

MESSAGES OF FRUGALITY AND CONSUMPTION IN THE  
*LADIES' HOME JOURNAL*: 1920S-1940S

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*LADIES' HOME JOURNAL: 1920S-1940S*

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## DEDICATION

To my mom, who has offered her constant love and support throughout my academic endeavors.

To my husband David, who inspired me to pursue a graduate education and never allowed me to give up during this four-year journey.

To my daughter, whose forthcoming arrival has been the greatest motivation to complete a thesis one could ask for.

In memory of my father William R. Colmery.

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MESSAGES OF FRUGALITY AND CONSUMPTION IN THE  
*LADIES' HOME JOURNAL*: 1920S-1940S

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ABSTRACT

Since its inception more than 125 years ago, the *Ladies' Home Journal* has provided readers with cost-saving, pragmatic advice on domestic matters, while at the same time promoting consumerism by exposing readers to all the material trappings of an aspirational lifestyle, including the “perfect” kitchen and an array of clothing and accessories. This study seeks to examine the messages the *Journal* sent to its readers regarding saving and spending during periods of economic prosperity, depression, and recovery to uncover what these messages may have said about women’s roles in society during those times.

A content analysis of 60 issues of the *Journal* from 1920 to 1949 examines messages of frugality and messages of consumption present in service journalism articles. The findings of the content analysis reveal a greater number of frugality-oriented messages in the 1920s, as opposed to the 1930s—which contained the fewest frugality-oriented messages overall—and the 1940s. Using mass communication theories of social constructionism and cultural Marxism, a discourse analysis reveals conflicting roles for women with regard to saving and spending, as defined by the messages of frugality and consumption put forth in the *Journal*.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Introduction*

Throughout its more than 125-year history, the *Ladies' Home Journal* has instructed its readers on child rearing, household maintenance, and various domestic crafts—topics that would be associated with service journalism<sup>1</sup> today (Endres & Lueck, 1995). Since its inception, the magazine has provided readers with cost-saving, pragmatic advice on domestic matters, while at the same time promoting consumerism by exposing readers to all the material trappings of an aspirational lifestyle, including the “perfect” kitchen and an array of clothing and accessories. This study seeks to examine the messages the *Journal* sent to its readers regarding saving and spending, particularly during periods of economic prosperity, depression, and recovery, and to uncover what those messages may have said about women’s roles in society during those time periods.

Though initially conceived in 1883 in response to interest from advertisers who wished to reach female consumers more directly, the *Journal's* first editors, husband-and-wife team Cyrus Curtis and Louisa Knapp, exercised strict ethical control over which products could be advertised in the magazine. Knapp rejected “[a]ll doubtful advertisements,” claiming there was “no room for swindlers in [the] magazine,” sometimes at the expense of the *Journal's* bottom line (Endres & Lueck, 1995, p.173). As editors, Curtis and Knapp were among the first to refuse to advertise patent medicines in their magazine (Ohmann, 1996). Their stance against advertising products potentially

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<sup>1</sup> The term service journalism was not used in the early twentieth century. Content focused on practical advice for women, including advice on marriage, cooking, fashion, children, and home decorating, was found in the service departments or simply “departments” of popular women’s magazines. Service departments, in one form or another, have been a fixture of women’s magazines throughout their histories (Zuckerman, 1998).

dangerous to their readers extended to their successors, as well. Even at the height of the Great Depression, the *Journal's* second husband-and-wife team, editors Bruce and Beatrice Gould, passed on a half-million-dollar advertising campaign by a well-known pharmaceutical company that promoted douching with a harsh disinfectant after they consulted with numerous gynecologists who cautioned against the product<sup>2</sup> (Walker, 2000). Bruce Gould stated their desire to place the magazine's credibility with readers above an unscrupulous relationship with advertisers:

We knew early that we didn't want our magazine to be that deadening thing, a catalogue for advertisers. Ham recipes published opposite a page advertising ham arouse some skepticism. Uncritical puffs for dishwashers without realistic discussion of their home performance may please manufacturers, but owners of failing appliances may begin to feel, "You can't believe what you read in the papers." (Walker, 2000, p. 61)

Such a declaration was "noble but naïve," according to Walker (2000), as despite the editors' best intentions to keep editorial content objective, women's magazines were dependent upon advertisers to remain in business, and without "complimentary copy" many advertisers were not willing to place ads in the magazine (p. 62). Indeed, despite Curtis's opposition to dubious advertisements in his magazine, he actively pursued advertisers: by 1888—just five years after the magazine was founded—the *Journal* contained three times as many advertisements as its competitor magazines, and by the turn of the century advertising revenue from the *Journal* had reached one million dollars

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<sup>2</sup> Though the Goulds never disclosed the name of the product they refused to advertise, Walker pointed to strong evidence identifying the product as Lysol (Walker, 2000).

(Zuckerman, 1998). A former advertising agent, Curtis demonstrated his ability to understand the mind of advertisers in a speech to the industry:

Do you know why we publish the *Ladies' Home Journal*? The editor thinks it is for the benefit of the American woman. That is an illusion, but a very proper one for him to have. But I will tell you; the real reason, the publisher's reason, is to give you people who manufacture things that American women want and buy a chance to tell them about your products.

(Zuckerman, 1998, p. 7)

Thus, Curtis was quick to acknowledge a new role for women as consumers as well as advertisers' need to reach these new consumers (Zuckerman, 1998), and the medium of the women's magazine presented advertisers with a new vehicle with which to reach this burgeoning consumer market.

By the late nineteenth century, married women had been identified as the household's chief consumer (Walker, 2000), and by 1929 it was estimated that women made more than eighty percent of family purchases (Ehrenreich & English, 1978). Additionally, between 1919 and 1939 the layout of women's magazines was redesigned so that readers had to navigate through several pages of advertisements to read an article from start to finish (Walker, 2000). The early twentieth century also gave rise to a culture of consumption that "presented a unified and powerful vision of satisfaction not through social change but through consumerism" (Scanlon, 1995, p. 230), and during this time period consumption became akin to patriotism (Marcellus, 2004).

As women's work around the home became increasingly professionalized

in the early twentieth century, producers of consumer goods became more sophisticated in their efforts to reach housewives. Domestic scientists and home economists, who, in the 1910s and early 1920s sought to free housewives from the daily drudgeries of home keeping and child rearing, were tapped by advertisers in the late 1920s to endorse specific products and hone market research efforts (Ehrenreich & English, 1978; Scanlon, 1995). Among the most vocal home economics advocates was Christine Fredrick, author and longtime contributor to the *Journal* (Scanlon, 1995). A 1906 graduate of Northwestern University, Fredrick worked as a maid, sharpening her housekeeping skills, until she married (Scanlon, 1995). Though initially active in the women’s suffrage movement, a wife and mother of small children herself, Fredrick soon became more interested in “liberating women from the inefficiency of the household, not from the household altogether” (Scanlon, 1995, p. 62). She consulted with her husband’s “efficiency engineer” colleagues, observed factory work and the principles of Taylorism<sup>3</sup>, and concluded that women’s work could, in fact, be made more efficient with the proper tools and methods—a philosophy she coined “new housekeeping” (Scanlon, 1995). As contributing household editor for the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, a post she held from 1912 to 1919, Fredrick professionalized housekeeping and promoted such efficiency improvements such as standardized heights for kitchen equipment (Scanlon, 1995). While Fredrick posited that a kitchen designed to accommodate the average woman’s height would enable her to perform her task more easily, Scanlon (1995) pointed out

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<sup>3</sup> Taylorism was a “set of principles underlying work organization” that emerged in the early twentieth century (Littler, 1978, p.186).

such modifications to the kitchen also ensured that women were now the only family members anatomically suited to those tasks. Though Fredrick's assertion that "new housekeeping" could offer women greater control of their lives and more free time was likely rooted in genuine concern for women, her advice would be later complicated by her relationships with manufactures (Scanlon, 1995). In fact, Fredrick's desire to directly endorse specific products precipitated her departure from the *Journal*, whose editors advised her against such a practice, preferring product endorsements in the form of letters to and from readers over advertisements integrated into editorial copy (Scanlon, 1995). Eventually, Fredrick found a niche as a market researcher for the home appliance industry, and, in 1929, penned a four-hundred-page advice manual for advertisers, *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, which, in the words of Ehrenreich & English (1978), explained how to appeal to the "fears, prejudices, and vanities" of the American housewife<sup>4</sup>. In the work, Frederick pointed to studies of appeals to common consumer items, such as breakfast food and soap, and outlined the appeals that resonated best with women, including cleanliness, doctor's recommendations, and "men like it" (Frederick, 1929).

When the Great Depression, the worst economic depression in America's history, began in late October 1929, the barrage of consumption-oriented messages spilling forth from the pages of women's magazines did not slow in the following months, as one might expect. While the *Journal* sought to provide its readers with features designed to help them survive the Depression, the magazine also encouraged women to continue to spend money to drive economic recovery

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, *Selling Mrs. Consumer* was dedicated to President Hoover (Ehrenreich & English, 1978).

(Endres & Lueck, 1995). In 1937, while America was still deep in economic depression, the Goulds peppered the pages of the *Journal* with images of fashions and home decorations most readers could not afford. The editors aimed to offer hope to readers weary of the Depression, but their decision to feature these higher-end items was also a calculated business strategy (Walker, 2000). As the *Journal's* second editor, Edward Bok, declared nearly a decade before the onset of the Depression: an editor must also be a businessman (Ohmann, 1996), and the Goulds followed in his footsteps as enterprising editors of the *Journal*. Walker (2000) explained that women's magazines, like other mass media, must appeal to those who supported them financially, advertisers, to survive; thus, each issue was the result of "negotiating a variety of often competing interests," resulting in a "sometimes contradictory image of domestic America" (p. 19). Scanlon (1995) also pointed out that the *Journal*, like many of its competitor women's magazines, was fraught with contradictions from its beginning:

It was not an easy task to promote a simple life for women, while at the same time promoting the primacy of consumer goods and material desires, nor was it easy to praise women's growing independence from onerous household tasks at the same time that one pleaded with women to limit the boundaries of that independence. (p. 4)

Zuckerman (1998), too, echoed Walker's and Scanlon's observations of contradictory content in women's magazines:

Women's magazines' coverage of the emerging consumption society and its special role for females paired with the journals' ever increasing

dependence on advertising offers an example of the complexity of the publications' content in these years, when diverse influences could yield contradictory material. (p. 81)

In other words, throughout their history women's magazines have contained contradictory messages, most of which stemmed from a growing culture of consumerism and controversy surrounding changing roles for women. Put differently: women were advised to keep a tight handle on the family's pocketbook, but also informed that their pocketbook should match their shoes and where that pocketbook could be purchased.

More than half a century later, many popular women's magazines still contain paradoxical advice about spending and saving. Beginning in early 2008, America was confronted with a mortgage crisis and subsequent recession dubbed the worst economic depression in the country's history since the Great Depression by the International Monetary Fund (Stewart, 2008), and many women's magazines responded by featuring a greater number of service journalism articles offering money-saving tips and do-it-yourself household hints. Yet, as in the 1930s, many of today's magazines for women continue to present clothing, accessories, home décor, beauty products, and other discretionary consumer items beyond the financial reach of middle-class readers. As long as the current economic crisis persists, women's magazines will likely continue to send contradictory messages, offering content related to readers' economic woes while simultaneously promoting consumer spending.

As Marcellus (2004) argued, present-day media representations are rooted in magazine depictions of the early twentieth century. Moreover, Kitch (2001) asserted that current media definitions of femininity have their origins in the mass media of the late



nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, an examination of messages about spending and saving in the *Ladies' Home Journal* during periods of economic prosperity, depression, and recovery in America may provide scholars of media and communication, sociology, and women's studies with a greater understanding of what these mixed messages in women's magazines may have said about what society expected of women and what women could have expected from society. Or, as Kelly wrote in her study of the changing images of women in the *Journal* between 1942 and 1954:

As a new cycle of women's history begins, then, it seems appropriate to study other cycles. Through such study one can learn how advances are made, and how backlash is carried out. One can see the cultural forces that make change likely, and those that make it impossible. In short, through hindsight one improves foresight. (1979, p. 6)

Like Kelly's study, this study, too, aims to improve the foresight of producers, consumers, and scholars of women's magazines by reexamining the historical treatment of messages about saving and spending in what is, arguably, the most influential women's magazine of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Review of Literature*

This review of the literature includes a discussion of various scholarly analyses of messages of saving and spending in women's magazines within the social, political, and economic contexts of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, as well as a discussion linking these messages to mass media theories of social constructionism and cultural Marxism, which when applied to research of women's magazines, suggest possible explanations for the magazines' contradictory content.

When referring to messages about saving and spending, it is helpful to provide a more specific definition of these terms. Messages about saving could be further defined as "messages about frugality," and messages about spending could be further defined as "messages about consumption."

