SELLING CONSUMERISM: GENDERED ADVERTISING ACROSS THE AMERICAN RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE, 1910-1920

By

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Integrated Studies Project
submitted to Dr Catherine Cavenaugh
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts – Integrated Studies

Athabasca, Alberta
March, 2007
Up-to-date. A wonder of modern technology! Scientifically formulated. The latest thing. New and improved! These words would be completely at home in an advertisement in our day. One phrase might describe a computer game, while another would perhaps work in a pharmaceutical ad. We’ve seen the words so often that their context doesn’t seem to matter anymore. Our comprehension of their message is accompanied by a healthy dose of skepticism since our perspective as twenty-first century consumers is tempered by our understanding of the dark side of scientific advances and a dawning realization that a consumption-driven culture is not entirely unproblematic. However, if we take those words uncritically at face value and drop them into a newspaper article from a century ago, they would not seem out of place at all. On the contrary, they would seem to be right at home.

The United States of the early twentieth century was brimming with the hope and energy of modernity. It was the first country to have its economy devoted to mass production, the first to create the mass consumer institutions and enticements to fuel the consumption of mass produced goods. Manufacturers believed that industrial progress hinged on stimulating consumption, and a mindset arose within middle class that greater access to new consumer goods was tied to a higher standard of living. This consciousness quickly spread to the working class and the younger generation of newly arrived immigrants eager to assimilate into their new home. Simon Patten, a prominent economist of the time, gushed over this in his 1907 work *The New Basis of Civilization*:

“…the social structure is being changed by the slow submergence of the primeval world, and the appearance of a land of unmeasured resources with a hoard of mobilized wealth.”

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“Each gain upon nature adds to the quantity of goods to be consumed by society, and lessens the labor necessary to produce them. Improved conditions make better men, and better men make improved conditions.”

Although there were challenges to this optimistic view of the new consumer culture, these grew more muted with each passing year, and eventually faded from view until re-emerging in the latter decades of the twentieth century in the form of post-modern cultural critique.

The rising tide of new factory-produced goods that flooded markets in the early 1900s needed masses of consumers to purchase them. Manufacturers turned to advertising in unprecedented ways in order to “create” consumers for these products, some of which were newly invented. In order for advertising to be successful, it had to identify potential consumers and speak to them in effective ways that would entice them to buy. One question was who were the consumers? The answer, for the most part, was women. The accepted wisdom was that women purchased 80% of consumer goods. Advertising agents (97% of whom were male) referred to consumers as “she”, and considered the management of family consumption the “most important work” of women in modern society. The rise of consumer culture was clearly a gendered phenomenon. This is not to say that men never purchased goods, or were never the target of advertising. Quite the opposite was true. The challenge for advertisers was to reach out to a diverse pool of potential consumers. Exactly how they tried to meet that challenge is the topic of this paper.

This paper will examine the emergence and development of gendered advertising in the decade of the 1910s, with particular attention given to the variable of rural vs. urban
consumers. Potential consumers were targeted differently by various product advertisers based on the variables of gender and locality. The development of gendered advertising is especially interesting in the early 1900s due to the challenges to traditional gender roles such as the suffrage movement and the changing labor market which emerged at that time.

Urbanization and the emergence of new, less physically demanding white collar jobs for men early in the new century contributed to middle class angst over masculinity, and fears that men were losing the essence of their “manliness”. In response to this perceived “crisis of masculinity”, Teddy Roosevelt advocated a return to a more rugged and physical type of manliness, termed the “strenuous life”. For the working class, the growing practice of paying a “family wage” to male workers enshrined gender privilege within the economic system and the concept of the “male provider” as the new norm. It also served to establish the middle class ideal of “wife as homemaker” within the ranks of the working class. Reality for the working class, both for urban immigrants and rural farmers, was quite different. Working class women, whether farm wives or urban factory workers, found the middle class ideal to be a distant fantasy.

For women, the decades prior to 1920 were a time of shifting expectations and roles, and the emergence of the “New Woman”. Martha Patterson describes her as “… a liminal figure between the Victorian woman and the flapper…” who was progressive, youthful, active, and decidedly “modern”. A middle class icon embodying the aspirations of working class women, she may have been employed prior to marriage, and after marriage would fill her days with clubs and shopping. Shopping, particularly for urban middle class women, became a form of entertainment and a mark of class
Some middle and upper middle class women were engaged in the political struggle of winning the vote, and rethinking traditional gender roles in new and radical ways. The word “feminism” appeared for the first time in the 1910s, although those consciously seeking radical changes in gender roles were a minority. The role of consumer was not an unproblematic one for women at this time. Shopping, both for household necessities and especially for leisure, brought women into public space and made their physical presence an undeniable consequence of the new consumer culture at a time when Americans in general remained ambivalent about women’s relationship to the world outside the home. Simon Patten described his opinion of the situation as a matter of women not yet being adapted to modern life: “Women feel that their times are out of joint, because they are not yet coordinated with the industrial civilization which is penetrating their homes and sifting through their activities.” According to Patten women just needed to ‘get with the program’, and to this end advertisers were eager to help. Even feminist writer Mary Roberts Coolidge (who also criticized women’s embrace of consumerism) writing in 1912 echoed Patten’s thoughts when she writes of the women of her day, “…who, though inheriting earlier traditions, were unconsciously forced to break away from them by industrial and social changes which they did not comprehend.” One paradoxical aspect of the relationship between women and advertisers was that successful advertising neatly fit the ideological paradigm of a seduction of the passive female consumer by the male advertiser (consider Patten’s choice of language) who frequently sold products (such as prepackaged food) that facilitated female emancipation from domestic drudgery. As a result, women’s desire for advertised products constituted both a threat to prevailing cultural norms and
the foundation for the new consumer-based culture and economy. T.J. Jackson Lears termed this phenomenon “fake liberation through consumption”.

Despite all the paradoxes and problems of a society in the midst of change, the fact remained that the increasing output of mass-produced consumer goods from factories needed to be sold to someone, somehow. New markets needed to be created from scratch for technologically new products, and expanded for more familiar products which were now mass-produced. Society needed to be sold on the idea of consumption. Monica Brasted explained this process as the advertiser’s linking of a society’s values to the product and its consumption. For example; a product associated with ‘scientific’ qualities would link a consumer’s value of modernity with consumption of that product. In this way, the advertising of the early twentieth century did not simply reflect the culture, but rather reinforced certain aspects of it, amplifying them in the process. This of course begs the question of exactly how this process was carried out. How was the abstract idea of “consumerism” sold to women and men in different locales and circumstances? What products were sold to whom?

This study attempts to answer these questions by examining newspaper advertising using the variables of product, gender and geographic locality. The validity of this approach is strengthened by the fact that early marketing professionals encouraged advertisers to distinguish between urban males, rural males, and females. The goal of the study is to give a more holistic view of the nascent consumer culture in the second decade of the twentieth-century America than is possible by examining each variable alone. The work is by no means exhaustive in nature. Examples of advertising as well as numerical data have been chosen to allow the reader to closely see relevant aspects of the
larger whole in detail, while still grasping the big picture of emergent consumerism. In essence, I hope to show both the forest and the trees. The choice of newspaper advertising as an object of study instead of magazine or other forms of print advertising is deliberate. Newspapers were one of the earliest forms of mass communication, and were intended for consumers from a particular locality. They exhibited regional variations and trends in a way that national magazines could not. Although there has been extensive study of national magazine advertising of the period, there has been comparatively little study of newspaper ads. The nature of this research necessarily involved the use of microfilm copies of archived newspapers, some of which were unfortunately poor in quality. In the copies reprinted here, the text is not always legible. Any references made to illegible copied text were drawn from readings of the original microfilm itself, which was of slightly higher quality.

This study examined advertising in three newspapers from the years 1910, 1915, and 1920. This provided a “snapshot” approach, which highlighted any changes over the decade. All three newspapers were published in western Pennsylvania, but represent very different cultural milieus: one very urban and industrial, one rural and agrarian, and one small town with some industry. The third represents an area in-between the two extremes of urban and rural. Issues from each paper were sampled and ads for consumer products were analyzed. Only consumer products are included in this study. Ads for services, wholesale products, public events, theatres, restaurants, etc… were not included. These would, however, be an excellent topic for further study. Ads were first coded as masculine, feminine, or gender neutral based on language, illustrations, and location within the paper. Next, the type of “selling point” or “pitch” used to sell the product was
identified. For example an ad could be coded for one or more selling points such as price, quality, novelty, and so on. This provided the data base for the quantitative analysis of broad trends. Additionally, representative ads for various products were chosen for a closer, qualitative look in hopes of balancing and optimizing the two approaches.

