

ISABEL HEINEMANN

## SELLING THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

*Social Order, Gender and Consumption in Magazine Advertising in the US since World War II*

**ABSTRACT:** Modern Western societies have always considered the family as the central unit of state and nation, while magazine advertising used the nuclear family concept to sell products and convey certain images of “modernity”. But how did images of the family and the gender roles suggested change over time? This contribution analyzes how mainline magazines in the US (*Time*, *Life*, *Good Housekeeping*) used images of “the modern family” in picture ads to attract consumers and gain acceptance for their products. Special emphasis will be placed on the question how notions of the family and the embedded gender norms did change (or were preserved or reaffirmed) in the course of the social transformations of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The paper provides a fresh look at accepted models of social and normative change in the United States by investigating a largely neglected set of sources that had to reconcile modernity, readers’ values and economic interest.

**KEYWORDS:** Family, Magazines, Picture Ads, Gender Roles, Consumerism, Value Change, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s

### Introduction

A beaming mother in white apron, wearing nice makeup and perfect hairdo, carries a tray loaded with soup bowls and sandwiches.<sup>1</sup> She is surrounded by her smiling kids, boy

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and girl. The table is laid nicely, next to the picture window with panoramic view, as the three head for lunch – “and what a lunch! With hearty nourishing Campbell’s Beef Noodle soup as your delicious and satisfying main dish!”<sup>2</sup> For maximum comfort, the housewife is advised how to prepare three meals with the help of one blend of noodle soup: “A dandy children’s lunch” (with cheese sandwiches, carrot sticks and milk), “An all-the-family lunch” (with minced ham sandwiches, Waldorf salad, pudding and coffee, tea or milk) and “When you lunch alone” (with crackers, lettuce, coffee or milk). So here we are in the golden age of the nuclear family, when housewives were not only perfect cooks (thanks to Campbell’s noodle soup), but also skillful homemakers and devoted mothers, while husbands were breadwinners and away from home all day. A colorful painted picture ad of the famous soup blend appeared in *Life* magazine, occupying an entire page, apparently celebrating the virtuous American homemaker and mother – and advertising the universally applicable noodle soup to ease her tasks (see Illustration 1).

Twenty years later, the situation seems to have changed. A young woman looks seductively into the camera over her sunglasses, smiling knowingly. The caption reads “No man wants the same thing every night.” What then follows is no erotic confession, but recipes for rice dishes: “Be creative with rice – Va-rice-ty.”<sup>3</sup> Still, it’s a woman’s job to prepare the dishes, but this time no children are around: “Un-potato the man in your Life. Starting tonight. Let your imagination run rice. [...] Just keep a little rice in your pantry, you’ll never ever run out of man-pleasing, family-pleasing ideas.” The family is present, but rather in the background, the center of the female (and the spectator’s) attention being the male eating habits. The ad has an undisputable erotic undertone as it evokes the seductive and sexual qualities of the female cook who is told how to “please” the man by seducing him with a rice dish (see Illustration 2).

What do these two picture ads for food suggest? Not the assumption that it was a woman’s job to do the cooking did change, but the way this task was framed in advertising – from motherly effectiveness to seductive creativity. Thus, can we speak of a value change from materialist to post materialist values as has been claimed by political scientist Ronald Inglehart in his value surveys since the 1970s (Inglehart 1971 and 1977)? It is the objective of this article to further explore if and how advertising reflected changing gender norms and family values over time. The underlying assumption being that advertisement was meant to sell products to consumers and thus had to take up, mirror or even emphasize current trends in the transformation of family concepts and gender norms (Heinemann 2013). Did advertisement maybe even act as a seismograph of social and normative change in the realm of the family? To answer these questions, the

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of brevity all sources will be provided in the footnotes. Campbell’s Beef Noodle Soup Ad, *Life*, April 3, 1950, underlined in the original.

<sup>3</sup> American Rice Council, *Life*, March 13, 1970.

article focuses on picture ads in mainstream magazines that referred to the family to sell their products. Of course, ads consist of both image and text and their respective interaction or sometimes even contradictory juxtaposition. Thus, my analysis will focus on both elements, explore their relation or even tension in the creation of the respective message conveyed. With Roland Barthes we can even distinguish three messages of the ad: a linguistic message (the accompanying text which both grounds and controls the image), a symbolic iconic message (the cultural meaning of the image) and a literal iconic message (the “pure” image) (Barthes 1999, 36). Only in the interrelationship of all three meanings, the overall structure of the image is conveyed and can thus be analyzed.