#### **Frugality**

As no scholarly definition is available, frugality, for purpose of this study, will be defined by the *Merriam-Webster* entry: "characterized by or reflecting economy in the use of resources" (2009), or using one's resources, financial and domestic, prudently in order to save money or subsist on less money. Women's magazines were not the first medium to dispense frugality-oriented domestic advice to the American homemaker. In 1828, Lydia Marie Child authored the *American Frugal Housewife*, the first domestic-advice manual for American women (Leavitt, 2002). Child strongly criticized frivolous spending, wastefulness, and living beyond one's means, advising women to avoid ostentatious home furnishings in favor of more modest items. "There is nothing in which

the extravagance of the present day strikes me so forcibly as the manner in which our young people of moderate fortune furnish their houses,” she wrote, adding “foolish vanity” would make young couples “less happy, and no more respectable” (as cited in Leavitt, 2002, p. 34).

From its early days, the *Journal* featured articles promoting the virtues of frugality, a reflection, perhaps, of Child’s campaign for frugality in the mid-1800s. Throughout his tenure as editor of the *Journal*, Bok was an ardent proponent of “simple living,” and probably had a greater influence on the middle class than any other editorial voice in mass media at the turn of the century (Shi, 1985). In 1900, he asserted that from “every class in American life, there comes the same cry for a simpler, more traditional way of living,” and he set about addressing those perceived needs in the *Journal* (Shi, 1985, p. 181). Under Bok’s editorial direction, the magazine adopted his personal philosophy of simple living and readers were advised to buy modest fashions and furnishings and live in small, manageable homes (Scanlon, 1995). He introduced a department dedicated to simple living titled “How much can be done with little,” which contained articles such as “How we can lead a simple life, by an American mother,” “How we live on \$1,000 a year or less,” “How to live cheaply,” “A lesson in plain sewing,” and “A Spartan mother” (Shi, 1985, p. 185). He also employed a cooking expert who emphasized inexpensive meals, even as the *Journal* began to feature more articles promoting consumption in the late 1910s (Zuckerman, 1998). Yet, Bok is perhaps best known for his introduction of inexpensive, progressive house plans to the *Journal*. From 1896 to 1919, he published house plans in the magazine aimed at modernizing the home (Dethier, 1993). Readers could purchase detailed plans of the homes pictured in the

magazine for \$5, while architects at that time typically charged between \$50 and \$100 a set, and early plans called for houses that could be built for a modest \$1,500 to \$5,000<sup>5</sup> (Dethier, 1993).

In addition to promoting his philosophy of simple living and efficient, modern houses, Bok also used the *Journal* to advocate his position that a woman's place was in the home: "My idea," he said, "is to keep women in the home, especially as there are enough writers who are trying to take her out of it" (Shi, 1985, p. 183). Scanlon cited several articles from the 1910s that exemplified the magazine's efforts to instruct readers on various ways to save money. For example, "The housewife who wants to economize" informed readers of thirty-eight ways to prepare a ham, so that a whole ham could be purchased and made into several meals, "The old back-yard fence" contained advice about fence repair, and "What other women have found out about economy" paid readers one dollar to share their best money-saving household tips (Scanlon, 1995, p. 21-22). By providing readers with cost-saving tips and opportunities to earn money as contributors to the magazine, the *Journal* under Bok's editorial direction also helped to ensure women would not seek employment outside of the home out of necessity.

The analogy of housework to business persisted in the *Journal* throughout the early twentieth century. In a 1913 *Journal* article, "How housewives make money," the president of the Housewives' League chides women for throwing away meat trimmings and not purchasing food that is in season, writing: "if one-half the men conducted their

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<sup>5</sup> Just four years later, the focus of the series shifted from appealing to a frugal middle class of modest means to a newly burgeoning affluent middle class. In 1900 Bok debuted a new series, "Model suburban houses which can be built at moderate cost" (Dethier, 1993). Despite its name, the series, which ran from 1900 to 1902 and featured designs by leading architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Bruce Price, presented plans that were beyond the means of most middle-class families— homes costing between \$5,000 and \$7,500, compared to the average home cost of \$2,000 to \$6,000 (Dethier, 1993). That these plans also included servants' quarters, at a time when only three in ten families employed live-in domestic help (Dethier, 1993), is telling of to whom they were meant to appeal.

commercial business as carelessly as the majority of women conduct their business of housekeeping, the country's bankruptcy courts would be running day and night" (Scanlon, 1995, p. 61)—an ironic declaration considering the country would be in the throes of the Great Depression less than two decades later.

Several scholars (Hapke, 1995; Zuckerman, 1998; Welky, 2008) note that few messages of frugality could be found within the pages of the *Journal* during the 1930s. Possible reasons for the decrease in frugality-orientated content in the magazine during this time, and the resulting increased prevalence of consumption-orientated content, will be discussed in the following section (consumption).

In the 1940s, women's magazines again touted the virtues of frugality and portrayed women as vital contributors to the war effort through their support of federal rationing and reduction of household expenses to purchase war bonds; however, it is important to note that women's magazines were ambivalent toward new roles for women in the workplace and often cited the negative consequences of such roles, particularly on children (Walker, 2000). Service journalism articles increased in women's magazines during the war years as shortages and rationing became commonplace. Articles and advertisements provided women with advice about product rationing and shopping on a budget (Walker, 2000). Recipes in the *Ladies' Home Journal* reflected food rationing and the limited incomes of its primarily middle-class readership, suggesting casseroles that made from inexpensive foods such as hot dogs, soybeans, and macaroni (Walker, 2000). The *Journal's* fashion pages during World War II offered practical tips on clothing alterations and encouraged readers to make their own clothing (Kelly, 1979). In 1940, the *Journal* debuted the long-running series "How America lives" in which "typical"

families—and their household budgets—were profiled each month with the goal of introducing Americans to their neighbors (Walker, 2000). The series promised to feature families of varying income levels, “from the \$1,000-a-year farmer to the \$25,000-a-year city big shot,” and early installments of “How America lives” served as a transition from the poverty of the Depression to the patriotism of the war years (Walker, 2000, p.76). In addition to learning a family’s income and the husband’s (or on rare occasions, the wife’s) occupation, the series focused on family budgets and spending habits, as well as a family’s material possessions, for example the number of bedrooms in the home and whether the bathroom towels matched (Walker, 2000). Though the socioeconomic status of post-Depression-era families was a central theme of “How America lives,” the series also championed democratic, middle-class values, and early articles often pointed out the thriftiness of American families—a value acquired during the previous decade (Walker, 2000).

### **Consumption**

Christine Frederick defined consumption as “the greatest idea that America has to give the world [and] the idea that workmen and the masses be looked upon not simply as workers or producers, but as *consumers*” (p. 5). Scholars of women’s magazines have differed greatly in their definitions of consumption. In a study of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, gender, and consumer culture in the early twentieth century, Scanlon (1995) argued that consumer culture promoted contentment through consumption and linked consumption to the “bolstering [of] capitalism” and the “nurturing [of] patriarchy” through the “tying [of] middle-class women’s inarticulate longings to consumption, the

*Journal*,... advertising [agencies], and the larger consumerism culture of the early twentieth century” (p. 230). Additionally, Scanlon (1995) introduced Fredric Jameson’s concept of “compensatory exchange,” in which passivity is exchanged for gratification in terms of consumption, and suggested that women made purchases based on an association of consumption with upward social mobility, or simply because consumption promised happiness. Zuckerman (1998) suggested the rise in popularity of service departments in the early twentieth century served not only to reflect the interests of middle-class readers, who were likely to be homemakers, but also to introduce women to their “new job” as consumers. Marcellus (2004), on the other hand, linked consumption to patriotism, while Ballaster et al. (1991) contended that messages of consumption in women’s magazines revolve around a “desired lifestyle” that can be obtained through consumer purchases. Sociologists agree that “pleasure and play” became associated with consumption during the rise of mass production and the “new capitalism” of the 1920s (Bell, 1972). The association of consumption with patriotism and democratic values increased in the 1940s as America entered World War II. Walker (2000) elaborated on the connection between consumerism and the maintenance of American middle-class values in the 1940s:

As the nuclear family and the material possessions of middle-class life became two of the central hallmarks of domestic culture, the magazines in both editorial content and advertising—reflected the fact that women were to be rewarded for preserving them. (Walker, p. 55)

Moreover, Walker (2000) asserted that women's magazines played an integral role in introducing female consumers to new products for the home in the late 1940s, a period in which consumption of products for the home sharply increased.

As early as 1924 fewer articles in the *Journal* addressed women's concerns about economizing (Scanlon, 1995). Additionally, by 1924 the magazine contained fewer advice and instructional columns than it did in the decade prior, though it grew by forty pages (Scanlon, 1995). In 1929, Christine Frederick declared it "unheard of and preposterous" for American women to wear the same evening gown for five or ten years as British women did, and claimed for the fictional Consumer-Jones, "a new car every year, sometimes two, is a foregone conclusion (Frederick, 1929, p. 253). Frederick's bold assertions about the spending habits of Consumer-Jones and her breezy contempt for old-fashioned thriftiness provide further indications that frugality was going out of style by the late 1920s.

Surprisingly, however, the trend toward a decrease in frugality-oriented messages continued throughout the economic despair of the 1930s. In fact, months at a time might have gone by without a reference to financial hardships in women's magazines (Hapke, 1995). Or, as author of the 1934 satirical novel *The Unpossessed*, Tess Slesinger, put it: "the problems of national politics and economics [did] not exist" in the world of the *Ladies' Home Journal* (Hapke, 1995, p. 11). Moreover, on the rare occasion women's magazines did allude to the Depression, mostly by way of cost-saving recipes, the "periodicals collaborated in the trivialization of women's economic difficulties" (Hapke, 1995, p. 12). Zuckerman (1998) conceded editors of women's magazines in the 1930s faced a difficult dilemma of how to write about Americans' economic struggles; instead



of articles offering practical advice for surviving the Depression, women's magazines "sounded themes of optimism and faith in the current system, touched on some specific problems, and stressed the need for all to pull together, work a little harder, and even spend a bit more" (p. 188). Loring Schuler, editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal* in the early 1930s, advocated what he called "pocketbook patriotism," urging women to spend their way out of the country's depression (Zuckerman, 1998). In 1932, Schuler stated:

The *Journal* reader who maintains at this time for herself and her family the highest standard of living that her income can afford, is the woman America needs to help end this depression. She has always courageously played her part. (Zuckerman, 1998, p. 188)

Additionally, Schuler outlined "Seven Points for Prosperity," a plan he, along with leading economists, devised to encourage women to purchase consumer goods and thereby stimulate the flagging economy (Zuckerman, 1998). Under Schuler's direction, the magazine included articles advising women to dress themselves and their husbands well, hinting women were in danger of losing their husbands and husbands were in danger of losing their jobs if they did not maintain the appearance of relative wealth (Zuckerman, 1998). Like Hapke, Zuckerman (1998) found women's magazines avoided direct references the Depression, instead opting to offer readers advice related to women's issues, such as children, the home, schools, and consumerism. In a study of print culture during the Great Depression, Welky (2008) reached a similar conclusion:

The early Depression-era *Journal* was a monthly tribute to marriage, motherhood, and housewifery in white, middle- and upper-class homes. Such themes were common across the cultural landscape; many radio soap

operas, popular novels, and pulp magazines dealt with similar material. Still, the *Journal* maintained a narrower perspective than other sources, holding firm to its definition of womanhood and rejecting alternative models that could be found in other examples from contemporary culture. (p. 117)

Welky (2008) also pointed out Schuler's political conservatism and editorial support for President Hoover in the *Journal*, citing Schuler's statement to readers in December 1930 that the Depression was affecting fewer families "than is commonly supposed" and his affirmation in May 1932 that "the worst [is] undoubtedly over" and "no reason why business should not start upward now" (p. 122).

By the mid-1930s, when the *Journal* could no longer pretend its readers were not suffering the effects of the Depression, the magazine suggested ways for women to economize while staying within the confines of traditional social and familial roles, such as substituting margarine for butter and replacing eggs with baking powder in recipes (Welky, 2008). Still, the prevailing tone in the *Journal* during the Depression was that the crisis was "as much psychological as economic," according to Welky (2008). Moreover, the magazine continued to link consumerism with happiness while implying too much thriftiness would bring about unhappiness, including marital strife and, ultimately, less income (Welky 2008). A March 1932 *Journal* article proclaimed: "The wife who dresses badly is inviting trouble in many directions and may find herself dressing for divorce court. If she induces her husband to dress badly in order to save, she is insuring that his income will remain at a low figure" (as cited in Welky, 2008, p. 123).

