

# Feminine Agendas: The historical evolution of feminism as reflected in the content of American women's magazines

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this research is to identify trends and themes that reflect feminist values in American women's magazines throughout history. The goal is to show that feminism was an frequently discussed topic in American media as it gained prominence and validity over time. This research draws primarily upon secondary sources, such as scholarly journal articles. Most research on this topic was conducted by analyzing magazines published during various time periods and by discovering general themes. By showing how feminism was represented in women's magazines, this research highlights the role of media in reflecting America's ever-changing political and cultural landscape.*

## I. Introduction

Magazine journalism in the United States has undergone a significant transformation from its early origins to present day, especially for women's magazines. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with the publication of the first women's magazine, *The Lady's Magazine*, to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with the publication of the first feminist magazine — Gloria Steinem's *Ms.* magazine — and onward, women's magazines have made gradual yet impactful changes over the years to better reflect an ever-changing society. Specifically, women's magazines have served over time as a strong indicator of feminism in the United States. For example, women's magazines of the late 1700s often included embroidery patterns to make clothes, reflecting a focus on female domesticity in 18<sup>th</sup> century society. But the 1970s brought on a wave of female independence at home and in the workplace, and magazines began publishing articles on such topics as how to balance a full-time career while starting a family. By examining these changes in content themes, it is possible to trace the values that women's magazines provided for their audience to reflect the new cultural and political landscape women faced in America. American women's magazines echoed the evolution of feminism in the United States from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to present day, and appealed to a progressing female society.

The American magazine industry has a rich history nearly as unique and eventful as the history of the United States itself. Benjamin Franklin intended to publish the first magazine in the country, *General Magazine*, in 1741, but he was beaten when *American Magazine* was published a mere three days earlier. The first women's magazine, *The Lady's Magazine*, which was published in 1770, contained literary and fashion content as well as embroidery patterns. The mid-1800s saw such popular magazine titles as *The Economist* and *The Atlantic* (both are still around today), and in 1902, *McClure's Magazine* began the famous muckraking era with the article "Tweed Days in St. Louis" by C.H. Wetmore and Lincoln Steffens. Henry Luce started *Time*,

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the first American newsmagazine, in 1923, and *Seventeen* became the first magazine devoted to adolescents in 1944. The debut of *Rolling Stone* in 1967 demonstrated the popularity of special-interest magazines, and in 1993, *Wired* magazine arrived on the scene, publishing content dealing with all sorts of topics to appeal to an audience of varied interests. In recent years, magazines of all types have been geared towards all sorts of audiences, but the transformation of American women's magazines in particular has likely been one of the most visible and memorable historical evolutions in the print news industry.

A major goal of this research is analyzing whether it was only magazine authors who set the feminist agenda throughout U.S. history. The major trends that resonated in women's magazines can be divided into three distinct time periods based on notable changes in feminist-minded — or, in some cases, non-feminist-minded — magazine content.

The first period, the early 1770s to roughly the late 1860s, which marks the early beginnings of women's magazines in the United States, saw these periodicals either succeed or fail at making a lasting impact in society. Studying this period reveals the notion of female civic participation, which was done specifically when women expressed their voices in society by directly authoring the magazines or indirectly through these authors. The authors' ideas and the female readers' voices interacted: Female authors determined a certain agenda for their audience, while the contributions of audience members guided what they want the agenda to be.

The second period, the early 1870s to the late 1970s, witnessed huge changes in the political and cultural landscape of the nation. It was the responsibility of women's magazines to keep up with these changes in order to help readers adjust to and prepare for new lifestyles. Household and marriage-focused content in the 1940s and 1950s shifted to academic and career-oriented content in the 1960s and 1970s. The magazines saw a gradual shift from female domesticity to female independence.

The third period covering the 1980s to present day characterizes a modern era in which women have many more options in society and in media consumption. Women now can read more feminist-minded content and support the ideas of feminism, but do not necessarily have to identify themselves as feminists, thus giving rise to the "I'm-Not-A-Feminist-But" generation. By focusing on the major themes that characterize each period, the author can more easily identify the ways American women's magazines reflected feminine ideals during these periods.