## The Nuclear Family Imagery

The family has always provided a powerful imagery, intensely referred to and cited in advertisement campaigns since the early days of advertising at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Williamson 1987; Ohmann 1996). As Carolyn Kitch argues with respect to the 1920s United States, the modern family even proved “the ultimate commercial and social construct of the era”: “In 1920s magazine imagery, the typical American family became a unifying metaphor for 20<sup>th</sup> century American Life” (Kitch 2001, 159). But how was the family presented in magazine advertising when such “unifying metaphors” lost ground in the face of social change, namely in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? In how far did family images in magazine advertising reflect changing family norms and gender roles – the rise of the dual earner family, the expansion of the middle class, feminism and new concepts of masculinity? To provide first answers to these questions, this paper investigates picture ads that focused on the family in the American mainstream magazines *Life* and *Time* and supplements them with images from the woman’s magazine *Good Housekeeping*.

*Life* conceived itself as a family-directed picture magazine, “to see, and to show” – as founder Henry R. Luce declared when he launched the new publication (Doss 2001b, 2; Kozol 1994). In 1948, *Life* had a circulation of 5.45 million and a tremendous “pass-along factor,” which meant that up to 17 (1938) individuals read each single copy of the periodical. Even shortly before the magazine was discontinued as a weekly in 1972, circulation exceeded 5 million and the “pass-along factor” was estimated close to five persons, providing the periodical with a total readership of roughly 25 million Americans (Halberstam 1979, 60; Baughman 2001, 42). This was much more than any other weekly magazine would achieve. *Time*, for example, founded in 1923 as a news magazine and considered the flagship publication of the Luce media empire, only sold 1.67 million weekly copies in 1948 (Baughman 2001, 48; Smith 2001, 26-27; Brinkley 2010). In the period under concern, *Time* set standards in political journalism and also developed a strong business appeal. Its readership can be assumed to have been predominantly male,

well-educated and upper/middle class. To bring in the (white, middle-class) homemaker as another target group, the monthly *Good Housekeeping* was accessed for the 1940s and 1950s. *Good Housekeeping's* popularity as a monthly magazine came close to that of *Life* (nevertheless a weekly) with about 5 million weekly copies sold in 1962 and 5.5 million in 1965 (Mott 1968, 140-143; Walker 2000). For longitudinal comparison over time, magazines were researched from the late 1940s through the mid-1980s and a sample of several hundred picture ads identified.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, the mass media market changed tremendously from the late 1940s to the mid-1980s: First of all, the 1960s and 1970s emerged as “Television’s Moment,” as mass audiences turned to the new medium and iconic TV sitcoms negotiated cultural value changes (Hodenberg 2015). Nevertheless, television did not end the popularity of either print media in general or magazines as such – *Life*, *Time*, and others remained hugely popular throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Rather, as Erika Doss has convincingly argued, print media fragmented into a wealth of niche markets since the late 1960s (Doss 2001b, 16). While still holding considerable circulation rates (as *Life* in 1972), most broad-based general magazines either were suspended (as the *Saturday Evening Post* (1969) *Look* (1971), *Life* (1972)) or branched out with new periodicals that addressed a more distinct readership. *Time*, for example, persisted but launched magazines like *Money*, *People*, *Discover* and *TV-Cable Week* (Doss 2001b, 16-17). These developments signal transforming markets as well as a trend towards a more fragmented consumer culture and maybe even a critique of the version of modern America established in mainstream magazines at the end of the period under concern here. To look at these transformation processes from a new angle, this article uses the family imagery as a lens to unearth tensions between normative and cultural change (and restoration) in a long-durée perspective.

