Magazines | Representation

Feminist perspectives in relation to historical magazines

**Task 1:** Read the following article and summarise key points about representations of women in advertising and magazines:

*The Ideal Woman* by Jennifer Holt – an article focusing on the 1950s and 60s concept of the ‘ideal woman’ and the feminist movement; American focus but relevant to British society:

https://www.csustan.edu/sites/default/files/honors/documents/journals/soundings/Holt.pdf

Holt discusses Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in her article – A level learners in particular may find the following extract from Friedan helpful:

https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/ows/seminars/tcentury/FeminineMystique.pdf

Friedan discusses the issue of the post-war American suburban housewife who was defined by her role as wife and mother and did not have opportunities outside the domestic sphere, despite potentially being highly educated, the ‘dream image of young American women’.

The following quotes and ideas are taken from a range of sources in relation to women’s magazines.

**Task 2:** consider which of these ideas could be applied to the historical magazine you have studied. Consider: cover, contents page, feature articles, advertising.

Place the ideas in order of how helpful they are to understanding the representations in your magazine. Give examples and reasons.
'There is a depressing stability in the articulation of women's politics and communication... The underlying frame of reference is that women belong to the family and domestic life and men to the social world of politics and work; that femininity is about care, nurturance and compassion, and that masculinity is about efficiency, rationality and individuality' Liesbet Van Zoonen

'There is a very uniform picture of women as household-family orientated consumers' Jennifer Holt The Ideal Woman

‘Friedan alleged that magazines did not passively participate in enforcing these gender roles, but were in fact an active force behind the creation of what she termed the “feminine monster.” She claimed that the manufacturing sector “had decided to make women better consumers of home products by reinforcing and rewarding the concept of women’s total fulfillment through the role of housewife and mother”’ Jennifer Holt The Ideal Woman

The idea that magazines construct ‘mythic’ representations of women that ‘represent the better self which every woman desires to become’ Jonathan Bignell Media Semiotics

‘In promoting a cult of femininity these journals are not merely reflecting the female role in society; they are also supplying one source of definitions of, and socialization into, that role. In maintaining the desire of adherents new and old to perfect and display their femininity, these journals can be seen to fulfill another of their most enduring purposes - the creation of profits for their owners in a market where the few organizations own the many titles’ Marjorie Ferguson, Forever Feminine: Women’s Magazines and the Cult of Femininity

Many second wave feminist writers condemned contemporary women’s periodicals as perpetuating narrowly defined, socially acceptable gender roles and encouraging conformity to these norms’ Rachel Ritchie et al: Women in Magazines: Research, Representation, Production and Consumption