

## The Power of Mothers in Advertising

Kayla Wong

After what seemed like years of arguing with her husband about their division of household labor, Nancy Holt ultimately convinced herself to accept that she was responsible for a much larger portion of housework in comparison to her husband, Evan Holt.<sup>1</sup> Although Nancy claimed to believe strongly in egalitarianism and demonstrated a genuine passion for her career as a social worker, Nancy sacrificed her full-time status at work in order to account for her overwhelming amount of housework.<sup>2</sup> Nancy's choices, as conveyed by sociologist Arlie Hochschild's 1989 book, *The Second Shift*, represent a mother's intense yearning to be a "supermom," a woman who, at least on the outside, flawlessly maintains a career while tending to her children and consistently finishing her chores at home.<sup>3</sup> While a number of factors went into Nancy's decisions, her situation largely reflects the social pressure that American mothers feel to fully embody our culture's definition of an ideal mother.

Today, the social pressure on mothers is physically inescapable. Whether they are out in public or within their own homes, mothers are constantly being influenced by what is shown on television, in periodicals, and on social media. Most importantly, these media outlets all have one type of content in common, which is perhaps our society's greatest supporter of cultural ideals: advertising.

From the perfect lighting in print ads to inspirational storylines in television commercials, advertisers have utilized every tool at their disposal to manufacture a glorified image that will lure viewers into wanting to purchase a brand's product or service. Accordingly, advertisers

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<sup>1</sup> Arlie Russel Hochschild, "Joey's Problem: Nancy and Evan Holt," in *The Second Shift* (1989; New York: Avon, 1999), 33-58.

<sup>2</sup> Hochschild, "Joey's Problem: Nancy and Evan Holt," 47.

<sup>3</sup> Arlie Russel Hochschild, "The Cultural Cover-Up," in *The Second Shift* (1989; New York: Avon, 1999), 32.

intentionally incorporate any interests or values of consumers that will trigger a positive association with the product being sold. Thus, advertisements strongly reflect the cultural values of a target audience at the time that the advertisement is created, and in doing so, advertising also reinforces and influences societal values. Since advertisements try to appeal to as many consumers as possible, advertisements generally try to target middle-class perspectives and have the tendency to “hug-the-middle-of-the-road” to avoid offending any potential customers.<sup>4</sup> Over time, this can “communicate cultural expectations for specific social groups” that “distort and constrain our perceptions of reality.”<sup>5</sup> This is especially prevalent with motherhood, because mothers are frequently depicted in print ads or commercials as emotional appeals to the audience to spark happy familial memories and a sense of trustworthiness for the brand being presented.

This essay analyzes the role that advertising plays in motherhood, particularly how traditional advertising, promoting products and services in periodicals, over the radio, or television, has raised expectations of what motherhood should look like that have been detrimental to society’s perception of motherhood and to mothers themselves. While there has been a shift in advertising to replace models and actresses with real mothers that have demonstrated an online influence, the portrayal of motherhood by advertisers still fails to accurately represent the realities of motherhood in America. However, considering the immense power that influencer mothers have earned for themselves online using their identities as mothers, I assert that these mothers should take the opportunity to undo the damaging standards that advertising has previously established for motherhood by leveraging the trust that influencer

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<sup>4</sup> Karen Danna Lynch, "Advertising Motherhood: Image, Ideology, and Consumption." *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 49 (2005): 34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41035601>.

<sup>5</sup> Lynch, “Advertising Motherhood,” 35.

mothers have with their audience and making an effort to portray motherhood more authentically in sponsored posts.

One of the most common narratives that exists in advertisements is that of a mother who, with the help of the product being promoted, can become a “flawless” mother. During the 1970s, a period when many women were entering the workforce for the first time in response to a wave of feminism and economic downturn, One-a-Day vitamins glamorized the working mother in an ad campaign that showed a woman effortlessly taking initiative both at work and at home. “She handles them all...husband, family, great job, too,” the ad reads cheerfully.<sup>6</sup> By depicting a mother who appears to easily achieve success in every aspect of her life, even though such advertisements are fictitious, brands simplify motherhood. Contrary to the expectation that is raised through such advertisements, many mothers struggle to find balance between parenting, work, and domestic duties. To that extent, the ease that mothers experienced in every aspect of their lives in advertisements make such a lifestyle seem extremely attainable, disregarding the major changes that would need to occur first, such as mitigating socioeconomic differences or improving the flexibility of workplace policies.