Interestingly, the use of the “modern family” in magazine advertising has not been subject to much historical scrutiny. Bruce W. Brown has argued in his sociological study on images of family life in magazine advertising that ads displayed a substantial “movement toward more egalitarian family life values since 1920” – but has stopped his analysis in the late 1970s (Brown 1981, 94). Whereas substantial research literature deals with women’s magazines and the changing notions of femininity (and masculinity)

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<sup>4</sup> The complete issues of *Life* are online. For this article, the magazine was accessed for the years 1945 to 1972 <[https://books.google.de/books?id=R1cEAAAAMBAJ&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.de/books?id=R1cEAAAAMBAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s)>. *Time* could be accessed in the print Atlantic edition only (years 1965, 1972, 1975, 1980, 1985) in the Press Archive, University of Münster and at the Library of the Department of North American History in Cologne. *Good Housekeeping* was accessed in print for the years 1945-1950, 1959 in the Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

conveyed in picture ads, studies of advertisement do not deal specifically with the use of family imagery.<sup>5</sup> To close this gap and to add a new perspective to the current body of scholarship, picture ads here will be analyzed as part of a discourse that had, of course, an economic relevance, but also a cultural one. Ads were commissioned by producers, realized by advertising companies, read by consumers and reaffirmed (or not) through the purchase of the products advertised. Thus, images used in advertising were in any case intentional, or, as Roland Barthes has put it, “in advertising the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional; [...] the advertising image is frank, or at least emphatic” (Barthes 1999, 33-34). While the analysis of the immediate and longtime effects of advertising on consumerism is a difficult terrain this article won’t engage in, it is nevertheless important to take into account here that ads had a specific economic purpose (Parkin 2007; Hill 2002).

At the same time, a wealth of historical literature has carved out the important social and normative changes in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the crucial role ascribed to the family therein. While Stephanie Coontz and Jessica Weiss argued for the US, that media images of the family created by TV sitcoms such as *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best* proved extremely powerful but did not at all reflect the social and cultural living conditions of the majority of American families, they did not turn to analyze the display of the family in magazine advertising (Coontz 1992; Weiss 2000). Also, the important studies by Jonathan O. Self and Natasha Zaretsky on the conservative transformation of family ideology from the 1960s to the 1980s did not cover the appeal to family values in the economic realm (Self 2012; Zaretsky 2007). Thus, this contribution seeks to further investigate how the family imagery was used in the context of advertising from the 1950s through the 1980s. To do so, picture ads that applied to the family will be classified thematically and then compared over time: ads for food, alcoholic beverages, cars, and insurances.

## From Feeding the Family to Shaping the Body: Food Ads

Campbell’s beef noodle soup of 1950 stands for a lot of comparable appeals to devoted motherhood and perfect housewifery in ads for food and household appliances in the period. Women smiled happily over the food they prepared for their loved ones or

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<sup>5</sup> Scanlon 1995. Kitch 2001. Walker 2000. Strasser 1996. Light 2012. For an entry into the topic see Heinemann 2013 and the unpublished M.A. Thesis at Münster University by Mester 2013. Parkin 2007. Sivulka 2009. Tomes 2016.

the frying pans, dishwashers, fridges, toasters they used to cater to their families' needs.<sup>6</sup> Several weeks ahead of Christmas, husbands were informed "to give her easier meal making" by buying her a frypan designed to prepare as much as nine fried eggs at a time.<sup>7</sup> Not the female obligation to prepare meals changed throughout the 1960s – but the way this task was presented to consumers. Women did not just have to cook, but seduce their husbands with creative meals. An ad for Bird's Eye frozen food displaying a photo of a delicious vegetable dish declared "Blame yourself if your husband is just a meat and potato man" and concluded: "Why shouldn't a man be tempted with exciting vegetable combinations every night?"<sup>8</sup> Now, housewives learnt how to balance calories and nutrition values for their families – an issue that had not been dealt with before.<sup>9</sup> Also, food brands started to appear in ads that did not display housewives or families – as in the case of tomato ketchup, milk, cereals, and whipped cream.<sup>10</sup> These trends – dieting and balancing nutrition values while relying more on the "seductive qualities" of convenience products – themselves manifested throughout the 1970s. Here, the cook (still the woman/mother) did enjoy more freedom and creativity – as in the rice ad quoted above – but still had to please her loved ones.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the sugar industry embarked on the trend of blaming fat as the source of fatness and bad eating habits and started to proclaim sugar as the solution to the individual's and the family's dietary needs<sup>12</sup>: "The 'fat time of the day': that's any time you overeat. Sugar's instant energy can