Although women encountered more advertisements and fewer cost-cutting hints in women's magazines in the thirties, in addition to more consumption-oriented messages in other media, such as radio, they were expected to spare their families from the worst consequences of the Depression through self-sacrifice and creativity—a view advocated by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt<sup>6</sup> in her 1933 book *It's up to the Women* (Orleck, 1993, p. 147). “Sometimes I think the most troubled people I know are [those] who have grown up in idle luxury,” wrote Roosevelt (1933), “now they have to learn to [deny] themselves cheerfully and without a feeling of martyrdom” (p. 1). In an analysis of the proliferation of messages of consumption in radio soap operas of the 1930s, Lavin (1995) suggested two theories that may explain the rapid increase in messages of mass consumption in the thirties despite the pervasive poverty associated with the Great Depression. First, Lavin (1995) suggested housewives' roles as purchasers became even more important in the 1930s and, as women became more prudent with their money, competition for consumers among advertisers increased. Second, Lavin (1995) pointed out that it was during the 1930s that the phrases the “American Way of Life” and the “American Dream,” both of which were associated with “material as well as social and political well being,” were popularized (p. 75). The role of the media in creating a “national consumer culture” has been cited often by historians as an explanation for the seemingly contradictory rise in consumerism in spite of prolonged economic hardship in the 1930s (Lavin, 1995, p. 75). Radio soap operas, like women's magazines, offered an audience “struggling to make ends meet in difficult times both a glimpse of the middle-class lifestyle and the hope that they had access to it” (Lavin, 1995, p. 87). Additionally, Lavin (1995) argued that the

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<sup>6</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt was a regular contributor to the *Journal*, beginning in 1937 with the biographical installments, *This Is My Story* (Zuckerman, 1998). Roosevelt would continue to contribute periodically to the magazine until her death in 1962 (<http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/abouteleanor/erarticles.cfm>).

association of women with consumption throughout the twentieth century could be found in sources related to women's daily lives, particularly in "so-called middle-brow and low-brow culture," (p. 88) a category in which women's magazines could be included. Still another theory, posited by Tobey in *Technology as Freedom*, suggests consumerism increased even at the height of the Depression mostly through a "social revolution in the household" brought about by President Roosevelt's New Deal, which provided more homes with electricity, and, in turn, allowed manufactures to market more home appliances (Nutting, 2003, p.449).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study applies the mass communication theories of social constructionism and cultural Marxism to further examine the relation between messages of consumption and messages of frugality in the *Ladies' Home Journal* during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, how these messages reflected women's social, political, and economic roles in society, and the forces that contributed to these contradictory messages. The theory of social constructionism states that the media act "as a reproducer of a selective and biased view of reality" (McQuail, 2005, p.101). Or, in the words of Carey (1989): "communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (p. 23). Thus, the reality that is postured in mass media is not what is "real," but what is constructed by society. When applied to women's magazines, the theory of social constructionism suggests that the content of the magazines is a manifestation of society's views of acceptable roles for women. While produced by writers, the content of women's magazines is a reflection in part of what editors believe to be popular with readers.

Therefore, the content of women's magazines is often created and selected based on what is thought to resonate best with a magazines' ideal reader demographic; the result is often a regurgitation of established social roles for women.

As Shevelow (1989) argued, "women's magazines construct and promote a collective social 'reality,' the 'world of women'" (p. 196). Shevelow also suggested that women's magazines did not merely reflect women's roles, but rather consciously created those roles:

Readers were invited to turn to periodicals to see themselves, to find a language through which they could understand what was happening inside of them. But the 'mirror' of the periodicals was not really a reflective surface; seeming to 'reflect,' it in fact constructed. In the guise of mirror images, the periodicals offered their readers normative representation of subjectivity. (p. 193)

Walker (2000) used social constructionism theory to argue that the changes in content of women's magazines after the Great Depression and World War II were not, in fact, a separate reality, "but rather a part of an American culture attempting to re-create itself," (p.17) and that "magazines that were read by millions of women allow us to understand what society expected of them, and, to a more limited degree, what women hoped for from life in American culture" (p. 19). In a study of representations of employed women during the interwar years in popular magazines, including the *Ladies' Home Journal*, Marcellus (2004) used the theory of social constructionism to explain why a historical study of mass media can further an understanding of the structure and nature of society within a particular place and time. Through the social construction of reality, people learn their roles in society; thus, identities are born of a socially-constructed reality perpetuated

by mass media. However, it is important to note that social constructionism is often used to show that the media's reproduction of society is selective and biased, a theory known as gate keeping. Gate-keeping theory suggests that those who control the media (e.g., editors and publishers) ultimately determine its content and set its agenda. Tuchman (1972) supported the application of social constructionism, or reflection hypothesis, to women's magazines, but took it a step further by introducing the theory of social annihilation, which states that mass media depict women symbolically and then either condemn or trivialize those symbolic representations. It is important to note, however, that the theory of social constructionism does not imply readers are "controlled" by the content of the magazines they consume; rather, it implies that the content of magazines, which is selectively produced, shaped, and propagated by magazine editors and writers, contributes to the spread of dominant messages by the media, which, in turn, permeate popular culture.

While the theory of social constructionism may explain why the editorial content of the *Ladies' Home Journal* encouraged frugality, self-reliance, and resourcefulness, particularly during times of economic crisis or war, Marxism, taken from a mass media point of view, may explain why—often simultaneously—the magazine's editorial content, and, of course, advertisements, promoted consumer culture and consumption both during periods of economic stability and periods of economic turmoil. Traditional Marxist theory suggests that economic ownership and the dissemination of messages that reinforce societal values and classes are inextricably linked (McQuail, 2005). Moreover, Marxist theory within the context of mass media states that media promote and spread the ideology of the established order (McQuail, 2005). As stated above, although writers

produced the content of women's magazines, editors shaped the final product. As the objective of magazine publishers is to sell magazines, editors in turn must put forth content they believe will be popular with readers while still encouraging readers to purchase the products advertised within the pages of magazines.

Marxist theory is rather broad, so for the purpose of this study it is helpful to focus on a specific theory derived from Marxism, cultural Marxism. Cultural Marxism, as defined by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), states that culture controls consumers through entertainment, and that culture and the advertising industry are inseparable, so that consumers become caught up in a cycle of wants based on promises of contentment and efficiency that go unfulfilled. As it is not possible to gauge to what degree, if at all, readers of women's magazines internalized the ideal roles for women promoted by the magazines, Horkheimer and Adorno's assertion that culture controls the actions of those who consume it cannot be supported by this study. However, Walker (2000) agreed that social-class consciousness was apparent in women's magazines' focus on promoting acceptable behavior, attire, and décor, and suggested that "this emphasis both increased and solidified around middle-class standards as the production of widely distributed household products coincided with the maturation of the advertising industry" (p. 31). Additionally, scholars have applied basic principles of Marxist theory to women's magazines in several ways. For example, it has been suggested that the medium glamorized household appliances and other modern conveniences not to free women from domestic drudgery, but to reinforce capitalist and patriarchal ideologies (Fox, 1990). The majority of advice the *Journal* bestowed on its readers in the 1920s and 1930s was tied to household purchasing decisions, which served to reinforce women's domestic

roles by praising, defending, and professionalizing housework (Scanlon, 1995). Moreover, when it was estimated in the 1920s that women were responsible for 80 percent of household purchases, the advertising industry began to capitalize on these consumers, often reaching them through the medium of women's magazines (Scanlon, 1991). Walker (2000) summed up the application of this aspect of Marxist theory to women's magazines as:

Magazines...like other aspects of popular culture, could survive only by appealing to those who supported them financially, and in the process these media endorsed ideologies, created fantasies, and engaged in dialogue with a host of other forces in the culture (p.19).

It has been suggested, too, that the gatekeepers of women's magazines, editors and publishers, filled the medium with propaganda, particularly in the form of gender-role stereotypes, that was then spread from the readers to their families and communities "like bees brewing poisonous honey," reinforcing the agendas of the powerful (Woodward, 1960, p.183). Likewise, advertisers constructed a "social tableaux" that created and reflected a view of society that was beneficial to the advertising industry (Marcellus, 2004). Therefore, when applied to scholarly research of women's magazines, the theories of social constructionism and cultural Marxism help to illuminate some of the possible explanations behind the mixed messages about spending and saving put forth in the medium.

When taken together, these two theories make it easier to understand why women's magazines may advocate thriftiness and self-reliance on one page while attempting to sell a luxury kitchen appliance on the next. Social constructionism theory



explains, for example, not only why women's magazines offered cost-cutting advice during the war, but it also explains why this advice was often steeped in contradictions and gender-role stereotypes: ambivalence toward women in the workplace, for example. Conversely, Marxist theories can explain why, even during times of economic crisis, women's magazines continued to appeal to readers' material and social aspirations while, again, reinforcing women's roles in society as consumers. It is important to note that although Zuckerman (1998) suggested editorial and advertising departments of women's magazines often clashed and editors of women's magazines still exercised a "fair amount of authority" in the time of Curtis and Bok, this study will assume that the intentions of the editorial staff at the *Ladies' Home Journal* cannot be known, and that as producers of the medium, the editors propagated a dominant ideology to readers. Moreover, this study does not presume to state how readers of the magazine reacted to the contradictory messages contained in the *Journal*; however, it is possible to *imagine* how the audience might have reacted. For instance, while readers yearned for the simple life Bok advocated, as one reader pointed out, living simply and inexpensively was often contradictory to the upwardly mobile desires of middle-class women. "We women want simpler lives," she wrote, "There's no doubt about that. But we are dismayed by the difficulties confronting the woman who essays to 'come out and be separate'" (Shi, 1985, p. 188). The reader argued it was difficult to find "simple" clothes at reasonable prices and expressed fears of her family being "dropped from [social] visiting lists" if they were not properly outfitted (Shi, 1985, p.188). She concluded by articulating a paradox that would become all too familiar in women's magazines:

Thousands of women see clearly the force of the needs you point out, and see them with an intensity born of defeated hopes and thwarted lives. But they find themselves helpless against the ever-increasing tide of complex and artificial standards of living. Woman knows and feels it a difficult task to hold her way in the swift currents of prevailing customs. But they are forced upon her. (Shi, 1985, p 188)

Similarly, many incensed readers wrote the *Journal* in response to Schuler's call for women to spend their way out of the Depression, stating that one must first have money to spend it and that many readers did not have any money to spare (Zuckerman, 1998). Given these examples of readers engaging in dialogue with the magazine's editors over contradictory and impractical advice, one may assume that some readers of the *Journal* were similarly outspoken against other instances of mixed—or simply out-of-touch—messages regarding saving and spending, though this study will not speculate on readers' reactions to the dominant ideology handed down from the magazine's editors, as it is beyond the scope of the current research.

A great deal of scholarly literature exists regarding women's magazines and their influence on women's roles in society, as well as how the concepts of frugality and consumption are illustrated in women's magazines. However, this study is unique in its attempt to examine the intersection of messages of frugality and messages of consumption across disparate social, political, economic climates to reveal the ideal roles for women presented in women's magazines and what those roles may have said about the function of women in society at those times.

## Research Questions

This study seeks to answer two questions:

**R1:** What is the relation, if any, between the type (frugality or consumption) and frequency of message and the economic climate of the decade in which the messages appear (i.e., prosperity, depression, and war/recovery)?

**R2:** What do these messages say about women's roles in society (e.g., what was expected of them and what could they have expected in return?)

**H1:** Based on the preliminary research, there will be fewer instances of frugality-oriented messages and greater instances of consumption-oriented messages during the economic depression of the 1930s.

**H2:** Messages of frugality will reflect the role of women as the resourceful, self-sacrificing keeper of the household budget. Messages of consumption will reflect the role of women as the family's chief purchaser and economic driver during periods of economic depression. Moreover, messages of consumption will be tied to the role of women as content, attractive, nurturing, and attentive wives and mothers.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### *Method*

This chapter will explain why the medium of the women's magazine, and the *Ladies' Home Journal* in particular, was selected for this study. This chapter will also explain why the time period of 1920 to 1949 was selected. Lastly, this chapter will outline the methodology used to obtain the relevant data.

The medium of the women's magazine was selected because it is a vehicle through which editorial content, including visual imagery and fictional stories, and advertisements aimed specifically at women are disseminated en masse. Additionally, magazines are often considered to be the first truly mass medium in America (Kitch, 2001; Ohmann, 1996). Moreover, Damon-Moore (1994) argued that women's magazines were "conveyors of both gender messages and commercial messages, serving a new and central function in American popular culture" (p. 3).

The *Ladies' Home Journal* is one of the oldest and historically most widely-read women's magazines; not only was it the first women's magazine to reach one million subscribers in 1904 (Marcellus, 2004), the *Journal* achieved the largest circulation in the world by 1940 (Walker, 2000). It was also the leader of the "Seven Sisters," a group of women's magazines that included *Good Housekeeping*, *McCalls*, *Family Circle*, *Woman's Day*, *Redbook*, and *Better Homes and Gardens* (Zuckerman, 1998), again underscoring the magazine's reach, influence, and status. Thus, the *Ladies' Home Journal* provides a good example of a popular women's magazine for these time periods. Moreover, the *Journal* perfected the format and economic formula for modern magazines. According to Ohmann (1996), "if one magazine should get more credit than

another for discovering the twentieth century, it is the *Ladies' Home Journal*" (p.28). It is important to note that the *Journal* was originally directed toward married, middle-class women with children (Damon-Moore, 1994). Additionally, this target audience was also White and native born (Scanlon, 1995), thus the *Journal's* content was generally not inclusive of women of other races or nationalities. When Bok took over the editorship in the late nineteenth century he acknowledged that the magazine had two intended audiences: "the rich and the...great majority," or the middle class (Damon-Moore, 1994, p. 73). Bok also courted a younger audience, adding a column for women ages sixteen to twenty-five (Damon-Moore, 1994). However, while Bok may have desired a "rich" audience, readers of the *Journal* were decidedly middle class. A 1927 survey of women's magazines found, in general, only seventeen percent of their circulation had an annual family income of \$5,000 or more, compared to between forty-two and fifty-one percent for readers of "class" magazines like *Vogue* (Zuckerman, 1998). By the 1940s the *Journal* was still directed primarily at middle-class women (Walker, 2000). Marcellus (2004) chose the *Journal* as the representative women's magazine in a study of the portrayal of employed women in popular magazines in the interwar years because it is considered the "prototype for modern women's magazines" and because the *Journal's* search for a permanent editor during the interwar years also showed the magazine's struggle to define itself and its values in a rapidly changing world (p.157). Kelly (1979) also selected the *Journal* for a study of the representation of women's roles in women's magazines in the 1940s and 1950s, calling the magazine the "obvious choice" and citing historian Frank Luther Mott's determination of the *Journal* as the "undisputed leader" of women's magazines

(p. 9).