In addition to the straightforward product counts and percentages, ratio scores were calculated in order to compare relative emphasis of different selling points in different papers. For example, ads for hypothetical product category X classified as feminine were advertised 57 times in a given year. In these ads, 35 used a selling point of novelty. Dividing 35 by 57 yields a ratio score of .614 for novelty. Note that these are not strictly percentages since an ad could be coded with multiple selling points, and that multiple ads for a given product category were used to generate the scores. It should be noted that the ads studied were fairly straightforward in both visual elements and text. They were not yet written with the subtle, indirect messages which would come to dominate advertising later in the century. As a result, ratio scores enable comparison across gender, locality, time or any combination thereof in a fairly uncomplicated way. The minimum possible score was obviously zero, meaning no use of a particular selling point was found. The maximum was one, meaning that all ads in a category used a particular selling point.

The first of the three variables considered is product type. This simple category classifies ads with similar products for purposes of comparison. Although advertising for all consumer products were initially coded for product type in this study, the three major types considered in-depth are packaged foods, clothing, and health related products which together comprised the overwhelming majority of consumer product advertising in
the newspapers sampled. A fourth category, broadly termed “products of a changing culture” is analyzed more briefly than the other three. This category includes such sub-categories as automobiles and tobacco.

The second variable is gender. As previously noted, women constituted the majority of identified “consumers” of newly available retail goods, and middle class women in particular engaged in shopping as a socially acceptable leisure activity. Advertising directed to women in the early twentieth century spoke to them at a critical moment in social history. Male advertisers attempted to answer in a physical sense Freud’s question, ‘what do women want?’ at a time when American women were themselves figuring out how to engage with the changing political, industrial, commercial and consumer worlds. Advertisers and retailers frequently flattered women shoppers, but degraded and insulted them among themselves, a phenomenon which reflects their own ambivalence about gender and economics. Addressing the topic of women and advertising, however, only tells half of the gender story. What about men?

Although most “consumers” were considered to be female, a significant minority of advertising was directed at men. Advertising for many products, from tailored suits and stomach remedies to auto parts and hair tonic, filled the pages of newspapers early in the century and were distinctly masculine in focus. The challenge for advertisers hoping to speak to men was quite different from the challenge of reaching the female shopper. Drawing men into the budding consumer culture as consumers was a delicate matter. Margaret Finnegan writes, “A person corrupted by luxury became emasculated; became woman. By the end of the nineteenth century, these gendered connotations had attached
themselves to the emerging image of the urban woman consumer.” Advertisers had to overcome this stereotype and as a result, addressed men quite differently than women.

The final variable of the study is that of locality, whether the targeted consumer was urban or rural. Prior to the 1920s, most of the population of the United States was not living in an urban area. Rural populations simply did not have direct access to the sheer volume of goods that their urban counterparts saw on a daily basis. Nevertheless, they participated in the shift toward consumerism by purchasing from small local merchants and/or national mail order catalogs, and steadily increased their purchasing in the early decades of the century. Additionally, farm incomes were rising in the 1910s even as the overall population was shifting toward cities. In the words of researcher Carolyn Kitch, rural people “aspired to urbanity” through their purchases. Paradoxically, these rural aspirations stood in tension with the national consciousness that identified America and Americans with romantic notions of what has been called an “agrarian myth”, a gendered concept that identified the land as female. This was one more variation on the recurring symbol of a fertile mother earth, a cross-cultural concept dating from the earliest human civilizations. Farm life had something of an exalted idealistic status in the consciousness of Americans, a status which was promoted by farmers themselves along with the government by the “Country Life Movement”. Romantic notions aside, the pull of modernity in the form of affordable mass-produced goods was irresistible. The emerging consumer ethic disparaged traditional lifeways as old-fashioned and offered instead convenience, abundance, novelty, and a heavy dose of all things “modern”.

Throughout the second decade of the twentieth century, advertising itself matured and developed, gradually becoming more sophisticated, effective and prolific. As it changed,
advertising also became far more of a force in the world of business and economics than it had ever been previously. It is significant that through the early decades of the twentieth century, advertising revenues for newspapers steadily grew, and eventually formed the largest share of income, surpassing subscription revenue. By 1920, advertising accounted for two-thirds of all newspaper income.28

The three western Pennsylvania newspapers that were examined for the study are the Pittsburgh Gazette-Times, the Greenville Evening Record, and the Mercer Dispatch and Republican.

Of the three areas considered, Pittsburgh was by far the most urbanized and a national center for heavy industry, particularly iron and steel. In 1910, greater metropolitan Pittsburgh was home to more than a million people within a ten mile radius of the city center.29 It had the highest per capita income of any American city.30 In addition to its reputation as a “steel city”, the Pittsburgh area was also a center for coal mining, a large railroad hub and home to the largest food pickling and processing plant in the world at that time.31 It had a large immigrant population, with more than a third of the total population being either foreign born or of foreign parentage.32 It is also notable that Pittsburgh had a particularly low employment rate for white women due to the predominance of heavy industry and the lack of industry that typically employed women (such as textiles).33 It had several daily newspapers (including one from the African American community).

In stark contrast to Pittsburgh, Mercer Pennsylvania seems worlds apart. Mercer is located approximately one hundred miles due north of Pittsburgh. In 1910, its population numbered only 2096, and remained relatively flat throughout the 1910s.34 It was
described in 1917 as a “fertile agricultural district”, with large livestock markets, farm, fruit and dairy interests, flour mills, along with lumber companies, a “carriage works” and a small wire goods factory. It had 32 stores, and boasted the largest horse market in the area. It was also the county seat, with both the courthouse and county government offices. It had two weekly newspapers, and boasted of its “many” paved streets and electric street lighting by 1917.35

Occupying the demographic between these two extremes was Greenville, located fifteen miles north of Mercer. In 1910, it had a population of nearly 6000 which had risen to over 10,000 by 1917.36 Like Mercer, it was surrounded by agricultural area, but it also was home to several small steel mills (branches of Pittsburgh companies) and foundries, as well as a railroad car manufacturing operation. It was midway on the railroad line between Chicago and New York, and as such was frequently an overnight stop for travelers between the two cities. It was home to 90 retail stores, several hotels and theaters, and one undergraduate college. By 1917, it had telephone, telegraph, electric streetlights, and municipal water service.37 It was also home to one daily and four weekly papers. A writer from 1917 declared, “no one need go out of Greenville for anything needed, not only the necessities, but luxuries as well.”38 Given all this, it seems that Greenville is more an “urban miniature” than a rural small town like its neighbor Mercer.

Before delving into the main product advertising analysis, it is necessary to note one feature of all advertisements in this study. Regardless of which product was being sold or where it was advertised, all ad illustrations presented the “consumer” as uniformly white and middle or upper middle class. This is indicative of not only the symbolic erasure of
racial and immigrant minorities, but also a trend toward the emergence of a middle-class norm. Additionally, for obvious reasons, advertisers sought to target the consumers with sizeable disposable income, which would have been the socially dominant groups. This targeting by class was deliberate and calculated. In a text written in 1919 for marketers, the author refers to research done by interviewing “…women of the well-to-do households…” For women, the new middle-class norm was linked to the concept of what it meant to be a “lady”. “Ladyhood” included norms of both dress and behavior, and as a concept was the means by which middle class women ranked and judged each other. The women pictured in the advertising studied were unquestionably “ladies”. More often than not, they were also younger ladies. During the 1910s, youthful models supplanted the more adult figures of the “voluptuous woman” and “portly bearded man” seen in advertising from previous decades. Advertising historian and analyst Jackson Lears sees this as significant in that “girlish” representations symbolized a devaluation of female authority, a movement away from “formidable mother figures” toward “giggling teenagers”, a less threatening icon for the consumer age.

Of all the products categories in this study, food is the one that in and of itself is gendered. This is not surprising, since food preparation in the home was (and is) considered a female activity. With very few exceptions, foods were marketed directly toward female consumers, regardless of whether or not the ad explicitly addressed women. In this study, the only food product ads that were found to be aimed directly at men were the occasional ads for boxed chocolates sold as a gift for one’s wife or sweetheart. As a general category, food fell under the label of “feminine”. With regard to food, the decade of the 1910s saw the continuance of broad societal trends that had
originated several years before. The passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 only intensified already existing social and economic trajectories. In general, the cultural trend toward “modernity”, “efficiency” and all things “scientific” spilled over into the household, bringing with it a movement toward processed, standardized, and prepackaged foods along with new “modern” appliances and gadgets. For example, consider figure 1. Under the heading “Demonstrations That Should Have the Attention of Women”, are listed three product demonstrations that “illustrate the science of household economy.”