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<sup>6</sup> Adams Korn Kurls, *Life*, January 2, 1950; Yellow, *Life*, April 7, 1952; Hotpoint Range, *Life*, April 7, 1952; Tide Soap, *Life*, April 7, 1952; Cromley Electric Range, *Life*, March 23, 1953; Campbell's Beef Noodle Soup, *Life*, March 23, 1953; General Electric Range, *Life*, March 28, 1955; Patio Ware Pans, *Life*, May 7, 1956; Sunbeam Frypan, *Life*, November 11, 1957; Kelvinator Kitchen, *Good Housekeeping*, January 1950, p. 31; Hotpoint Electric Dishwasher, *Good Housekeeping*, June 1953, p. 3; New Frigidaire Electric Range, *Good Housekeeping*, August 1953, p. 15; Lux Liquid, *Good Housekeeping*, September 1956, p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> Sunbeam frypan, *Life*, November 11, 1957.

<sup>8</sup> Bird's Eye Frozen Food, *Life*, November 27, 1964.

<sup>9</sup> Carnation Low Fat Milk Crystals, *Life*, September 5, 1960; The Sunny Sunday, *Life*, August 4, 1960; Carnation Instant Low Fat Milk, *Life*, November 23, 1962; Tang Instant Breakfast Drink, *Life*, September 16, 1966; Monsanto Cake Mixes, *Life*, May 5, 1967; Swanson's Fried Chicken Dinner, *Life*, May 3, 1968.

<sup>10</sup> Carnation Instant Non Fat Dry Milk, *Life*, September 5, 1960; Carnation Non Fat Dry Milk, *Life*, November 23, 1962; Kellogg's Corn Flakes, *Life*, November 23, 1962; Del Monte Tomato Catsup, *Life*, November 23, 1962; Campbell's Soup, *Life*, March 13, 1964; Birdseye Corn and Pea with Tomatos, *Life*, November 27, 1964.

<sup>11</sup> Shape, *Life*, April 10, 1970; Sugar Information, *Life*, April 10, 1970; Minute Rice, *Life*, November 13, 1970; Hunt's Tomato Sauce, *Life*, April 2, 1971; Kellogg's Cereals, *Life*, July 16, 1971; Va-Rice-It, *Life*, March 13, 1970.

<sup>12</sup> For a document analysis on how the sugar industry even sponsored biased research see Kerns et al 2006.

slip you past” declared the ad while showing a happy couple snacking sweets.<sup>13</sup> Other ads applied to the homemaker and told her how to manage the family’s budget, but did not display the family as such.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in conclusion of this first part, it is safe to say that while the woman was still held responsible for the food and food-preparation, more ads appealed to her capacity to balance nutrition values and even administer dietary products during the late 1960s and the 1970s. Correspondingly, the family was less present in the ads since the 1960s while traditional female gender stereotypes still loomed large.

## From a Man’s Drink to the Emancipation of the Spirit: Ads for Beer and Whiskey

Ads for alcoholic beverages yet suggest a significant shift in gender roles, at least in public display. While in the 1950s, women served beer and drinks, but only sipped at their beers while the man was around, whiskey and other spirits clearly belonged to “a man’s world.”<sup>15</sup> In 1953, for example, the beer company Schlitz from Wisconsin invested in a one-page picture ad of a woman arranging a tray with two beer glasses while she looked out of the picture window and saw her husband arriving home from work “(see Illustration 3). The message conveyed was that, while the husband would enjoy his beer after a hard day’s work, his spouse would join him for company, but would never drink on her own.<sup>16</sup> This changed during the 1960s, but first the husband remained the active part. For example, an ad for Canadian whiskey declared “My husband introduced me to a really smooth Canadian last night” – referring not only to a romantic adventure but to the whiskey she then tasted.<sup>17</sup> A couple of months later, a Ballantine’s ad stages two conversing men holding whiskey glasses in their hands and observes: “Men like Scotch [...] preferably smooth scotch” only to display an almost empty glass, stained with red lipstick: “So do other people.”<sup>18</sup> From here, it was only a small step to women enjoying

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<sup>13</sup> Sugar Information, *Life*, April 10, 1970; Sugar Information, *Life*, November 13, 1970.

