parties, for dancing, for a pleasant background of
music at dinner – it’s really wonderful. I mean, it really is.”

By the end of the 1920s, female desire and its fulfillment was legitimized. The
idea of shopping as a meaningful and uniquely female recreational activity had emerged
and marked the triumph of consumerism over Victorian values. The implication was that
the actual act of searching for and buying goods was a normal and satisfying pastime.
Shopping was portrayed as a leisure activity: one ad recommended its tonic water “...as
a bracer after a shopping or motoring trip.” Consumption was no longer a means to an
end, but an end unto itself.

The act and enjoyment of consumption became associated with femininity and
female nature. In one piece of fiction, a woman saw “a vista of shops opening before
them like a glorious prospect in a magic land,” and when her male companion addressed
her, “she walked along as though she hadn’t heard him, as though she were stepping on
the clouds and wished no more of earth.” A Packard car advertisement credited
women’s “fine sense of discrimination” with making them “instantly appreciative of the
distinctive smartness” of owning one of their cars. There was even a sense of some
innate female compulsion to shop; as one author stated plainly, “no matter how high
prices soar, it doesn’t lessen the interest of women in new clothes nor prevent them from

---

164 LHJ, May 1929, 1.
165 Matt, 8-10.
166 LHJ, May 1920, 105.
167 See Virginia Scharff, Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 145-149, on the “mystification of middle-class women’s work” due to its equation with the home and leisure activities like driving. Shopping clearly contributed to this fuzzy definition.
168 LHJ, May 1924, 27.
169 LHJ, May 1924, 71.
buying them. ¹⁷⁰ When modern women were less frugal, it was not because they were uninformed about the world of the market, but because price was no deterrent from participating in the most female of pursuits.

The pursuit of consumption had become a major cultural factor by 1929. The structure and content of *Ladies' Home Journal* was shaped by the consumerism that increasingly provided the bedrock of American values as increasingly producers, both male and female, were turned into consumers. The image of the modern woman, independent and powered by consumption, dominated women's magazines by the end of the 1920s. This was a woman who bought things like beauty products and cars to serve her own needs first, and the needs of her family second. Not only did the modern woman purchase goods for her personal fulfillment, but she also was motivated by modern values of efficiency and self-gratification when making purchases for others. Purchasing goods was seen as a natural and expected act of women as well as an acceptable recreational activity. Consumption, of minor concern to *Ladies Home Journal* just forty years earlier, by the end of the 1920s shaped not just the structure of the magazine but also the women who were envisaged on its pages.

¹⁷⁰ *LHJ*, May 1920, 133.
V. Conclusion: Desire, Satisfaction, and Agency

The rise of consumer culture and the decline of Victorian virtues in America was among the most profound shifts in the cultural history of America. The popular discussion of the "woman question" around the turn of the century contained debates over middle class women's duties, dependence, and desires. Popular women's magazines contributed to that conversation, even as they reflected its developments and contours. Thus, as a single source of cultural information in the midst of a great social shift, *Ladies' Home Journal* influenced the very culture which shaped its content and readership interests. Exploring changes on its pages provides insight both the mentalité of the era and the pragmatic ways in which consumerism was institutionalized in American culture.

In the 1890s and early 1900s, *Ladies' Home Journal* primarily featured images and messages promoting Victorian domesticity. Female consumption, although it was acknowledged, was not significant enough as a cultural force to merit much space or discussion in articles and stories, and the small, genderless ads were of secondary importance to the editorial content. Women were presumed to lack both the financial means and natural temperament to participate in the male world of commerce. When they did purchase goods writers presumed husbands would provide their spendthrift wives with both money and guidance.

By the 1920s, *Journal* ladies were presumed to no longer need guidance or a husbandly allowance to engage in the market. The modern woman on the magazine's pages was an independent consumer, who controlled her (husband's) money and had personal desires. Consumption was considered the female domain, an activity that
complemented the masculine production of wealth. Sophisticated ads appealed to women's sense of liberation, offering her freedom from domestic burdens and access to beauty and popularity. The message was that personal satisfaction was connected to the very act of consumption, regardless of what goods were purchased, and depictions of recreational shopping as an acceptable female activity signaled a significant change in the Journal's interpretation of the role of women's consumption.