The 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s represent broad social, political, and economic changes in the United States. The 1920s were characterized by prosperity and innovation, as well as the culmination of the women's suffrage movement with the passage of the nineteenth amendment granting women the right to vote in 1920; however, as Rutherford (2003) noted, momentum for the "radical feminism that had sought to change the fundamental role of women" waned in the twenties (p. 109). In stark contrast to the 1920s, the 1930s were defined by the Great Depression and resulting poverty and unemployment. The 1940s were marked by America's entrance into World War II and women's entrance into the workforce to fill jobs vacated by men fighting overseas, while the postwar period of the late 1940s gave way to a time of economic recovery and optimism. Thus, these three decades represent dramatic fluctuations in America's culture and economy, as well as in stereotypical gender roles for women. According to Kelly (1979), the changing social, political, and economic landscape of America in the first half of the twentieth century is evident in the pages of women's magazines:

If one were to chart [the progress of women's magazines] there would be not a continuous ascent, but a series of peaks and valleys. The early 1900s saw the line moving upward, culminating in the right to vote. With the Depression of the 1930s, the line turned back down, as women were blamed for taking men's jobs and legislation was passed limiting women's employment. In the mid-1940s the movement was again upward, as women entered the labor force in unprecedented numbers during World War II. (p. 1)

This study employed a mixed methods approach to analyzing the contents of the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Mixed methods procedures incorporate both quantitative and qualitative research methods with the purpose of both exploring and explaining the study's findings. Mixed methods research, a relatively new approach in the social sciences, may be known as “integrating, synthesis, quantitative and qualitative methods, multimethod, and multimethodology” (Creswell, 2003, p. 210). The study used content analysis as a means of quantitatively collecting data about messages of frugality and messages of consumption, while discourse analysis was used to qualitatively describe the nature of those messages. The qualitative analysis applied mass communication theories of social constructionism and cultural Marxism to examine how messages of consumption and frugality in the *Ladies' Home Journal* may have reflected or rejected stereotypical gender roles, as well as the role of the advertising industry in disseminating these messages and, thereby, reinforcing gender role stereotypes. Priority was given to the quantitative data, while discourse analysis was used to extrapolate upon particularly salient examples of messages about frugality and consumption and provide a theoretical basis for the analysis.

### **Content Analysis**

Content analysis is a common method in journalism and mass communication scholarship, particularly in the study of magazines (Riffe, 2007). Moreover, scholars with similar research interests have employed content analysis as a primary methodology. For example, in a study of advertisements for household goods in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, Fox (1990) used content analysis “with the aim of understanding the ideological

campaign that characterized the years in which households were mechanized and women's domestic labor transformed" (p. 25). Fox (1990) coded 962 ads for 15 types of appeals to the housewife (e.g., end to drudgery, increased convenience, etc.) to show which appeals were most common and trends among appeals over time.

### **Sampling Procedure**

A content analysis was performed for two issues of the *Journal* for each year between 1920 and 1949. The two issues to be examined for each year were selected by randomly choosing two numbers between one and twelve from a hat, where each number represented its respective month (e.g., 1 = Jan., 2 = Feb., etc). The numbers three and six were selected, so the March and June issues of each year were examined. A total of 60 issues were analyzed. Each issue was scanned from cover to cover for service journalism articles containing messages that could be categorized as either "frugality" or "consumption." Advertisements, short fiction, photographs, and illustrations, while certainly telling of a culture of consumption and stereotypical gender roles, were excluded from this study as the study is most concerned with how the *Journal* constructed reality through service journalism pieces. Service journalism articles were defined as content offering advice to readers on a variety of domestic topics, including child rearing, household maintenance, domestic crafts, food preparation and hostessing, budgeting (and the purchase of household and personal items), home decorating, fashion, and beauty, among others.

A pretest was performed by the study's author prior to beginning the actual coding of the study to ensure that the method for selecting the issues of the *Journal* and



the information recorded on the coding sheets were sufficient to continue with this method. The pretest consisted of a review of one issue of the magazine by the study's author. The issue was selected by randomly choosing a number between one and twelve to obtain the month to be studied, two through four to determine the decade, and one through nine to determine the year. Minor adjustments to the coding sheet were made based on the author's experiences with the pretest.

### **Coding Procedure**

Each issue was examined for service journalism articles containing either messages of frugality or messages of consumption. A tick mark was made in the appropriate category for each article identified as either "frugality" or "consumption." The total number of messages for each category was then calculated on a coding sheet (see Appendix 1). A "message" was defined as the prevailing tone of the unit of measure. In this study, the unit of measure was a single service journalism article. Frugality-oriented messages were defined as articles that mention ways to save money or "make the most" of one's resources. Consumption-oriented messages were defined as articles that promote the purchase of consumer goods, such as furniture, decorations, appliances, clothing, shoes, accessories, and jewelry. Articles that promote expensive houses or vacations were also counted as consumption-oriented messages. However, fashion spreads containing minimal, captioned text that merely describe the item pictured (i.e., "red polka dot dress") and did not contain language urging the reader to purchase the item were not coded. For example, an article touting the benefits of canning vegetables from one's own garden in order to cut down on a family's food expenses would have

been coded “frugality,” while an article reporting on the latest fashions from Paris would have been coded “consumption.” Content analysis methodology requires categories to be mutually exclusive, thus only one message was recorded for each unit of measure (Stemler, 2001). If messages about frugality *and* consumption were present within the same article, the dominant message was recorded.

### **Inter-Coder Reliability**

Inter-coder reliability was calculated in order to establish the reliability of the coding system. To establish inter-coder reliability, an individual in addition to the study’s author independently examined and coded ten percent of the issues (six issues). To determine which years the second coder would examine, he randomly selected the number three or six, then a number between two and four, and, finally, a number between one and nine. The process was repeated until a total of six issues were selected. The study’s author informed the second coder of the coding procedure and instructed him as to how to record data on the coding sheet prior to the second coder commencing with the coding process.

The second coder’s findings were compared to the author’s findings (see Appendix 3: Comparison of Findings) to determine the reliability of the content analysis. Inter-coder reliability was determined using Pearson’s correlation coefficient (Pearson’s  $r$ ), a common measurement of correlation in communication research (Hayes, 2005). Pearson’s  $r$  is a measure of linear association only (Hayes, 2005), where  $r$  is the correlation between the author’s findings and the second coder’s findings. The value of Pearson’s  $r$  may range from -1 to 1, and measures the direction and strength of the

relation between two variables, where the sign indicates the direction of the correlation (positive or negative) and the closer the  $r$  value is to the absolute value of 1 indicates the strength of the correlation (Hayes, 2005). Pearson's  $r$  was calculated using the data analysis software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The two data sets were determined to have a correlation of  $r = 0.718$ , which is an acceptable level of reliability (DeVellis, 1991).

### **Data Analysis**

SPSS was also used to organize and analyze data collected from the content analysis.

### **Discourse Analysis**

In addition to the primary method of content analysis, this study used qualitative analysis to examine the nature of messages of frugality and messages of consumption in the *Journal*. Qualitative analysis was selected as an additional research methodology because it allows the researcher to look for “meaningful patterns of human behavior” (Berger, 2000, p. 133). Moreover, qualitative research is interpretive, allowing the researcher to look for themes and draw theoretical conclusions from those themes. Additionally, qualitative research takes a holistic, big-picture view and gives the researcher the opportunity to personally reflect upon the findings (Creswell, 2003). In a study of the representation of employed women in the 1920s through the 1940s in the *Ladies' Home Journal* and other magazines, Marcellus (2004) employed a qualitative approach to analyzing more than one thousand magazine issues, describing a figurative “long preliminary soak” of the magazines, which eventually revealed themes to which

theory could be applied (p. 163). Marcellus (2004) explained qualitative analysis was best suited for the study because it allowed the researcher to interpret the findings from a feminist perspective while incorporating the researcher's personal experiences and beliefs.

This study used critical discourse analysis to examine particularly salient examples of messages of frugality and messages of consumption to discuss in detail their meanings as well as their "real-world context" (Fairclough, 1989). Discourse analysis examines patterns of language in texts and the social and cultural contexts in which the texts exist (Paltridge, 2006). As the scope of this study would not allow for a textual analysis of every article examined in the content analysis portion of the study, only passages of text that best illustrate messages of frugality, messages of consumption, and the interaction between these competing messages, as well as the discourses employed to convey and reinforce these messages, were included in the analysis. The study's author recorded passages of text exhibiting recurring discourses until thematic patterns were revealed. The study's additional coder was not asked to record qualitative data.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Findings and Results*

This chapter will examine the quantitative findings of the content analysis and the qualitative findings of the discourse analysis.

#### **Summary of Hypotheses**

The findings address Hypotheses 1 and 2, derived from the research questions. Hypothesis 1 stated there would be fewer instances of frugality-oriented messages and greater instances of consumption-oriented messages during the economic depression of the 1930s. Hypothesis 2 stated that messages of frugality would reflect the role of women as the resourceful, self-sacrificing keeper of the household budget, and messages of consumption would reflect the role of women as the family's chief purchaser and economic driver during periods of economic depression. Hypothesis 2 also stated that messages of consumption would be tied to the role of women as content, attractive, nurturing, and attentive wives and mothers.

#### **Quantitative Findings**

A content analysis of 60 issues of the *Journal* from 1920 to 1949 found a total of 175 (41.6 percent) frugality-oriented messages and 251 (58.4 percent) consumption-oriented messages. When separated by decade, 81 (45.29 percent) frugality-oriented messages and 97 (54.71 percent) consumption-oriented messages were found in the 1920 through 1929 issues; 40 (34.49 percent) frugality-oriented messages and 86 (65.51 percent) consumption-oriented messages were found in the 1930 through 1939 issues;

and 54 (45.02 percent) frugality-oriented messages and 68 (54.98 percent) consumption-oriented messages were found in the 1940 through 1949 issues (see Appendix 2 for raw data and Table 4-1 for the means, standard deviations, and percentages for each decade).

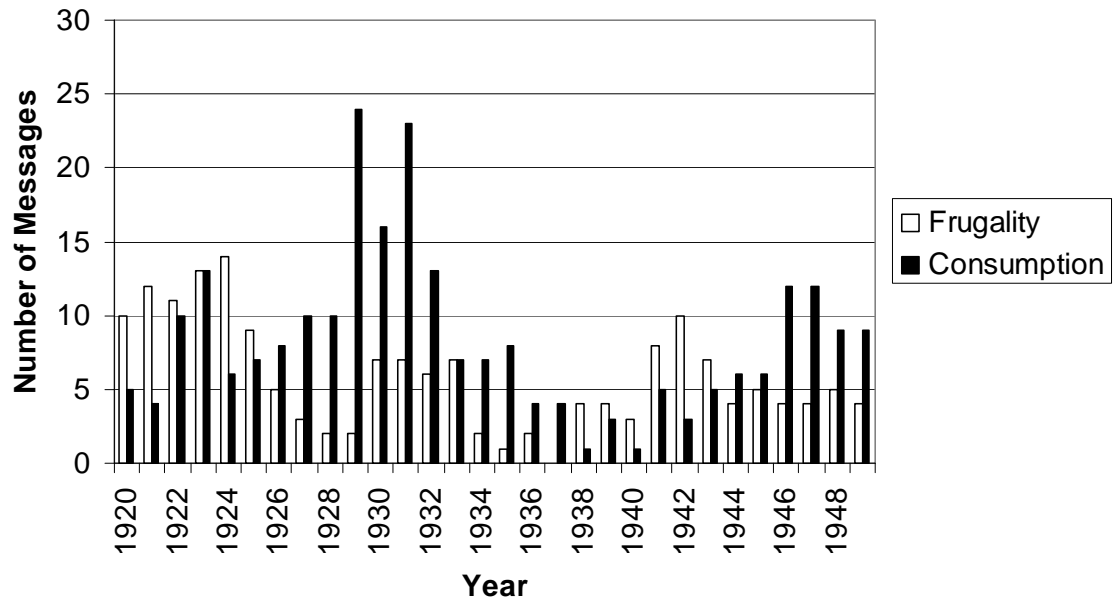
**Table 4-1 Mean number of frugality and consumption ratings by decade**

Decade		Frugality	Consumption	%	
				% Frugal	Consumption
20	Mean	4.05	4.85	.45	.55
	Std. Deviation	2.63	2.98	.25	.25
30	Mean	2.00	4.30	.34	.66
	Std. Deviation	1.62	3.54	.26	.26
40	Mean	2.70	3.40	.46	.54
	Std. Deviation	1.83	2.04	.28	.28
Total	Mean	2.92	4.18	.42	.58
	Std. Deviation	2.21	2.93	.26	.26

An examination of the frequency of each type of message for each year of the study (Figure 4-1) shows a somewhat inversely proportional pattern for each message. Figure 4-1 also reveals a spike in the number of consumption-oriented messages in the years 1929, 1930, and 1931. As seen in Figure 4-2 and Figure 4-3, the study found a sharp decrease in both the proportion of frugality-oriented messages to consumption-oriented messages and the percentage of frugality messages between the years 1920 to 1924 and 1925 to 1930. Subsequent decreases in the percentage of messages of frugality, though not as great, may be observed in the periods of 1935 to 1939 and 1945 to 1949 (Figure 4-3). As seen in Figure 4-4, messages of consumption increased steadily from 1920 to 1934, at which point a sharp decrease in the number of consumption-oriented messages was observed. The number of messages of consumption remains flat from 1934 to 1944, and a sharp increase is observable for the period of 1944 to 1949.