<sup>14</sup> “If you think it’s tough feeding your family on a budget – you’re not alone”. Hunt Wesson Menu Plans, *Life*, November 13, 1970.

<sup>15</sup> United States Brewer’s Federation, *Life*, March 23, 1953; Old Hickory, *Life*, May 7, 1956; Calvert Reserve, *Life*, July 20, 1959.

<sup>16</sup> Schlitz Beer, *Life*, March 23, 1953. See also the ad for Early Times, Kentucky Bourbon, *Life*, July 10, 1959. Here, the wife rests in a deck chair in the garden, reading a magazine, while the husband treats himself to a glass of Bourbon. Only one beer ad from the 1950s displayed a woman enjoying her beer alone: Schlitz, *Life*, July 5, 1954.

<sup>17</sup> Seagram’s VO Canadian Whisky, *Life*, March 3, 1965.

<sup>18</sup> Ballantine’s Scotch Whisky, *Life*, March 19, 1965.

their drinks without the help of their husbands, as several ads from the late 1960s underline.<sup>19</sup> At the beginning of the 1970s, however, couples posed casually, Whiskey glasses in their hands, and demanded “Join us for a true Bourbon.”<sup>20</sup> For the late 1970s and 1980s, we see that while whiskey is still associated with male taste, strength and adventure, women as independent consumers are nevertheless integrated into the picture.<sup>21</sup> Also, social drinking came up as a topic for picture ads, displaying youthful groups of people sharing their drinks instead of single families.<sup>22</sup> While the drinking of alcohol developed from an all-male privilege into something women could even enjoy in private and public on their own terms, the family was still evoked in juice and milk ads during the 1960.<sup>23</sup> Here, the nuclear family figured as a “team” that had to be sustained with high quality nutrients and vitamins. The incorporation of women into ads for spirits during the 1960s seems to reflect not only a change in marketing strategies – appealing to women as buyers and consumers – but, more importantly, a successive broadening of the female gender norm. While the homemaker/mother still was held responsible for the nutrition and well-being of her family, it nevertheless became acceptable that she enjoyed a drink independently of her husband or mate.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, not ads for food or drinks, but the ones for cars capitalized on the nuclear family.

## Forever for the Family: Car Ads

The product category that constantly referred to the family in picture ads was cars. During the 1950s, especially the spaciousness and power of cars were advertised – for the

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<sup>19</sup> Smirnoff Wodka, *Life*, March 8, 1968; Byrrh, *Life*, November 29, 1968; Old Grant-Dad Whiskey, *Life*, November 29, 1968.

<sup>20</sup> Ten High Bourbon, *Life*, March 13, 1970; Seagram V.O. Canadian, *Life*, March 18, 1965.

<sup>21</sup> White Horse Whisky, *Life*, November 19, 1971; White Horse Whisky, *Life*, June 9, 1972; Sherry, *Time*, June 2, 1980, p. 62; Old Parr Whisky, *Time*, June 9, 1980, p. 6; Sherry, *Time*, June 16, 1980, p. 63; Courvoisier, *Time*, May 20, 1985, p. 13; Cutty Sark, *Time*, May 20, 1985, p. 16; Tuborg Beer, *Time*, May 27, 1980, p. 18-19.

<sup>22</sup> Seagram’s Whisky, *Life*, July 17, 1972; Johnnie Walker Red Label, *Time*, June 17, 1985, p. 3; Ballantine’s, *Time*, May 13, 1985, p. 31; Canadian Club, *Time*, August 16, 1980, p. 59; Courvoisier, *Time*, May 20, 1980, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Tang Instant Juice, *Life*, September 16, 1966; Carnation Non Fat Dry Milk, *Life*, November 23, 1962.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of women’s broadened gender norms in the 1960s see Echols 1994. Weiss 2001. Coontz 2001.