This research attempts to answer the questions proposed in the introduction by reviewing scholarly articles on this topic, ranging from American feminist movement, to the history of women's magazine journalism, to feminism as reflected in media, to overall trends in the history of feminism and the history of women's magazines. The author creates a rough timeline for women's magazines to categorize their reflection of feminist movement.

## II. Period I: Female Civic Participation in the 1770s to 1860s

During the time when the United States was just beginning to gain its footing as a nation, women's magazines were also slowly beginning to find a place in early American society. It is widely known that the mindset of society at this time was largely male-dominated, and women were often viewed as the "second sex" and deemed biologically second in importance. This hierarchy of genders based on what society saw as natural differences between men and women resulted in a male hierarchy in nearly every aspect of life, such as politics, religion and the workplace. Because of this, some modern scholars of feminism assert that, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American society had not yet begun to progress towards female independence. These scholars also believe that the domestic ideology associated with women was largely produced by men and received by women — particularly women readers of popular literature and women's magazines.

Aronson argued the opposite, however, saying that the 19<sup>th</sup> century was much more progressive in women's rights than many give it credit for. Specifically, Aronson said the publication of women's magazines was one of the first major outlets for women's voice in American society, and that "early women's magazine readers left behind plenty of evidence that they operated in some creative, sophisticated, and self-authorizing ways."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Aronson stated that women, not men, predominately authored and edited early successful magazines and were actively involved in the editorial process. It was through the perseverance of these

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1 Amy Beth Aronson, "Domesticity and Women's Collective Agency: Contribution and Collaboration in America's First Successful Women's Magazine," *American Periodicals* 11 (2001): 1.

early women's magazine editors, such as famous magazine editor Sarah Josepha Hale, that they were able to capitalize on the possibilities of a magazine for both women's public participation and gender construction. For instance, "Hale's Boston-based (*American Ladies Magazine* (1828-36), a \$2.00-per-year monthly, was the first American women's magazine to survive more than five years."<sup>2</sup> Hale made her motives for the magazine clear from the beginning, specifically by stating in her introduction to the magazine that she did not intend to "weaken parental authority,"<sup>3</sup> but she intended to teach women to improve on their moral and intellectual character in the company of other women within their social sphere.<sup>3</sup> Though it seems that Hale may be covertly supporting conventional masculine privilege, she actually undercuts male authority by speaking to women from within a feminist-minded context, thus establishing an overall theme of female support in *Ladies Magazine* that women could turn to for encouragement.

In addition to the overall feminist tone in *Ladies Magazine*, women's independence was furthered by the way Hale structured her magazine's editorial content. For example, in her self-written book reviews, Hale "gave visible endorsements to women authors . . . [and] structured her book reviews in ways that validated women readers' personal judgment of the virtues of literary texts."<sup>4</sup> Also, she often encouraged other women to speak out about their own lives in addition to frequently contributing to the magazine herself. When a male writer with the initials "U.R." submitted a letter to the magazine in 1829 asserting that physically attractive women are more noticeable to men than ones with kind personalities, Hale recruited female readers to respond to the letter in the next edition. Many did, and one of them wrote to Hale, saying "Mrs. Hale — had you not so kindly invited me . . . in your last Magazine . . . I do not think I ever should have summoned resolution to appear in print,"<sup>5</sup> indicating that Hale's tenacity encouraged female readers to voice their opinions in spite of potential consequences.<sup>5</sup> Hale's revolutionary vision was essential in starting a long line of women's magazines geared towards what we know now as the feminist ideology.