While it is not difficult to envision the new “caloric cook stove” as having “scientific” potential, the decorative grapefruit cutter is a bit of a stretch! Still, it is clear that the zeal for at least the appearance of “science” was ubiquitous. The new academic discipline of home economics sought to bring “scientific cookery” into the kitchen of middle-class women. In a sense, this represented a form of industrialization of the home, bringing the
male world of scientific objectivity squarely into the female world of food preparation.\textsuperscript{43} For the most part, this process was welcomed by women, particularly middle-class women who identified with progressive social reforms, and who embraced the pursuit of “pure food” as part of a broad reform agenda.\textsuperscript{44} It was also embraced by feminists, who saw the advent of packaged, precooked food as liberating. This new emphasis on “scientific” home management made the purchase of packaged food not only a marker of modernity, but also of social status and the ability of the woman to function in the new consumer society. Home economists declared that instead of producing necessities for the home as their grandmothers may have done, the modern housewife must learn to “consume efficiently.”\textsuperscript{45} The link between food choices and social class is made explicit by none other than that cheerleader of consumerism Simon Patten. Speaking of packaged breakfast cereals, he writes, “…these ‘ready to eat’ goods…economize fuel, and they set free a fraction of the housewife’s time— it is asserted that they were devised to simplify the servant problem in the houses of the well-to-do.”\textsuperscript{46} The combination of class identity, modernity, science and convenience was irresistible to more and more women as time passed. The trends that began with middle class social reformers and those with a “servant problem” would spread to all consumers in later decades.

The most common type of packaged food, canned goods, became commonplace in most American homes by 1900, with packaged cakes, cookies, and crackers following soon after.\textsuperscript{47} The spread of these products was not uniform, however. New products came sooner to cities than to the countryside, with the middle and upper classes (not surprisingly) purchasing more of them than the working class or the poor.\textsuperscript{47} This national trend was mirrored by the food advertising in Pittsburgh, Greenville, and
Mercer. The following illustrates the percentage of consumer product newspaper advertising that was devoted to packaged food products in 1910:

![Graph showing percentage of consumer product ads devoted to packaged food in 1910 for Pittsburgh, Greenville, and Mercer.]

By 1920, the numbers were down slightly, due to the emergence of new goods, such as autos, that influenced the relative percentages of food products. Still, the trend remains the same, with the urban area of Pittsburgh showing a higher percentage of packaged food ads than rural Mercer, with Greenville in between.

![Graph showing percentage of consumer product ads devoted to packaged food in 1920 for Pittsburgh, Greenville, and Mercer.]

Clearly, the rural Mercer newspaper advertised packaged food far less than urban Pittsburgh, or “urban miniature” Greenville. Possible explanations for this trend are the simple availability as well as price of packaged food in a rural setting, availability of
other sources to purchase processed food that were not advertised in local papers, the choice of traditional local foods over packaged foods, some aversion to purchasing packaged food on the part of the rural (female) populace, or some combination of any or all of these factors. Looking at the ads themselves in greater detail will yield the answer to this question. Consider these selling point ratios for 1910:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pittsburgh</th>
<th>Greenville</th>
<th>Mercer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>0.191</td>
<td>0.667</td>
<td>0.875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>0.660</td>
<td>0.667</td>
<td>0.750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>0.170</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.625</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, the method of selling packaged food to potential consumers varied considerably based on locality. Looking at these data, new questions as well as answers emerge. First, a clear trend is visible regarding price as a selling point. The more rural the target audience, the more important price becomes. This may have been a function of disposable income itself, or it may have been indicative of the availability of less expensive local foods in the rural area, making it necessary to advertise the fact that the packaged foods are competitively priced when compared to local fresh foods. Two other aspects of the data are quite significant. First, the emphasis placed on status in ads
targeted to rural consumers must be explained. Thomas Sclereth writes that many rural families of this time period “began buying soda pop, ice cream, cigars, bags of potato chips, canned salmon and dried fruit by mail order to impress guests at mealtime.”49 This could explain both the low number of ads compared to Greenville and Pittsburgh, and the status emphasis on the ads that were published. Clearly, they did not have any sort of aversion to packaged food, especially foods that would have been unavailable from local farmers. Perhaps Mercer residents purchased packaged food by mail order instead of from local merchants, and/or simply viewed it as a luxury item instead of a staple of everyday life. This is consistent with the previously noted associations with packaged food and social class. Consider this ad for coffee:

![Ad for Royal Coffee](image)

fig. 4

This particular ad shows clear emphasis on status as a selling method. The illustration shows an elegant upper-class lady, addressed as “madam” in the text. The product itself is labeled “royal”, with a crown on the package and all the class associations that accompany such a name. The price is clearly shown, although it is not especially emphasized as a “bargain” (which would detract from the status message). Although no direct health claims are made, unlike some foods advertised in more urban areas the product is “scientifically” blended and packaged in “hygienic” containers, both attributes associated with modernity. It is also notable that the product is not one that would have been possible to produce locally, which was a common characteristic of packaged food advertising in the Dispatch.

The second important issue raised by comparing the selling points of Mercer and Greenville to Pittsburgh is the significance of health as a selling point for Pittsburgh advertising. The perceived healthfulness of a food was directly tied to perceptions of its safety and purity. For urban consumers, it was a particular concern since they were more likely to be disconnected from the producers of their food than were rural consumers. Branded food products sold in sealed packages counteracted the sense of helplessness that urban consumers felt from purchasing food from an anonymous distant producer. The brands themselves offered some measure of comfort and the perception of manufacturer accountability and quality. Manufacturers of packaged food capitalized on the “pure food” movement among middle class urban women, and characterized bulk foods and those who sold them as “backward and dirty”. The disconnect between food producer and food consumer goes hand in hand with the steady urbanization of the 1910s. Consider the following:
Table 2: Selling point ratios for Pittsburgh by year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1910</th>
<th>1915</th>
<th>1920</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>0.170</td>
<td>0.097</td>
<td>0.250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>0.191</td>
<td>0.355</td>
<td>0.139</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Health as a selling point was more important in 1920 than in 1910, reflecting the ongoing concerns of food purity and safety. The anomaly here is in 1915. Suddenly, price becomes a greater selling point than health. I believe that the reason for this is the overall economy, possibly influenced by the outbreak of World War I (even before the United States entered the war), and its effect on the cost of consumer goods, including packaged food. Between 1914 and 1921, the cost of consumer goods doubled. In 1915, this inflationary cycle was well underway, and anxiety about cost would make price a relatively more important selling point. By 1920, the wartime anxiety had passed, consumer confidence had returned despite lingering high prices, and health once again emerged as a greater concern for urban shoppers.

It should be noted that among the three localities considered, Greenville had the best of both worlds in terms of variety of both local produced and nationally packaged foods. The proximity of the surrounding farmland made access to fresh farm products easy, and the railroad allowed for shipments of packaged food to be distributed with ease year round. Pittsburgh would have experienced typical urban food distribution and access challenges resulting from the distances which separated farm producer and consumer, and rural Mercer did not have the benefit of railroad transport to the extent that Greenville and Pittsburgh did.
Along with food, clothing is generally considered a necessity. In cold climates, this is certainly the case! But clothing is much more than simply a source of warmth and protection from the elements. Throughout history and across cultures, clothing has been the carrier of social messages about gender, class, religion, wealth (or lack of it), and power. Until the mass production of clothing, however, the concept of “fashion” that changes quickly from year to year (or even season to season) was restricted in practice to the very wealthy. In the late 1800s, this historic reality was about to change. The manufacturing principles of “flow production” were in place for ready-to-wear clothing makers, and numerous periodicals devoted solely to fashion made their debut. The masses of middle and working class people were about to be sold the idea of fashion. The American fashion industry of the early twentieth century blended two nineteenth century European ideas: French design and English methods of mass production. Lacking any American designers with suitable status, the result was that the upper class French trade became the American mass market. This market was huge, and by 1915 the clothing industry was America’s third largest, lagging behind only the steel and oil industries. Like other mass markets of the period, it developed in response to high output from manufacturers. Someone simply had to purchase (consume) the constant output of new clothing in order for the industry to continue to thrive. The task was to convince potential buyers who were not members of the elite upper classes that they must constantly purchase new fashions, regardless of the condition of the clothing they had purchased only a year or two before or alternatively, that they must continuously purchase cheaply made imitations of upper class goods that were not as durable or practical as traditional clothing. Naturally, advertisers took on this task with enthusiasm.
What makes American fashion of the 1910s and 1920s particularly interesting is the unique role it played in constructing class identities during a time of tremendous social change. Similar designs were available to all consumers from upper class socialites to working class shopgirls. Fashion crossed class barriers as never before. For newly arrived immigrants, fashion could assist them in assimilating into a new culture, and help them to forge connections across ethnic boundaries. Leiss, Kline and Jhally express the significance of fashion to mass consumer culture as follows:

“The consumer society brings into being a distinctive way of life based on a notion that individuals can regard their affiliation with social groups as a fluid milieu of temporary associations based on styles of appearance...