family, but also for pleasure.<sup>25</sup> For example, Buick declared proudly in 1957: “Just born – and bound to make history – big, bold, buoyant” and portrayed a family car (father behind the wheel, mother besides him and daughter in the back) in an adventurous ride into the wilderness.<sup>26</sup> A couple of years later, Ford Anglia (imported from Great Britain) was pictured as the ideal car for the family, efficient and low cost.<sup>27</sup> In the 1960s, Ford and Firestone as well as Kelly Tires used the family to refer to security issues: the tires and the quality service coming with them would allow the family to “sight-see worry free” (Kelly) while able mechanics would effectuate any maintenance needed when the family was travelling (Firestone). Ford simply staged a mother and her two young kids observing a Ford mechanic checking their car and relying on “Quality Car Care.”<sup>28</sup> Dodge/Chrysler combined more space for the family of four with technical gadgets as the “two way tailgate which makes it as easy to handle people as it is parcels or potted palms” – the kids posing in the back of the car.<sup>29</sup> Buick’s Opel Kadett was introduced as “The family Mini-Brute” (compared to the Maxi-Brute, an Indian elephant), inexpensive, spacious, efficient. “For my family – for any family – my Mini-Brute is perfect. [...] And my wife can park it. Do you know how fantastic that is?”<sup>30</sup> The gender issue was also referred to by other motor companies. While Chevrolet proudly declared “A Chevy pickup is built to be womanhandled” – showing an elegant woman maneuvering the car loaded with oranges, Ford directly appealed to women consumers and invoked the allure of sensuality and pleasure of its Mustang model.<sup>31</sup> Displaying a radiating woman in a white wedding gown, just having stepped out of a white car in free nature, the Mustang ad declared “Life was just one diaper after another, until Sarah got her new Mustang. [...] Suddenly there was a new gleam in her husband’s eye: For the car? For Sarah? For both? Now Sarah knows for sure: Mustangers have more fun!”<sup>32</sup> The combination of image and text is especially revealing as the new car seems to promise not only freedom from daily drudgeries of homemaking and motherhood (“one diaper after another”), but a veritable rebirth of female sensuality and, ultimately, sexuality (the

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<sup>25</sup> For example Chevrolet, “First and Finest at Lowest Cost,” *Life*, April 3, 1950; Ford, “America’s Ablest Car,” *Life*, April 7, 1952.

<sup>26</sup> Buick, *Life*, November 11, 1957. Comparable: Plymouth, *Life*, May 7, 1956.

<sup>27</sup> Ford Anglia, *Life*, July 20, 1959.

<sup>28</sup> Firestone Tires, *Life*, September 21, 1962; Kelly Tires, *Life*, September 21, 1962; Ford, *Life*, March 22, 1963.

<sup>29</sup> Dodge / Chrysler, *Life*, March 8, 1968.

<sup>30</sup> Buick Opel Kadett, *Life*, November 14, 1969.

<sup>31</sup> Chevrolet, *Life*, November 29, 1968.

<sup>32</sup> Ford Mustang, *Life*, March 19, 1965. See also Pontiac, *Life*, March 19, 1965.

wedding gown, the “gleam” in the husband’s eye). While still partly an affirmation of the conservative gender order which frames the woman as the object of male desire, the ad nevertheless opens up a space for female fulfillment and “fun” apart from a mother’s daily duties – and be it only through the purchase of the right car.

Interestingly, during the 1970s, the cheap, reliable, family car again occupied center stage, but now with a new focus on family vacations. While Chevrolet ads staged happy families travelling to US amusement parks on their vacations (“Chevrolet: Building a better way to see the USA”),<sup>33</sup> Ford and Volvo relied more on budget considerations and spaciousness, while the accompanying photo of a father with his young daughter on his shoulders suggested exotic settings and outdoor experiences (Ford).<sup>34</sup> This development also has to be seen in the context of the 1973 oil crisis and the 1979 energy crisis, which not only severely impacted the American automobile industry, but also resulted in an increased presence of cheap and energy efficient Japanese and Asian cars on the American market. In the 1980s, however, cars were mostly advertised as sports cars that guaranteed pleasure, or as cars suitable “also for women,” with no families displayed which could limit the male and female consumers’ freedom.<sup>35</sup> This observation stands in stark contrast to the common observation of the 1980s as the period where the family was declared to be at the heart of politics and of the nation by the President in his campaign for “traditional family values” (Collins 2007; Ehrman 2005).

