

THE WOMEN'S MAGAZINE MYSTIQUE: A RETROACTIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in the early 20th century, this retroactive analysis seeks to trace the lineage of women's magazines to present day. The historical criticism of the institution of female-targeted advertising and women's magazines is punctuated by the behemoth text of Betty Friedan *The Feminine Mystique*. The study is organized into eight sections by which the circumstance of women's magazines will be scrutinized in conjuncture, and often as symptomatic, of the wider American sexual political climate. By giving rise to the different acts of the great drama of women's magazines and the implicated condition of women's liberation and progress, the work aims to see the threading relevance of Friedan's watershed assessment of the institution and reconcile its importance 50 years later in the modern, digital American landscape.

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INTRODUCTION

Walk into a bookstore, a dentist office, or school library and one will inevitably find a brightly lit shelf stacked with titles such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Self*, *InStyle*, *Elle*, *Allure*, *Vogue*, or *Better Homes and Gardens*. The modern American woman lives within a world that is informed by what these magazines represent: sex, beauty, celebrity, health, cooking, wellness, cleaning, and decorating. Whether or not she reads these magazines or subscribes to their point of view, she is still affected by their position and prevalence in middle-class American society. Now is as crucial a time as ever to examine the messages our culture is consistently sending and often take for granted, particularly woman in the form of magazines. As a culture, we are 50 years removed from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and the second-wave of feminism that surged up in its wake. Friedan wrote articles for women's magazines before writing her landmark text and provides one of the first comprehensive criticisms of women's magazines. Her willingness to look inside the messages and manipulations of the ladies' magazine proved not only groundbreaking, but essential to the 60's and 70's analysis of power structure embedded within everyday spaces. However, flashing forward to 2014, one cannot help but wonder how evolved the representation of females in women's magazines has actually come since what Friedan condemned as "young, frivolous and fluffy" (Friedan 83). How invested are women's magazines with the ideas and principles of feminism? Or are the women's magazines of today simply reconfigured amalgamations of the same 1950's ideals? By scrutinizing women's magazines will we see evidence of female empowerment and political agency?

In the legacy of Friedan, women's magazines seem an apt place to gauge the sexual political climate of our culture. However, to appreciate the enormous influence magazines still have in the digital age, the history and lineage of the institution must be chronicled and explored. Without the larger contextual history, it is impossible to fully realize how the modern magazine has come to be. This project will seek to reconcile three goals: to trace history of the modern women's magazine, to analyze the textual phenomenon of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in the context of women's magazines unique social influence, and to examine the lingering legacy and relevance of Friedan's critique, and thereby current social implications, today. By engaging with feminist scholars and magazine historians, I hope to construct a thought-provoking analysis of a social movement performing as a literary movement with a rhetorical vector in the form of the women's magazine. Through my analysis, I hope to prove the importance of the woman's magazine as both a tool to advance larger cultural trends, and therefore enact strategies of propaganda, and also a thermometer of cultural assumptions and expectation as pertaining to women's gender role performance. Throughout my study, Friedan's feminist critique of women's magazines will provide structure to my own deconstructive process while building my own critique. In this way, I hope to demonstrate Friedan's lingering relevance today.

Rhetoric, Culture, and Persuasion

Before delving into the specific history of women's magazines, the assumptions surrounding my argument must be discussed. Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell explain in their book *Propaganda and Persuasion* that "shaping perceptions is usually attempted through language and images" (Jowett and O'Donnell 6). Because magazines

include both language and images, magazines are situated in an instrumental position to shape perceptions. The authors go on to say “[that] as perceptions are shaped, cognitions may be manipulated....[and] an attitude is a cognitive or affective reaction to an idea or object, based on one’s perceptions. Of course, once a belief or an attitude is formed, a person’s perceptions are influenced by it” (Jowett and O’Donnell 8). The complex process of perception formation intersects with popular culture, including women’s magazines, because perceptions are nourished by prevalent language and images. Though I am not accusing magazine editors and publishers of being malicious propagandists, it is essential to my argument that we witness how magazine rhetoric and format is capable of performing as propaganda. Jowett and O’Donnell define propaganda as “a form of communication that attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett and O’Donnell 1). However, for the sake of this project, my definition of propaganda is a form of communication that attempts to achieve a response that furthers *the notions of status quo that privileges those already in power*. Informed by my distinction, it will be possible to observe the women’s magazine in a role of propagation and perception shaping.

In Andi Zeisler’s book *Feminism and Pop Culture* she writes “in examining how feminism has informed pop culture and vice versa, it’s instructive to look at the way the evolution of the women’s movement has been mirrored in pockets of popular culture. This evolution has almost never been linear, as with women’s experience as a whole” (Zeisler 12). This principle is integral to comprehending the inherent linkage between the undulating tides of feminine role definition and the periodical, or more specifically the magazine. The magazine itself, therefore, becomes somewhat emblematic of the greater

drama unfolding; since the 1930's, magazines were uniquely positioned in American culture to demonstrate the unadulterated obsession with consumerism and the trappings of material wealth.

The magazine is a participant in a social movement to define gender roles and yet also symbolic of a parallel literary movement with a rhetorical vector. Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton, Jr. unpack the rhetorical situation within a social movement in their book *Persuasion and Social Movements* by explaining how “societies and their institutions have prevalent ideologies that explicitly and implicitly support and are supported by the prevailing social structure” (Stewart, Smith, Denton 132). The media is a prevailing social structure and the women's magazine is a player in the media. That is why “the power of control [which] allows legitimate institutions and leaders to regulate the flow of information and persuasion” is thematically important to the study of women's magazines (Stewart, Smith, Denton 133). As will be addressed and explored further, women's magazines have traditionally served to support the prevailing social structure, particularly rigid definitions of femininity and womanhood, as a concrete tool by which magazine editors, publishers, and advertisers have the license to regulate information. The women's magazine as a mode of persuasion, particularly as it includes both language and images, is therefore privileged to affect beliefs and attitudes and therefore shape cultural perceptions. This understanding buttresses how my project approaches and engages the unique social influence of women's magazines throughout history.

An Early History of the Modern Ladies' Magazine

The women's magazine was not new to the 20th century. However, the media institution of the magazine began changing shape into something that is more familiar to us today at the dawn of the 20th century. According to Jack Lule in his essay "The Role of the Magazine in the Development of American Popular Culture," "mass circulation allowed news, stories, consumer goods, and fashions to be diffused and advertised to widespread, rather than regional, audiences. Mass circulation of magazines united the country as geographically diverse consumers read the same stories and saw the same advertisements" (Lule). Lule goes on to say, "by the 1930s, market research had become the norm for periodicals as magazines—and advertisers—worked to better understand what readers wanted in their publications" (Lule). In Theodore Peterson's book "Magazines of the Twentieth Century" he asserts that

As new publishers introduced new magazines reflecting the changes in American life, many of the magazines which had once led in circulation and prestige were driven out of business. They were replaced by new leaders which achieved huge circulations of fairly short periods, especially after World War I. Since some of these new leaders were based on original approaches to publishing, and since other publishers imitated the successful innovations, whole new classes of magazines emerged during the twenties, thirties, and forties. (Peterson ix)

Though the magazine has a magnificent, long history before the rising 20th century, scholars recognize the twenties and beyond as the true conception of what modern readers now understand as magazines. The modern women's magazine by sheer volume of readership and circulation rates is easily qualified as a literary movement. As

supported by both magazine historians, a specific style and sensibility of magazine writing and formatting was developed in the beginning of the 20th century that was repeated and carried on for decades, thus rendering it a kind of literary movement situated within popular culture. Our search to understand how ladies' magazines are both a tool for cultural trends and also a thermometer of the larger sexual political climate will begin near the beginning of the 20th century.