In addition to setting high standards for the lifestyle of an ideal mother, advertisers have also established expectations of who a mother should be. Numerous attempts have been made by advertisers to show more women of color over the years, but these attempts have failed to make motherhood more inclusive. For example, “the most recognized ‘face’ of black womanhood in the United States,” according to the Center for Media Literacy, continues to be Aunt Jemima.<sup>7</sup>

Created decades after the Civil War in 1889, Aunt Jemima was inspired by a black-faced

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<sup>6</sup> Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, “Mouthing Off to Dr. Spock,” in *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined Women*, (New York: Free Press, 2004), 55-84.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth C. Hirshman, “Motherhood in Black and Brown: Advertising to U.S. Minority Women,” *Advertising & Society Review* 12, no. 2 (2011), doi:10.1353/asr.2011.0015.

performer in a minstrel show and designed to spark nostalgia from middle-class white consumers about the days where black slaves would serve their white masters breakfast.<sup>8</sup> The racist background behind the creation of Aunt Jemima results in a portrayal of black women as “Mammy” for white families, instead of showing black women starting their own families and raising their own children. With images like Aunt Jemima circulating in advertisements, advertisers reinforce degrading and stereotypical depictions of black women and prevent Americans from considering African-American women as equally suitable mothers.

A century later, the depiction of black women and mothers in advertising still failed to better represent African-American motherhood. In 1989, Quaker Oats decided to “improve” the image of Aunt Jemima, by making her a slimmer, lighter skinned woman who wore pearls and a perfectly white blouse.<sup>9</sup> This represents just one example of women and mothers of color being conformed to “Caucasian standards of female beauty,” and other examples frequently include straightening the woman’s hair, lightening her hair, and giving her a thinner nose or lips.<sup>10</sup> By taking the effort to manipulate photos or limit talent casting to certain women to make mothers in advertisements more closely resemble white women, advertisers send an extremely narrow message of who they associate with motherhood. Since ads are designed to make consumers want to be in the situation that is outlined in an advertisement, it can seem as if they are implicitly suggesting that women of color should want to become more like white Americans. This phenomenon reflects white supremacist attitudes, and by showcasing them in upbeat

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<sup>8</sup> Saskia Fuerst, “The Sexy Aging Black Woman in US Advertisements: From Aunt Jemima to the Pro-Age Campaigns,” in *Arapoglou E., Kalogeras Y., Nyman J. (eds) Racial and Ethnic Identities in the Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 229-244.

<sup>9</sup> Hirshman, “Motherhood in Black and Brown,” *Advertising & Society Review* 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

commercials and print ads, advertisers continue to enforce strict racial expectations for what a mother should “ideally” look like.

Overall, the “ideal” mother that advertisers have chosen to associate their products with gives mothers, who inevitably do not always fit the mold, the impression that they are unworthy. In 2005, Karen Danna Lynch embarked on a study of nearly 2,000 advertisements that were included in two mainstream magazines from 1950 to 2000.<sup>11</sup> Lynch found that while each decades’ advertisements adjusted for shifting ideologies and gender norms, the depiction of mothers as “neat attractive white women who focus their energies on their home and/or children rather than the paid labor force” persisted across decades.<sup>12</sup> This repeated formula of characteristics to display on mothers in print ads endured for 50 years, so marketers had evidently discovered a simple set of qualities to display on mothers that would entice viewers to purchase the product being promoted in the hopes of becoming like the women in the ads.

However, a single, stagnant archetype never speaks for an entire population. Therefore, many American mothers, particularly those who were non-white, working outside of the home, or did not fit the stereotypical definition of attractive that was being depicted, were inevitably not represented by what they were seeing in advertisements. Although it may seem trivial, repeatedly seeing a similar image in magazines causes the human brain to expect motherhood to look a certain way. Thus, it could easily be discouraging and detrimental to a woman’s self-esteem when she realized that her home or lifestyle did not resemble the standard that was deemed worthy enough to be displayed in a nationwide advertisement. Such a mentality can become detrimental to women’s abilities to advocate for themselves against institutions and relationships, as well as confine women to stay within stereotypes like being a stay-at-home mother.

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<sup>11</sup> Lynch, "Advertising Motherhood," 34.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Today, advertising has transitioned from television, radio, and magazines over to the Internet, a place where everyday mothers now have a great influence over consumers. The democratization of the Internet that emerged at the beginning of the 21st century has paved the way for everyday mothers to gain a platform online. Known as “mommy bloggers” or “mommy influencers,” millions of mothers have websites and social media accounts dedicated to sharing their experiences as mothers with followers located all over the world. Popular blogs and their owners include *The Latina Mom* by Claudia Felix-Garay, *Mommyhoodjoy* by Kimberly Gelin, and *LaTonya Yvette*, named after herself. These blogs, and many others within the category, consist of posts with topics that range from family fun and travel to the challenges of parenting and pregnancy. This type of content naturally attracts other mothers who often find themselves empathizing with the perspectives that they are reading about.