## Weighing Financial Risk for the Family: Insurance Ads

Another product group that was constantly advertised to the family and for the family were insurance contracts. Here, in the 1950s, the husband as the bread-winner and head of the family clearly stood in the focus of ads for family insurances, as he had to provide for his loved ones. For example, the Travelers Life Insurance ad “Our Mortgaged Home is Blessed” directly appealed to the husband’s and father’s responsibilities as provider and protector – while he was still pictured with wife and daughter. New York Life, however, only centered on the male provider and his health that needed to be protected to ensure the family’s living. This focus on male health as central is also mentioned in the research literature. In her discussion of fatherhood and masculinity concepts put forward by

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<sup>33</sup> Chevrolet, *Life*, June 9, 1972. See also Chevrolet, *Life*, March, 17, 1972; Datsun, *Life*, June 19, 1972, Cover inside.

<sup>34</sup> Ford, *Life*, June 9, 1972; Volvo, March 31, 1972.

<sup>35</sup> See for example Nissan, *Time*, February 25, 1985, after p. 36; Mitsubishi, *Time*, March 11, 1985, special page 32-33; SAAB, *Time*, April 22, 1985, p. 2-3; Nissan, June 24, 1985 *Time*, p. 2-3.

advertisements and advice books in the 1950s, historian Tracy Penny Light has argued that “we need a fuller critique of authoritative messages found in advertising, particularly in terms of men’s health and the role they were expected to play in society” (Light 2012, 122). During the 1960s, insurance companies started to shift their focus more to the nuclear family to emphasize the need for risk protection and for a balanced family budget. For example, an ad for “Nationwide’s Family Security Plan” showed a family of four and their groceries, loaded into a convertible car decorated with a big number one. Below was written the slogan “Got kids? Got a house? Got a car? Get the one!”<sup>36</sup> In the same issue of the magazine *Life*, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company staged the cost of family living when a husband emptied his purse to pay for his wife’s and daughter’s shopping at the supermarket cashier: “But there’s one family need that won’t cost you anything. It’s this Metropolitan service: Family Security Check-Up!” Below the readers were advised “Check your family’s financial health, just as you check physical health.”<sup>37</sup> Other ads by the same company also drew on the nuclear family when advertising their insurance plans – although in a more playful mode (the family playing monopoly together, the family with their hands up in the air)<sup>38</sup>. Two more companies chose different approaches in their ads. While Investors Insurance pictured a couple in a conversation with the “insurance man” – and the wife spilled her coffee out of eagerness to listen to the advice – Equitable Life Insurances focused primarily on the husband.<sup>39</sup> A husband posed with a toddler girl while the ad explained: “Look ahead. Today you can protect her as never before,” which was, of course, due to the new insurance plan.<sup>40</sup> Thus, again the male breadwinner figured as the key person in charge of protecting and supporting his loved ones.

During the 1970s, interestingly, the emphasis shifted from family security to family finance. For example, the General Motors Acceptance Corporation (GMAC) displayed a family of four with family dog trying to squeeze camping equipment into their already overloaded car, while the caption read “Camping out is one thing. Fitting in another.”<sup>41</sup> Of course, as the text outlined, GMAC would offer its services to finance a potential new car and corresponding insurance contracts. Other companies stressed the budgeting

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<sup>36</sup> Nationwide, *Life*, May 3, 1963.

<sup>37</sup> Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, *Life*, May 3, 1963.

<sup>38</sup> Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, *Life*, March 22, 1963; Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, *Life*, March 19, 1965.

<sup>39</sup> Investors Insurance, *Life*, March 19, 1965.

<sup>40</sup> Equitable Life Insurances, *Life*, March 22, 1963.

<sup>41</sup> General Motors Acceptance Company, *Life*, June 6, 1972.

issue as well.<sup>42</sup> The next theme acquiring relevance was that of explaining insurance policies to the customer, mostly represented by the wage-earning husband.<sup>43</sup> Another outstanding ad is that of Hunt-Wesson, a giant food company specialized in oil and tomato products, offering a computerized meal plan, to help families live within their food budget. A housewife was pictured while shopping for groceries with a rather concerned expression on her face. The caption reassures her: “If you think it’s tough feeding your family on a budget, you’re not alone.”<sup>44</sup> While the last one is not exactly an insurance ad, it rather deals with the problems a family faced in “getting by” on a limited budget and the solutions proposed. Still, it is quietly assumed also in that ad that the homemaker/mother was in charge of buying and preparing the food for the family, while the husband was supposed to secure the family’s living.