In contrast to the types of news and feature content published in magazines today, early women's magazines often published fiction and non-fiction literature/essays written by staff members or audience members. This was another method that enabled women to voice their opinions, whether they were the editors of a magazine or simply a contributing reader/writer who wished to take part in a feminine-minded conversation, thus allowing women to better dictate the female agenda of the time. In addition to the aforementioned book reviews and letters-to-the-editor published by Sarah Josepha Hale, Aronson discusses a non-fiction essay submitted to *Ladies Magazine and Repository* that also reflected feminist themes and values. The 1792 contribution, "Thoughts on Old Maids," questioned the judgmental cultural readings of unmarried women that had been carried over from the Old World into the new one without being transformed. This particular piece was "the first piece in American women's magazine history to talk about the unheard-of possibility that a woman might live respectably on her own — but it would not be the last."<sup>6</sup> The writer asserts that female autonomy may result from adherence to society's gender rules, but she still nevertheless moved to change the way in which woman must achieve this autonomy. This indicates that it was not only magazine editors in positions of power who wrote feminist-minded content, but contributing writers also wished to join the conversation in challenging female stereotypes and conventional attitudes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Laura McCall also wrote about the feminist values expressed in early women's magazine literature. Like Aronson, McCall challenged the idea that women were frail and dependent on men in 19<sup>th</sup> century society. She cited *Godey's Lady's Book*, published by Louis A. Godey in Philadelphia from 1830 to 1878, as a publication that should be sharply scrutinized for allegedly preaching domesticity and submissiveness to 19<sup>th</sup> century female readers. But McCall admitted that this dismissal of *Godey's Lady's Book* may not have been entirely fair because, like *Ladies Magazine and Repository*, the magazine frequently published fictional stories that reflected feminist values, such as female independence and involvement in society. Much of available 19<sup>th</sup> century literature played a critical role in reinforcing the woman's domestic role by celebrating the joys of marriage and motherhood and providing models of the ideal woman that female readers were encouraged to emulate. But in *Godey's*, there were a number of fictional stories that depicted marriage in an unfavorable light, such as a story in which the heroine "pined in the beautiful seclusion of her husband's home" and one could "scarcely recognize . . . the discontented wife who now moved languidly through the apartment. . . .

2 Ibid., 3.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 5.

5 Ibid., 6.

6 Amy Beth Aronson, *Taking Liberties: Early American Women's Magazines and Their Readers* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002): 78.

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She despised the simple pleasures and homely duties she was now called upon to fulfill.’”<sup>7</sup>

In addition to these anti-marriage stories, McCall asserted that *Godey’s* did not often publish content that compared women to men or portrayed women as inferior. For example, when men and women were compared on the basis of their mental abilities, 22.8 percent of the female characters were depicted as intellectually equal, but in 73.3 percent of the cases, there was simply no discussion of this issue.<sup>8</sup> Among women, 18.4 percent of them were depicted as equal or superior to men in their ability to take independent action, yet in 76.5 percent of cases, no comparison was made.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, women were marked as superior in the areas of moral strength and caring for the home, but they also scored high in their knowledge and understanding of business and politics, “qualities generally regarded as bastions of the male sphere.”<sup>10</sup> These characteristics of the magazine’s content indicate that *Godey’s* may have been in support of an early feminist agenda, as were many of the early successful magazines published in 19<sup>th</sup> century America.

### III. Period II: Feminine Independence v. Domesticity in the 1870s to 1970s

Despite the increase in female civic participation throughout the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the first major developments in the overall American feminist movement did not occur until the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Coming on the heels of urban industrialism and the emergence of more liberal, socialist politics, the first wave of feminism set its goal of opening up opportunities for women, mainly through suffrage. “Women’s rights pioneers first identified 1848 and 1920 as the critical turning points in women’s struggle to achieve sexual equality.” Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were instrumental in organizing the Seneca Falls Convention, where 300 men and women rallied to the cause of equality for women.<sup>11</sup> The onslaught of World War II (1939-1945) was a unique period in the history of the United States, and was one of the biggest changes in lifestyles to average American citizens. Now more than ever, women were relied upon to take care of their homes and children while men were responsible for protecting the country. This emphasis on female domesticity lasted through the 1940s and continued into the 1950s as the picturesque American Dream lifestyle became popular, and the content of women’s magazines during this time mirrored this shift in gender roles.

According to Waller-Zuckerman, the number of magazine consumers expanded enormously between 1890 and World War I, which roughly coincides with the first wave of the feminist movement. She asserted that the economic and demographic changes during this time period caused women to “search for reliable prescriptive manuals that would tell them how to lead a proper feminine life,” indicating that magazines were expected to set a specific agenda for how women should live their lives.<sup>12</sup> Waller-Zuckerman also wrote that, as women’s roles shifted from producer to consumer during World War II and into the 1950s, “reading and learning about new products in the marketplace became part of the housewife’s job,” indicating there were a variety of ways magazines promoted a certain agenda that wasn’t quite on par with the feminist ideology at this time.<sup>13</sup> Walker compiles an extensive volume of content taken from popular women’s magazines from 1940 to 1960 dealing with such topics ranging from women at the workplace to marriage and motherhood. She also includes a section that delves into criticism aimed at American women’s magazines during this time period. In her introduction, Walker writes that many “criticized the magazines for being repetitious, for condescending to readers by assuming that women were responsible for correcting all flaws in both household and marriage, or by creating within their pages worlds far removed from the realities of women’s lives,” asserting that American women were not entirely pleased with the domesticity-based agenda they found during this

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7 Laura McCall, “‘The Reign of Brute Force Is Now over’: A Content Analysis of ‘Godey’s Lady’s Book,’ 1830-1860,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 228.

