

Keeping mum in the kitchen – representations of mothers in ads haven't changed in six decades

December 11 2019, by Margaret K. Hogg and Teresa Davis



Credit: August de Richelieu from Pexels

It's the 1950s. There's a woman at home in the kitchen. She's busy running the domestic world of her family, whose health and happiness

she's responsible for. Sixty years pass and advertising in women's consumer magazines continue to show her there, sorting out all the family's affairs, and putting their needs first.

Between 1950 and 2010, representations of mothers buying for their families did evolve. At first, mothers were guided by mostly male experts who knew better, but now mothers are the experts themselves. And yet, a mother's [knowledge](#) and expertise is still confined to consumption and the domestic sphere of [family](#) life. Our mother of the 21st century is still in the family home and, in that, such adverts continue to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes.

We looked at 1,147 ads from the [Australian Women's Weekly](#) (AWW) and more than 775 ads from the UK's Good Housekeeping (GH) covering the decades between 1950 and 2010, [focusing](#) on visual representations of women as mothers. We identified various themes linked to the portrayal of their responsibilities around consumption, families and knowledge (expertise and experience) over time.

Experts know best

The caring mother is one of the most recurring themes in post-war advertising. In the 1950s, ads show mothers following the advice of mainly male experts such as doctors and psychologists, on how to use the "right" product to care for their children. This was because the professional advice from experts was seen as more important than mothers' knowledge based on their own practical experience.

In these early ads the mother is seen as the protector. She is challenged to devote a lot of time to ensuring the health and happiness of all her family by using products that scientists and other "experts" suggest protect her family.

A 1950s [ad for eggs](#) from AWW, for instance, shows a happy, wholesome-looking mother by a farmhouse with a basket of eggs. To her left is a male doctor (his white coat signifying his professional expertise) pointing to the eggs and below him sits a block of text presenting the "medical point of view" of why she should feed her family eggs. This mother looks happy and secure that her consumption choice is legitimised and "doctor approved".

Protection, safety and nurturing continue as themes associated with mothers throughout the 1960s and 1970s as seen in an AWW ad for [Weetbix](#), which shows two pictures. The first, evoking old black-and-white photographs of childhood, depicts a little boy and is contrasted with a full-colour picture of a man on skis. The copy reads: "Feed the man inside your little boy with Weetbix ... He needs the kind of food nature meant men to grow strong on—like Weetbix. Now with twice as much thiamine, Riboflavin and Niacin and iron as wheat itself."

Here maternal knowledge is being invited to draw on the scientific (the the listing of vitamins) to help her son to achieve his adult potential. Scientific language is evoked to show how instinctive maternal knowledge can be scientifically grounded and used to protect her son not just today but into the future.

Working mothers' domestic lives

In the 1980s and 1990s, the professional and domestic lives of mothers are shown as interwoven. In these later ads mothers use their own professional skills and know-how to consume efficiently for the family. In the 1980s, readers are presented with the efficient mother who knows exactly how to manage her private (family) and professional (work) life without compromising her family.

A 1980 AWW advertisement for [Scotties tissues](#) shows a woman at an

office desk, beaming happily, with a diary open in front of her. The catch line reads "I made up my mind", it then goes into a first-person narrative of how the working mum in the image woke up one morning and realised that since her children were at school she did not have much to do—so she got herself a job, new clothes and a new hairdo and changed her life.

She now brings this change to the way she shops: "I look around for things like Scotties tissues which are soft and gentle ... I wonder why I never noticed them before, I guess I was set in my ways—but that's all different now".

Enduring assumption about mothers

By the 2000s and 2010s, the mother has become the expert herself, no longer passively following instructions. Instead, this generation of mothers needs to know enough to be able to question experts equally about genetically modified foods as they can about solar power. However, these later advertisements still represent women as striving for knowledge, which is primarily to be used for the protection of their families, especially their children. The domestic not the professional sphere continues to drive these women's knowledge worlds.

Although visual representations of mothers' knowledge and expertise as consumers change and seem to increase over this period, assumptions about the responsibilities of mothers endure in such ads in these women's magazines. Of the GH ads from this period (125 from 2000-2009 and 89 from 2010 to the present) only a very few included men as fathers and in AWW only 20 out of 139 ads in the 2000 decade and 38 out of 203 ads in the 2010 decade showed men as fathers.

Advertisers repeatedly positioned women's knowledge as confined to their domestic responsibilities—such as cooking, cleaning and caring.

Despite apparent shifts in society's attitudes about sharing the role of caregiver within a family, there remained an enduring and natural assumption that mothers should be responsible. Advertisements increasingly represented mothers as having to acquire more expertise and skills. However, this expertise is not shown as being used in the external world, instead it is used to professionalise their mothering and to use this knowledge primarily for family purposes.

Essentially, what we see here are largely superficial changes in the portrayal of mothers and their knowledge across the decades. Although knowledge changes, it remains bent towards the pursuit of being a perfect mother — a selfless maternal ideal which only serves to strengthen gender stereotypes and reinforce the traditional roles within family life.

Regardless of shifts in the ads that appear to increasingly value a mother's knowledge, there exists an enduring assumption that [mothers](#) should use their knowledge for caring and consumption—so that ultimately, when women have expert knowledge, the world of commerce continues to project the idea that this should be used for domestic purposes.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Keeping mum in the kitchen – representations of mothers in ads haven't changed in six decades (2019, December 11) retrieved 14 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-12-mum-kitchen-representations-mothers-ads.html>

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