### Conclusion: From Family Affair to Hedonist Pleasure? Family Advertising from the 1950s through the mid-80s.

The family figured prominently in picture ads that appeared in US-American mainstream magazines in the period under investigation. However, the “all-American family” referred to had its specific limitations as it seemed always to be white, middle class, consisting of mom and dad and their kids. Race was never conceptualized, neither was class – except in one ad that dealt with the problem of limited family budgets.<sup>45</sup> Despite these obvious biases and limitations, the way in which companies and advertisement agencies relied on family imagery to advertise their products underwent crucial changes. Over time, the family was referred to in a more sublime manner as couples, singles and youthful peer groups started to dominate picture ads from the mid-sixties onward. The family was still there, but it loomed more in the background. Interestingly, especially the 1980s – the decade of “traditional family values” as proclaimed by President Ronald Reagan – displayed the least family imagery in magazine advertising. Thus, the perspective on the family in magazine advertising opens up a new path to re-evaluate this decade, mostly referred to as the “conservative decade.” Regarding family forms, gender concepts and consuming patterns mirrored in those ads – and taking into account that ads had to translate people’s self-concepts into urges to

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<sup>42</sup> Bankers Life, *Life*, May 28, 1971; Allstate Car Insurance, *Life*, August 11, 1972.

<sup>43</sup> New York Life Insurance, *Life*, March 6, 1970; Metropolitan Life Insurance, *Life*, October 23, 1970; The Travelers, *Life*, August 13, 1971; The Travelers, *Life*, October 13, 1972.

<sup>44</sup> Hunt-Wesson, *Life*, November 13, 1970.

<sup>45</sup> The only picture ad that conceptualizes race in the entire sample is one for Walkers DeLuxe Bourbon, *Life*, May 7, 1956: An African American butler serves actor Lee Bowman his high-class whiskey.

consume and companies could not risk to alienate consumers – it seems quite plausible that advertising served as a sensitive seismograph of social and normative trends.

Four points serve to further outline this result:

In food ads, women were in charge of food preparation over the entire period. Here, the classical gender roles remain surprisingly stable. Nevertheless, the focus considerably shifted from preparing family dinners and lunches to seducing the husbands or partners with creative and skillful cooking. Also, women's dietary competence referred to in ads turned from barely satisfying their families' needs to balancing nutrition values and, since the 1970s, administering diets.

Ads for alcoholic beverages, however, started to display more egalitarian gender roles during the 1960s. While women had been limited to serve beer to their husbands and never touched spirits during the 1950s – when whiskey was framed as “a man's drink” – women started to consume spirits independently in the 1960s and were even addressed as potential consumers from the 1960s through the 1980s.

Car ads since the 1950s either visualized the family or the couple as consumers and car buyers, relying mostly on comfort and safety. This did not change much over the years, but since the 1960s women were staged as independent customers

Insurance ads always relied on the family – but here the family figured primarily as an object of care, attention, and financial commitment. Interestingly, even in the 1960s it was the male breadwinner who had to balance his investments for the family and who was offered support by insurance companies.

To conclude, picture ads from the 1950s to the 1980s suggest that the family was present in advertising, but was referred to to a far lesser extent since the mid-1960s. Instead, individuals and youthful peer groups partly replaced the nuclear family imagery – which suggests a trend towards more individuality and hedonism in food preparation, leisure and consumption. Nevertheless, this did not account for an integral “value change” from material to post-material values – as claimed by Inglehart and others. In the 1960s and 1970s, the family remained important, but was more and more associated with finance and security issues – as the car ads since the mid-1960s aptly demonstrate. Thus, “material values” coexisted with “postmaterial” ones, depending on the product category advertised. Whether the perceived absence of the family in picture ads in the 1980s can be read as a counter-trend to current assumptions on the decade's fascination with conservative family values could provide a meaningful subject of further historical study.

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1: Family Lunch: Campbell's Beef Noodle Soup Ad, *Life*, April 3, 1950.



2: Food for Love: American Rice Council, *Life*, March 13, 1970.



3: A Man's Drink: Schlitz Beer, *Life*, March 23, 1953.