No one is bound permanently to particular circumstances originating in accidents of birth or fortune; on the contrary, everyone can participate in an eternal process whereby groupings are dissolved and regenerated.”

It is easy to see how this “way of life” meshes well with the early twentieth century ideals of upward mobility and the proverbial rags-to-riches “American Dream” embraced by many immigrants. In the end, the upper classes led the fickle fashion parade, followed by hordes of middle and working class imitators, always striving to keep up with the latest thing. Fashion was, from its beginnings, a gendered industry, marketing to women and men in distinct ways. Fashion advertising does not simply create disembodied “images” of men and women; it helps construct social differences between them and functions as though the constructions were reality. Clothing advertising was by far the largest category of consumer advertising in the Pittsburgh and Greenville newspapers, and incessantly offered up the “latest and cheapest” to the public. Readers in Pittsburgh,
Greenville, and to a lesser extent Mercer were regularly presented with ads for any type of clothing imaginable, including: day wear, evening wear, loungewear and lingerie, underclothing of varying sorts, outerwear for any weather, shoes, “picnic” clothing, clothes for church, special occasion clothes, business wear (for men), furs (for women), separate coats for spring and fall, clothes for “afternoon visits”, and of course hats of every imaginable style. According to the advertising, one needed at least four full changes of clothes per day! The following chart illustrates the percentage of men’s and women’s clothing ads in the Pittsburgh, Greenville, and Mercer papers in 1910:

![chart showing relative percent of men’s and women’s clothing advertising, 1910](image_url)

fig. 5
relative percent of men’s and women’s clothing advertising, 1910

Both Pittsburgh and Greenville papers advertised clothing significantly more to women than to men, approximately 50% more for both. Mercer, on the other hand, is the only paper to advertise men’s clothing more than women’s, and is nearly the opposite of the other two. It is interesting that “urban miniature” Greenville follows the pattern of urban Pittsburgh (as it did for food advertising) rather than that of rural Mercer.

Mercer’s uniqueness with regard to the amount of clothing advertising aimed at men is significant. Not only is the Mercer paper highly unusual in that it advertised far more
clothing to men than to women, but the types of selling points used are equally unusual.

Table 3 shows the top selling points for all three locales for the category of men’s clothing:

Table 3: Selling point ratios for men’s clothing by locale, 1910

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pittsburgh</th>
<th>Greenville</th>
<th>Mercer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Utility</td>
<td>0.104</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>0.833</td>
<td>0.600</td>
<td>0.703</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>0.333</td>
<td>0.650</td>
<td>0.676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novelty</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td>0.150</td>
<td>0.351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>0.541</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here rural Mercer stands out in two ways: first, the emphasis on novelty and status compared to Pittsburgh and Mercer, and second the use of tradition as a selling point. These ads were selling men’s suits, dressy clothes and accessories, whether ready-made or tailored, to the relatively small population of men in Mercer who could purchase them. They were decidedly not advertising farm overalls. In fact, ads for farm clothes were conspicuously absent in the *Dispatch and Republican*, despite ads for heavy farm equipment, animals, etc… The potential customer for the advertised dressier clothing would have been those men working in local government and law (recall that Mercer was the county seat), together with businessmen, professionals (such as ministers or doctors), and perhaps some farmers looking for a Sunday suit. The emphasis on novelty and status clearly seems to indicate not only an “aspiration to urbanity”, but a certain anxiety over
appearances as well. It is well-established that for urban women of this period, clothing served as a carrier of messages about social class. I think it is reasonable to suggest that this is also true for rural men, particularly those whose professions would have had them in contact on a fairly regular basis with their urban counterparts. Given the overall volume of clothing advertising in general, it is clear that how one dressed was portrayed (and likely perceived) as extremely important. Eager not to be seen as the “country bumpkin”, the men of Mercer would have tried their best to keep up appearances. For example, consider the following ad:

![Image of an advertisement](image-url)

fig. 6

ad for J.C. Moore, *Mercer Dispatch and Republican*, May 6, 1910
The image is of a stylish man in the foreground, dressed for daytime activities. In the background a train station can be seen, complete with porters and fashionable ladies. The station is clearly a large one, unlike anything one would see in Mercer at the time (which did not have rail service), suggesting an urban setting and with it an image of urbanity and sophistication. The text also speaks of “correct dress”, “discriminating dressers”, and “correct style”, all of which would convey clear status messages to rural men anxious about appearances. Further, the association with the *Saturday Evening Post* also appeals to class-conscious male consumers eager to be seen as fashionable and modern. The line “Young Men’s Styles Don’t Have to Be Freaks to Be Popular” is evidence of some tension not only between generations, but also between tradition and modernity as well. Given the rapid social changes of the period, the existence of this tension is not surprising. This next ad from the *Dispatch* dates from only a week later than the first. It too is for a local Mercer business, this time selling tailor-made clothing.

![Image](image.png)

**fig. 7**
ad for J. A. Myers, *Mercer Dispatch and Republican*, May 13, 1910
Here we see two well-dressed men, the younger in daywear and the older in full evening dress. The opening line “Class about that!” referring to “what they all say” is another example of status-based advertising to the men of Mercer. The ad skillfully targets both younger and older men, and speaks with a casual and familiar tone that stands in contrast to the formality of the clothing itself. However, both ads emphasize the emerging youth culture by focusing on the styles of “young men” explicitly.

William Leach describes the function of fashion during this period in history as making the wearer feel special, giving opportunities for play-acting, and lifting the wearer into the “world of luxury” beyond work, drudgery and the everyday.60 This description referred originally to women’s fashion, but it is applicable to the men of Mercer as well. Another possibly relevant point here is the previously mentioned “crisis of masculinity” brought on by urbanization. According to this theory, white men felt increasingly threatened by the “New Woman” who was “invading their territory” in the public sphere.61 According to psychologists, the remedy was a combination of “rugged physical life and the acquisition of money and consumer goods, a combination of strength and status.”62 Perhaps the advertisers of Mercer sought (consciously or not!) to both evoke and cure the anxieties of rural white men in a changing society. In contrast, Pittsburgh and Greenville papers used status appeals far less than the Dispatch.

The other unique aspect of rural Mercer men’s clothing advertising is the emphasis on tradition which is completely absent from both Pittsburgh’s and Greenville’s ads. Frequently the tradition aspect was evoked by purveyors of hand-tailored clothing (also a rarity in Pittsburgh and Greenville, whose ads were dominated by ready-made clothing). As before, it seems that even as the men of Mercer aspired to keep up with the fashions
of the moment, there existed a tension with desire for the familiar practices of the past, such as hand-tailoring.

In some ways, the men’s advertising of the rural Dispatch and Republican more closely mirrored the ads targeted at women than urban men, a fact which is particularly ironic given the psychology of the “crisis of masculinity” mentioned earlier. For example, the novelty of various clothing styles was an important selling point, and was used extensively to sell both urban and rural women on the newest trends in fashion. It was also used in ads targeted at the men of Mercer in a way not used in either the Pittsburgh or Greenville papers. The graph below compares the selling-point ratios for novelty in 1910 across gender and locality.

![Graph](image)

**fig. 8**

novelty selling point ratios for clothing advertising, 1910

As the decade progressed, the advertisers of Mercer continued to use novelty as a selling point to men, and the Pittsburgh and Greenville papers began to use it more as well. The use of appeals to tradition faded from view along with ads for custom-tailored clothing, which had essentially disappeared by 1920. Ad emphasis also shifted more heavily
toward utility, quality and price reflecting the economic uncertainty in the years surrounding World War I.

