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INTRODUCTION

Whether a married woman is a full-time housewife or she works outside the home, she spends a considerable amount of time doing housework. Marketers offer women and their families all sorts of modern, stylish devices to help make such work faster and easier. Studies show that despite the rapid increase of women in the workforce, men have not substantially increased their share of responsibility or duties in the maintenance of the household (Oropesa 1993). There are still strong effects of traditional gender role stereotypes on who does what around the house (Ware 1989). That is, the definitions of responsibility for domestic chores are gendered. Women in dual career households are experiencing time and energy constraints in trying to fulfill work and family expectations, leading to a further increase in the marketing of improved household technology.

Housework can be defined as “the work involved in the care or management of domestic concerns, such as kitchen work, sweeping, and scrubbing” (Webster's Third New International Dictionary 1971, p.1096), or alternatively as “the domestic service of wife to husband, children, and house within the private (versus public) realm of society” (Kramarae and Treichler 1992, p.198). The second definition supplies the actor primarily responsible for this work, the wife or female head of household. In order to accomplish domestic work (as well as industrialized market labor), tools must be employed. Household tools have always been an essential part of housework, and have become increasingly modern as society at large has become increasingly industrialized (Cowan 1983). In fact, many household appliances were developed first for commercial use and then adapted to the home. “The curtailing of household labor is achieved through the mechanization of work processes once performed by hand, mainly cleaning operations” (Giedion 1948, p. 512). The original purpose of introducing such devices into housework was to eliminate manual drudgery, lighten the workload, and thereby create more efficient housewives.

On the surface this sounds good for women responsible for ensuring that the household is maintained properly. In fact, the popular view of household appliances today is that they are time and labor saving devices that ultimately make life better for women. These assumptions are investigated by taking a deeper look at the historical role that increased household technology has played in women’s daily lives, thus uncovering the underlying symbolic meanings of household appliances and the paradoxes they present for women. It is important to look at women’s distinctive experiences in consumer research in order to better understand the gendered meanings of products (Bristor and Fischer 1993).
PRODUCT SYMBOLISM

It is an established notion in consumer research that the products people acquire and consume are imbued with meaning above and beyond their functional uses. The essence of the product becomes not the object itself and its physical functioning, but the relation between the object and consumer, so that the material world of products becomes transformed into a symbolic world of ideological meanings. Meaning is an individual’s perception or interpretation of an object, and is not inherent in the object itself. One’s perception of an object consists of two dimensions: an interpretation of its attributes and an interpretation of its performance potential. These two dimensions vary in importance among objects and among individuals, and vary as well according to the context(s) in which the object is perceived (Kleine and Kernan 1991).

All symbols find their meaning through social agreement based on arbitrary codes of rules representing particular worldviews developed by some cultural system (Mick 1986). More precisely, there is a three-way interaction between marketers, consumers, and the products themselves (Gottdiener 1985). Marketers give a product an exchange value, accompanied by symbolic promotional meanings; then consumers imbue the product with a use value, accompanied by symbolic meanings derived from the effect of the product’s use in social interactions; then marketers use this feedback in further promotional campaigns and improvement of the product in order to broaden the social acceptance and use of the product. Advertisers create new meanings by inventing new connections between products and benefits, so that over time the true relationship between the symbol and reality can no longer be discerned, and the symbols with their “artificial” associations take on lives of their own (Solomon 1996, p.81). The product itself can also have an effect on the social interaction process, such as aiding people in more effective role definition and helping to place them in social networks (Solomon 1983).

For example, in early post-industrial society (late 1800’s in the United States) the specific role of housewife was unfamiliar to most women, who had up until this time participated in a more cooperative process of household production. In order to bring more meaning to the housewife role and to more clearly define the role requirements, housewives adopted tools and practices designed by marketers to help them more effectively create a haven from the outside world that kept up with the ever-changing middle class standard of living. Cultural transformations of foodstuffs into meals and house into home became more elaborate in order to convey the rising status of the middle class. The home itself was a reflection of the housewife’s character, as well as being the only domain in which she could express herself (Smith 1989). The central role that household appliances have played and continue to play in women’s day-to-day lives, as evidenced by the amount of time, energy, and money invested into such tools, has produced a rich, yet contradictory, network of symbolic associations within the overall societal framework. Because of the changing nature of household technology and the socio-political context in which it was developed, the historical background of housework and its differential effects on men and women warrant a deeper investigation in order to fully understand the symbolism behind household tools.