To examine the relation between the year of publication and the frequency of messages of frugality and messages of consumption, the year of publication was regressed on the total number of messages of frugality and the total number of messages of consumption in two separate hierarchical linear regression models. An analysis of the data shows a significant relation between the year of publication and messages of frugality ( $b = -0.10$ ,  $t(58) = 3.25$ ,  $p = .002$ ). This suggests that for each year of publication, the total number of messages of frugality decreased by 0.10 messages per year. However, there was not a significant relation between the year of publication and total number of messages of consumption ( $t(58) = 1.38$ ,  $p = .172$ ). This suggests that although the number of messages of frugality decreased over time, the number of messages of consumption remained relatively stable over time.

**Figure 4-1 Number of Frugality and Consumption Messages by Year**

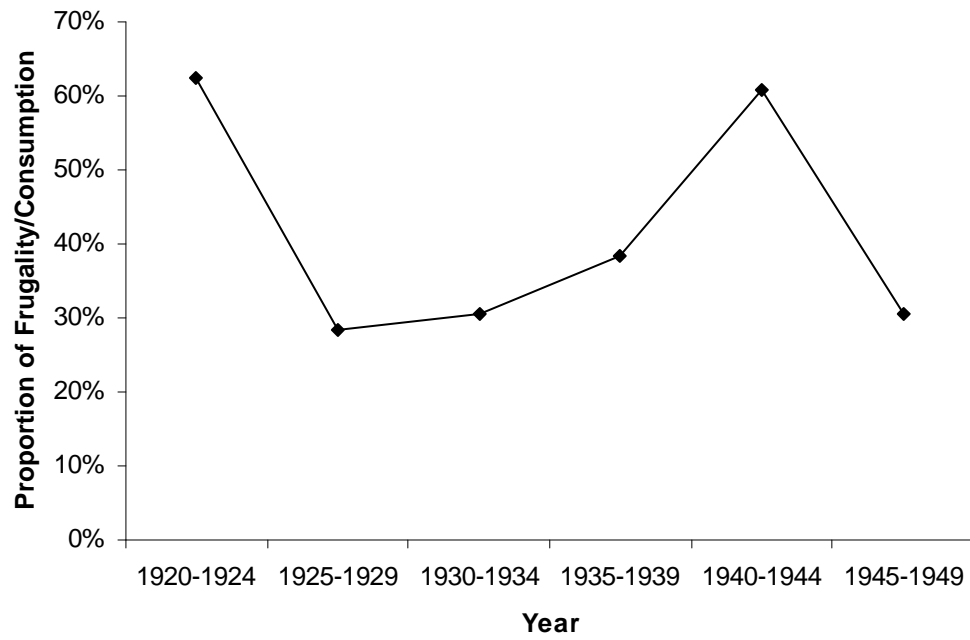




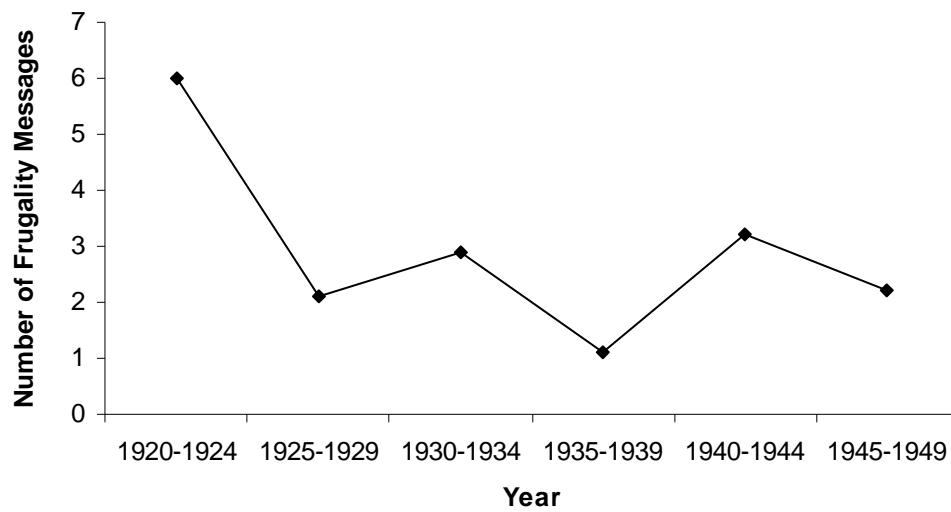
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**Figure 4-2 Percentage of Frugality Messages**

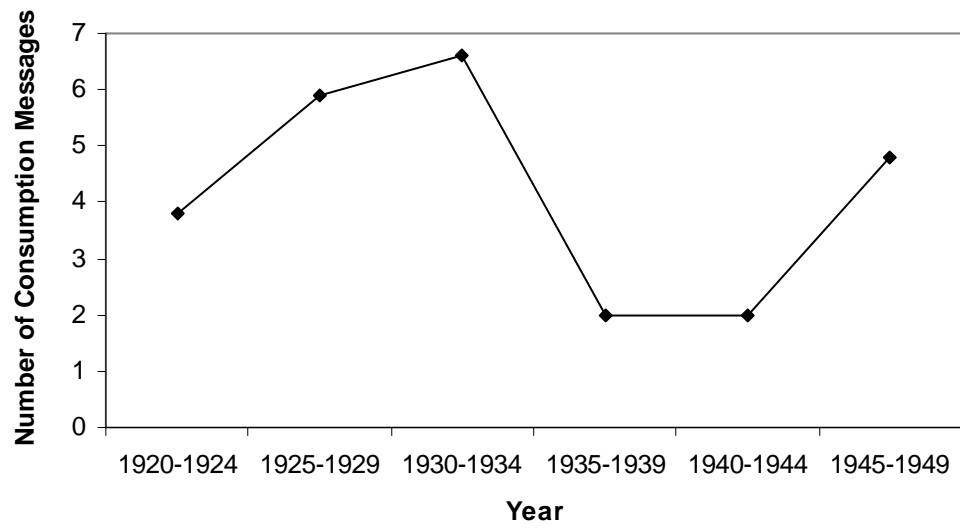
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**Figure 4-3 Number of Frugality Messages in Five-Year Increments**



**Figure 4-4 Number of Consumption Messages in Five-Year Increments**



To test whether the association between the year of publication and total messages of frugality could be accounted for by a general decrease in the total number of messages, the total number of consumption messages was added as a covariate in the first step of a hierarchical linear regression predicting messages of frugality, and the year of publication was added in the second step. The relation between the year of publication and messages of frugality was still significant, even after removing variance shared with the total number of consumption messages ( $t(57) = 3.58, p < .001$ ). This suggests that the observed decrease in messages of frugality was not the result of a decrease in the total number of messages in the *Journal* overall.

To test whether the relation between the year of publication and messages of frugality could be accounted for by the month of publication (i.e., March vs. June), the same analysis as described above was run with the month as a covariate. The relation between the year of publication and messages of frugality was still significant, even after removing variance shared by the month of publication ( $t(57) = 3.26, p = .002$ ).

To test whether there were differences in the number of messages of frugality and messages of consumption across decades, a one-way ANOVA was run with the year of publication grouped into the 1920s (1920-1929), the 1930s (1930-1939), and the 1940s (1940-1949). There was a significant difference in the number of messages of frugality across decades ( $F(2,57) = 5.05, p = .010$ ). However, there was not a significant difference across decades in the number of messages of consumption ( $F(2,57) = 1.13, p = .292$ ) or the proportion of messages of frugality to messages of consumption ( $F(2,57) = 1.16, p = .320$ ). Comparisons of specific decades revealed a greater number of messages of frugality in the 1920s than the 1930s ( $t(58) = 3.13, p = .003$ ) and the 1940s ( $t(58) =$

2.06,  $p = .044$ ). Additionally, there were fewer messages of frugality in the 1930s than in the 1920s and 1940s grouped together (average of 1920s/1940s vs. 1930s) ( $t(58) = 2.42$ ,  $p = .019$ ), which suggests that there were markedly fewer messages of frugality in the *Journal* in the 1930s compared to both the 1920s and 1940s.

### **Qualitative Findings**

A discourse analysis of especially salient passages selected from among the articles coded revealed more nuanced distinctions between the two categories. The discourse analysis found that the nature of messages of frugality changed over time, while the nature of messages of consumption remained relatively similar. The discourse analysis also found several instances in which both messages of frugality and messages of consumption were present within the same article, resulting in mixed messages to readers.

#### *Frugality*

Messages of frugality were often found to be linked to patriotism, particularly around wartime. For instance, the article “Ways to keep down the H.C.L.,”<sup>7</sup> from the March 1920 issue, informs readers on the heels of World War I:

The splendid work done by the American woman during the war is conclusive evidence...that once she knows how, she may be depended upon to carry out any patriotic duty which confronts her. Persistence in

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<sup>7</sup> Author’s note: Though the article does not state what “H.L.C” is an abbreviation of, one may assume from context that it stands for “high cost of living.”

thrift and frugality is the patriotic duty which confronts her. (Redfield, p. 71)

This passage is an example of how the *Journal* used the discourse of patriotism to encourage frugality among its readership. The discourse of patriotism appeals to readers' sense of allegiance to their country and calls for self-sacrifice for the greater good. Interestingly, the magazine also employed the discourse of patriotism when seeking to promote consumption, a phenomenon that will be discussed in the following section. Additionally, it is significant to note the use of the paternalistic caveat "once she knows how" in this passage, which implies that were it not for the *Journal's* instruction, readers would not know how exercise thrift.

Another theme of frugality-oriented articles, mostly observed in the early 1920s, was to educate women on how to devise and maintain a household budget, as well as to suggest areas where women could economize. "Your income and how to spend it" begins:

Most of us maintain a style of living which becomes more or less habit, and we are not conscious of the fact that we have very indefinite standards which we do not willingly lower [and] by which we are slowly advancing until our wants outrun our incomes and we wonder why it is that we cannot save and why we are so often need of essentials with no money to buy them. (Donham, 1921, p. 107)

The article suggests that readers who wish to lower their expenses should group their spending into four categories: existence, living, comfort, and luxury, and then prioritize

their needs over their wants. Additionally, the article instructs readers on how to create a budget and open a checking account, and a chart accompanying the text outlines areas in which readers could limit or eliminate expenses (e.g., long-distance telephone service and out-of-season foods). An example of a checkbook ledger is also included. Still other frugality-oriented articles caution against giving in to a psychological urge to consume. For instance, the *Journal* advises its readers in an article about how to purchase home appliances:

Don't be forced to admit you bought a washing machine because it was pink, or because your sister's neighbor said she felt sure you'd like a pink washing machine! Buy your equipment to fit your need. The washer you buy is to wash your clothes, and not for decoration. (Tomlinson, 1930, p. 122)

The article also includes an explanation of each appliance's operating costs and a chart showing estimated kilowatts usage per year by each.

“Don't be persuaded to buy what you do not need or do not want,” (Bane, 1931, p. 116) another article cautions readers in 1931. The article asks readers to consider *why* they buy the things they do and suggests they “review [their] expenditures critically, and compare with those of similar incomes” (p. 116). Although frugality is the prevailing tone of the article, there is a hint of consumption buried close to the surface; in suggesting readers wait for items to go on sale, the article states: “No denying either that we have a sense of satisfaction when we find that by waiting for a sale we can get a purse for \$2.98 for which a neighbor had to pay \$3.50” (p. 116). While the article encourages readers to not buy what they do not need, at the same time it makes an exception for

items that may be acquired for a “bargain.” The message to readers appears to be: “don’t buy it if you don’t need it—unless it’s on sale and you know your neighbor paid more for it, because, in that case, the item *will* bring you happiness.”