During the years that the men of Mercer worried about the urbanity of their wardrobes, advertisers elsewhere were eagerly selling not only clothing, but the recreational aspects of shopping for the latest fashions to middle-class women. Feminist writer Mary Roberts Coolidge even lamented that shopping had replaced “healthful exercise and recreation” for women. An example of the conscious marketing of shopping itself as a recreational activity for urban middle-class women is the department store “hour sale”, an event which promoted items that were only discounted for an hour of the shopping day. Consider the following portion of a typical ad from Pittsburgh:

![Ad for Kaufmann's hour sales, Pittsburgh Gazette-Times, October 1, 1910](image-url)
Such sales were a common feature of urban Pittsburgh department stores throughout the 1910s. In combination with on-site luncheons and the previously discussed product demonstrations, they would offer the married urban shopper a complete day out in the city, a chance to see others and be seen as a middle or upper-middle class “lady” who had no need for employment, while offering the hourly “bargains” as a bonus. Naturally, single, employed middle class young women would also shop for leisure as well, but obviously their free time was structured differently than their married homemaker counterparts. Shopping allowed middle class women to cultivate “gentility” through their purchases, which was considered a marker of “respectable living.” Savvy urban marketers also embraced the “New Woman”, particularly in her aspect of suffragist. As the decade progressed, and the suffrage question shifted from an “if” to a “when”, a number of urban retailers incorporated suffrage colors, symbols and products into their store decorations.

Middle-class women were not the only ones concerned with appearances. As previously mentioned, fashion during the early century crossed the barrier of social class in that it allowed working-class women to dress “up” in a way they were not previously able to do. With the advent of mass production, similar styles could be marketed to consumers at various prices. This process was assisted by the advent in the late 1800s of cheap fabrics that resembled satin and silk. As a result; fashions of the upper classes were constantly copied by the working class. In a sense, “class” itself became a commodity, something that was for sale to all. For working-class and immigrant women, this aspect of consumer culture was liberating. It offered the opportunity to transform class and ethnic identities, and to lay claim to the concept of being a “lady”.
Working women, through their fashion choices and behavior, declared that they were “ladies”, and in the process consciously attempted to blur class divisions. Naturally, this behavior was met with disdain and criticism from middle and upper class women who critiqued working-class women who “put on airs”.

Mary Roberts Coolidge showed her class bias when she wrote in 1912, “…in our day many women of small means know scarcely any other way of spending their leisure except to drag a fretful child past the shop windows every weekday afternoon; and then to go home and try to copy the most violent combinations of color and the most striking designs in sleazy, cheap imitations.”

The advertisers in the Pittsburgh Gazette Times were targeting the middle and upper classes. Department stores and larger women’s clothing stores could afford to advertise in a large paper like the Times, leaving smaller, cheaper shops to rely on neighborhood signs, handbills and other less expensive forms of advertising. Vendors who sold the cheapest goods would have worked from shop-carts, moving around neighborhoods.

For a large city like Pittsburgh with its various ethnic and immigrant neighborhoods existing relatively close to middle and upper class enclaves, opportunities for working-class emulation of upper class styles would have been ubiquitous.

Greenville’s population by 1920 was composed of 5% first generation and 15% second generation immigrants. Like immigrants elsewhere; they tried to assimilate, and likely used clothing to help in this process. The Greenville Evening Record contained advertisements for middle-class local women’s clothing shops, as well as pricier stores in cities such as Pittsburgh, it also advertised several shops which carried the “latest fabrics and patterns” along with other household goods. Greenville’s smaller absolute population numbers when compared to Pittsburgh made it less likely that cheaper
clothing shops would have had enough business to survive. However, it does seem reasonable to assert that the working class women of Greenville emulated their middle-class peers by sewing their own clothes in imitation of the middle-class styles they saw around them.

As previously shown, Mercer’s newspaper advertised clothing to women far less than either Greenville or Pittsburgh, despite the fact that they advertised extensively to men. This pattern held true throughout the decade, and deserves some consideration and explanation.

Based on examination of the Dispatch and Republican, it seems that Mercer simply had relatively few women’s clothing shops, although it did have quite a few men’s shops and tailors. Some out of town merchants (such as large Pittsburgh department stores) did advertise in the Dispatch, leading to the conclusion that the more well-to-do women of Mercer made regular shopping trips to Pittsburgh rather than patronize local merchants. This would have taken an entire day (at least) due to the distance involved. It is easy to imagine Mercer ladies at the “hour sale” mentioned before, enjoying a day in the “big city”, perhaps while their husbands (dressed in their finest no doubt) engaged in business. Shopping in Pittsburgh surely served as a symbol of status in and of itself for the middle-class women of Mercer, since it allowed them (at least for the day) to participate in the world of their urban counterparts. Rural women not only perceived a gap between their wardrobes and those of urban women, but also between their lives and those of their urban peers who were constantly surrounded by an endless parade of luxury goods of all sorts in large urban department stores.72 Certainly some shopped in nearby Greenville as well, but it would probably not have held the status of a shopping trip to the city.
Another option available (especially to working farm women) was the ubiquitous mail-order catalogue, sometimes referred to as a “department store in a book.” For women’s fashion, at least, this was not entirely an acceptable substitute for urban styles. By the 1920s, “catalog clothing” had become recognizable as such and was looked down upon as the clothing of the proverbial country cousin who lacked sophistication and flair. Certainly, some Mercer women made their own clothes as well, with fabric purchased either locally or by mail order. Unfortunately for them, this too was not the most desirable option for those aspiring to the “silk stocking” class.

When discussing women’s clothing in the decade of the 1910s, the effects of World War I must be mentioned. Recall that American fashions were essentially styles copied from French designers. When World War I began in Europe in 1914, the effect on the French fashion industry was immediate and profound. Many designers simply closed up shop for the duration of the war, while others converted their businesses into factories for the war effort. The few that did remain in business were subject to shortages of materials and labor. The results were that few new designs emerged, and those that did were noticeably more austere. The effects of the war in France thus rippled through the American women’s clothing market even before the United States entered the war. This is easy to see simply in terms of the number of ads placed in papers during this time. Figure 10 shows the number of women’s clothing ads in the sample of Pittsburgh newspapers from 1910, 1915, and 1920:
The sharp drop-off in ads in the 1915 sample is evidence of the effect of a distant war on American women consumers. By 1920, the industry had recovered, and the number of ads surpassed the 1910 mark. The influence of the foreign war was felt by American consumers, and advertisers reflected the mood of the times in their ad copy. The following quote from an ad for “new fall millinery” in the September 2, 1915 edition of the Pittsburgh Gazette-Times is revealing:

“Paris, of course, has given the inspiration, but America too is strikingly represented in creations that vie with foreign models for top honors. Among vast showing America forges to the front…You’ll find here a diversity of influences—from feather-trimmed martial helmets and turbans to the simple head-coverings of peace-loving Puritans…”

The ad recognizes the shortages resulting from the war, offers a solution, and accommodates all political points of view in the process!

Regardless of the year or locality sampled, clothing advertisers addressed potential male and female consumers in very different ways, “constructing” differences based on
assumptions about gender and then building on them to frame consumer messages in a
gendered context. Ad writers and businessmen assumed that for women, reading
advertising was a form of leisure in and of itself, a concept somewhat akin to the idea
of shopping as recreation. The act of reading an ad, and the act of shopping initiated by
that ad becomes something more than a simple purchase. The millinery ad quoted above
is a good example of this. While it acknowledges the distant war, it offers the female
consumer a way to express her views of the war through her choice of hat, infusing the
act of consumption with political self-expression. In this way, the ad was a subtle and
slightly manipulative nod to the “new woman”, allowing her some limited political
“speech” in the non-threatening form of a hat purchase.

A sharp contrast to that message is a quite different message contained in the
following ad for men’s suits from the same paper.
Here there is no ambiguity about the war, and no subtle expression of opinion through clothing choice. The message is almost military in tone, a mandatory order to “dress up”. Accompanying this “order” was the reason behind it, “Prosperity is on the way… the mills are glowing white hot day and night…” The “voice” of this ad is clearly the voice of one man addressing another in the implicit hierarchical context of wartime.

Other “man to man” ads were equally direct in tone, although not as overtly military as the previous one. The ad in fig. 12 uses the language of a business deal:
Here we see two men facing each other as equals, discussing the suits for sale. From the context, one is the potential buyer and the other the salesman. Both are visible, and the transaction is “above board”, open and honest. The small print text “explains” in a rational business-like way how the bargain sale prices were negotiated with suppliers, making the business savvy of the seller clear to the buyer. Both image and text support the masculine tone of the ad.