It is unhelpful, however, to look at the immense position of ladies' magazines in a vacuum of 21st century understanding without proper contextualization. To correctly appreciate the influence woman's magazines have been afforded throughout the 20th century, there must be no doubt the differences between American society in the 1930's and 40's to today. As Nancy A. Walker writes in her book *Woman's Magazines, 1940-1960*, "to understand the different role that magazines played in the lives of many women in the 1940's . . . we must imagine a society very different from our own" in that media had not infiltrated the popular consciousness in the same regard as today. Tracing the history of the American women's magazine, starting in the early 20th century, provides a proper basis to explore the way magazine's influencing messages have taken shape and the ramifications these messages have held within popular American culture. Walker concludes that "magazines thus assumed more importance than they do today in helping to shape and reflect the values, habits, and aspirations of American women and their families." To demonstrate her argument, Walker points to the staggering fact that in the 1940's *Ladies' Home Journal* "claimed the largest circulation of any magazine in the world" (Walker 1). Magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, *Woman's Home Companion*,

McCall's, and *Redbook* were fortified by subscription lists circulating two to eight million copies which were then shared among family members and friends.

Enter magazine advertisements and with them an entirely new medium of messaging whereby the female is either the vehicle for sales or the target of such. Andi Zeisler continues her argument by emphasizing the duality of white femininity in advertisements, as seen as early as the late 1800's, to either act as the bare-breasted pinup girl featured in a calendar to sell mechanical parts to men or as the objective for messages such as "Keep that schoolgirl complexion," "Be the girl he marries . . . forever," and "Bring out those romantic curves that will make your bust line your beauty line." (Zeisler 25). Mary Ellen Zuckerman writes in her book *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995* that "advertising's success spilled over to magazines and a significant portion went to women's journals, swelling their pages and pocketbooks...[and as] the advertising industry and ad agents became more organized and more powerful, [they] gain[ed] increased influence over women's journals" (Zuckerman 101). In light of Walker's assessments of influence and readership, the shaping effect of such messages to inform gender performance heightens the stakes. Walker writes, "the prevailing ideology that equated women with the domestic sphere. . . together with the technological developments such as vacuum cleaners and frozen foods that were marketed to women through advertising, ensured that.... the largest numbers of both readers and advertisers [would be reached] at midcentury" (Walker 3). In this way, the magazines contain layers of influence: advertisement and brand development in the context of magazine articles and images disseminating particular messages. Thus the

influence is strengthened and then focused on the female population through the vehicle of the women's magazine.

As becomes clear in Betty Friedan's opus *The Feminine Mystique*, the history of 20th century woman's magazines is fraught with manipulation. While ladies' magazines brimmed with titles such as "Are You Too Educated to Be a Mother?" and "Do You Make These Beauty Blunders?", Walker concedes that the magazines themselves were not always devoid of some substance such as published nonfiction and fiction written by women or infrequent political pieces (Walker 6). However, while there is not total and complete break from political and literary content, there is a carefully controlled filter through which information is sorted and deemed appropriate for women's interest. For instance, Walker discusses the electric social political atmosphere of the civil rights movement in the 1950s that remains mysteriously exempt from the pages of widely circulated women's periodicals. Landmark events such as the 1954 Supreme Court school desegregation decision, the Montgomery bus boycott, and the 1957 integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas are strangely missing (Walker 8). If women's magazines were the only historical evidence left of that era, we would know virtually nothing of the political struggle. And yet, in the years following World War II there is mention within women's magazines of "cold war tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union... especially in articles exploring the adequacy of the American education, but also in allusions to bomb shelters and civil defense plans" (Walker 8). By looking at the political content of the magazine, and just as importantly the absence of political content, there is a clear paradox at play. In the quote above, Walker outlines the distinction between what political content was allowed into the magazines by looking at

the nature of controversy. The civil rights movement was clearly divisive, testing loyalties and patriotism. But women were not readily welcomed into that subversive space. As is alluded to with a title such as “Are You Too Educated to Be a Mother?” women were protected from significant conflict that may force a reasoned response and a growing consciousness of personal thought. However, promoting the presence of Cold War tensions did not present this same threat. By infusing the propaganda of the Soviet/America conflict into the women’s magazine, there was an obvious hope that women would then disseminate this logic to their families and further enforce the “American way of life” as dutifully guarded by the mother and wife.

However, this was not the first or last time white American women would be sold a pre-packaged tradition, ideal, or political stance as commodity through the vehicle of the magazine. To set the groundwork for Friedan’s coming critique, we must first have a vivid example, including salient historical background, of how magazine’s glorified authoritative voices that promoted certain cultural assumptions and expectations surrounding the issues of gender. In Alfred Toombs’ article “War Babies” published in *Woman’s Home Companion*, April 1944, he argues that government officials, social workers, psychiatrists and public health experts are “particularly alarmed by what is happening to babies whose mothers are working or living in war production centers and to babies whose fathers have been called off to war” (Walker 51). The article begins with the bombastic declaration that America is running the risk of “creating another lost-generation.”

Toomb’s article and those like it were afforded so much clout partially because of tumultuous nature of the era. The gender politics of World War II were radically shaken

when Roosevelt called for middle-class women to join the war effort and forgo the quiet placidity of home. The magazine was a primary tool to reinforce this ideal with figures such as “Rosie the Riveter” and “Mrs. Casey Jones” who sacrificed their comfort to work industrial, manual labor and bring the boys home. Magazine narratives featuring female protagonists, often focusing on their participation in wartime effort such as creating liberty gardens, buying war bonds, working in factories and the ability to still have ‘successful and happy’ families, readily sprouted up to match the irrefutable need. Zuckerman writes, “World War II turned back to the content of the thirties, as women’s journals stressed information, telling women what they could do to help the war effort. The magazines joined the government campaign to attract females into the paid labor force” (Zuckerman 102). This shift flew in the face of the often villainous presentation of the working women during the Great Depression era in which working married women were seen as a direct threat to unemployed men. Walker cites a 1936 Gallup poll which “revealed that 82 percent of Americans opposed the paid employment of married women, and more than half of the then forty-eight states had laws that prohibited such employment in at least some circumstances” (Walker 12). However, the previous vitriol for working women is markedly contrasted by the same poll in 1945 in which only 13 percent of Gallup respondents opposed women working.

