

Analyzing Historical Commercial Postcards

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Introduction

Since their invention in the late 1800s, postcards have served many rhetorical purposes. During the early 1900s postcards became an advertising method. Postcards are a form of communication amongst consumers through mailing and being displayed. Companies need to create quick and enticing strategies to persuade consumers. Through evaluation of the specific textual and visual elements of early twentieth century postcards, there is a deeper understanding of values and societal norms at the time. Postcards are no longer a primary form of media, but advertisements are still prevalent through billboards, television commercials, and social media posts. Knowing historical rhetorical strategies can be extrapolated to modern advertisements.

Methods

- Researched and acquired five historical commercial postcards advertising household items, shoes products, or cars that were collected from across the United States.
- Through an inductive coding scheme, identified textual patterns, such as information, humor, and emphasis, and visual patterns, such as humor, exaggeration, and realism.
- The information provided on the back of the postcards was also analyzed
- Literary research about historical rhetoric in advertising and postcards was conducted.
- Cards were organized based on their codes, with some displaying multiple categories and overlapping of textual and visual elements.

Observed Textual Patterns:

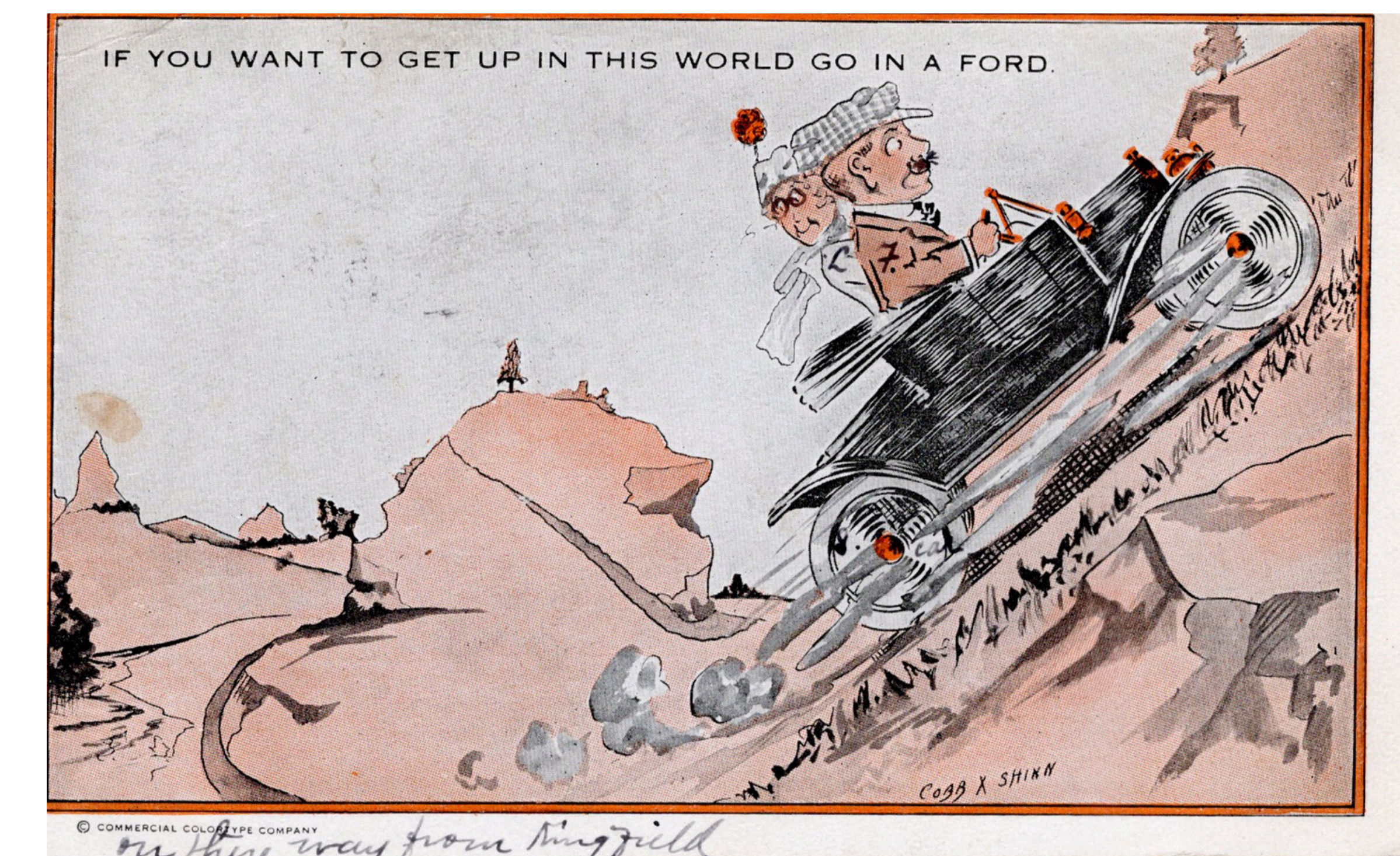
- **Fonts - varying sizes, multiple styles, underlining, and bolding**
- **Encouraging words**
- **Information heavy**