Certainly ads aimed at women wished to portray the honesty of a business as well, but the male seller was not shown overtly as in the ad above, even though consumption transactions of various sorts were commonly framed with women as receptive buyers from forceful male sellers. Although not selling clothing, the following piano ad vividly illustrates this point, showing how messages about gender can be communicated through advertising even when the use of text is minimal:
Here we see the woman at the piano, ready to play, floating in a sphere representing the world (or perhaps it is “woman’s sphere”?). Holding the sphere is a clearly male hand which keeps a firm grip on the world and the woman contained within it, loading this simple piano ad with a very powerful gendered message. An example of gendered language in clothing advertising text is shown in fig. 14:
Here, the woman’s hat is not a carrier of a political statement, but carries instead an unmistakable sexual connotation when pierced by the ostrich plume made from “hard male stock”! Advertising like this took the common advertising “courtship paradigm”\textsuperscript{79}
to a new and clearly more intimate level. The illustration is also perhaps a subtle parody of the stereotype of the fickle, fashion-obsessed woman who must be catered to by the hardworking male provider (in this case, represented by the presumably male ostrich).

In the following century, advertisers of all sorts would continue to “push the envelope” of cultural acceptability by framing advertising in more overtly sexual ways, as well as advertising previously taboo products (such as feminine hygiene items) openly.

Along with food and clothing, health products were advertised heavily in the newspapers of Pittsburgh, Greenville, and Mercer. By the 1910s, the importance of basic sanitation was well known, along with microbial causes of disease. Simple public health practices based on this knowledge would prove useful in attempting to control the influenza pandemic of 1918. Still, drugs like penicillin were a distant dream, and deaths from infection were common, especially in childhood. Understanding of complex disease processes for conditions such as cancer was minimal, and the concept of biological causes for mental illnesses such as clinical depression was completely unknown. Because of this, hospitals and doctors were only marginally effective for treating most serious medical problems. As a result, purveyors of various miracle “cures” found many who were willing to purchase their products out of desperation if nothing else.

By the 1910s, the worst of the patent medicine era had passed. The Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 required their makers to disclose the presence of powerful and addictive ingredients such as alcohol and opiates, and prohibited claims of ingredients not actually present in the medication in the amount specified. Still, many tonics, compounds, potions and pills vied for consumers searching for effective treatments. It is
likely that some of these preparations (such as herbal laxatives or cough syrups, for example) were effective for some common conditions. However, wild claims of “cures” for serious conditions had not disappeared completely. Even more common were vague descriptions of feeling “run down” or having “nerves”, conditions for which patent medicines were marketed as nothing short of a miracle. Obsession with bodily cleanliness, frequently carrying racial or ethnic overtones, was common along with an almost morbid fascination with the liver, kidneys, and elimination.81

Much of the health advertising hoopla was directed at women. Although approximately two-thirds of health product advertising in the newspapers sampled for this study was gender neutral, the remaining one-third was explicitly gendered. Of this gendered advertising, approximately three-quarters was directed at women. Some of the newspapers for the years sampled had no health ads directed at men at all. This focus on women as consumers of health products is reflective of the lingering “cult of female invalidism” prevalent among well-to-do women in the nineteenth century, which did not completely fade until the late 1910s.82 Within this social class of women, it was “fashionable” to be considered weak and delicate. As researchers Ehrenreich and English put it, the entire enterprise served to keep a great many women very busy at doing nothing at all!83 I believe it is significant that female invalidism faded as consumerism grew and shopping for entertainment took hold as an acceptable female activity. Of course, not all women “indulged” in invalidism any more than all women embraced shopping as a vocation. Many well-off women engaged in some charity or suffrage work, particularly as the decade progressed. However, both invalidism and leisure shopping functioned as socially acceptable means for well-to-do women to pass their
days in a society that offered them few options or outlets for their energy. Fig. 15 echoes the cult of invalidism:

![Ad for Dr. Pierce's Favorite Prescription](image)

*Fig. 15*  
Ad for Dr. Pierce’s Favorite Prescription, *Mercer Dispatch and Republican*, April 29, 1910

Here is the weak woman, on her knees with hands clasped almost prayer-like, seeking deliverance from her “suffering” resulting from “disorders and derangements of the delicate and important organs that are distinctly feminine.” It vaguely promises to treat inflammation, ulceration, pain, as well as to “tone the nerves”. No doubt many women with legitimate medical issues turned to such products as this, but the hint of invalidism is evident. If a woman was not in a state of “despair and despondency”, perhaps she was concerned about her appearance.
This advertisement, also from the *Dispatch*, selling the same medication as the previous ad, takes a different approach.

![Image](image.png)

As before, the problem is “female weakness”, but this time the results are a clear complexion, bright eyes and red cheeks. If, in the potential consumer’s mind, she did not rival her daughter in appearance, it was now clearly a sign of “female weakness” regardless of how she felt. “Dr. Pierce” was clearly no fool, at least as a salesman. During the 1910s, the cult of invalidism was fading, and a new youth culture was taking hold. As previously discussed, the decade saw a devaluation of older female authority figures and a new focus in advertising imagery on younger women, the precursors of the 1920s flapper. According to Jackson Lears, corporate advertising of the period contained nothing but “sweet young things”.

In these two ads, “Dr. Pierce” appealed to both the...
new and the old, the cult of youth and the fading but still present cult of invalidism. By 1920, the vision of the weak woman, on her knees praying for deliverance was no longer a viable marketing device. Now, in her place, was the “Strong Woman”.

![Figure 17](image)

This ad appeared a decade after the ads in figs. 15 and 16, and is selling another product from the same company that sold the “Favorite Prescription”. Here we see an image of a clearly young woman holding small weights in her hands, and more exercising women in the background. The text sells the product as a “spring tonic” to deal with “thin and watery” blood. The message is that the product will help a woman to stay strong. While
the ad certainly aims to sell a product to cure “weak” blood, the premise of the natural state of the woman in the picture is one of strength, not of weakness as previously seen.

While the overwhelming number of gendered health product ads in this study were found to be aimed at women, there were a few that focused on men. Consider the following ad for (again!) “Dr. Pierce’s Golden Medical Discovery”:

![Ad for Dr. Pierce’s Golden Medical Discovery](image)

The “clean man” shown is obviously well-dressed and well-to-do. According to the ad text, using the product will enable him to “work with energy and think clean, clear, healthy thoughts”. It goes on to blame various diseases on “uncleanliness” of the related organs. The tone of the ad is consistent with the emerging social dynamic associated with the brisk pace of industrialization and modern urban life. This ad appeared in the same year (1910) and in the same paper (the *Dispatch*) that the previously discussed men’s clothing ads were published. Both the look (the well-dressed man) and the hints of
modernity/urbanity in the text mesh well with the previous conclusions regarding the anxieties of the men of rural Mercer in an increasingly urban and fast-paced modern world. At the very least, it speaks to the anxieties of those who wrote the ads!

In addition to the major differences in the way that health products were marketed to men vs. women, there were also profound differences in health products associated with the rural vs. urban variable.

![Health advertisements as percent of all consumer product ads](image)

For both 1910 and 1915, health products were advertised significantly more in the most rural area than the other two localities. In fact, for 1910 and 1915, the total number of ads in the Mercer paper was greater than the number in Pittsburgh and Greenville combined. Factoring in the difference in overall size of the newspaper itself, this becomes even more significant. Only by 1920 had the situation begun to even out. Somehow, this disparity must be explained. At first glance, it is easy to speculate that a rural area such as Mercer would not have had access to doctors and hospitals as more urban areas such as Pittsburgh would have had. This, however, is not the case. The
people of Mercer had access to a well-staffed local hospital initially founded to serve area miners, but which had grown by the 1910s to a community hospital which provided care to the general population. I believe that the answer lies in a combination of factors related to quality and price of the available care, issues surrounding transportation, the type of products advertised, rural tradition, and gender.

The Mercer Dispatch and Republican was read not only by the upward-aspiring middle classes targeted by the clothing advertisers, but also by the population of the surrounding area’s working-class farmers as well, evidenced by the ubiquitous presence of agricultural news and classified ads for farm equipment. For those living in the outlying areas of the county, a trip into town to the hospital or a house call from a local physician might have been prohibitively expensive. Under these circumstances, a trip to the hospital or physician would have been undertaken only in the most serious of emergencies. Also, the issue of transportation is relevant, especially in winter when roads may have been impassable at worst and marginal at best. Given these realities of rural life, a well-stocked home medicine chest would have been a very desirable thing, allowing people to treat common ailments at home.