However, Toombs’ article punctuates the turning attitudes of the public, as supported by statistic, to reinstate the traditional mantra of female expectation, therefore offering an attractively conservative solution to rectify the era’s social upheaval. The importance of Toombs’ article, in the discussion of the precedent women’s magazines set in the lives and mindsets of actual women, is that it shows the elevated position of

resident experts and authorities over the female psych. There is clearly a wagging finger presiding over the women who fail to remain within the specific terms of socially acceptable behavior. Now that the war is over, women must be told that remaining employed will hurt their babies. The moment in the sun has vanished, disappeared behind the bulbous clouds of sprawling suburbanization and the baby boom. They are widely manipulated to quickly rush back in the kitchen and make way for the returning veterans who will take it from here.

The point is not only how women's magazines were reflective of shifting sexual political climate, but also how magazines enforced power of control over the female psych to keep them in line with the larger political agenda therefore enacting strategies of propaganda. Walker writes, "As early as June 1944, a *Good Housekeeping* article featured designs for efficient 'postwar kitchens' – the phrasing providing a succinct description of the expectations for women's postwar work" (Walker 16). In addition to the *Good Housekeeping* article demonstrating the notion of regressive, domestic cloistering, the fact that the phrasing and the implementation of authoritative voice could be used as one tool to persuade the majority of white, middle-class women back into the home is indicative of the medium's power. Betty Friedan would soon carefully scrutinize the position of ladies' magazines that left women-readers vulnerable to masculine discourse of popular science and the patriotic political agenda. In subsequent years of WWII, pop social workers, psychologists, education professionals, and Christian ministers would all weigh in on the conversation on the middle-class housewife's role, obligation, failures, and expectations. The tradition of outside authorities speaking over women's lives gave the medium of women's magazines the important power to shape

thought and reinforce norms. However, the forces pressing against middle-class women's stirring sense of equality are, ironically, what also inspired the impending sexual revolution of the 1960's. Blanch G. Linden writes in her book *Americans at War*, "female involvement in World War II, the expansion of the middle class and consumer society following the war, and the expanded role of women in politics and the economy during the Cold War (1946– 1991) had created the context for women to reexamine their personal and social identities" (Linden 66). The crucial reexamination of female personal and social identities would become the axle by which the history of women's liberation would rotate.

Enter Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*

1963, a year planted in the middle of a century ushered in by the poverty and innovation of the Industrial Revolution, the debauchery and excess of the Roaring Twenties, the crash and fallout of the Great Depression, and on the heels of two bold and bloody World Wars. 1963 remembers the fearful, wagging fingers of McCarthyism; the sentiment still lingering uneasily. Forty-three years had passed since women won the vote with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. The suburbs were sprawling and each sensible home is fitted with the newest washer dryer unit and vacuum cleaner. America continued to evolve, the shape of society and culture morphing and shifting. Yet, there was a woman who looked up from the grind of societal platitudes long enough to notice that all the massive movements of American progression yielded a deeply untapped stifling and a strangely unmet cry. This woman, this Betty Friedan, was aware of how woman were not visibly included in the essential molding of a decade and she wondered why.

A spark was ignited in Betty Friedan that began a fifteen year quest to find the middle-class white women, to know them, hear the struggles and realities of their cloistered suburban life and bear witness to the truth. In 1963, the first edition of *The Feminine Mystique* hit the market. The western world was never the same. Her book was conceived under her suspicion of an immense inequality. However the brilliance was not truly developed, did not find those legs to traverse the nation, until her own commentary and intuition flooded through her to connect the gaps. Though the inequality masqueraded as a surface-deep problem, she unearthed the great systematic divide designed to institutionally demean the feminine. This was not an issue of taste, or opinion, or differing interest, but one of principle, dignity, and humanity. Within these women's homes she found a profound air of confusion, hurt, and apathy. They felt tricked, trapped, a pawn within a cruelled orchestrated bait and switch. They had married, born children, and for what? What now? This was the problem without a name plaguing the middle-class American women and Friedan was one of the first to not only understand, feeling within the chasm of her own feminine experience, but further explore and draw poignant conclusions. She confronted the enormousness of American gender inequality within the institutions of media, psychology, education, and then masterfully relayed the message to the world: the business man, the isolated mother, the policy maker, the magazine editor, and the educator. Friedan tapped into the vague, unmapped space of feminine isolation and desperation. Her behemoth text awoke a public consciousness that became a revolution; few books since have matched the impact of "mystique's" legacy.

Betty Friedan was not always, however, the influential feminist activist we remember today. According to Linden, Friedan graduated from Smith College in 1942 and went to Berkeley to study psychology. However, she quit her graduate studies after a year saying she did not want to become “an old maid college teacher,” and went to write for the left-wing Federated Press from 1943 to 1946. In 1951, Friedan became a labor journalist for the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America and wrote the pamphlet *UE Flights for Women Workers* in 1952. She also taught a few classes at New York University and the New School for Social Research. What is most important of her pre-Mystique biography to focus on is her background as a writer for women’s magazines. Linden writes, “An occasional magazine journalist from 1955 on, she contributed articles she would later critique as ‘propaganda’ to *Charm*, the old *Cosmopolitan*, *Coronet*, *Family Circle*, *McCall's*, *Mademoiselle*, *Parents' Magazine*, and *Redbook*, bearing titles like ‘I Was Afraid to Have a Baby’” (Linden 66).

Perhaps one of the most interesting sections of Friedan’s work is that of “The Happy Housewife Heroine” because it pertains to the magazine industry. Because of Friedan’s personal experience with the magazine industry, she can speak into the reality of women’s magazine editor’s discussions and decisions unlike any other topic. Friedan writes, “ the women’s magazines, advertisements, television movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment and by the popularizers of sociology and psychoanalysis shape women’s lives today ” (Friedan 80). The focus of her magazine study was to discover the beliefs and attitudes these media outlets sought to bolster and shape for women in order to propel perceptions of domestic fulfillment. In addition to the obvious presence of propagated rhetoric aimed to

reinforce the domestic status quo, she also found a great chasm of content. She realized the extent to which women had been systematically left out of national dialogue, just as magazine historian Walker also discusses. Friedan hoped to fill the void with something substantial and perhaps pay a debt of penance for all the years she was a cog in their patriarchal system. The void is embarrassingly clear however from the onset of the study: where is the life of the mind and spirit, of thoughts and ideas represented in these periodicals? In Friedan's own words, "they are crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women" and yet there is no place for higher thinking – all concern is relegated to the "young and frivolous, fluffy and feminine, passive, gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home" (Friedan 83).

Though the world around these women was brimming with political unrest and scientific exploration, there is little mention of that wild, progressing public sphere in the magazine. For instance, Friedan gave an example of a conversation she sat in on at a women's magazine mostly compiled of male writers in which one of the men said, "Our readers are housewives, full time. They're not interested in the broad public issues of the day. They are not interested in national or international affairs. . . You just can't write about ideas of broad issues of the day for women" (Friedan 84). This eye-opening speech underlines the fact that women were being fed a very specific regiment of mind-numbing fluff. Women's stimulus and provocation is seen by magazine executives to lie solely in consumer and domestic tasks, thereby justifying gaping holes in magazine content and lack of any meaty journalism.