THE CONFLICTING MEANINGS OF HOUSEHOLD TECHNOLOGY

By examining the surface meanings historically associated with the introduction of modern technology into the domestic realm, and comparing this with the real-world effects that such devices have had on women’s daily lives, several contrasting themes emerge that serve to illuminate the underlying product symbolism characterizing household appliances.
Ease vs. Devaluation

With the separation of the public and private spheres that came with industrialization, housework was defined as women's work and work outside the home as men's work. If the family could live on the husband's wages, the wife did not usually engage in market labor, and there were several practical reasons for this arrangement. "Despite job segregation, the workplace was often a sexually charged arena. Taunts and roughhousing around factories could create a constantly unpleasant, even dangerous atmosphere for women" (Smith 1989, p.278). Another reason why men did not want women to work outside the home is that women would provide an additional source of competition for the men. "Victorian attempts to get women out of the factories and mills and into the home were motivated largely by the anxiety of men whose own situation had been radically transformed by the change to factory production" (Oakley 1974, pp.44-45). Also, men needed someone to take care of the children and to provide domestic support in order for them to leave the home. Therefore, if husbands could afford it, their wives did not work outside the home.

This middle- and upper-class social custom was justified not by the foregoing practical arguments, but instead by the loftier doctrine of separate spheres. This doctrine was based on basic biological differences between the sexes. Women's reproductive physiology was used to establish the notion that women were unsuited for physically demanding work and were instead naturally equipped for the nurturing nature of motherhood and domesticity. According to this philosophy, working outside the home was unwomanly and would lead to neglect of the family. This doctrine has its roots in the Romantic notion of republican motherhood from the early 1800's, which focused on the effects of women's virtue on the state (Smith 1989). The effective result of the separate spheres philosophy by 1850 was to make housekeeping the exclusive domain of married women, such that any work performed by women outside the home, including charity, was seen as conflicting with not only the health of the home but also with the health of the state. This effect was enhanced by so-called protective legislation that barred women from certain types of jobs and by the higher status accrued to a man whose wife did not work outside the home. So by 1911 only one in ten married women worked outside the home (Oakley 1974). Of course, the womanliness of employed working-class women was not an important issue: it was never a disgrace for a lower-class woman to have a job. However, these women were still affected by the doctrine of separate spheres through wage and employment discrimination, since their labor was seen as secondary to that of their male counterparts.

Since women were not seen to be suited for hard manual labor, according to the doctrine of separate spheres, it was necessary for women to appear as if they were idle and leisurely in the home. Servants in the more well-to-do households, and later so-called "time-saving" machines, symbolized the ease of housework (Smith 1989). The stated purpose for introducing mechanized tools into the household was to make it possible to "reduce manual drudgery to a minimum" (Giedion 1948, p.516). Early advertisements for modern appliances focused on how easy housework would be, showing smiling women effortlessly manipulating the devices, with copy like "Planned to save you time, labor, and money!" "Prevents the inconvenience of stooping!" "No tired feeling—it's a pleasure to use," or "Isn't it fair that you should have this simple, economical suction sweeper and be saved the back-breaking labor of sweeping the old-fashioned way?" (Giedion 1948, p.593).
Another way that housework was made to seem light and ladylike was to require that the woman exhibit a feminine appearance. Clothing was used to exaggerate the femininity of the housewife. Women in ads for new appliances were immaculately dressed without a hair out of place. Corsets were used to emphasize women’s hips and breasts (body parts associated with fertility), which in reality created much discomfort and inconvenience for women and interfered with their ability to do housework effectively. Women were exhorted to change clothes numerous times throughout the day in order to exhibit freshness and newness for their husbands (Beeton 1861). In the 1930’s long, enameled fingernails became the fashion for women, so as to make every gesture appear dainty, and evidence of straining effort, such as sweating, a clenched jaw, and grunting, were discouraged as unladylike (Brownmiller 1984). Modern household appliances were promoted as allowing women to exhibit proper feminine decorum and appearance while still maintaining the home.

However, as long as women’s work in the home was camouflaged so that they looked like they did not actually work, their labor could be trivialized and devalued. The illusion of ease brought on by the mechanization of household labor has contributed to housework not being valued as real work. Housekeeping is seen by society as easy work that anyone could do with very little effort. Statements like, “Just throw the laundry in the machine and turn it on!” fail to acknowledge all the manual processes involved in washing clothes, such as carrying, lifting, folding, ironing, and hanging. Beeton’s (1861) housework manual outlines the vast number of daily duties, skills, and responsibilities required of the proper “mistress.” The first chapter goes through a typical day in the life of a housewife, from rising (6 AM) to retiring, enumerating sixty-one recommendations for proper performance of the role. She includes thirty-eight chapters on the techniques of cooking alone. This indicates that the standards and requirements imposed on women for running the household were greatly increased from pre-industrial times. That is, as the perception of housework became that it was easier, the number of chores that women became responsible for increased. The claim that domestic work was leisurely and more suited for the dainty female constitution than was “real work” was in direct contrast with the reality of women’s hectic, burdensome schedules filled up with endless tasks.