The types of products themselves support the assertion of their being used to keep a well-stocked home medicine chest. Those advertised in the Dispatch included stomach remedies, liniments for sore muscles, cough medicines, laxatives, and of course various tonics and compounds marketed to treat vague complaints of “weakness”, “thin blood”, etc… For these sorts of conditions, it is unlikely that a doctor of the 1910s could offer much more to a patient than would be available over the counter from local merchants.
Additionally, there may have been a strong and functional rural tradition operating which would favor the home use of patent medicines, which were heavily advertised in agricultural publications as well as “medical” almanacs sent to rural merchants. Local newspaper advertising would have added to this intense barrage. The idea of tradition is especially evident in ads aimed at Mercer area women. In both 1910 and 1915, more than two-thirds of all advertising written for women contained an appeal to tradition as a selling point. This is especially relevant when compared to Greenville and Pittsburgh, where not a single ad for women used an appeal to tradition to sell health products. By 1920, the tradition appeal as a selling point had dropped off somewhat, even in Mercer.

The final factor which helps explain the high overall number of health product ads in the Dispatch is gender. Health product ads for women in Mercer outnumbered ads for men by an average of three to one. As previously noted, the appeal to tradition was especially high in ads written for women, which may indicate that the rural tradition of home medical care may have had a strong gender component. This is consistent with earlier American history, when women in general and rural women in particular were expected to have some medical knowledge. Further supporting this is the heavy use of testimonials in women’s health product advertising. Throughout the decade, testimonials were used an average of 5 times more often in ads for women than in ads for men. These testimonials were written (assuming that they were not complete fabrications by male writers) by women for other women, and frequently extolled the virtues of a product for “female” ailments. Some carried overtones of the female invalidism discussed earlier. What is clear is that the advertisers capitalized on women’s trust of
other women in health and medical matters, a trust that had its origins in history, particularly for rural women.

Taken together, the combination of quality and price of care, transportation, type of products advertised, rural tradition, and gender adequately explains the unusually high amount of health product advertising in the Mercer Dispatch and Republican.

Although this study’s main focus has been on the three major consumer product categories of food, clothing, and health products, there are other products whose emergence in the 1910s is culturally significant. These deserve at least a brief mention here, although they are worthy of far more in-depth study than is possible in the present work. The decade of the 1910s in the United States saw not only tremendous social changes, but also changes emerging from new technologies as well. For the first time, technologies such as electricity, automobiles, and communication innovations were available to the masses. Consumer products based on these were also emerging, and changing the everyday lives of both rural and urban people. The significance of these products lies not only in their impact on the quality of daily life for ordinary people, but on the fact that their mass production helped to shift the emerging consumer culture into a new phase. Instead of merely purchasing necessities as manufactured goods (such as packaged food), the consumer was now purchasing wants. Eventually, at least some of these wants (such as automobiles, electric lamps and washing machines) morphed into new necessities for modern life.

The advent of automotive transportation for the masses was an ongoing process throughout the 1910s and beyond. With very few exceptions, newspaper advertisements in Pittsburgh, Greenville and Mercer for cars and their related products (tires, batteries,
etc…) were targeted explicitly at male consumers or were not overtly gendered in emphasis. Only a handful of ads in the Pittsburgh Gazette-Times were targeted at women, and only in the 1920 sample. This trend is in opposition to the national magazine trend of explicitly advertising cars to women. I believe the resolution of this paradox lies in the fact that newspapers were advertising not only the cars themselves, but the specific dealerships, where the sale would have taken place possibly involving salesmen and male customers (either alone or as part of a couple) more often than solitary female customers. National magazines, on the other hand, were more interested in selling the idea and possibilities of car ownership and the virtues of various brands rather than negotiating the nitty-gritty details of an individual transaction. Auto manufacturers were keen on selling the idea of ownership to women, then working out the details of the sale at local dealerships with their husbands or fathers. With this in mind, the variation in ad focus between national magazines and local newspapers makes sense. Overall, advertising for automobiles and related products increased steadily in the 1910s in Pittsburgh and Greenville, and jumped sharply in Mercer.

![Automotive advertising as percent of consumer product ads](image)

fig. 20

Automotive advertising as percent of consumer product ads
The mass-marketing of cars would have had a larger impact on the lives of the rural people of Mercer than on the populace of either Pittsburgh or Greenville, who both had access to other forms of public transportation. This was certainly true for all those Mercer women making shopping trips to Pittsburgh!

The influence of the automotive technology was also experienced indirectly by consumers in the form of increased availability of out-of-season perishable products. For example, by 1920 ads for florists were common in the Mercer paper year round, evidence of the ability of growers to transport a very perishable product to an area which did not have direct railroad service.

Cars were not the only technology emerging into the daily lives of the women and men of western Pennsylvania. Various electric appliances were being marketed as well. Washing machines, electric lighting, phonographs, and many more household consumer products were advertised to both urban and rural consumers. For example, in Greenville and Mercer, there was a marked trend in products related to home entertainment. Early in the decade, pianos were extensively advertised, but by 1920, they had been nearly eclipsed by advertisements for phonographs and the latest new recordings which were announced with great fanfare. This trend was not evident in more urban Pittsburgh, where piano advertising continued alongside advertising for recorded music. This may have been due to simple economics. The affluent urban consumers in Pittsburgh would have possibly purchased both items, whereas perhaps the “affluent” of Greenville or Mercer would have had to choose one or the other. An alternate explanation is more psychological in nature, and hearkens back to the rural anxiety and enviousness of urbanity/modernity. The new technology of the phonograph would have had more
“modern” associations than the old-fashioned parlor piano, and therefore might have been more desirable for less urban people seeking to embrace all things modern. Perhaps both explanations are partly correct.

With a few exceptions, most advertising of technology-based household products and appliances was not “gendered” in any obvious way (despite the gender connotations for the use of said products!) This was particularly true for big ticket items, which would have likely been purchased by a couple together. It was not uncommon for ad illustrations to show both a man and a woman together, and for the text to be written in a gender neutral way, or addressed to the couple as a pair. There were exceptions, of course, and occasionally it was clear that an appliance ad was targeted specifically at men. Consider the following ad:
At first glance, it would seem that the ad is directed at women since it clearly advertises a product that would be used by women, and shows a picture of a woman in the ad itself. However, the headline of the ad copy immediately conveys the opposite message: “Do you beat your wife?” This is the voice of one man (the seller) talking to another man (the potential buyer) and grabbing his attention by asking an extremely provocative question. Thankfully, the ad answers the question with a resounding “No!”, but then goes on to elaborate on the wife/rug analogy, and points out that poor treatment of the rug (wife?) will “make you spend your hard earned money”. The underlying assumption here is that it is the husband who is in charge of the finances, and that ultimately the investment in what is a labor-saving device for his wife is his decision. Another assumption is that the wife/rug analogy is unproblematic, and useful for selling the product. This ad was for a local Mercer store, and presumably not written as part of any national ad campaign. Although it would not be justified to jump to conclusions about the nature of gender relations in Mercer as a whole, it is fair to say that the social climate and attitudes about women in rural Mercer were such that the writer of this ad did not refrain from publishing it. The fact that this ad was published at all speaks volumes.

In addition to emerging technologies such as appliances and automobiles, the changing social milieu of the decade influenced other product advertising, such as ads for alcohol and tobacco. In the years leading up to the passage of national Prohibition in 1919, alcohol use was under attack throughout the US, particularly by women’s groups such as the WCTU. It is not surprising then, that the only alcohol advertising seen in this study was in Pittsburgh in 1910. Without exception, the very few ads present featured upper-class men imbibing an after-dinner drink. No alcohol advertising whatsoever was
found in either the Greenville Evening Record or the Mercer Dispatch and Republican. This is not surprising given that the WCTU was very active in the area, and local WCTU leaders regularly wrote a column for the Dispatch preaching the evils of drink.

The situation for tobacco was the opposite. Throughout the 1910s in all three newspapers, advertising for tobacco steadily increased. Again, in all three newspapers, the ads were unquestionably masculine in tone, reflecting the broad societal taboo against women smoking. Although some national tobacco ads did depict women smokers as early as the nineteenth century, most Americans were shocked to see a woman smoking well into the 1920s. The following ad expresses well the gendered connotations of tobacco use:

![fig. 22](image-url)
The ad copy here takes the masculinity of tobacco use to an extreme, and practically reeks of testosterone. Any Greenville man who was experiencing the proverbial “crisis of masculinity” apparently only needed to purchase this tobacco brand in order to solidify his manliness and affirm his “two-fisted” character. It is not difficult to see early shades of the rugged “Marlboro man” in this text.