In addition to feeding women frivolity that disconnects them from the realities of the world and from the real experiences of other women, women's magazines of the 1950s did their best to heap burning coals on women's heads for not having already achieved feminine fulfillment, for asking for too much or needing too much. Friedan writes, "Women were taken to task for making their husbands do housework, instead of letting them pioneer in the nation and the world" (Friedan 97). By the magazine's logic, there was no excuse for an unhappy woman pulling the rest of her family down. As Friedan's text demonstrates, even profiles on career women, for instances poets of actresses, always highlighted their domestic role as a housewife, and did not shirk away from calling out their feminine failures. For instances Judy Holliday, in her *Redbook* profile, was described as "a brilliant woman . . . that as an actress has succeeded almost without trying, although, as a woman, she has failed" (Friedan 104.) Her failure, of course, is due to her recent divorce – an unforgivable feminine sin. If the brilliant women of the day, flaunting around the silver screen or writing memorable poetry, were not exempt from the cruel measuring stick of feminine fulfillment, no one was. While in attempts to vaguely tie "women's issues" together with redundant human interest pieces on the PTA and medicine cabinets, and story after story of the girl who finally finds her place in apron strings and a man's arms, these magazines did more to tear women down. The writing was essentially focused on holding a mirror to women's lives and showing them how they were failing to measure up, how they were already so many steps behind, how they were alone, and their own worst enemy, and destined for no interior worth, no real humanness, except for that of their children and husband. However, Friedan points out that there were many articles by psychiatrists that could not be featured because they

would have “blown it wide open,” by outlining the negative effects two parents “propping their whole weight on their kids” would immediately and ultimately have (Friedan 99). The women’s magazines were running on an unsustainable system, in which there was less and less credibility to what they said as the scope of their focus continued to shrink, to accommodate the atrophying world of the overwrought housewife.

Perhaps one of the most essential takeaways from Friedan’s chapter on ladies’ magazines is best summarized by P. Sita Chanda in her essay “Birthing Terrible Beauties.” She writes, “the fate of the 'women's magazine' [is] for the woman who is thus unique and different [to feel] necessarily alone. The magazines carefully exclude the possibility of sorority or solidarity. When more than one woman is represented (very rarely anyway) it is generally a gossip session” (Chanda, 70). I wish to assert that while studying Friedan’s analysis of the 1940s and 50s women’s magazine, Chanda’s indictment comes painfully to life. Not only are the narratives insubstantial, they are misrepresentative of the real lives of white, middle-class American women and serve as a driving wedge, dividing women between themselves. The power in these magazine images and stories is that they perpetuate an ideal, an image, a stereotype that every other woman is this way. When a dissatisfied, alienated woman reads these stories and articles she will feel even more alone. This intersects with what is said in *Persuasion and Social Movements*, “the power to reward...allows legitimate institutions to reward those who conform and obey and to coerce or to punish those who strive to be different or challenge approved norms, values, or institutional arrangements” (Stewart, Smith, Denton 133). Though punish may seem a strong term, I find it appropriate to qualifying Chanda’s observations. The sensibility of the pre-Friedan magazine is certainly one of conformity

and social approval, therefore to not feel up to the standards of womanhood as set forth by the magazines would be a punishing, shameful exercise. The phrase “feminine mystique” directly refers to the nebulous disillusionment with womanhood - the way in which women feel unrewarded for their domestic pursuits and punished for questioning or straying away from convention. Chanda’s argument speaks to the “feminine mystique” phenomenon by accusing women’s magazines of bolstering such malaise by disassociating women from honest dialogue. This is accomplished through the messages within the magazines that perpetuate the myths of consumerism leading to satisfaction and motherhood leading to ultimate joy. Those not experiencing this satisfaction or joy are therefore made to feel inferior and unusual. This, of course, perpetuates a vicious self-sabotaging cycle in which the underdeveloped lives of housewives remain shrouded in shame and darkness.

As evidenced, however, *The Feminine Mystique* changed the game by breaking open this long-held silence, and infusing the charged space with free-flowing personal narrative and consciousness-raising. After the initial propulsion of Friedan’s influence on white, middle-class, American women, the landscape of ladies’ magazines was ripe for inevitable change.

The Emerging Feminist Rag

Dawn H. Currie writes in her breathlessly comprehensive book *Girl Talk* that the “cultural consumption [of magazines] is implicated in the reproduction of relations of domination and subordination through the construction of gendered subjectivities... it is much more than texts, images, and representations because it leads to questions about the nature of everyday relations which sustain these understandings” (Currie 96). The brazen disregard for the traditionally gender normative ideals, as partially inspired by Friedan’s

book, of second wave feminism recognized the foothold magazines held in the female consciousness and the consequence, therefore, to fundamentally impose socially accepted understandings of femininity. Instead of altogether defaming the institution of ladies' journals, there was a growing feminist movement to harness the power of the women's magazine literary movement and use it as an agent for progressive thought and consciousness-raising, as opposed to the tradition of the Interwar Period and the 1950's.

Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richard's book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* highlights the salience of the emerging feminist magazine, specifically *Ms.*, in the same manner as Curie by writing, "the philosophies of women's liberation and women's political equality were delivered to suburbia and the rest of America in 1972, when the monthly feminist glossy called *Ms.* magazine hit the stands, the first feminist magazine to be available cross-country on newsstands and by subscription" (Baumgardner & Richards 74). Ellen McCracken's book *Decoding Women's Magazines* similarly comments on the importance of the emerging feminist magazines such as *Ms.* to help set new precedents for women as they carved out a new place in media. McCracken writes,

Unlike other women's magazines, however, a number of editorial features in *Ms.* focuses readers' attention on a wide range of important issues. Many lengthy letters from readers are published each month, showing intelligent, thoughtful responses to articles. Here readers argue and disagree with one another to evaluate the magazine's content. There is a sense of real communication between the women who write letters and those who read them, and opportunity for serious thought about some feminist issues. (McCracken 281)

Though the *Ms.* effect appears idyllic, it too was still dependent on the institution of advertising for a time. Before *Ms.* was sold to a Jay MacDonald and his group of investors in 1996 and became an 100% advertisement-free magazine (Baumgardner & Richards), McCracken surfaces what is inherently problematic of advertisements within an apparently feminist magazine by stating that “the advertisements in *Ms.* promote a consumption-based model of women’s liberations and sometimes undercut the magazine’s positive editorial message” (McCracken 279). Zuckerman, however, contends that “despite criticisms *Ms.* profoundly affected the women’s magazine world...[by] forcing [advertisers] to be more conscious of women as human beings participating fully in society” (Zuckerman 228). Though *Ms.* failed to perform as the perfect feminist magazine at every point, Zuckerman’s assessment of its obvious success pushing the boundaries of acceptable content for popular women’s journals reinforces the important part it played in opening up feminist discourse.

