
ROLE OF TELEVISION IN 1950s

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The 1950s was a decade of economic boom. US entered the World War II in 1941, and spending focus was on warfare, but consumer products were rationed, creating immediate shortage of products. Manufacturers were forced to convert to war production during the war that added to the scarcity. Americans on the home front had to learn how to ration food, recycle scraps, plant backyard "Victory gardens" and cut back on travel.¹ After the war in 1945, many feared a return of the Great Depression similar to post World War I. However, the economy soared and consumer demand pent-up, as people were eager to spend money on the new, once rationed, products, such as, nylon, Styrofoam, and plastics.² Fueled by the politicians, Americans saw consumption as a patriotic activity that made the 1950s a decade of economic boom. Post-World War II era, also known as the Golden Age of Capitalism, witnessed abundance in production of cars, televisions and other consumer goods. The development of malls and department stores dominated the consumer values in American economy and culture. Fast food restaurants and mobility changed the eating habits of the people.³

Television was the most influential innovation of the 1950s and advertising on TV proved to be a viable medium. Televisions have become pervasive in the American culture since the 1940s. The number of households with at least one TV set grew from 1 million to 44 million from 1949 to 1969.⁴ Common national coverage of presidential elections and sports events connected America from coast to coast and generated a national dialogue. Many formats of variety show and situation comedies were borrowed from radio.

The commercial advertising had a profound effect on American society and consumer culture. The primary purpose of television programming was to create an audience for product advertisements.⁵ Advertisers and marketers would buy time on television to advertise their products and services.⁵ The consumers were able to see the products and its functions in the commercials. Television overcame the limitation of the both print and radio

¹ "The U.S. Home Front at a Glance." *The National WWII Museum*. N.p., n.d.

<<http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/ww2-history/at-a-glance/home-front.html>>

² 1940s War, Cold War and Consumerism. (2005, March 28). Retrieved from

<http://adage.com/article/75-years-of-ideas/1940s-war-cold-war-consumerism/102702/>

³ Neuhaus, Jessamyn. "The Way to a Man's Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology, and Cookbooks in the 1950s." *Journal of Social History* 32.3 (n.d.): 529-55. Web.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3789341>>.

⁴ "Television during the 1950s and 60s." *Television during the 1950s and 60s*. N.p., n.d. Web.

<http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe50s/life_17.html>

⁵ Allan, Kenneth, and Scott Coltrane. "Gender displaying television commercials: A comparative study of television commercials in the 1950s and 1980s." *Sex roles* 35.3-4 (1996): 185-203.

ads. Men, women and children⁶ were shown in different settings, performing different activities and depicting different traits.⁴ The advertising industry captured the attention of women with the daytime commercials in order to influence them to buy products through carefully crafted messages.⁷ The messaging was mostly geared towards women – with tips of making their husband's happy by serving good coffee⁸ or doing laundry.⁹

The advertising industry also saw an increase in spending from \$2.1 billion in 1941 to \$2.8 billion in 1945 to \$5.7 billion in 1950.¹⁰ Manufacturers invested in new technologies to improve their products and seem attractive than their competitors. By the end of 1950s, the US had 6 percent of the world's population, consumed one-third of all the world's goods and services, and made two-thirds of manufactured goods.¹¹ High consumption economy meant high production market. American economic system became highly dependent on mass consumption as the means of creating growth.¹² Television was one of the many reasons that the daily life of Americans after World War II was drastically transformed.

⁶ Advertising in America in 1950s video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RR08gwRsyxY>

⁷ Ford commercial video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7t9YIMxWoE>

⁸ Husbands don't like coffee video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBBfqfOBbHw>

⁹ Laundry commercial video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChaRHZB2EpQ>

¹⁰ "History: 1950s." *Advertising Age AdAge Encyclopedia*. N.p., 15 Sept. 2003. Web.
<<http://adage.com/article/adage-encyclopedia/history-1950s/98701/>>

¹¹ Hart-Davis, Adam. "The American Dream." *History: From the Dawn of Civilization*. S.l.: Dk, 2015. N. pag. Print.

¹² Whiteley, Nigel. "Toward a Throw-Away Culture. Consumerism, 'Style Obsolescence' and Cultural Theory in the 1950s and 1960s." *Oxford Art Journal* 10.2 (1987): 3-27. Oxford University Press. Web. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1360444>>.