8 *Ibid.*, 231.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 Nancy A. Hewitt, “From Seneca Falls to Suffrage? Reimagining a ‘Master’ Narrative in U.S. Women’s History,” in *No Permanent Waves*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010): 15.

12 Mary Ellen Waller-Zuckerman, “‘Old Homes, in a City of Perpetual Change’: Women’s Magazines, 1890-1916,” *The Business History Review* 63, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 747.

13 *Ibid.*, 750.

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specific time period.<sup>14</sup>

Pierce responded to Waller-Zuckerman's and Walker's claims by saying there were still ways in which women's magazines in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century led to a more female-empowering society. In the context of Progressive Era reform work, suffrage and World War I, "arguments for change gained prominence and broader acceptability, in part through the way women's magazines represented social issues for their readers and represented readers themselves."<sup>15</sup> She wrote that many magazines published a continuous flow of information about women's expanded sphere of activities and commentary about the effects of these transformations. Several magazines even began to link a woman's responsibilities as a mother with her rights as a citizen, turning motherhood into a subject of public significance rather than private sentiment. This showed that many women's periodicals sought to influence public opinion rather than simply advise homemakers, according to Pierce, indicating that some early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century magazines did indeed have the feminist agenda in mind.

Due to the abundance of domestically-focused magazines published throughout the 1920s to 1950s as well as the drastic political changes occurring in the country during the Vietnam War (1959-1975), women's magazines of the 1960s and 1970s strived to reflect these societal changes by presenting women with an agenda more focused on independence, namely through the presentation of women in the workplace and in higher education. Additionally, the second wave of the feminist movement began in the 1960s and went on well until the 1990s. This wave unfolded in the context of the anti-war and civil rights movements and the growing self-consciousness of a variety of minority groups around the world. In this phase, sexuality and reproductive rights were dominant issues, as well as equal rights in the workplace. Magazines began to pick up on these changes, showing women working instead of residing in their homes as housewives and portraying women being successful.

Flora mirrored McCall's insight into the way that women were presented in 19<sup>th</sup> century women's magazine fiction when she methodically examined women's status in magazine fiction in the 1970s. Magazine fiction of this decade was varied in its presentation of women as passive and dependent, especially depending on whether the fiction was geared towards working class or middle class women. Flora asserts that, overall, "intelligence is a quality in women that counters the image of passivity" in this type of content.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, women's intelligence was mentioned increasingly between 1970 and 1975 and usually presented positively. Middle-class women's occupational statuses were presented more positively by magazine fiction, which made a "shift away from defining the worth of women through unpaid domestic functions."<sup>17</sup> Flora's analysis takes a unique perspective by examining how women's magazines presented feminism based on class differences, which is something that largely defines feminism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Starr wrote about a few women's magazines founded in the 1970s that combated the traditional notions of feminine identity by presenting more independent ideals. Whereas traditional women's magazines catered to women at home (*Good Housekeeping*) or young women (*Mademoiselle*), "working women" were seen to have a different mix of interests: more interested in news about progressive changes in gender roles and in workplace success, and less interested in cooking, housekeeping, home décor, fashion, and dating.<sup>18</sup> Two prime examples of these magazines were *Working Woman* and *Working Mother*, both of which had rapidly growing circulation in the 1970s and early 1980s, at a time when women were eager to think and read more about how to revise their identities. These magazines borrowed an abundance of ideas from academics, activists, business consultants and/or successful role models about how women could form new identities. "Yet the magazines were not simply *relaying* information that was obvious in content and accuracy . . . they were *creating* ideas and suggestions that were grounded in existing knowledge and that they thought readers would find valuable and effective."<sup>19</sup> These magazines and their overall themes indicate a switch in emphasis from domesticated housewives to career-driven women. Thus, Starr's analysis is notable for examining

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14 Nancy A. Walker, "Critiques of the Women's Magazines, 1946-1960," in *Women's Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press*, ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998): 228.

