What Became of Rosie the Riveter?
Women’s Roles: A Narrative Analysis of Advertisements
In Life Magazine in 1939 and 1947

M.E. Yeager
Elliot School of Communication, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

1. Introduction

This paper uses narrative analyses to examine samples of advertisements from 1939 and 1947 to see how women’s roles were portrayed and if these portrayals changed. Differences were expected because women’s roles in society changed dramatically during World War II.

A lesson in each advertisement told women readers what they could do with their lives to achieve a happy ending. A significant change in the messages within the advertisements was found. Specifically, nearly a fifth of the advertisements in 1947 mentioned that women worked outside the home. None of the advertisements in 1939 did this. The messages in the remaining ads in both 1939 and 1947 told women that they should be a wife, caregiver, and homemaker.

The war and advertisements influenced women to take jobs that were previously not available to them. Although some women returned home, large numbers of women continued to work after the war (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1960). These women had three dimensional lives, just as the women shown in nearly a fifth of the 1947 advertisements. They were wives, mothers, homemakers, and they had a job outside the home.

2. Literature Review, Research Methods, and Results

Following America’s abrupt entry into World War II with the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the home front became a place where women were expected to transform their lives almost overnight. Before Pearl Harbor, women were expected to stay home to tend to the needs of their husband, home, and children. With the war, social norms governing women’s occupational endeavors changed. House arrest was over for the millions of “Rosies” who were ushered into the workplace to help out with war production (Anderson, 1981; Blum, 1976; Campbell, 1984; Hartmann, 1982; Honey, 1984; Rupp, 1978; Weiner, 1985).

As documented by historians such as Neville and Lewis among others, this major shift in societal expectations concerning women and work is evident in the mass media of the period (Honey, 1984; Neville and Lewis,; Rupp, 1978; Thompson, 1989). In poster campaigns, newspapers and magazine articles and advertisements, as well as radio and movie messages, women were invited to do their part by going to work. In response to this patriotic call to action, the number of women in the work force increased by 55 percent from 1940 to 1945.

What happened after the war? Large numbers of women quit work. However, many women who left home for the factory or office continued to work outside the home after the war, and it is easy to imagine that they might find the suggestion irritating, that at war’s end they leave their jobs just as quickly as they entered them a few years previously. The magazine advertising industry was an active agent in the glorification of “Rosie’s” image during the war. Did mass media messages aimed at women continue to reflect the more complex occupational roles they assumed during the war, or did they revert to their pre-war framing of women as homemakers?

According to Hannah Arendt, “Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it” (Arendt, as quoted in web site). Following this line of thinking, I suggest that, through storytelling, print advertisements not only tell their targets what to purchase, but secondarily, they give them broader lessons in life. The well-known “Ring Around the Collar” commercial serves as an example. Its primary lesson tells women to buy the kind of detergent promoted in the ad, but secondarily, the ad also tells women to keep their husbands’ shirts collars clean if they want to be socially acceptable wives. In essence, the lessons in these stories socially construct women’s lives by telling them what to do, as well as what not to do. It was thought that the narrative lessons embodied in post-war Life magazine ads were directed to women who work outside the home. This could represent a shift in the way society viewed women’s roles.
Magazines continued to incorporate women workers into their ads after the war’s end. Research for this paper addressed the following questions: What narrative lessons concerning women’s occupational roles were published in Life magazine advertisements in 1939 and 1947? How did the narrative lessons identified in 1947 Life magazine advertisements compare to those published in 1939? Finally, did these lessons reflect the occupational role shift of women from home to workplace that transpired during World War II and if so, how?

These dates were selected to allow for a pre- and post- war comparison. Advertisements from Life magazine were studied because Life was a widely read popular magazine. In 1947, Life had 2,029,761 paid subscribers and a total audience of 17,300,000. This circulation and readership compared favorably with other widely read contemporary magazines such as Collier’s, Liberty, and the Saturday Evening Post (Four Ladies, 1947; Magazine lineage, 1943).

A stratified sampling method was used to insure that one advertisement was included from each issue of Life during 1939 and 1947. Hence, 52 separate advertisements were analyzed for each year. Specifically, the first advertisement was examined in each issue of Life magazine for 1939 and 1947 that met the following criteria: First, an advertisement had to be targeted to women. Second, an advertisement had to contain a narrative. Third, full and half-page advertisements were used because most smaller advertisements did not contain explicit narratives.

The coding scheme used in the analyses of the ads’ lessons for women were adapted from Clarkson (2003), Lawler (2002), and McQuarrie and Mick (1999). Typically, narratives contain a storyboard or a sequence of events. They often contain a problem or a point of dramatic tension that captures the reader’s attention. This is followed by actions to solve the problem that result in a positive outcome, which is the lesson of the story (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 85). A storyboard or series of panels does not have to literally be present in an advertisement for it to contain a narrative. The equivalent of a storyboard could occur in the text, telling the reader what the people depicted in the advertisement were thinking, thus suggesting the ad’s secondary lesson.

Once the advertisements were selected, they were examined to collect the following descriptive data: year of publication, their characters, characterization of the woman, specific products advertised, and the elements of their narratives, including plots, dialogue, and points of dramatic tension. Next, the ads were read to ascertain their secondary lessons for women.

Results of these analyses are summarized as follows: In 1939, three major types of lessons for women existed in the 52 advertisements. These included the following: get married (n = 20, 38.5%), be a caregiver (n = 21, 40.4%), and be a homemaker (n = 10, 19.2%). One advertisement had a theme that did not fit within these categories.

In 1947, these lessons reoccurred as follows: get married (n = 13, 25%), be a caregiver (n = 22, 42.3%), and be a homemaker (n = 5, 9.6%). However, a new lesson called “be a super mom” appeared (n = 10, 19.2%). Two additional advertisements had a theme that did not fit within these categories.

3. Conclusions and Significance

Earlier researchers who examined the content of advertisements before, during, and after World War II found that advertisements only showed women working during the war. When the war ended, these advertisements virtually disappeared. They concluded that widespread social beliefs about woman’s place caused this shift back to traditional portrayals of women (Honey, 1984 and Lewis and Neville, 1995). In contrast, the results presented here indicate that a significant number of advertisements in 1947 contained lessons telling women that they could have it all—a husband, family, and a job outside the home. This was a significant shift accompanying the beginning of the two-income, two-career family in the United States.

4. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Patricia Dooley for her advice during this research project.