Looking back at all the advertising considered for this study, it is not difficult to discern the roots of contemporary consumer culture in the sometimes laughable text and illustrations of these early ads. The “Not Sisters” ad equated youth with beauty and health, a strategy used today to sell everything from vitamins and breakfast cereal to exercise equipment and shampoo. The food ad for “Royal Coffee” imbues coffee with status, not unlike Starbucks does today. Technology and prepackaged food are still viewed as liberating time-savers by contemporary women, and masculine anxieties are alive and well. The label of “girly man” is an undesirable one for most men.

This study began with the premise that potential consumers were targeted by product advertisers differently through the decade of the 1910s based on variables of gender and locality. It examined how various products of emerging consumerism were sold to the public. Gender proved to be significant for all product categories. Local variations also proved to be very much evident. This is especially important in that it shows how studies of national advertising completely miss local social and cultural variations. This is not to dismiss studies of national magazine advertising as irrelevant, but rather to point out possibilities for future research in other locales which will certainly add depth and nuance to the present understandings of period advertising.
As the twentieth-century progressed, advertising did become more homogenized in character as a result of the interaction of many factors. The inevitable assimilation of immigrant communities into mainstream consumer culture certainly contributed to this process. The rise of large retail outlets such as supermarkets and department stores, along with the creation of more streamlined and economically efficient distribution networks combined to make more mass-marketed consumer products available on a national scale. The emergence of new media such as radio and motion pictures, and eventually television also contributed to this process. Interestingly, the submergence of local variation was not considered problematic in the early century and was itself considered a marker of “progress” by advertisers. This transformation of culture from lifestyles and consumption habits based on local relationships and regional production to those dependent upon mass production at distant locales coupled with national marketing was a long process that took decades to come to full fruition. In our time, this national homogenization of consumer culture begun at the early twentieth century has been extended to a global scale unimaginable to the consumers of the progressive era.

However, in the 1910s this transformation was in its early stages and small-scale local variations were significant in ways that have long since passed into history. Each newspaper examined in this study had its own distinct character and voice. The Mercer Dispatch and Republican was filled with partisan commentary, religious fervor, and advertising that spoke to the anxieties of a rural population in an urbanizing world. In sharp contrast, the Pittsburgh Gazette-Times spoke with a more secular voice comfortable with urbanity and modernity that reveled in Pittsburgh’s status as a heavily industrialized city. Its advertising spoke to those who did not need to be convinced of their own
sophistication. Class distinctions were conspicuous by absence, and the *Gazette-Times* addressed itself to the white middle and upper classes alone. Occupying the middle ground, both in terms of demographics and culture, the Greenville *Evening Record* spoke with the voice of a small town straddling two worlds. On the one hand, the influence of the more urban world was clear. The steady flow of travelers passing from New York to Chicago and back gave the readers of the *Evening Record* a more “modern” self-image than their cousins (literally) down the road in Mercer. Still, the small town pride was clear, along with connections to rural culture. In terms of advertising, Greenville in general tended to mimic the trends of Pittsburgh far more than those of Mercer, despite its rural geography. This is significant in that it shows how rather large cultural variation can occur even in geographically close (less than twenty miles apart) communities. It also shows how studies of variation among larger regions (such as the “Midwest” or “South”) can mask variations within those regions. Again, this is not to say that broader studies lack meaningful results, but rather that it is important to be aware of the possibilities of social and cultural variety even on a very small scale.

Speaking of cultural variations like these on the basis of a study of advertising leads to the proverbial “chicken and egg” question of exactly what aspects of culture are influencing what. Is it valid to comment on local societal variation based on advertising? On one hand, it is important to recognize those elements of a society rendered invisible by studies of dominant “mainstream” media, and recognize the limitations of media studies in general. Nevertheless, on the other hand it must also be remembered that advertisers and ad writers were also themselves members of communities and cultures. They were embedded within the society of their time, not living on a desert island.
somewhere far removed from it. In order to be effective, advertising could not depart too much from established public tastes, habits, and social norms. As a result, advertising reflects its times. It also shapes culture and consumption habits, particularly in an era of change such as the 1910s, in part by familiarizing the public with emerging products and technologies. Advertising and broader social trends thus reinforce each other, forming a circle of cause and effect that doubles back and merges again. Advertising also amplifies certain aspects of culture such as gender differences, by building on stereotypes (such as the “frail woman”) and fears (such as emasculation) in order to sell products. Historian Nan Enstad writes that, “commodities are always consumed symbolically as well as to satisfy needs and wants.” This insight is key to resolving questions surrounding studies of advertising and consumer culture. Paraphrasing Enstad, advertising is always created symbolically as well as to sell products. Understanding the social significance of both consumption and communication about consumption (advertising) leads one to the realization that for consumerist cultures, acknowledging advertising as a factor in shaping social norms is critical to a full understanding of social and cultural dynamics.

In the present day, consumer culture has ballooned globally. People worldwide find themselves in an interdependent web of relationships that connect producers on one continent with consumers on another while simultaneously experiencing a social disconnectedness from these relationships. These connections and relationships are not entirely unproblematic, and they may not even be entirely visible to and understood by consumers. Today, issues surrounding human rights, environmental concerns and economic justice are intimately entwined with an overall critique of consumer culture in
general. This has led to the desire of many around the world to shift economies back
toward more local production, and to preserve local traditions in the face of global
cultural homogenization. The success of these efforts remains to be seen.

From the earliest beginnings of contemporary consumer culture, women have been
identified as consumers. The earlier cited statistic from the 1920s that women made
80% of consumer purchases\(^97\) has proven to be durable indeed. According to a
publication of the federally funded Small Business Administration (SBA), women still
buy or influence 80% of household spending.\(^98\) Culturally, the concept of “recreational
shopping” that originated in the early twentieth century as a suitable activity for women
still remains a potent social force. Young girls are socialized into this role through
games, toys and television. The “seduction” continues into adulthood through an
incessant barrage of advertising that uses messages not dissimilar from those seen in
advertising from the 1910s. It is easy to look at “vintage” advertising from nearly a
century ago and laugh. However amusing the ads may be, their most meaningful
function in our day is to serve as a lens through which to view the deep social and
cultural roots of contemporary globalization. The social, economic and environmental
challenges of the twenty-first century require a strong critique of consumerism from the
group who have comprised “consumers” for the past century. Whether examining
purchases of overly processed food, sweatshop-made clothing, heavily marketed
pharmaceuticals or the latest high-tech gadget, it is my sincere hope that today’s
generation of women will take a long hard look back to the history of consumerism, learn
from it and then move forward to address the contemporary challenges of globalized
consumerism in a truly meaningful way.
Notes:


3. Ibid., 16.


17. T. J. Jackson Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization”, 27.

18. Monica Brasted, “The Reframing of Traditional Cultural Values”.

19. Ibid.


22. Ibid., 33.


24. Ibid., 341.

25. Ibid., 345.


30. Ibid., 160.

31. Ibid., 161, 167.

32. Ibid., 164.


35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 96.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.


42. Ibid., 118.
43. Ibid., 184.

44. Margaret Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage*, 16.

45. Janice Williams Rutherford, “A Foot in Each Sphere”.


54. Ibid.


56. Ibid., 93.


62. Ibid., 10-11.


64. Margaret Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage*, 18.
65. Ibid., 66.


76. Ibid., 137.


78. Ibid., 174.


81. Ibid., 164.

82. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Complaints and Disorders*, 17.

83. Ibid., 37.


85. Ibid., 159.

86. W. Philson, Executive Director, Mercer County Historical Society, pers. comm.


89. Daniel Delis Hill, Advertising to the American Woman, 7.

90. Ibid., 169.

91. Ibid., 222.

92. Jackson Lears, Fables of Abundance, 205.

93. Susan Strasser, Satisfaction Guaranteed, 110.

94. Stephen Fox, The Mirror Makers, 64.

95. Ibid.


98. Small Business Administration, “Women Are More Than a Market”. 
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The three newspapers used for this research, together with the locations of their archives are as follows:

*Pittsburgh Gazette-Times:* Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, main branch, Pittsburgh PA.

*Greenville Evening Record:* Mercer County Historical Society, Mercer PA.

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