As McCracken rightly assessed, however, *Ms.* was a “special-interest publication read primarily by relatively privileged women” (McCracken 279). Though it desired to reach to women across race, class, and economic division, the content remained relatively entrenched in the same white, middle-class perspective, similar to Friedan. In response to the widely unreached African-American female market, Edward Lewis, Clarence Smith, Cecil Hollingsworth, and Jonathan Blount founded *Essence* for the middle-class black women in 1970 (Zuckerman 229). Though the publication persisted in the traditions of women’s magazines by focusing on fashion and beauty, they also “broadened to include articles on social and political topics... In the seventies the magazines included stories by Alice Walker and Gayl Jones and interviews with Amiri Baraka and Fannie Lou Hamer,

in addition to fashion and beauty pieces” (Zuckerman 229). Like *Ms.*, *Essence* is more than a simple magazine. Though it features articles on fashion and fitness, it is highly emblematic of the seismic shifts rippling across the American landscape. Kathleen L. Endres and Therese L. Lueck write in their book *Women’s Periodicals in the United States: Consumer Magazines* that *Essence* was “launched at a critical juncture in history – a time when feminist and black nationalists were reshaping the American dialogue on race and gender” (Endres & Lueck, 79).

Though *Essence* was established as a legitimate women’s magazine for women of color, and therefore met an important purpose within the fight for equality and fair representation, that alone was not a singular, self-contained achievement. *Essence* provided a necessary springboard, along with *Ms.*, by which “hundreds of women’s newsletters and pamphlets were born just to get the word out that the women’s movement was shaking things up” (Baumgardner & Richards 99). The success of these feminist magazines lies not specifically in the magazine itself, but the ability and capacity to pave the way the subsequent feminist periodicals such as *Bamboo Girl*, *Bust*, *I’m So Fucking Beautiful*, *Maxi*, and *Jane*. (Baumgardner & Richards, 99). They proved integral to spurring on the movement. Looking back on the success of *Essence* and *Ms.* is to acknowledge the lasting momentum carried on by the next generation of feminist magazines.

In this same spirit of progress and social reform *Working Woman* was released November 1976 as “the right magazine at the right time” (Endres & Lueck 478). *Working Woman* fell upon the cultivated soil of the women’s movement “when unprecedented numbers of women were participating in the paid workforce” (Endres & Lueck 478).

Though women were flocking to employment in droves, they still lacked guidelines and models of women not just having jobs but careers. In 1976, the *career* woman as opposed to the *working* woman was not a taken for granted norm. Within the context of widespread transition, *Working Woman* aimed to unify the individuals participating at the ground-level of the social revolution by providing a community of like-minded women to fortify each other's experiences. Though backlash was soon to rear its ugly head in the early years of the magazine's popularity, *Working Woman* not only survived but thrived as it matured along with the woman-reader's professions. Endres and Lueck write that by "the 1980's, the magazines offered advice on executive recruiting...advice about how to ask for a raise became advice about how to turn such requests down. Beauty tips were replaced by health advice, and fashion was examined as a business" (Endres & Lueck 479). In accurately tracing the history of the women's magazine, it should be noted that the feminist rag did not supersede the traditional ladies' magazine. More attention to the dominant form of traditional ladies' magazine will be paid when discussing backlash because they fed into the prevailing cultural pressures for female gender performance. Though there was an impending fall out to the second wave of the feminist movement, *Working Women* and her sister magazines represented the stubborn resilience of feminist progress; despite oncoming backlash, progress would not be completely washed away.

The Fallout

As recent studies of women magazines have uncovered, the 1960's and 70's was an exceptionally fruitful time for the feminist magazine that was unable to continue at the same frenzied hype, unable or perhaps more accurately forcefully halted. In her essay *Women's Magazines: Slouching Towards Feminism*, Kalia Doner writes "the country

recoiled from the turmoil of the 60s and 70s, and elected Ronald Reagan... Most magazines shrank from discussing anything in a political context, and women began to feel that feminism was the true F word” (Doner 37-43). The progress of women’s magazines was just as susceptible to political backlash as the rest of the women’s movement; the efforts of the women’s movement to harness the power of the women’s magazine literary movement was hampered by the strength of prevailing social ideologies. Traditional magazines kept a foothold. Feminist magazines lost some credibility. However, most troublingly, magazines that were following the feminist trend of liberated rhetoric, including issues of contraception and abortion, began returning to the rhetoric of convention and rigid gender definition. Zuckerman agrees in stating, “Women’s journals reflected U.S. society to the extent that women’s issues received more extensive and more serious coverage in the 1970s than in the 1980s, when calls for changes in the status quo declines” (Doner 237). McCracken looks to the sex advice column in *Seventeen*’s December, 1982 edition as anecdotal evidence of the crumbling prevalence of messages upholding women’s liberation. In her estimation, the column validates the predominantly accepted values guarding teenage girl sexuality through scare tactics like “telling reader that contraception often fails for teens... [and by emphasizing] that teens are not emotionally ready to engage in sex” (McCracken 146). Though aware of female’s newly, albeit slightly, elevated status in society, articles such as these demonstrate women’s magazines propensity to backpedal from liberated views on sexual and reproductive rights to the more comfortable, puritanical of old.

The reversion of feminist progress would not have been quite as easy to accomplish if the media had not constructed a hostile environment towards feminism by

ludicrously undercutting the campaign. For instance, Zeisler writes about ABC anchor Howard K. Smith who “stated confidently that women were equal already, given that they made up 50 percent of the population...Smith’s reasoning was made even more ridiculous when he added that women ‘get the most money, inherited from worn-out husbands’” (Zeisler 63). In addition to minimizing the women’s movement to a circus of miscreants, in this circumstance the media deployed a far more potent strategy that undermined the movement by shaking women’s confidence in the fundamental pretenses of the fight for equality. As Zeisler continues to highlight, ABC, Smith, and other media sources of the same constituency espoused vehement declarations against so-called “liberated women” by brashly proclaiming that “they would abandon their children and refuse to cook or do laundry for their families...They’d make a mockery of the armed forces and of traditionally male workplaces by displacing men who’d ‘earned’ the right to be there. And most horrifying of all, they’d defeminize themselves, refusing to pretty up their surroundings or smile on cue” (Zeisler 63).

Perhaps one of the most interesting elements of backlash is the lack of originality. In the systematic smearing against feminist ideals broadly circulated throughout women’s journals, the media largely reverted to the old sensibility to keep “her” in her place: fear mongering. In Susan Faludi’s famous book *Backlash*, Faludi examines the provocative 1986 *Newsweek* story “that said a single woman in her mid-thirties with delusions of meeting a partner... were more likely to be killed by a terrorist than to get married” (Baumgardner & Richards 103). Though this is a laughable claim, particularly in the modern day in which the average American couple is getting married closer to their thirties, there is a definite sense of punishment or state of anxiety freely imposed on

women for following the feminist regime whether that be something as trivial as buying the “wrong” cosmetic product or as permanent as electing to have an abortion.