Findings

- Most cards used multiple strategies overlapping visual and textual rhetorical methods.
- Exaggeration was the most common strategy, appearing both visually and textually, emphasizing product use and making the card memorable.
- Baking-related postcards had more text than postcards advertising other items, giving consumers useful and accessible information for cooking.

Observed Visual Patterns:

- **Exaggeration**
- **Color**
- **Photography**
- **Illustration**



Ford Motor Company advertising on a postcard

EXTRA SPECIAL

Thursday, Friday and Saturday

FREE One-half pound can of **HERSHEY'S BREAKFAST COCOA** with each purchase of the **HERSHEY Special**. **FREE**

We are allotted a limited supply of these **HERSHEY** free goods deals. First come, first served. Call at our store or phone your order early.

We carry a Complete Line of Standard Hi-grade Groceries at all times. Let us serve you.
Yours truly,
RAMONA, S. DAK. **J. H. BAST & SON**

Postcard advertising a special offer for Hershey's Cocoa

Important to Housekeepers.

The HOME BAKING POWDER COMPANY, request you to try this sample of Baking Powder, which their Agent will give you with this Card.

It is positively the **BEST** ever used.

PUT UP IN
Quarter, Half, One, and Five pound Cans,
AND SOLD BY ALL FIRST CLASS GROCERS.

DIRECTIONS.

Sift together two heaping teaspoonfuls of this Baking Powder with a quart of Flour, and mix a smooth dough soft enough to be handled; then put it in a hot oven immediately.

The object of sending you this sample is to prove that on trial, you will find it much better for cookery than any Powder you have been using. Insist on your Grocer getting it for you should he not keep it—use no other but the

Home Comfort Baking Powder.

Office:—285 WASHINGTON ST.

(OVER)