Independence vs. Greater Dependency

The introduction of mechanized technology into the household was promoted as leading to “greater independence, that is, to the enfranchisement of the housewife” (Giedion 1948, p.512). However, with the advent of modern tools also came a drastic reduction in the amount of help women received from children and husbands. Tasks that previously had been shared by members of the whole household in a cooperative fashion were allotted to the housewife’s list of chores, as children went off to school and husband went off to work. This trend was accompanied by a continual increase in the elaborateness of food, home decor, and clothing standards imposed by society on women (Cowan 1983).

The tasks performed by women in the home are inextricably linked to one another: preparing a meal requires shopping for groceries, planning and cooking, maintenance of energy source and cooking appliance, coordination with children’s and husband’s tastes and schedules, cleaning, and disposal of waste. New tools introduced into the performance of this task can change the whole process and cause a shift in the responsibilities of those involved (Cowan 1983). For example, a new food processor releases the children from their vegetable chopping duties, or a gas stove releases the husband from his wood procurement duties. In fact, the main effect of the introduction of
most new household appliances was to eliminate most of the helping duties of the children and nearly all of those of the husband and to make women exclusively responsible for the performance of each task, which would often be done by the woman in isolation. And these new tools required cleaning, a labor-intensive task almost exclusive to women (Cowan 1983). Other product examples exhibiting this pattern include vacuum cleaners, toilets, an increased number of food preparation and serving utensils, and washing machines.

Women’s increased reliance on tools to be able to independently perform household tasks actually contributed to greater dependence and alienation of the housewife. As tools became more complex, women knew less about how the tools of their labor worked (Cowan 1983). When these new appliances broke down, women depended on repairmen to understand and fix them. Most women also depended solely on their husbands to pay for such appliances and services.

Even today with more than 60% of women with children under 18 and more than 70% of women without children working outside the home, women are overwhelmingly responsible for the housework: in 83% of married couples women do most of the cooking, in 82% women do the grocery shopping, and in 76% women do the dishes. Women thought that if they shared in the responsibility for earning a living, men would participate more in household responsibilities, but this has not generally been the case (Farhi 1994).

Time Savings vs. Heightened Standards

The housework that women perform is affected by and affects the work that men do. Therefore, men have a vested interest in how housework is performed by women in all of its aspects, so that throughout history men have been involved in its so-called improvement. Attempts to apply Frederick Taylor’s principles of scientific management to the private sphere around the turn of the century, known as “household engineering,” represent such an effort. This involved reviewing the old established work processes and ordering them in a more rational way. The focus was on the amount of time wasted by the typical housewife. One woman whose dishwashing was analyzed stated, “For years I never realized that I actually made 80 wrong motions in the washing alone, not counting others in the sorting, wiping, and laying away” (Giedion 1948, p.521). Men attempted to create organized work areas and surfaces and esthetically appealing new appliances in order to eliminate wasted movements (Giedion 1948). Women's work environments then were altered for these purposes so that women could be even more efficient. The implication is that women need men to tell them how to do even work that is supposed to be particularly suited for women, and that women's natural efforts are not good enough: they need men's tools and advice to be good housekeepers.

Bringing the “science of efficiency” into the home, however, also resulted in greater expectations and higher standards regarding housework, much as it did in the workplace. By eliminating wasted movements and creating more efficient tools, one would expect less amounts of time spent by women in the performance of housekeeping duties. However, the bottom line was that the time women spent in housework was not reduced by equipping their homes with the latest technology (Robinson 1980). An illustrative example is doing the laundry, which has been affected greatly by technological change and increased organization of the work space. “A large variety of soaps and detergents and automatic appliances have come on the scene, and the once burdensome requirement of ironing has been greatly reduced by wash-and-wear fabrics. Nonetheless, the amount of time spent
doing the laundry increased (from 5 1/2 hours per week in 1925 to 6 1/2 hours per week in 1968). Presumably people have more clothes now than they did in the past and they wash them more often" (Vanek 1974).

Economy vs. Consumer Debt

In pre-industrial society women’s work in the home was valued for its economic contributions, even if the products were not sold for money. With the separation of the workplace from the home, housework lost its economic value, and only work that earned wages was considered economic activity (Haarven 1976). Housework became an essentially consumption-oriented activity, and women’s status fell when they became consumers rather than producers (Gordon and McArthur 1985).