15 Jennifer Burek Pierce, "Science, Advocacy, and 'The Sacred and Intimate Things of Life': Representing Motherhood as a Progressive Era Cause in Women's Magazines," *American Periodicals* 18, no. 1 (2008): 71.

16 Cornelia Butler Flora, "Changes in Women's Status in Women's Magazine Fiction: Differences by Social Class," *Social Problems* 26, no. 5 (June 1979): 563.

17 *Ibid.*, 567.

18 Martha A. Starr, "Consumption, Identity, and the Sociocultural Constitution of 'Preferences': Reading Women's Magazines," *Review of Social Economy* 62, no. 3 (September 2004): 296.

19 *Ibid.*, 297.

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changes in how magazines were presenting feminism at this crucial time in the United States.

#### IV. Period III: The “I’m-Not-A-Feminist-But” Generation in the 1980s to Present

The 20<sup>th</sup> century had brought about a number of radical changes in the perception of women in American society. By the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, women found themselves in a much more equal position to men than they had in previous decades. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, however, led the national public agenda to shift markedly toward the Right. This gave rise to the third wave of feminism, commonly called the New Feminist Movement, in which “the major challenges of the 1980s included maintaining public approval for positions that a popular president and the federal government no longer supported,” such as defending feminist organizations and their members from direct, sometimes violent, attack.<sup>20</sup> At this time, the term ‘feminist’ began to gain a bad connotation due to the controversy surrounding the intensity of the new movement. Even many women felt they had gained enough in terms of equality and that the feminist movement was becoming rather exhaustive, so women’s interests were no longer focused on one singular goal, such as workplace equality. As their interests became much broader, magazines responded by offering as much diverse content as possible. Specifically, popular women’s magazines, which focus on topics like pop culture, fashion and beauty—they continue to be popular today—became the main source of information and entertainment for many women.

Taylor took a unique look at these popular women’s magazines in her analysis of their support of the “I’m-Not-a-Feminist-But” generation, which she described as individuals who support the core principles of existing feminism, but do not identify themselves as a feminist. Despite their ambiguity, Taylor says these individuals became the main readers of popular women’s magazines who, like their readers, “have benefited from more than forty years of feminism, but they do not consider themselves feminist.”<sup>21</sup> She said that these types of magazines, with some of the leading titles including *Redbook*, *Family Circle* and *Better Homes & Gardens*, provided an important place for feminism and popular culture to cohabit. In *Forever Feminine*, Ferguson argued that women’s magazines had become “‘about more than women and womanly things, they are about femininity itself — as a state, a condition, a craft, and an art form which comprises a set of practices and beliefs.’”<sup>22</sup> Though third-wave feminists condemned these periodicals for supporting an image of women that was too “fluffy” and “almost childlike,”<sup>23</sup> the magazines continued to boast impressive circulation numbers to this day: *Redbook* averaged a circulation of well over 2 million in 2007.<sup>24</sup> According to Taylor, popular women’s magazines aim to encourage their readers to bring about their own personal transformations, “even as the magazines cultivate more traditional messages of femininity and domesticity” — a contradiction felt by those women who claim “I’m not a feminist but,” as well as by third-wave feminists.<sup>25</sup> Taking all this into consideration, it would appear that Taylor’s research could support the idea that modern magazines support feminism without forcing readers to accept a strict feminist agenda, which may be what modern women prefer in their reading.

Winship’s novel, *Inside Women’s Magazines*, gave a great deal of information on how feminism has been represented throughout the entire history of women’s magazines in the United States, with special consideration to how magazines of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century transitioned to the magazines we know today. Specifically, she connects with Taylor’s ideas on magazines not declaring themselves as feminist, but supporting feminine ideals for readers instead. She then transitions into discussing women’s magazines that became popular in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that are still around today, such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Woman’s Own*. Though these magazines are often praised for being more progressive in the way they present women’s issues, Winship

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20 Myra Marx Ferree and Beth B. Hess, *Controversy and Coalition: The New Feminist Movement Across Four Decades of Change*, (New York: Routledge, 2000): 159.