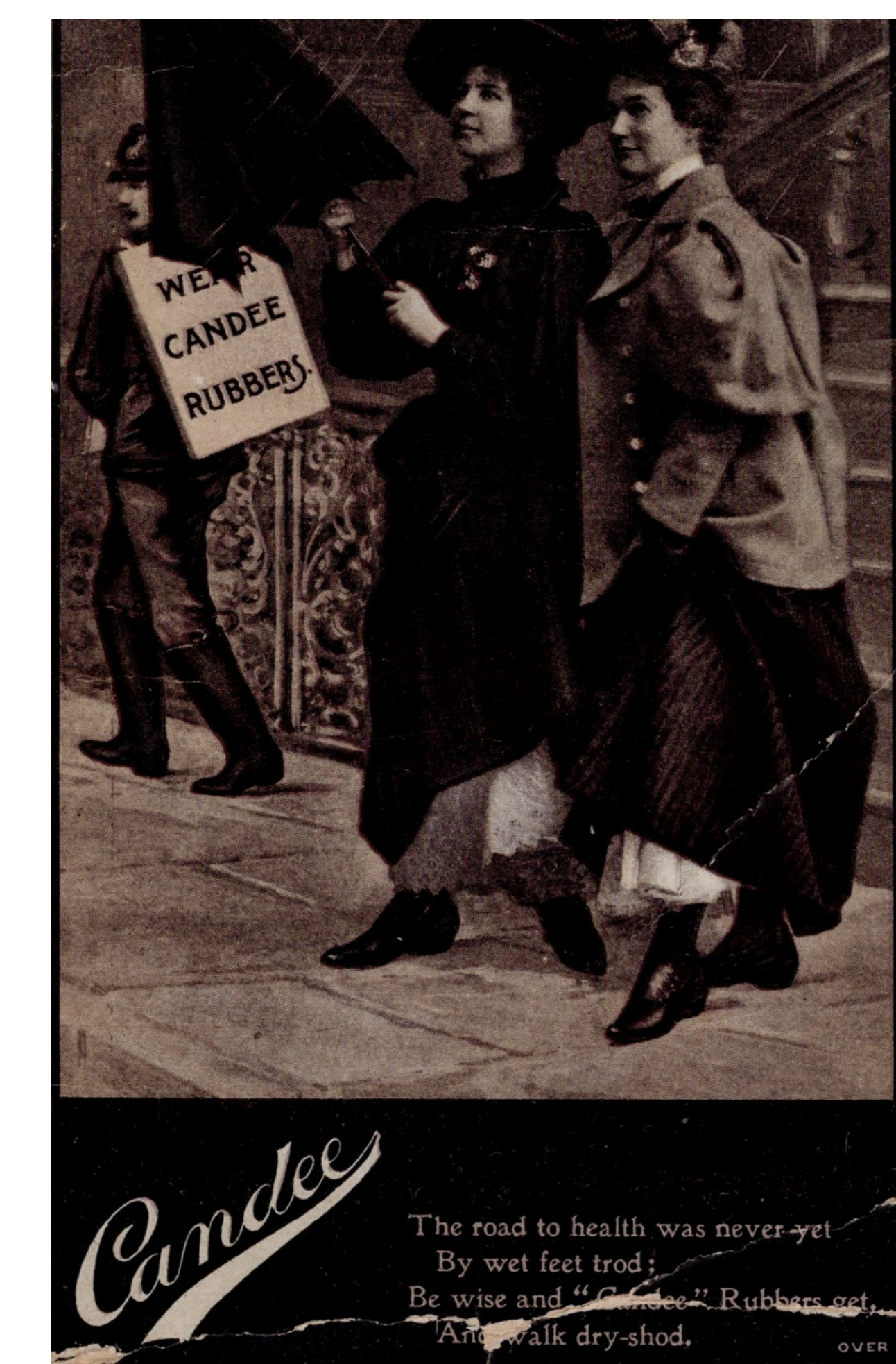
Back of a postcard promoting baking soda