As these mothers began to gain popularity online, advertisers have increasingly sponsored the mothers and their blogs in exchange for promoting a product or service to the blog’s followers. For example, Jennifer Borget, who has approximately 115,000 followers on Instagram and runs the blog, *Cherish 365*, promotes Shell’s Fuel Rewards Program in her December 3, 2020 post entitled “4 Ways to Make a Road Trip for the Memory Books.”<sup>13</sup> In honor of the approaching holiday season, Borget details four ideas that she would implement while taking a road trip with her three young children, who are shown smiling in multiple photos on the page.<sup>14</sup> The post concludes with Borget explaining that signing up for the Shell Fuel Rewards Program can be a great cost-saving method for road trips.<sup>15</sup> This is just one of many examples of mothers becoming more involved in advertising by replacing traditional models and

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<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Borget, “4 Ways to Make a Road Trip for the Memory Books,” *Cherish 365*, December 3, 2020, <https://cherish365.com/4-ways-to-make-a-road-trip-for-the-memory-books/>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

actresses. Evidently, these mothers can customize their sponsored message to match their lifestyle and blog's typical content, as opposed to following a script that is written by the marketer.

Regardless of the changes in how advertisements are presented and the new role that real moms play, it seems as if the expectations that traditional advertising had raised for motherhood have only grown. Sarah Pulliam Bailey, a journalist for *The Washington Post*, has called out “the ‘mommy Internet’” for being “miles away from what motherhood looks like for many of us – and miles from what the mommy Internet looked like a decade ago.”<sup>16</sup> Ever since advertisers entered the scene to sponsor mothers online in exchange for promoting a brand, many mothers have sacrificed their authenticity to align themselves with brands who have a professional image to uphold. The polished photos that followers of mommy blogs and social media accounts are greeted with normalize the expectation that motherhood is always supposed to be beautiful and disregards the more realistic challenges that mothers can experience, much like the messages communicated by earlier advertising.

What has changed in advertising, however, is the strength of the messages conveyed in sponsored posts. In a blog post entitled “How to Avoid Being a Zombie Mom” by Aaronica Cole, the mom behind *The Crunch Mommy* blog, Cole partners with Vicks to promote ZzzQuil.<sup>17</sup> What appears at first glance to be a relatable blog post about a mother's struggle with not getting too carried away with working after her children go to sleep for the sake of her sleep and health, ends as an endorsement for ZzzQuil PURE ZzzzS Melatonin Gummies products, which Cole claims “taste like dreams waiting to happen” and “contain the optimal level of melatonin so I can

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<sup>16</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “How the Mom Internet Became a Spotless, Sponsored Void,” *Washington Post*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/how-the-mom-internet-became-a-spotless-sponsored-void/>.

<sup>17</sup> Aaronica Cole, “How to Avoid Being a Zombie Mom,” *The Crunchy Mommy*, Accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.thechunchymommy.com/zombie-mom/>.

wake refreshed with no next-day grogginess.”<sup>18</sup> Cole’s ability to subtly integrate the product endorsement is a clever technique for her to reach her audience without triggering them to immediately exit the page. After scrolling through to read about Cole’s nightly routine, her nearly 20,000 followers are far more likely to consider the few lines written about ZzzQuil. This is just one example of advertisers taking advantage of the fact that mothers like Cole built their platforms online by establishing themselves as figures that the audience could trust, having formed a virtual bond over being American mothers with similar experiences. As a result, advertisements have more psychological power over consumption patterns and society than ever before in traditional advertising, including the ability to convey any expectations for what motherhood should be like, where it was clear that actresses were merely following a script.

By making real mothers that people already trust the new ambassadors for their products, advertisers have identified another crucial marketing outlet that boosts sales and amplifies the expectations that advertisers place upon mothers. This also makes it even *more* important to be conscious of what types of messages are being conveyed about motherhood in ads.

Since the narrative for motherhood that advertisers have historically created has set unrealistic expectations, mothers who have a voice online should take advantage of the fact that much of the power of advertising is now in their hands. Initially, it may seem that mothers are obliged to submit to the requests of paying advertisers. However, members of the advertising industry are highly aware of the much stronger power that the mothers have. Amber Anderson is the co-Founder and Head of Strategy at Tote + Pears, a branding agency that is specifically dedicated to targeting female consumers. As an advertiser, Anderson recognizes the importance of “leveraging the trusted voice of a mom blogger,” a major contributor to influencer marketing

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



being “one of the fastest growing digital marketing tactics.”<sup>19</sup> The loyalty that mothers have already built online with their followers by constantly sharing glimpses into their lives through photos and captions gives brands an advantage that didn’t exist previously; there is a more meaningful connection than what advertisers can offer in a short commercial. This acknowledgement of mother’s voices by advertisers is key, because it demonstrates that they will be willing to negotiate with and listen to the people who have the ultimate power to generate sales for a company. With this new leverage that individual mothers have over advertisers, mothers are justified in having more agency over their sponsored content. If enough mother bloggers and influencers endorse products in a manner that is more authentic to their personal experiences of motherhood over time, the portrayal of motherhood in the world of advertising will begin to better reflect the varying forms of motherhood that exist in America.