21 Natalie Fuehrer Taylor, “The Personal Is Political: Women’s Magazines for the ‘I’m-Not-a-Feminist-But’ Generation,” in *You’ve Come A Long Way, Baby: Women, Politics, and Popular Culture*, ed. Lilly J. Goren (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009): 216.

22 *Ibid.*, 217.

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*, 220.

25 *Ibid.*, 221.

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argued, however, that “commercial magazines are not and do not wish to be part of the women’s movement,” but they “constantly hold out something that is possible for individual women to achieve. As one *Woman’s Own* article put it, ‘I am my own woman’ . . . It is on that unspoken assumption that magazines are premised; it is a knowledge intimately shared between women.”<sup>26</sup> This idea implies that women no longer felt they needed to read a magazine that specifically set out to tell them how to live a feminist life — feminist ideals were now much more firmly engrained into the daily lives and mindsets of modern women. But Winship also says that this attitude allowed many magazines to start gradually falling away from feminist values altogether. Specifically discussing *Cosmo’s* ideas of feminism, she opined that there are problems with its presentation of feminism, one of which being that the magazine “gives unusual prominence to men’s views — about feminism, their contributions are barbed.”<sup>27</sup> Though popular magazines gave female readers a variety of different ideas that they could choose to accept, some scholars of mass media seem to suggest that female readers tend to share a feeling of ambivalent pleasure about these publications. “They *enjoy* the magazines, and may at times learn bits and pieces — ideas for how to look or behave, as well as more straightforward information about health, popular culture or social issues. At the same time, these readers would not really argue that the magazines are ‘perfect’ or ‘ideal’ in terms of how they address women.”<sup>28</sup> This presents an interesting view of women’s magazines during this time period as something that women could choose whether or not to indulge in, but no longer something they relied upon for guidance, as they were viewed in previous decades.

On the other hand, Winship wrote that the rise of magazines like *Everywoman* and *Women’s Review* was a more authentically feminist response to magazines like *Cosmo* in the 1980s. She wrote, “*Everywoman*, focusing on news and current affairs and largely steering clear of ‘the personal,’ pitches itself towards women who might not think of themselves as feminists but who are interested in a wider range of issues than the women’s glossies deal in.”<sup>29</sup> This idea largely reflects how women’s magazines continue to function today. Though there are lots of periodicals that are criticized for their unfair representation of women and feminist values, there are just as many, if not more, magazines that strive to address these issues by presenting female values in an empowering light. In general, women’s magazines today offer “a confusing and contradictory set of ideas,”<sup>30</sup> but many scholars argue that the public should work on accepting and merging the values presented in popular women’s magazines — “to be assertive, confident, sexual, ‘true to yourself,’ demanding rights and pleasures” — and the more “traditional” feminist view.<sup>31</sup> It is a debate that will likely continue for quite some time, but despite any controversy that may linger on, women’s magazines have come a long way in terms of positively presenting feminist values as feminism has evolved over the course of American history.

## V. Conclusion

Despite some general inconsistencies and variations, the majority of American women’s magazines from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to present day show a steady increase in support of feminist ideals based on several researchers that the author reviewed. By reading the articles published in these magazines, female readers were able to gain knowledge about the feminine agenda of their time. Over the course of three distinct periods studied, women’s magazines from the early 1770s to the late 1860s served as early advocates of female civic participation when female subservience was a cultural norm. Women’s magazines from the 1870s to 1970s encouraged female independence through involvement in academia and the workplace, mirroring the huge cultural and political changes in the United States during times of war. Finally, women’s magazines from the 1980s to the present day provide empowering content that allows women to form their own, unique feminine identity in an age when a better variety of lifestyle choices are available. Furthermore, this research found that magazine authors over time were not the sole determinant of what ideas would be presented in the content their audience read. Female readers also had set the public agenda by providing commentary on the content of women’s magazines, and by writing content themselves. Women’s magazines have served as a reflection of America’s changing political and cultural landscape over the years, and they can be credited with delivering

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26 *Ibid.*, 80-1.

27 *Ibid.*, 116.

28 David Gauntlett, *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 206.

29 Winship, *Inside Women’s Magazines*, 158.

30 Gauntlett, *Media, Gender and Identity*, 215.

31 *Ibid.*, 217.

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feminist ideals to an ever-developing, progressive female society.

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