Conclusion

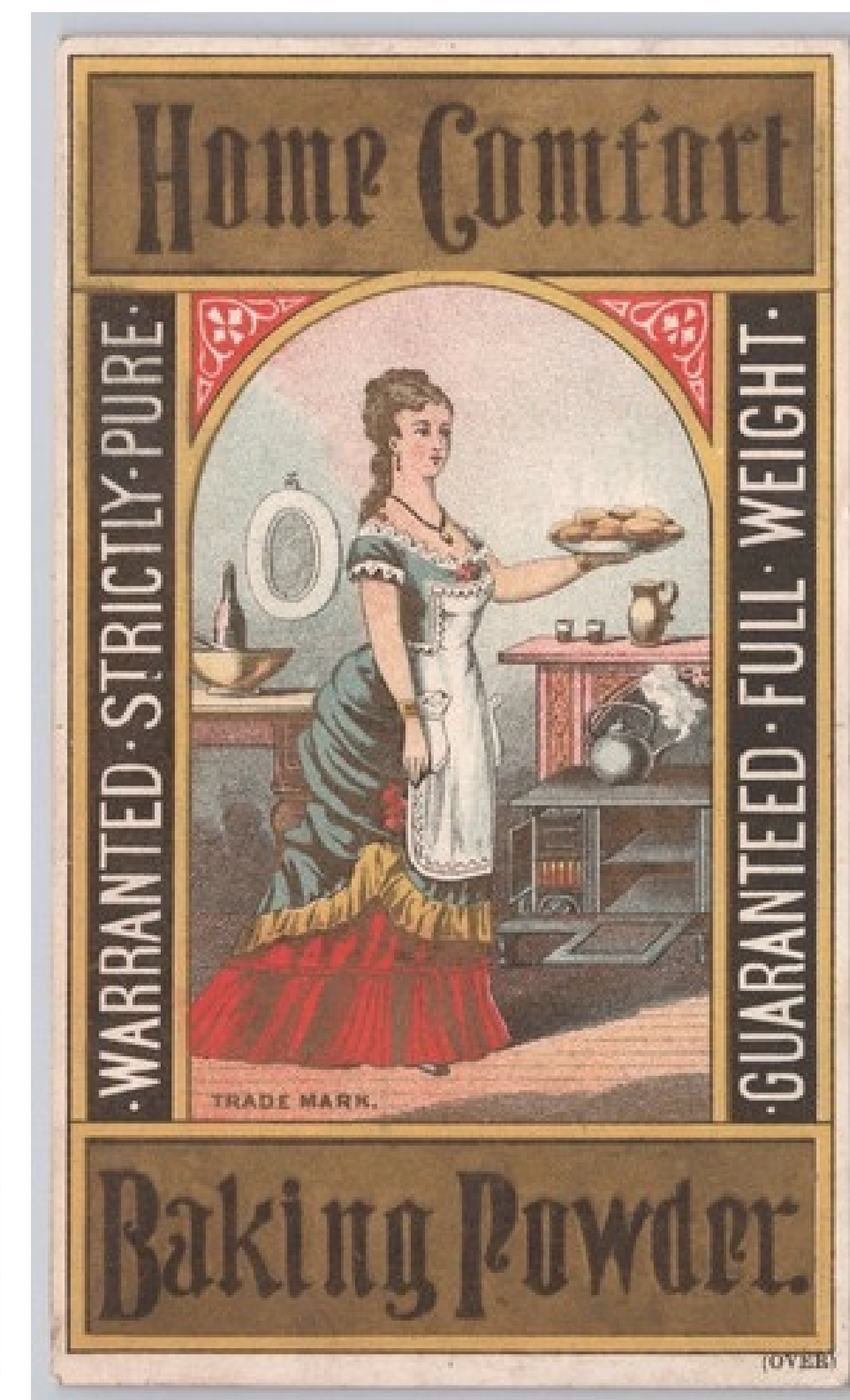
- This research provides insight into the past and companies' advertising strategies.
- The patterns suggest that advertisers combined imagery and language to reinforce values such as domestic productivity, consumer efficiency, and product reliability.
- Understanding companies' methods for advertising offers ideas for future advertising strategies and answered the research question.
- A strength was having access to the physical postcards because it allowed for detailed observation of each card and its rhetorical patterns.
- The sample size was a limitation as more cards would have created a larger scope and understanding of historical postcard advertising patterns.
- Future studies could analyze more cards with a wider range of products.

Resources

- Barthes, R. (1977). Rhetoric of the Image. In S. Heath (Ed. & Trans.), *Image, Music, Text* (pp. 32-51). New York: Hill and Wang.
- Kohn, Ayelet. "Let's Put Our (Post)Cards on the Table." *Visual Communication*, vol. 2, no. 3, Oct. 2003, pp. 265-284, doi:10.1177/14703572030023002.
- Postcrossing.com. "History of the Postcard." World Postcard Day, worldpostcardday.com/history. Accessed 20 Feb. 2026.



Postcard promoting Candee Rubber



Baking Powder advertisement featured on a postcard



Wolverine Shell Horsehide advertisement on a postcard