The launch of the feminist magazine *Sassy* in 1988 stands in direct contrast to such fear tactics, though it too would suffer from the backlash of rigidly defined gender society. The first issue of *Sassy* included a feature story entitled “Losing Your Virginity – Read This Before You Decide” coupled with a full-page condom advertisement (Endres & Lueck 312). In obvious distinction from the motherly-tone of *Seventeen*’s December 1982 sex column, the *Sassy* article took the voice of a friend eager to explore the different vantage points from which to look at teenage sex without any hidden messages of condemnation. The condom ad, of course, reinforced the ideal of safe sex, while at the same time asserting that teenager girls can responsibly enjoy sexual activity. However, like many two-step-forward-stories in the women’s movement, there was almost an instantaneous three-steps-back-outrage in the form of a letter-writing campaign the summer of 1988 that threatened *Sassy*’s advertisers with boycotts if they did not cut ties with the magazine altogether. Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority (a Christian Fundamentalist lobby) successfully targeted three predominant advertisers - Cover Girl, Levi’s jeans, and Maybelline - by accusing *Sassy* of “promoting ‘teenage promiscuity’ and ‘homosexuality’” (Endres & Lueck 313). Falwell’s rigorous push-back against *Sassy* as well as advertiser’s inability to withstand the pressure of boycott both act as a vivid reminders of the diligent resistance to feminist progress within the media-scape through the vehicle of fear.

An examination of feminist backlash within the context of ladies’ magazines would be woefully incomplete if the topic of female body representation was not

addressed. The conversation about supermodel/Barbie proportions, airbrushing, and the impossible standard of beauty portrayed in advertisements is easy to take for granted as it is now common speak in many circles. However, in the backlash of the '70s and '80s the effects of body shaming and impossible standards of beauty had not been closely scrutinized and therefore established an unfettered access to the messages presented and propagated in advertisements (often featured in women's magazines). Currie writes "femininity is increasingly presented through advertising as a bodily characteristic. The primary message of [these] ads is beautification of the female body" (Currie 120). The troubling conclusion Currie unfurls from this line of logic is that beauty ads supply "messages which act to give meaning to the cultural construction 'woman,' and messages which give meaning to the bodily practices associated with the accomplishment of womanhood" (Currie 121). In other words, Currie is concluding that these advertisements impress binary standards of "good gender performance" versus "bad" in a compelling enough way to alter behavior, whether that be wearing lipstick, eating less, or showing more cleavage. In this way, magazine publishers and advertisers deploy the persuasion of images to affect attitudes and beliefs about the female body, therefore shaping perceptions on female beauty.

To this point, Doner writes "[advertisements and photos] consistently pound the reader with the message that young, rail-thin, and surgically-enhanced bodies are the ideal. Advertisements feature impossibly flawless models; the how-to beauty and fashion pages make it seem as though a bit of hard work, the right attitude and the correct purchase of clothes can transform any woman into a 5' 10, 120-pound, 19-year old siren" (Doner). Doner addresses the contradictory paradox of oppressive message of 'hotness',

or the 'beauty myth', with the candor of solidarity and sorority meant to be found in the pages of a women's magazine. Doner wonders where the spirit of inclusion has gone when she writes "women's magazines convey a kind of 'let-me-help-you-up,' 'oops-I-pushed-you-down' message" (Doner). However, Baumgardner and Richards nuance this argument with their own exploration of what they call the "Cosmo-Girl Myopia" in which a white "scantly clad, voluminously coiffed" woman with breasts pushed up to around her ears "is being used to sell everything from iPhones to Pepsi" (Baumgardner & Richards 102). But they reject the assumption that these sorts of overt sexualization for the sake of commodity should be seen as inherently oppressive or as evidence of the patriarchy. They contend that the hideousness of the well-known "Fly Me" ads for National Airlines in which "women's bodies [were] conflated with the product" is more aptly linked with the vulnerable position actual flight attendants were accustomed to than the distant objectification; "fly me" might as well have been "rape me" or "pinch me while I'm bringing your fourth Scotch, sir" (Baumgardner & Richards 102-103). Baumgardner and Richards want to make it clear that today the sexualized woman in an advertisement can feel empowered, she's not the issue; "it's the cosmetics manufacturer in the suit silencing the voices we most need to hear" who is truly at the core of enforced gender expectation (Baumgardner & Richards 103). The feminist backlash against the second wave of women's movement is essential to understanding and appreciating the environment in which the next generation of feminists were raised.

As the project now ventures into the digital age, current sexual politics, and women's magazines, an accurate analysis of our time is impossible without stressing how backlash of the second wave plays a part in the construction of female standards,

expectations and assumptions today. The cultural influencing forces at be, specifically in the women's magazine, are an amalgamation of old and new, traditional and liberated. This must be recognized to effectively sift through the pieces.

A Discussion of Current Ladies' Magazines

Interestingly, in my research for feminist perspective on women's magazines I stumbled across a short article written by Roger Black in March 2004 entitled "Women's Magazines." In a completely functional representation of design patterns and purpose of the modern women's magazine from a non sexual-political perspective, he displayed staggering insight into the pulse of the current magazine's state. Black writes, "To a real extent, they are leading the trends seen throughout the medium: shorter articles, more items per page, bright-as-all-hell covers and celebs, celebs, celebs" (Black). According to his design sensibilities, he deduces that the current aesthetics of women's magazines are busy, messy, celebrity conscious, commercial, insanely colorful and typographically tricky (Black). The emphasis on commercial and celebrity consciousness struck hard within the gathering body of my feminist research. His assessment of "[editorial catalogs that] seem to say: 'Just give women what they want: shopping'" while "products abound in women's magazines...[so] the reader can concentrate on the products and the art director can stay on budget" and "that if a pretty girl on the cover can sell magazines, a supermodel might sell more, and a Hollywood movie goddess even more" seems aptly pointed towards larger cultural criticism emblematic to these "design distinctions" (Black).

In the opening paragraph of her book “Remake, Remodel,” Brooke Erin Duffy asserts “magazines are carefully designed to meet the perceived needs of reader...” (Duffy 21). This simple aphorism is charged with meaning, particularly when stacked on top of Black’s design insight and my own research sampling, to more broadly demonstrate how the magazine industry is responding to a generation in the midst of identity formation. What does it say about this generation exactly if they are, in fact, reeled in by bright messy colors, or more importantly celebrity obsession and overt commercialism? Duffy later writes, “meaningful social implications emerge...by providing demographic, psychographic, and behavioral statistics on current and potential consumers, measurement techniques simultaneously reflect and reify existing social divisions” (Duffy 69). In other words, segments of female populace are narrowly defined by demographic factors such as age or race and niche cultural behaviors such as fitness or weddings. In this way, the evolving, increasingly digital magazine industry can respond to the “perceived needs of the reader” by catering to a generation of individuals.

However, as Curries speaks to in her analysis of adolescent magazines and readership, females are often turning to magazines for a sense of self, for a sense of how to be, how to achieve “good performance” which smacks of Friedan. In Ian Burkitt’s book *Social Selves: Theories of Self and Society* he makes an important point that “those who assume that their self-identity is a given right or natural fact – say, a straight white man in Britian – are those in a privileged position who identities have automatic ‘right of way’ in most social contexts” (Burkitt 4). The inverse of this is equally true. Women and people of color are not within the privileged position of automatic self-identity. To develop a sense of agency of self in a non-privileged position requires a specific effort,

but because a woman's self-identity is not a given right she may feel compelled to reflect and mimic prevailing attitudes and beliefs about femininity. Burkitt explains how "we look [to the culture] to see the image of ourselves reflected back in their words, attitudes, expressions or actions" (Burkitt 2). As we have already discussed, woman's magazines have a persuasive advantage within culture because of the powerful combination of language and images. Therefore, the stakes are higher as more magazines informed by more standards of successful femaleness pop up.