The modern woman was many things the Victorian woman was not: desirous of goods, and concerned with personal gratification and beauty, active in the consumer market. The transition between the two was marked by the emergence of a third feminine ideal, which embodied Victorian virtuous womanhood but also functioned in the public world of exchange. This image was the selfless consumer, an anomaly of altruism within the culture of indulgence. A general decline in the domestic knowledge assumed of Journal readers accompanied a new emphasis on efficiency and scientific methods. The magazines exhorted women to fulfill their existing domestic duties by purchasing consumer goods for her home and family. The emerging consumer did not stay within in the confines of private sphere of the home, but neither was she a full-fledged participant in the market, as she was expected to forgo her own desires for the good of her family.

This paradoxical message of selfless consumption for the satisfaction of others ultimately proved unstable in the face of the value placed on self-gratification in what became the dominant consumer culture. The selfless consumer was a transitional female model, with the values of the cult of domesticity overlaid on modern consumptive behavior. The transience of the image reveals it to be the product of an uneasy truce between the values of Victorianism and consumer society. Consumerism's emphasis on
self-pleasure and popularity directly challenged older standards of temperance and respectability. The selfless consumer was how *Ladies' Home Journal* coped with the contradictory messages for women to both contribute to the growing consumer economy and not stray from the safety of the domestic sphere.

The selfless consumer was just one area in which femininity came to be marked by contradictory activities with the onset of consumerism. The shocking rate of department store shoplifting among middle-class women, argues Elaine S. Abelson, can be seen in part as women’s reaction “against their own dependence and economic powerlessness” when faced with “sufficient money... [but little] freedom or control over spending.” Stuart Ewen writes that “sexuality was, for women, a duty of leisure,” noting that in such a system, work and relaxation were inextricably linked. The many overlaps between leisure and domestic activities created what Virginia Scharff terms the “mystification work” of Progressive-era America just “had a hard time visualizing what women did in the home as real work.” And this confusion did not end when the transition was over. Indeed, as shopping became a recognized recreational pursuit, it undermined its legitimacy as a household duty, contributing to the “devaluation of domesticity” in twentieth-century America. Sociologists and home economists, who contributed to housework’s evolution into a consumptive rather than productive activity by emphasizing expertise and standardization, ironically leveled the heaviest criticism against the dwindling responsibilities of the new consumer housewife.

---

Matthews argues that undervaluing housework leads to undervaluing women’s time in general, as well as opening up the potential for corporate control of domestic activities.

The relationship between consumer liberation and sexual liberation is also fraught with ambiguity. The act of purchasing consumer goods for one’s self was a powerful rejection of an earlier gender role that had constricted women’s very capacity for desire. However, some have questioned the liberatory potential of consumer activities. Stuart Ewen, for example, argues that while consumer society may have had a slightly equalizing effect on gender roles, men and women both became subjugated to the paternalism of Corporate America. What is clear is that the experience of femininity and domesticity in American consumer society is complex. It exploration requires careful consideration of the possibilities and limitations of desire, agency, and satisfaction, and consideration of the larger context of the economic shift from an industrial economy to a corporate one in which this particular shift from Victorian to modern consumption took place. Analyzing the pages of the *Ladies Home Journal* is just one avenue in the ongoing exploration of the interactions of consumerism, culture and gender.

---

175 See Elaine Tyler May’s *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980) for an analysis of marital problems in the 1920s. Tyler argues that men and women came into marriage wanting different things, only a possibility in a society which allowed women to have personal wants. Rosemary Hennessy even links social acceptance of white middle-class female consumer desire with the acceptance of women’s active sexual desire, a shift which produced the object-oriented hetero- and homosexualities that persist today. Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 90-110.
176 Ewen, 184.
Works Cited


1. Total number of pages, total number of ads, and total number of ads for women, per issue.

2. Average and maximum number of ads per page, per issue.

3. Average number of ads per page with ads, per issue.

4. Percentage of ads by type, per issue: January 1899, January 1909, and January 1919.

5. A graph of percentage of ads by type, per issue: May 1890, May 1894, May 1904, May 1914, May 1924, and May 1929.

6. Percentage of ads by type, per issue: January 1919 and May 1919.
Average & Maximum Ads per page

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Ads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890 January</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890 May</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890 September</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899 January</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899 May</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904 January</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904 May</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914 January</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914 May</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919 January</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919 May</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920 January</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920 May</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924 May</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929 May</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Average**
- **Maximum**
Average Number of Ads per page with Ads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Average Ads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>January</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>May</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>September</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>May</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>January</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>May</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>January</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>May</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>January</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>May</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>May</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>