In the late 1930s and 1940s, the majority of frugality-oriented articles concerned handmade clothing. While these articles advocated making one’s own clothing as a means of saving money, the articles also served to promote Hollywood and Vogue brand patterns<sup>8</sup>, which could be purchased through the *Journal’s* pattern service. As with many of the articles coded “frugality” in the 1930s, notes of consumption are often present, as well. For example, the March 1939 article “Self-made,” which features clothes that can be made from Hollywood patterns, declares: “Our smart young marrieds have learned that if they make their own, their clothes allowance will go twice as far” (Johnson, p. 27). Thus, although the article does champion an initial savings by making one’s own clothes, the implication is that women should continue to spend the same amount of money to achieve an even greater wardrobe. Another example of an article about handmade clothing that was coded “frugality” but contains underlying tones of consumption appears on the Sub-deb (sub debutante) page of the June 1939 issue. “A cool \$25 makes a big show” features six outfits for teenage girls to wear to the World’s Fair in New York City and suggests that sub-debs make the clothes themselves: “The more you save on these clothes, the more pocketbook money you’ll have to spend at the Fair!” (Johnson, 1939, p. 58). The article was coded “frugality” because it advocates making one’s own clothes to save money; however, at the same time, the article implies that 1) teenage girls would have the \$25 necessary to purchase the materials needed to make these outfits; 2) that

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, both pattern companies were owned by rival magazine publisher Condé Nast. Hollywood Pattern Company formed in 1932 and ended production in 1947. Vogue Pattern Service began in 1899 and was purchased by Butterick Company in 1961 (Steele, 2005).



teenage girls would have the means to travel to New York City, and 3) that once one arrives at the Fair, it will be necessary to have additional “pocketbook money” to spend. A similar rationale for making one’s own clothing appears again in June 1946: “Summer is the time to begin or continue to make your own clothes: because they’re easy and quick and fun to do; because you need more, want to spend less and save for your vacation” (O’Leary, 1946, p. 41). Again, while the article promotes handmade clothes as a means of saving money, the assumption that readers “need more” clothing and will want to spend more on their vacations illustrates how messages of consumption were woven into articles purportedly concerned with saving money.

In 1940, the short-lived “You might consider...” column, which first appeared in the magazine in 1938, took a decidedly more frugal tone. Between 1938 and 1939, “You might consider...” read more like an arts-and-crafts column than a cost-savings column, addressing topics such as knitting projects and promoting dress patterns licensed to the *Journal*. Economy was not mentioned in the column during these two years. However, from 1940 to 1942, the column offered truly frugal advice focused on augmenting one’s existing wardrobe. For example, “You might consider making 1939 into 1940” advises: “Small budgets aren't made for big bills, but they fit in nicely with these ideas of making last year's suit and dress a year younger and snappier” (Stevenson, 1940, p.35). The article goes on to offer suggestions for low-cost, do-it-yourself alterations to update a suit or dress. “You might consider: Your favorite hat before and after” instructs readers on inexpensive ways to restyle hats: “You'll have a new bonnet for some small part of a dollar!” (Harris, 1941, p. 54) the article promises. Finally, “You might consider: Fixing over last spring's clothes, if you can't buy a thing this season” appears in the March 1942

issue. The study did not find any instances of “You might consider...” after that issue. The shift in the focus of “You might consider...” from simply a crafts page and a vehicle for selling *Journal*-licensed patterns in 1938 and 1939 to a column that offered practical, thrifty advice for making over “last year’s” fashions in the early 1940s mirrors a greater trend observed in the magazine in which the late 1930s featured fewer frugality-oriented messages than the early 1940s (with the exception of 1940, which featured slightly fewer messages of frugality than 1938 and 1939). A possible explanation for the change in direction of the column in 1940 could be the editors’ delayed recognition of a readership fatigued by a decade of economic depression, as well as a reflection of mounting apprehension surrounding the war in Europe.

Also in the 1940s, a theme of being frugal where large purchases were concerned but treating oneself to small purchases emerged. In these cases, the articles were almost always coded “frugality,” though consumption-oriented messages were implicit in the article. For example, in “Bright business girl” from the March 1941 issue, readers are told: “Most business girls save on big things, turn spendthrift on gadgets...they go on a lunch hour to buy a pin, a bag, a blouse, a hat—keeping the same costume constantly new” (Packard, p. 99). A year later, readers were told: “That little fringed suit deserves attention, looks expensive, but isn’t...be sure your hat, gloves, bag, shoes are right, too” (Cushman, 1942, p. 24). Both of these articles address readers’ concerns about their clothing budgets by advising readers to be frugal when it comes to large purchases, such as a suit or dress, while simultaneously encouraging readers to splurge on accessories. In March 1948, the *Journal* advises readers: “It’s easy and not very original to want a lot of new clothes [it’s] much more clever to know how to buy a few” (McAdoo & Strain, p.

60). This article was coded “frugality” because it emphasized strategic, limited purchases; however, by equating the “clever” shopper with a thrifty shopper, the *Journal* manages to still promote consumption even while professing penny pinching. In the same issue, the author again encountered an article in which the prevailing message was frugality, but a message of consumption was also present. The article, “Three-piece wardrobe: goes everywhere...does everything,” showcases a practical, coordinated three-piece wardrobe consisting of a winter coat, suit, and dress that promise to leave readers with a “comfortable balance of time and money” (Packard, R. M., 1948, p. 62). Of course, what one considered to be “comfortable” was all relative: the total cost of the ensemble was \$159—a fairly large expenditure for the time.

The *Journal* often offered commonsense advice for purchasing furniture, with an emphasis on selecting a few durable, quality pieces over several years, as opposed to acquiring an entire set of lesser quality furniture at once—echoing the advice of Lydia Marie Child nearly a century earlier. In “Choosing modern furniture,” from the June 1922 issue, the magazine recommends:

Buy fewer pieces and spread the buying power over a longer time if need be, using substitute furniture—things you have painted yourself, wicker chairs you have cushioned—until you can replace them one or two at a time with the furniture of your dreams. (p. 151)

Similar advice was also given in the March 1924 issue. In March 1931, the *Journal* again advises readers to buy quality pieces one at a time and “reserve [unnecessary pieces] for later purchase when there is less drain on the pocketbook for actual necessities” (Palmer, p. 22). While this advice is similar in nature to the furniture-purchasing advice given a

decade earlier, and the mention of a “drain on the pocketbook” may have been a nod at the deepening economic depression, the cost of refurnishing the living room in this article was \$342.50—a significant sum at the time. In 1941, the *Journal* again advises readers to invest in a few quality pieces of furniture that will last for many years. “I learned that your major items of expense should go into the basic pieces of furniture,” (Murdock, p. 100) wrote a young bride after the *Journal* showed her how to furnish her New York City apartment for \$250.

In summary, a discourse analysis of messages of frugality revealed two prominent discourses: patriotism and femininity. The *Journal* used the discourse of patriotism in periods during or surrounding wartime to promote the role of women in conserving the country’s limited resources. In this instance, the discourse of patriotism praises readers for their thriftiness and equates frugality with virtue, noble sacrifice, and love of one’s country. The magazine also employed the discourse of femininity when delivering messages of frugality. As Shevelow (1989) noted, femininity is often associated with love, romance, marriage, children, and the household. Moreover, the domestic woman in particular is a “highly idealized construction of femininity” (Shevelow, 1989, p. 6). Thus, the *Journal* employed the discourse of femininity when instructing readers to be prudent with the family budget. By framing the duty of controlling the family’s purse strings as an obligation to one’s husband and family, the discourse of femininity allows the magazine to confine frugality to the women’s sphere. The discourse of femininity is also evident in articles that promoted handmade clothes as a means of saving money. As dressmaking is a traditionally feminine pursuit, this means of exercising thrift is also limited to the women’s sphere. Lastly, it is significant to note that the discourse of

femininity also dictated that adherence to a frugal lifestyle, while a virtuous, and often necessary, endeavor, did not excuse readers from concerning themselves with being attractive and fashionable. As illustrated by the “You might consider...” column, even if readers could not afford a new wardrobe, with the ability to sew and the help of the *Journal*, they could remain chic and feminine.

### *Consumption*

While the study’s quantitative analysis found the number of consumption-oriented messages in the *Journal* to be relatively steady across all three time periods, at no point were the messages to consume as direct as they were during the late 1920s and the early 1930s. Though the *Journal* contained a greater percentage of frugality-oriented messages in the 1920s than in the 1930s or the 1940s, messages of consumption in the 1920s were evident in the magazine’s obsession with Parisian fashions. The *Journal* had employed a Paris correspondent whose mission it was to report back to readers the latest developments in Parisian design since 1900 (125 years of the *Ladies’ Home Journal: Fashion*, n.d.), despite the editor’s, Edward Bok, opposition to Parisian fashions (Scanlon, 1995; Zuckerman, 1998). In a March 1929 advertisement (which was not counted in the content analysis) for Parisian clothing patterns sold through the *Journal*, the text states:

Paris clothes are different—you can pick them out in a group of well-dressed women, you can pick them out in sketches, and everyone would love to wear them...The Fashion Department at the *Ladies’ Home Journal* regards it as a great privilege to be able to offer to the American woman patterns of dresses actually designed and shown by the great Paris

couturiers, so that she can reproduce these dresses with their original chic and charm, select the type and the designer best suited to her own style and wear the modes which are being worn by the best dressed Parisians.

(Coyne, p. 47)

This passage illustrates not only the *Journal's* long-standing affinity for Parisian designs, but a phenomenon Walker (2000) describes as the tendency for women's magazines between the world wars to emphasize individual social aspiration (p. 5). This advertisement for Parisian patterns capitalizes on the desire of the middle class for upward social mobility. The message, essentially, is: if the homemaker in Iowa could not afford to purchase her wardrobe in Paris, she could, with assistance from the *Journal*, easily replicate such a wardrobe from her on home at a fraction of the cost.

Overt messages of consumption are present in issues from the mid-1920s, as well. A 1927 article about decorating poses the rhetorical question: "if...you like a thing because it's gay and beautiful, and you want it and can afford it, why not get it?" and with the tone of a trusted friend, suggests:

Don't discipline yourself to live with homely commodities just because they're safe and will wear well...Get it and be thankful that you were fortunate enough to find the lovely thing...You'll find that it's possession brings an hourly pleasure. (Seal, p. 36)

This blatant encouragement of consumption for aesthetic and not practical purposes is a clear departure from the *Journal* of a decade earlier, which under the tutelage of Bok advocated modest, affordable furnishings.

In a similar vein, mothers-to-be in 1927 were advised to go shopping for themselves to lift their spirits:

How foolish deliberately to cut ourselves off from normal happiness for three quarters of a year of life...Let's not wait to have that new outfit...and for heaven's sake, let's have that new hat! Nothing is so uplifting to the feminine spirit...A famous psychologist once told me whenever a woman came to him with a nervous breakdown, the first step in his cure was to send her out for a shampoo, a wave and a new hat...Give up some of your fussing over baby dresses and expand some of that time and money on yourself. (Montell, 1929, p. 62)

This passage exemplifies the link between consumption and the never-ending quest for self-improvement foisted upon the readers of women's magazines. As Walker (2000) observed, "all [women's] magazines shared an abiding faith in the possibility of improvement" (p. 49), and the *Journal's* "long history of providing instruction in 'better living'...furthered an ideology of self-improvement" (p. 122). The implication that readers could improve their appearances, homes, marriages, children, and domestic skills (among other areas) through the acquisition of consumer goods—and thereby find true happiness—is perhaps one of the most effective appeals to consumption in the magazine.

The *Journal* often links consumption, particularly the purchase of new clothing, to happiness. "Now that winter is almost over we find ourselves turning eager, longing looks toward the new clothes," begins one fashion article, "[we are] hoping to see an attractive frock that...will be a spring tonic to our tired wardrobe and our spirits" ("Spring weather suggestions," 1929, p.54). The magazine also advises that new clothing is meant

to please others as much as its owner. An article about new fashions from renowned Paris designer Chanel emphasizes the importance of a new outfit for each activity in one's life—whether the activity is going to a show or to dinner:

Every circumstance of life, every hour of the day, each season, each age, suggests a suitable toilette. There are dresses for the theater, for the restaurant, these are worn not only for oneself but for the many people who look at them. (Chanel, 1929, p. 29)

The magazine often sends readers messages about who their new purchases are *really* meant to please. Particular emphasis is given to the supposed reaction to a new outfit from male admirers. “You couldn't be cuter,” a fashion spread from March 1941, promises:

...an eyeful of your new bib and tucker, and he'll steer you gently through the scrimmage, write a sonnet to your bonnet, spend his ducats on gardenia for your shoulder, and sock any guy that looks your way. If he doesn't, he's dull. You'll want one of these, or all five. (Harris, p. 56)

This passage is telling of how the discourse of femininity is often used by the magazine to convince readers that the acquisition of consumer goods, especially clothing and accessories, will make them more appealing to men. The allusions to love and romance in this passage fit Shevelow's (1989) definition of the discourse of femininity. Moreover, as Mills (1990) noted, power relations are central to the construction of femininity.