The fracturing of the magazine industry into niche culture titles and readerships splits the already raging river of female expectation into dozens of multi-directional tributaries in which the female reader feels compelled to keep up. Just as the design of the magazine itself is chaotic and frantic, the female reader is seeking to find self-expression within the extravagant menagerie of gender performance shards. Each magazine only offers a piece of her "perceived need" to achieve good gender performance. Currie makes an important distinction in light of Duffy's exposition, "while readers are free to pick and choose the texts they read, the magazine text determines the range of possible meanings because it contains implicit assumptions about womanhood and therefore defines what kind of life can be taken for granted and what is open for struggle and renegotiation" (Currie 155). Though Duffy seems to promote the freedom for women readership in this newly-minted era of impossibly extensive options based on location and preference, Currie puts into perspective how this pattern is not innocuous. As the market for magazines matched to the specifics of an individual continues to break-off and divide, the magazine text itself will continue to determine its own meaning whereby the *generic* female that is concerned with the "celebrity and commercialism" will be held under the

gauntlet of the splintering gender performance expectation. Females are in a vulnerable position to inform their self-identity on the many standards disseminated by different women's magazines. More magazines does not equate to a lighter burden of gender performance expectation, because women are not yet in a position of equality. If, like the straight white British man, a woman's self-identity was a "right of way" new magazines with different focuses might in fact be a positive shift in the literary movement. But because women are still not in a position of privilege, more magazines instead piles gender pressures higher and higher as a generation of individuals attempt to form identity and self-express. We are not at a point in our history where more magazines equate to more freedom, because the rhetoric of these magazines does not propose liberated rhetoric.

Friedan versus Now

To validate the importance of Friedan in the current dialogue of women's magazines, it is advantageous to hold up the rhetoric Friedan deconstructed next to our own today. In her chapter on the "The Happy Housewife Heroine," she breaks down the 1960 July edition of *McCall's* into the "complete editorial contents of a typical issue" (Friedan 81). This action was foundational to deconstructing the "big, pretty magazine" into simply a conglomeration of rhetoric supporting the prevailing social ideology of feminization.

I thought it would be an interesting exercise to pick a widely circulated women's magazine today and perform the same action, therefore highlighting the immediacy to my arguments made in my discussion of current women's magazines. According to Alliance

for Audited Media's list "Top 25 U.S. Consumer Magazines for the Second Half of 2013," the famed *Ladies' Home Journal* has an annual circulation of 3,225,863 which was much larger than *Women's Health*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, or *Glamour*. Here are the complete editorial contents of *Ladies' Home Journal* April 2014 issue.

1. How to obtain "natural beauty" with eco-friendly hair and skin products
2. Beauty experts dish on best new beauty products
3. New, cute rain gear to look good in bad weather
4. Stories about readers taking risks and being "brave and bold"
5. A story about a marriage with a wife who is totally focused on mothering and a "sex-starved" husband
6. Advice column on dealing with other females in the office after receiving a promotion, parenting, and a female friend who is drinking "too much"
7. Pet owners dish on their obsession with cats
8. A story about a woman who swam with a dolphin
9. A story about a dad who owned a bakery entitled "Real Men Bake Cookies"
10. A new recipe for chicken potpie
11. A story about a woman who almost died from a blood clot which she partially attributes to her birth control
12. A spread on ways to celebrate Spring with fresh DIY crafts
13. Tips on finding the right glasses and makeup "to show them off"
14. Ideas for family brunch
15. Ways to improve memory and stay sharp

16. The cover celebrity Maria Menounos “shares the eating plan that helped her lose 40 pounds”

This list is important because it demonstrates how mainstream magazines have been influenced by the growing interests of different magazines. The 1960's *McCall's* does not include single title concerned with exercise and weight loss. It does not entertain a woman working in an office. The magazine does not concern itself with improving cognitive functions. There is no mention of contraceptive health. These could seem like improvements, because it shows evidence of athletic women, succeeding professionally, and who care about the health of their mind and body. However, these “progressions” are all framed within prescriptive convention. There is still the very present burden of domesticity and traditional gender roles in presuming readerships would care about cooking brunch, crafting, makeup, and how to keep husbands from feeling sexually deprived and watching pornography. Instead of less pressure because of women's growing interests, there are now added voices of social pressure, expectation and obligation. In this *Ladies' Home Journal* edition the voices say: be the traditional woman of the 1960's plus the modern, powerhouse of today. Be the woman who still cooks brunch like her own mother, but does so with very expensive organic ingredients. Be the woman who makes bold decisions but also cares about what makeup techniques will show off her new glasses (and if you're Editor-In-Chief, Sally Lee, you'll pick the ones your husband likes most). Be the woman who has time for a job promotion, making crafts for springtime, swims with dolphins, and follows a celebrity's “get-fit” guide.

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan's analysis of *McCall's* highlights how the magazine reinforces a traditional domestic narrative. The articles include a story about a

baby throwing his bottle out of a crib, “a story about how a teenager who doesn’t go to college gets a man away from a bright college girl,” a story called “Wedding Day,” and patterns for home sewing (Freidan 81-82). However, there is a particular luxury in a narrative that obligates women to one space. While the post war idea of rigid domesticity is oppressive, I see the *Ladies’ Home Journal* April edition as imbued with a subtler oppression still representative of June Cleaver ideals. The reader of the magazine is not free from the standards of 1960’s domestic bliss; those have not been subtracted from the current rhetoric of the women’s magazine. Instead, there are simply more standards and pressures by which to fail. By the rhetoric of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* April edition, you have failed if you are not Maria Menounos’ size. You have failed if you are not the one who receives the job promotion. You have failed if you are a sexually withholding wife who is too concerned with mothering a child. You have failed if you do not look naturally beautiful. You have failed if you don’t have the freshest recipe for chicken potpie. These are obviously amalgamations of a familiar status quo, not evidence of women’s liberation progress. As we see here, the definition of successful femininity has not progressed into a more liberated ideal but simply evolved to include more variables by which to judge, as is evidenced by a current women’s magazine.

How Friedan’s Assessment of Women’s Magazines Remains Relevant

Fifty years after the introduction of the behemoth text *The Feminine Mystique* American culture has not yet completely shirked the shadow of realized gender inequity. As Duffy writes, “Betty Friedan was among the first to denounce the problematic identity constructions circulating in women’s magazines by staunchly arguing that their frequent domesticity topos stunted women’s ‘basic human need to grow’... This laid the groundwork for feminist analyses of the ways these texts socialized women and enforced

an uneven distribution of power to reflect dominant sexual politics” (Duffy 24). As Stephanie Cootz, author of *A Strange Stirring*, was quoted saying in Jennifer Schuessler’s *New York Times* article “50 Years Reassessing *The Feminine Mystique*” “Friedan’s genius was to provide, with the ‘feminine mystique’, the first phrase you could use to explain that you thought there was something wrong, and it was a lie” (Schuessler). Though Cootz’s explanation of Friedan’s brilliance does apply to the grandeur of the breathlessly comprehensive text, it speaks most poignantly, in my opinion, to her tenacity to name her misgivings with the magazine industry and claim foul-play. Though she famously coined the phrase ‘the problem that has no name’, her mammoth book is a compilation of all the problems she can name, including the women’s magazines.