The shift from pre-industrial production activities, such as growing produce and weaving cloth, to post-industrial consumption activities, such as purchasing bread from the baker or buying a new utensil to assist in housework, resulted in significant changes in the daily chores of the housewife. By the 1880’s domestic consumption had become the norm for most American households. However, women’s consumption behavior was severely restricted by their husbands (Gordon and McArthur 1985). In order to maintain the home, women had to become consumers in the marketplace, but most depended solely on their husbands to give them money for such purchases, at least until women began to enter the labor force in larger numbers. Many husbands routinely expected their wives to keep detailed accounts of all expenditures, supply usage, and activities. Housewives were expected to be frugal and careful in the purchase, preparation, and usage of all goods purchased for the running of the house (Gordon and McArthur 1985). Housewives, in an effort to economize and gain the advantages offered by new mechanical devices, got hooked into pay-as-you-go credit plans, which led to even further dependence on manufacturers (Giedion 1948). Easy credit terms were offered to enable families to invest in the latest and most economical household appliances. Also, as more household chores became mechanized, energy consumption (mostly in the form of electricity, gas, and oil) increased, leading to higher utility bills (Cowan 1983).

Oftentimes the functional utility and economic value of appliances were not the prime reasons for purchasing newer and better ones. Instead, the home became a showcase for the woman’s personality and talent, and the focus was on style and decor (Smith 1989). Irrational motivations such as keeping up with the latest colors, fashions, and technology, as well as the Joneses, were often the prime movers in deciding to invest in better tools. With rapidly changing technology, many appliances became obsolete in just a few years. Ironically, the increase in consumer debt in post-War America, largely due to the purchase of household durables, was one of the main factors contributing to the need for women to work outside the home, which ended up increasing their overall workload (Andre 1981). Mothers working fulltime outside the home experience the greatest constraints on their time (Dawson and Harrington 1995).

Freedom vs. Greater Confinement

Having the right tools for the job can greatly improve the performance of any task, and thereby free up time and energy for other, more enjoyable, things. However, tools also serve to set limits on as well as organize the tasks for which they are designed. The application of male-defined technological and organizational principles to housework resulted in women being relegated to rational, orderly confines with set standards and
duties. The amount of leisure time between tasks and socializing during tasks was greatly reduced for the modern homemaker.

The division of space in the home also carried with it symbolic meaning. In pre-industrial homes there were no separate bedrooms or kitchens. The compartmentalized kitchens that followed were particularly the special domain of the housewife (Oakley 1974). The homemaker had a separate identity in her kitchen. This separate space intensified the housewife's separation from life in the outside world. Specialized appliances and work surfaces served to put boundaries on her work role and symbolized her specific place in society. As women played increasingly varied roles in our society over time, and as more women went to work outside the home, they continued to receive food processors and knife sets for Christmas and birthday gifts, and were expected to take up inexpensive hobbies contributing to the home, such as gardening or crocheting (Andre 1981). This illustrates how even women's leisure activities are often not of their own definition, but instead extensions of their domestic confines. The current popularity of Martha Stuart bears witness to this.

CONCLUSION

The historical definition of housework as "women's work" has had a holdover effect, and reflects on the symbolic associations that exist with the tools of the trade. Mechanized household appliances were developed and touted as time- and money-saving devices that would make housework easier for women, thereby increasing their independence and freedom. By looking at the historical record and the role that household technology has played in women's daily lives, these assumed benefits take on a different meaning for the women who mainly use these tools. This can help to explain the mixed feelings women have toward many of the household appliances they have in their homes.

Today's women are continually offered new and improved devices to make their housework practically effortless: the Salad Shooter spits out the perfect salad for the woman on-the-go, LaMachine allows the ordinary housewife to slice and dice like a professional, and computerized appliances do a lot of the thinking for the user. The increasing time pressures on women who are employed outside the household are enticing marketers to develop more such devices (Oropesa 1993). However, it will require fundamental changes in the accepted roles of women and men in our society, not better tools, to reduce the role overload that modern American women are experiencing and to place appropriate value on the very necessary task of keeping house.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the complexity of the interaction among consumer, usage situation, and household tool over time, there is a lot more room for symbolic interpretation of the meaning of appliances in our culture. For example, a phenomenological investigation of women and their appliances would yield interesting findings regarding the role(s) that these gadgets actually play in women's daily routines and the meaning they attach to housework. Study of the evolution of particular appliances over time could be used to understand changes in household make-up, roles, and functions within the overall socio-political and commercial/marketing environment. The varying meaning of household tools to women and men of different demographic and lifestyle segments, especially non-traditional households, would be interesting to analyze as well. An important question to ask is what gender biases still exist in the socialization of children regarding housekeeping? How
central is housework to perceptions of femininity? As housework becomes more automated, will women experience greater freedom from traditional expectations? Because of the highly gendered meanings associated with this activity and its tools, housework is important to study.

REFERENCES