Therefore, the message of consumption in this passage is reinforced as the magazine engaged readers in the fantasy that the purchase of a new outfit could yield the affections of a powerful yet poetic suitor.



“On choosing a hat” proclaims: “A spring hat, above all, should give you delight,” but goes on to say, “It should make you pretty and provocative. It should please your husband” (Cushman, 1947, p. 61). Readers are also frequently promised that a new outfit can transform their entire appearance. For example, readers in 1946 are told: “A pastel dress does a lovely thing for a woman. It makes her prettier, younger, cooler, more feminine than almost anything else she can wear” (Packard, 1946 p. 39). One article goes as far to suggest that having more feminine clothes would be preferable to having women’s rights, asking readers: “How often have you wished that you had been born hundreds of years ago when women had fewer rights, but more romantic clothes?” (Packard, 1947, p. 64). Again, these examples demonstrate how the magazine used the discourse of femininity to reinforce messages of consumption by equating new clothing and accessories with beauty, youth, and romance.

The *Journal* placed an even greater importance on dressing attractively for men as America’s involvement in World War II escalated, linking consumption to patriotism (in instances in which the commodity promoted was not a rationed item). In the fashion spread “Keep them looking like a million” from the March 1942 issue, a photograph of a soldier appears on the top left of the page and the article begins:

And thanks a million, we say, for all the women who want to look their best, as well as do their utmost. Nothing better for the public morale.

Address yourself, therefore, to the pretties on these pages, without fear of reprisal by your conscience. (Cushman, p. 22)

Here, the magazine used the discourse of patriotism to make appeals to readers similar to those it made in 1920, however, this time with the opposite effect in mind: to promote,

rather than discourage, consumption. The discourse of patriotism again praises women for doing their “utmost” for their country, though that sentiment is implied to be secondary to looking their best. Moreover, the discourse of patriotism is used to assuage any guilt readers may have felt about purchasing new clothing during a time of war. In fact, readers were told, in not so many words, that to be parsimonious was akin to being unpatriotic.

To summarize, the *Journal* employed the discourse of self-improvement, the discourse of femininity, and the discourse of patriotism to deliver messages of consumption to its readers. The discourse of self-improvement can be found in articles concerning the superiority of Parisian fashions, which, as Walker (2000) suggested, emphasized individual social aspiration, as well as in articles concerning improvements that could be made to one’s appearance, wardrobe, and home. Through the discourse of self-improvement, the magazine promised its readers happiness in exchange for consumption—both of the magazine itself and the consumer products it endorsed. The discourse of femininity was also used in conjunction with messages of consumption. Like the discourse of self-improvement, the magazine used the discourse of femininity to promote the purchase of clothing and accessories by suggesting these items would lift readers’ spirits and make them more attractive to men. Finally, the magazine also used the discourse of patriotism to encourage consumption, or as *Journal* editor Loring Schuler termed it, “pocketbook patriotism.” By tying consumption to a sense of duty to one’s country, the *Journal* attempted to remove readers’ guilt surrounding consumerism—guilt put in place, perhaps, by a long history of conflicting messages of frugality in the magazine.

Interestingly, both messages of frugality and messages of consumption employ the discourses of patriotism and femininity, though to different ends. That similar discourses were used to convey both messages of frugality and messages of consumption suggests that the producers of the *Journal* believed these discourses to be effective in influencing reader behavior. In the case of messages of frugality, the discourse of patriotism is used to equate frugality with patriotism, while the same discourse is later used to persuade readers that consumption is patriotic and that to be frugal at a time in which the country is in need of economic stimulus is akin to not being a good citizen. Likewise, the discourse of femininity is used to reinforce both the role of women as prudent keepers of the family budget (frugality) and the role of women to be attractive to men, which, the magazines implies, requires new clothing and other accoutrements (consumption).

#### *The Journal's treatment of the Great Depression*

Although this study examines messages of frugality and consumption in the *Journal* from 1920 through 1949, special focus was given to the 1930s, for it is during this decade of economic despair that messages of frugality are the most scarce and messages of consumption are the most prominent in the magazine. Therefore, a discourse analysis was also performed on service journalism articles that specifically refer to the economy in the 1930s. The discourse analysis supports the findings of the literature review: the *Journal* rarely alluded to the financial crisis that faced the nation in the 1930s, and, when it did, the magazine attempted to placate readers' legitimate economic concerns with patronizing reassurances. In fact, the study encountered only four articles

that referenced the Depression. These articles take either a light-hearted or a trivializing approach to confronting the Depression, and all place an emphasis on consumption and a swift return to “business as usual.” The title of a March 1930 *Journal* article asks readers: “Why you should build your home this spring?” (Sherlock, p. 32). The article goes on to explain to readers that one “can build a house today cheaper than...during anytime in recent years,” and attributes lower home construction prices to the “famous bull market on Wall St. which culminated in the headaches of last year.” The article also notes that in 1929 residential construction declined 20 percent below the preceding four years’ average, and draws on various experts from home construction-related industries to inform readers of the values that could be had. The article offers a house plan for \$1 instead of the typical \$5 and concludes by urging readers “build that home now.” It is significant to note that the article reduces the stock market crash of 1929 to a mere “headache” in an attempt to minimize the crisis and spur on the lagging construction industry. It is also significant to note that one year later, in 1931, the *Journal’s* home plans remained priced at \$1. While this article was coded “frugality” because of its mention of cost savings, there is a clear message of consumption, too. The call to readers to “build that home now” could not be clearer. In the March 1932 article “What you can do,” the *Journal* outlines ways women can “help bring about better days” (Crowther, p. 3). The article features the slogan “It’s up to the women” (which Eleanor Roosevelt would go on to title her book the following year) in a decorative frame and asks readers: “Are you really as poor as you think you are?” The article goes on to offer the following pieces of advice:

Make the best possible appearance...Discuss business conditions with your husband...Question rumors of impending bank, business and personal failures...Look over the real-estate field...Look over your own property...Keep as little cash on hand as possible...Pay by check...Do not be afraid of debt if you have surplus money, put it to work—stop worrying...(p. 3)

This article is yet another example of the *Journal* promoting a consumption agenda—this time without bothering to couch the message behind a veil of frugality. Clearly, the article’s aim, above all, is to placate readers and quell their mounting fears surrounding the country’s economic turmoil while promoting consumerism. Another article in the same issue again strongly encourages readers to spend as a means of stimulating the economy, advising: “Maintain normal living conditions...Satisfy your wants at today’s prices...Buy a home now...Stop being afraid...Don’t hoard your money” (S. L. A., p. 13).

A year prior, in the June 1931 issue, the “Hostess page,” a page devoted to party planning, suggests throwing a “poverty party.” The article informs readers:

There has been a fad in the past winter, which still services, for giving Poverty Parties. So many people have felt it wise to cut down unnecessary expenses this year that a number of clever hostesses decided to feature this temporary leanness of pocketbook, and use it as the basis for a new jolly type of party. Hostess and guests all wear their oldest clothes, the menus is simple to the point of being amusing, you don’t play cards for prizes, and often, the lunch, tea or supper, whichever it may be, is served in picnic

style with either your oldest cookery or real paper picnic platter, and, of course, there isn't a trace of constraint or boredom or formality, and everybody has a perfectly marvelous time. (Oakley, 1931, p. 167)

The “poverty party” article appeared at a time in which the unemployment rate jumped from 8.9 percent in 1930 to 16.3 percent in 1931 (Singleton, 2000). This passage illustrates the *Journal's* often-cavalier attitude toward the Depression—when the magazine alludes to it all. The Depression is treated as a “fad” and “temporary,” and the article suggests that people wore last year’s clothes and served inexpensive food at parties not out of a real necessity, but as a “jolly” lark.

Moreover, of the 126 service journalism articles examined between 1930 and 1939, only two articles contain the word “depression” in reference to the economy<sup>9</sup>. A 1934 fashion spread, “Paris sends us a call to the colors,” casually mentions the Depression while linking consumption to optimism: “History of costume has told us that after a war or an economic depression, there is a spontaneous outburst of color in dress. Maybe our colors will show our optimism” (Coburn, 1934, p. 24). It is significant to note that the article refers to the Depression as if it has ended, when, in fact, the Depression would not end for several more years. The next direct mention of the Depression was found two years later in an article about meal preparation. “Nellie is a bride of only a year. But she does her own cooking. It is the depression,” (Batchelder, 1936, p. 40) the article begins. Accompanied by photographs and recipes, the article tells of Nellie preparing egg dishes for her husband “until she can’t look an egg in the face” (p. 40). The young bride then goes on to imagine her husband telling her the Depression is over and

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<sup>9</sup> President Hoover described the economic collapse as a “depression” as early as 1930 in an annual message to Congress on the state of the union (*The American Presidency Project*, n.d.)

she may purchase whatever foods she would like. She decides to buy bananas and make banana chips. A photograph and recipe for banana chips are also included—perhaps as a sign of optimism, or perhaps to prompt readers to buy bananas, presumably a luxury food item at the time.

However, more often than not, the *Journal* continued to feature consumption-oriented articles that were at best woefully out of touch and at worst bordering on insensitive to the financial hardships of readers and the country as a whole. For example, the article “Decorating a three-room apartment for \$900” from the March 1931 issue, was coded “frugality” because readers were informed that they could save money by purchasing all of the furniture needed to furnish a three-bedroom apartment from a department store. Despite the emphasis on the cost savings of purchasing furniture from a department store as opposed to an antique dealer, the article is rife with tones of consumption. When one considers that the average family income in 1932 was \$1,600 (Phillips and Mitgang, 2000), the suggestion that the *Journal’s* mostly middle-class readers could feasibly allocate more than half of their family’s income to fully furnish a new apartment was unrealistic, especially given that the article was directed toward young, newly married women.

The few allusions to the Depression the *Journal* made in service journalism articles during the 1930s served to either deny or downplay the severity of the economic crisis. The magazine again used the discourse of femininity to persuade readers to consume. In an effort to encourage women to spend their way out of depression, the *Journal* advised readers to “make the best possible appearance” and “stop worrying” about the economy. Moreover, the *Journal’s* solutions for coping with the Depression

were limited to the feminine sphere of the home, hostessship, fashion, and cooking. More often than not, the magazine's advice concerning the Depression was of little substance or consequence, and therefore was likely of little help to its struggling middle-class readership.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

The final chapter will discuss the implications of the data and explain the findings within the context of the literature reviewed. This chapter will also include a discussion of the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

#### **Implications**

The purpose of this study was to determine: 1) the relation between the type (frugality or consumption) and frequency of messages and the economic climate of the decade in which the messages appear and 2) what these messages say about women's roles in society. Based on a preliminary review of the literature, Hypothesis 1 predicted a content analysis of the *Journal* would reveal fewer instances of messages of frugality and greater instances of messages of consumption during periods of economic depression as women were urged to purchase consumer goods to stimulate economic recovery.

Hypothesis 2 predicted a discourse analysis of messages of frugality and messages of consumption in service journalism articles would reflect two primary societal roles for women: 1) as the resourceful, self-sacrificing keeper of the household budget (frugality) and 2) as the family's chief purchasers and economic drivers during periods of economic depression, and content wives and mothers whose lives were improved through consumerism (consumption).

Hypothesis 1 is partially supported by the findings of the study. As a review of the literature suggested, the study did, indeed, find fewer messages of frugality during the 1930s, as opposed to the 1920s and 1940s. Moreover, the study found few references to

the Depression in the 1930s, consistent with the findings of Hapke (1995), Zuckerman (1998), and Welky (2008), who found little mention of the gravity of the national economic crisis in women's magazines, and the *Journal* in particular, during the 1930s. However, the study did not find a significant increase in the number of consumption-oriented messages either over time or in the 1930s specifically, though the percentage of consumption-oriented messages was significantly greater in the 1930s than in either the 1920s or the 1940s, due to the marked decrease in frugality-oriented messages during that time period. Thus, while there was not a true increase in consumption-oriented messages in the 1930s, the lack of frugality-oriented messages upset the balance of pragmatic household hints and array of aspirational commodities the magazine achieved in the 1920s, and to a somewhat lesser extent, the 1940s. In other words, while the volume of typical consumption-oriented articles (e.g., articles concerning fashion, home furnishings, home appliances, etc.) in the *Journal* did not increase significantly during the 1930s, because these types of articles occupy a greater portion of the magazine, it is reasonable to suggest that readers may have *felt* as if they were encountering a greater number of articles tempting, and sometimes patently urging, them to be active consumers—at a time when their financial resources were likely strained.

Thus, when consumption-oriented messages are viewed as a percentage of total service journalism content in the 1930s, the findings are consistent with Lavin's (1995) suggestion that the media played an important role in creating a "national consumer culture" that accounted for a rise in consumerism during the 1930s, despite the nation's economic crisis. For instance, the *Journal's* continued emphasis on Parisian fashions would seem antithetical to the needs of readers during the 1930s. However, the study's

findings of the *Journal's* praise for and proliferation of clothing designs from Paris during the Depression is congruent with Lavin's (1995) argument that the media's depiction of an aspirational lifestyle bolsters hope for a better life—and often increases consumerism—among those struggling during times of fiscal crisis. This finding also supports Walker's (2000) observation that the *Journal's* editors sought to offer readers hope in the midst of economic crisis while ensuring the magazine remained current.