So is today, in the 21st century American society composed of digital and social networks of interacting individuals, too far a cry from the compulsory culture of the 1950’s and 60’s for Friedan’s work to remain vital and relevant to the modern conversation on women’s magazines? As a researcher and a woman, I claim no. Though it is easy to take for granted how much ground women have covered in the last five decades, the precarious nature of identity and gender formation in the digital age present new problems and societal blind spots that Friedan’s principles can continue to illuminate. Friedan’s precedent to uncover the norm, name the problem and reject the lie is necessary for the future health of American women within society – to fulfill their “basic human need to grow.”

Strangely prophetic, Friedan writes “Does the mystique keep American woman from growing with the world? Does it force her to deny reality, as a woman in a mental hospital must deny reality to believe she is queen? Does it doom women to be to be

displaced persons, if not virtual schizophrenics, in our complex, changing world?” (Friedan 121). Though Friedan was obviously speaking into the circumstances and realities of her white, middle-class 1950’s America, it still remains relevant in the assessment of women’s magazines today. As magazine industries continue to address the splintering expressions of gender to a highly individualized women-readership base grappling with self-definition, the pressure to successfully accomplish the ever-expanding repertoire of feminine performance will continue to grow. While I would like to believe that the vast network of women’s magazines acts as a highway for women to help discover their true path, I fear it acts more like the fibers of a net to ensnare. While women of today do not meet the same forceful pressure to be solely domestic engineers, they are still not exempt totally from this domestic pressure, and now they are also under the gauntlet to be sexual goddesses, size-two joggers, raising well-adjusted children, succeeding in a challenging and satisfying career, only to come home and prepare an organic, free-range dinner, all the while living up to the glamour standard of a Hiedi Klum or Kate Moss. All of this we saw evidenced in the April edition of *Ladies Home Journal*. While one woman may not subscribe to a women’s parenting, beauty, or cooking magazine, she still lives in a world that is informed by the sensibility that women should be able to juggle all that. Instead of a liberation movement giving way to a sense of choice and freedom, the current climate of women’s magazines seem to demonstrate that instead we are still deeply entrenched in a culture of obligation and expectation. The false sense that we live in a post-sexist society often leaves the women feeling like a “displaced person” and “virtually schizophrenic” while trying to accomplish and bulwark her ground of ostensible femininity. As Chanda’s sentiment on the fate of the women’s

magazine applies to the world Friedan lived, so too it applies here and now. Though it is no longer her distinction or individuality that keeps her “necessarily alone,” it is instead her failure to reconcile the schism between who she is as a human being and how she falls short of the ever-fracturing standards of female achievement.

However, it would be factually erroneous and sensibly wrong to accuse the institution of the women’s magazine for the continued displacement of the middle-class, millennial female. The women’s magazine has, in fact, strongly contributed to the progressive conversation on women’s basic human rights. For instance, Doner writes

In recent years, almost all of the publications have hammered home the conviction that: it's never the woman's fault if she is beaten by her spouse; the police and judicial system are prejudiced against women in rape cases; the lack of women at the top levels of business is an outrage; equal pay for equal work is mandatory; no man has a right to make uninvited sexually motivated comments or to physically harass a woman; men should participate equally in running the home; women deserve and should demand sexual gratification. (Doner).

However, it would still be incorrect to prematurely pat ourselves on the back just yet. Friedan left a legacy of vigilance and activism with *The Feminine Mystique* that has not yet been realized. As Zuckerman points out in the very introduction of her own work, “the beginnings of Betty Friedan’s ‘feminine mystique’ can be seen [in the remaining material focus on women as homemakers and sex objects]. While women’s journals have continued to discuss social political, and cultural issues of importance to females, they do so in less details and with less emphasis than in the early twentieth century” (Zuckerman

xiii). Just as Black suggested in *Folio*, many women's magazines of today are less interested in substance and more with style and panache. But there is a responsibility on the part of politically engaged citizens to see that the prospective evolution of the women's magazine continues to move forward, if only to live up to the "mystique's" legacy. This ambition requires a commitment to media literacy, societal awareness and cultural critique. As Currie writes "critical cultural studies emphasizes the relationship between power and knowledge...[and] aims to make visible and put into crisis the structural links between the disciplining knowledge and the larger social arrangements" (Currie 93). We cannot transform the privileged position of the women's magazine into the shrine of female liberation and progress that offers solace and acceptance for the different and the unique, for the displaced and the alienated, until we take ownership of who we are as a generation and demand for an accurate reflection as such. Ziesler speaks to this by writing about media literacy and how it "makes every consumer more responsible and more active...but if people ...are aware of the machinations of media, they won't be poisoned by them. Along with media literacy comes the ongoing project of media and pop culture reform— making changes so that the media and pop culture we see actually reflects a picture of who's consuming it" (Zeisler 144). The spirit of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* lives on when we continue to look at the world with a critical eye, question the enduring institution at play in our lives, and name the problem.

CONCLUSION

It would be easier to let the women's magazine industry continue on in its trajectory. It would be easier to buy into the arguments proclaiming all the progress that has been made since 1963. It would be easier to leave it alone and not scrutinize how the

messages and images we consume form attitudes and shape perceptions. It would be easier to view what Friedan called “the big, pretty magazine” as an innocuous source of popular culture. But it would not be better. By digging into the history of the 20th century women’s magazine, by highlighting the ramifications of social influence in the forms of persuasion and propaganda, and by linking Friedan’s assessments of the past to the current conversation, I have attempted to make meaning out of a complex, tangled mess of truths. Though it is neither an easy nor altogether attractive analysis, it is a necessary one.

The literary movement of the women’s magazine is not inherently in opposition to the social movement of women’s liberation. However, the privilege and power of the media institution is not currently advantaging women’s liberation as it could. This analysis did not address the many ways feminism is still prevalent in the media, though it is and continues to have a following and a voice. However, this analysis did demonstrate how mainstream, widely circulated women’s magazines do seem to persuade readers of a traditional definition of femininity plus added pressures. In this way, the magazine is primed to foster prevailing ideologies and shape larger cultural perceptions that inform a sense of identity and purpose.

It may be impossible to answer if first women’s position in society must be elevated in order for the women’s magazine to effectively distribute feminist ideals, or if feminist ideals can permeate the women’s magazine thus helping to elevate the position of women in society. As it stands, women have not yet ascertained a position of privilege in which more ideas of gender equates to more freedom. We have reason to be grateful to Friedan for initially raising public awareness about the women’s magazine and providing

a relevant guidebook by which to scrutinize the sexual political health of a given magazine edition. In the same way that Friedan dismantled the power of the deceptive domestic narrative and its growing disillusionment by giving it a name – “the feminine mystique” – so too I hope to dismantle a little of the women’s magazine’s power by surrounding it with historical and social context and ultimately giving it a name: “the women’s magazine mystique.”

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