Despite the changes that have occurred in advertising and the new role that mothers have, a major continuity that appears from traditional advertising is the lack of diversity among influential mothers. Currently, the top ten mom bloggers are not only middle-aged white women, but also share similar characteristics of having gone to college, having an interest or expertise in writing and journalism, and being heterosexual.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, it is cited that the average mommy blog’s household income is \$14,000 higher than the average income for non-blogging moms.<sup>21</sup> While this may be the case for women who currently have the *greatest* followings online, there are certainly influencers that represent other demographics who are working on growing their audiences. For example, Jennifer Borget, mentioned previously, is African-

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<sup>19</sup> Amber Anderson, “How Influencer Marketing With Mom Bloggers Can Help Increase Sales.” American Express, November 9, 2018, <https://www.americanexpress.com/en-us/business/trends-and-insights/articles/how-influencer-marketing-with-mom-bloggers-can-help-increase-sales/>.

<sup>20</sup> Sam Larid, “The Rise of the Mommy Blogger,” Mashable, May 8, 2012, <https://mashable.com/2012/05/08/mommy-blogger-infographic/>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

American and has three biracial children with her white, police officer husband. Such women with different backgrounds can attract like-minded followers or followers with similar lifestyles, who may have previously been strangers to the world of mommy blogs simply because other blogs were less relatable. Since brands aim to reach the most consumers, advertisers will be forced to acknowledge and work with more diverse mothers, who are a direct channel to new, more diverse groups of consumers.

The day in which advertising becomes a more accurate representation of motherhood in America may seem far away, but several women are already paving the way by using their platforms to broaden society's understanding of motherhood beyond conventionally advertised portrayals of motherhood. For example, on her blog, *Love That Max*, Ellen Seidman focuses much of her content on a mission "to help people better see the ability in disability."<sup>22</sup> Although Seidman has three children, her son Max is the only one with cerebral palsy. Thus, some of her most notable posts consist of titles including "15 Superpowers of Special Needs moms," "A Bill of Rights for Parents of Kids with Special Needs," and "Smile at a Special Needs Mom."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, LaTonya Yvette frequently incorporates her identity as an African-American woman into her blog with posts named "Motherhood Right Now: Young, Gifted, Black and Building"<sup>24</sup> and "On Decriminalizing Black Hair."<sup>25</sup> By consistently acknowledging how deeper issues like disabilities and race impact their experience of motherhood in their blogs, mothers like Seidman and Yvette expose readers to versions of motherhood that fall outside of the perfect pictures that

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<sup>22</sup> Ellen Seidman, "About me/this blog," *Love That Max*, Accessed December 8, 2020, <https://www.lovethatmax.com/p/about-methis-blog.html>.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> LaTonya Yvette, "Motherhood Right Now: Young, Gifted, Black and Building," LaTonya Yvette, June 8, 2020, <https://latonyayvette.com/2020/11/motherhood-right-now-7.html>.

<sup>25</sup> LaTonya Yvette, "On Decriminalizing Black Hair," LaTonya Yvette, February 22, 2020, <https://latonyayvette.com/2019/02/on-decriminalizing-black-hair.html>.

mainstream media and advertising have traditionally used to attract audiences. Therefore, whenever these bloggers promote brands, they alter the narrative of advertisements to demonstrate a more realistic image of motherhood that considers the experiences and challenges that various groups of women undergo.

Although our society is constantly evolving, institutions, public policy, and social norms still commonly disregard issues pertaining to mothers. This idea has been reflected in advertising portrayals of motherhood in the past, but with the prevalence of advertising in the modern world, expectations for what American motherhood supposedly looks like have a detrimentally widespread reach. However, since advertising is one realm where mothers have recently achieved respect and power, advertising is a unique channel where mothers can create change for themselves, and future mothers. With time and dedication, mothers may finally be able to gain large-scale control over their own narratives in America, instead of leaving it up to advertisers, who have commercial interests to prioritize. By leveraging their identities as mothers and revealing more realistic depictions of both their struggles *and* victories online, mothers can expand America's perception of what motherhood looks like. In doing so, mothers demonstrate the need for systemic changes in areas that have previously made motherhood far more challenging than what has been more frequently depicted by advertisers.

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