As suggested by a review of the literature, and supported by the study's findings, the greatest number of frugality-oriented messages within the *Journal's* service journalism articles were found in the first half of the 1920s. The most likely explanation for this observation is that Bok's philosophy of "simple living" remained at the magazine for the first few years following his departure in 1919 (Zuckerman, 1998). It is possible, too, that society in the early 1920s retained some of the thriftiness of previous decades, including the values of domestic economy espoused by Lydia Marie Child. The decrease in the number of frugality-oriented messages from the period of 1920-1924 to the period of 1925-1929 may be accounted for, in part, by Scanlon's (1995) observation that by 1924 the *Journal's* editors had significantly decreased the number of advice and instructional columns in the magazine while simultaneously increasing the size of the magazine.

Though, when taken as a whole, the 1920s contained the greatest number of frugality-oriented messages, the content analysis revealed a steady increase in the number of consumption-oriented messages, both from 1920-1924 and again from 1925-1929 (see Figure 4). As discussed in the qualitative findings section of this study, many of the messages of consumption in service journalism articles for this time period were related

to Parisian fashions. As Zuckerman (1998) noted, Bok, who petitioned against Parisian fashions, was forced to resign from his post as editor in 1919 by owner Cyrus Curtis after he refused to modernize the content of the *Journal*. Bok's successors were charged with reviving the magazine, whose circulation had fallen to third place (Zuckerman, 1998). Bok's departure from the *Journal*, coupled with updates to the fashion and style departments as part of the new editorial direction of the magazine (Zuckerman, 1998), may account for not only the rise in Parisian fashions-related content, but also the rise in consumption-oriented messages in the magazine in general.

Again, as suggested by the literature, there was an observable increase (see Figure 3) in the number of frugality-oriented messages in the first half of the 1940s, or the period of time in which American was engaged in World War II. At the same time, there was no increase in the number of consumption-oriented messages from the period of 1935-1939 to the period of 1940-1944 (see Figure 4). As the literature suggests and the qualitative findings support, thriftiness, in particular with regard to consumer goods that were rationed, is often associated with patriotism in the magazine. However, messages of frugality decreased slightly in the second half of the decade, while messages of consumption increased sharply (see Figure 3 and Figure 4)—a possible implication that, as in the 1930s, women in post-war America again had a large role to play as consumers in speeding economic recovery.

A discourse analysis of messages of frugality and messages of consumption in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s reveals a variety of conflicting roles for women. The periods of time in which women received the greatest number of frugality-oriented messages—a reflection of the socially-constructed role of women as thrifty housekeepers—were in the

early 1920s and the early 1940s. As previously discussed, two primary explanations may account for this phenomenon. First, a higher frequency of frugality-oriented messages in the *Journal* in the early 1920s may be a holdover from the era of Bok's "simple living" editorial agenda, and even earlier proponents of thriftiness, such as Lydia Marie Child. Second, as the literature shows and the results of this study support, instances of frugality-oriented messages increased in the magazine during wartime, as in the early 1940s.

Hypothesis 2, which predicated two primary societal roles for women as 1) resourceful, self-sacrificing keepers of the household budget and 2) families' chief purchasers and economic drivers during periods of economic depression, and content wives and mothers whose lives were improved through consumerism), was supported by the findings of the study.

In the 1920s, a woman's role as a consumer became clearly defined. In the early 1920s, the *Journal* often offered women sensible advice regarding this new role, such as how to formulate a budget, balance a checkbook ledger, and choose fewer, high-quality pieces of furniture that would retain their value over a greater quantity of lower-quality pieces that would not stand the test of time. However, by the mid-1920s, readers were exposed to a greater number of Parisian fashions from high-end designers, such as Chanel. Women whose mothers perhaps owned only one special outfit were now being advised to buy a new outfit for nearly every activity, from dining out to going to the theater—activities that are luxuries in their own right. During the Great Depression, women were instructed to fulfill dual roles: first, as selfless mothers and wives, sacrificing their own needs and wants while ignoring their concerns about the state of

their family's finances, then as economic-drivers, purchasing new clothing for themselves and their husbands to maintain the illusion of wealth. As messages of frugality increased in the early 1940s with America's entrance into World War II, the *Journal* advised women to grow Victory Gardens, can fruits and vegetables, reduce waste, and make their own clothes—a return to the role of women as thrifty housekeepers seen in the early 1920s. Still, the role of women as consumers remained prominent, and this role, too, became linked to patriotism. The *Journal* advised women to check their conscience at the shop entrance when purchasing new clothing for themselves, as a woman's appearance was portrayed as playing a vital role in keeping up the morale of America's soldiers, not to mention the flow of money into the rebounding economy. Thus, feminine beauty itself, which, as the magazine implies, is attainable through consumption, became symbolic of patriotism, and women were advised to be attractive not only for their husbands, but for their country.

As posited in the Theoretical Framework section of this study, the mass media theories of social constructionism and cultural Marxism may help to explain the conflicting messages of frugality and consumption in women's magazines. It is through mass media that socially constructed roles and expectations are shaped, communicated, and reinforced to consumers of media. Thus, during periods of time when it was advantageous for women to fulfill the role of the resourceful, self-sacrificing keeper of the household budget—such as during wartime—women's magazines reflected and reiterated this role through messages extolling the virtues of frugality. In support of this theory, the study's content analysis findings show an increase in frugality-oriented messages in the *Journal* between 1941 and 1945 (Figure 3). Similarly, during the Great

Depression and the years immediately following World War II, when it was necessary to bolster consumerism to revive a stagnant economy, women's magazines reflected the role of women as consumers. The study's content analysis reveals a high number of consumption-oriented messages in the early and mid-1930s, as well as the late 1940s (Figure 4). The findings of the study's discourse analysis confirm the *Journal's* support for and advocacy of women's role as consumers. The slogan "It's up to the women" says it all: the role of women during the Depression, as put forth in the *Journal*, was to spare the country from economic ruin by dressing themselves and their husbands well, building new homes, not hoarding money, and, most important, not worrying about the state of the economy.

The theory of cultural Marxism may also be applied to explain why messages of consumption increased during the Depression. Cultural Marxism, as described by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) may offer insight as to why messages of consumption in the *Journal* often promised happiness, as in the case of a new dress or piece of furniture, and efficiency, as in the case of frozen dinners or a new kitchen appliance. According to Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), promises of happiness and efficiency through consumer goods often go unfulfilled, ultimately creating greater consumption as consumers become caught in a cycle of wants. This cycle of wants is, in turn, beneficial to the producers of both consumer goods and media, as consumers caught in this cycle will not only want to consume more, they will become further tied to the media that encourage and facilitate their consumption. Moreover, as Walker (2000) pointed out, the *Journal's* promotion of middle-class values coincided with the growing market for household products and the rise of the advertising industry. Together, these forces may account for the proliferation

of consumption-oriented messages in the magazine, regardless of the ebb and flow of frugality-oriented messages or the country's economic climate. Additionally, the *Journal's* promotion of middle-class values linked to consumerism provides further support to the application of the theory of cultural Marxism to this study.

### **Limitations**

This study contains limitations that may have affected the findings. First, this study was limited to an examination of two issues a year. Thus, only the March and June issues of each year were examined. A study that examines three, six, or even twelve issues for each year would yield a greater amount of data and more comprehensive findings. However, the current sampling rate of two issues per year yielded sufficient information to address the research questions, as well as sufficient statistical power to detect significant results.

Second, this study was limited to an examination of service journalism articles only. Service journalism articles were selected because they offer advice to readers and often contain messages about saving or spending. Additionally, service journalism articles were selected because their content was dictated and framed by the editors of the *Journal*. However, editorials, short fiction, illustrations, and advertisements all contain valuable information about messages of frugality and messages of consumption. An examination of one or more of these content areas would yield important additional information about messages of frugality and consumption directed at readers via a variety of platforms.



Last, and perhaps most important, this study was limited to a certain degree by the somewhat subjective method of making coding decisions in the content analysis. A coding sheet that includes a series of questions aimed at determining whether the dominant message is one of frugality or consumption would remove some of the coders' subjectivity, as well as aid in the coding decision-making process—a feature that would be particularly useful in the case of ambiguous messages. Although the reliability of this study was acceptable, a more detailed coding sheet could yield higher inter-rater reliability.

### **Future research**

There are several possibilities for future research that could expand upon this study's findings. This study was limited to service journalism articles; however, future studies could include editorials, short fiction, illustrations, or advertisements. A study of messages of frugality and messages of consumption in any of these content areas would provide additional context to the current study's findings and reveal more information about women's roles with regard to saving and spending as espoused in the *Journal*. A review of the literature pertinent to the current study uncovered scholarly research related to the themes of frugality and consumption in these content areas of women's magazines. A quantitative method, such as a content analysis could be used to examine content in any of these areas. Qualitative methods, such as discourse analysis, or visual analysis, in the case of illustrations, would also be appropriate.

In addition to examining content areas other than service journalism, the study could be expanded to include other popular women's magazines in the same time periods.

An examination of other popular women's magazines could reveal whether similar magazines shared the *Journal's* pattern of frequency of messages of frugality and messages of consumption in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. This information could support the current study's assertion that women's magazines convey messages of frugality and consumption to their readers that reflect society's desired roles for women at particular points in time. A study of this nature could include peer magazines of the *Journal*, such as *McCall's*, *Good Housekeeping*, or *Better Homes and Gardens*. Additionally, a comparison of the *Journal* to a "class" magazine, such as *Vogue*, could reveal differences in the way messages of frugality and messages of consumption were directed at middle- and upper-class readers, respectively. Again, either quantitative or qualitative methods (or both) would be appropriate.

A third possibility for future research would be to compare the quantity and quality of messages of frugality and consumption in service journalism articles in the *Ladies' Home Journal* to the quantity and quality of messages of frugality and consumption in service journalism articles in a general interest magazine, such as *Time*, or a men's magazine, such as *Esquire*<sup>10</sup>, in the 1920s through 1940s. A study of this nature could reveal whether messages of frugality and messages of consumption are unique to women's magazines, as well as reveal similarities or differences among the frequency of those messages in a women's magazine compared to a general interest or men's magazine.

Another possibility for future research would be to apply the methodology of the current study to a greater period of time—1900 to 2000, for example—and examine the findings within the social, political, and economic context of each decade. Although such

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<sup>10</sup> *Esquire* was launched in 1933 (Zuckerman, 1998).

a study would be a lengthy endeavor, data about the quantity and quality of messages of frugality and messages of consumption for the entire twentieth century would reveal valuable information about trends in messages of frugality and messages of consumption across a greater period of time.

Finally, as the current study was inspired in part by the author's observation of increased frugality-oriented articles, as well as the steady presence of consumption-oriented articles, in popular women's magazines during the 2008 to 2009 recession, a comparative analysis of the *Journal* during the first two years of the Great Depression, 1930 and 1931, to the *Journal* during the first two years of the current recession (2008 and 2009) would yield interesting results. Such a study might aim to answer questions such as: 1) has the quantity and quality of messages of frugality and messages of consumption changed from the Great Depression to the recession of 2008-2009 and, 2) has what these messages "say" to readers changed between these two periods of time, and if so, how?

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*Appendix 2: Raw data*

Year	Month	Frugality	Consumption
1920	M	5	2
1920	J	5	3
1921	M	7	2
1921	J	5	2
1922	M	3	6
1922	J	8	4
1923	M	4	9
1923	J	9	4
1924	M	7	3
1924	J	7	3
1925	M	4	3
1925	J	5	4
1926	M	2	4
1926	J	3	4
1927	M	1	4
1927	J	2	6
1928	M	0	6
1928	J	2	4
1929	M	0	13
1929	J	2	11
1930	M	6	7
1930	J	1	9
1931	M	4	9
1931	J	3	14
1932	M	4	8
1932	J	2	5
1933	M	3	4
1933	J	4	3
1934	M	0	4
1934	J	2	3

Year	Month	Frugality	Consumption
1935	M	1	2
1935	J	0	6
1936	M	1	2
1936	J	1	2
1937	M	0	2
1937	J	0	2
1938	M	2	1
1938	J	2	0
1939	M	2	1
1939	J	2	2
1940	M	2	0
1940	J	1	1
1941	M	3	2
1941	J	5	3
1942	M	3	3
1942	J	7	0
1943	M	1	4
1943	J	6	1
1944	M	1	4
1944	J	3	2
1945	M	4	3
1945	J	1	3
1946	M	2	5
1946	J	2	7
1947	M	0	6
1947	J	4	6
1948	M	4	4
1948	J	1	5
1949	M	2	6
1949	J	2	3

*Appendix 3: Comparison of findings*

Year, Month	Coder 1		Coder 2	
	<i>Frugality</i>	<i>Consumption</i>	<i>Frugality</i>	<i>Consumption</i>
1929, J	2	11	2	9
1932, J	2	5	3	6
1937, J	0	2	0	2
1939, J	2	2	3	2
1943, J	2	7	2	6
1949, M	2	6	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>28</b>