

Running Head: FEMALE HYGIENE ADVERTISEMENT CRITIQUE

A Critique of Advertisements for Female Hygiene Products: A Silent Crisis in America

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Abstract

Female hygiene advertisements can be ambiguous due to the intimate nature of menstruation. This can result in a lack of information and invoke the need to hide signals of menstruation. Further, understanding the target audience's desires and needs is crucial. Just like any other advertisement campaign, the women buying female hygiene products desire to know the benefits of one type over another. Adding an emotive appeal or a creative method to the advertisement is not wrong. This thesis does not suggest for a dull advertisement; however, there is a balance—a campaign designed to care for and inform women while meeting their body's needs.

A Critique of Advertisements for Female Hygiene Products: A Silent Crisis in America

To begin, this thesis recognizes the power and influence that advertisements have. More specifically into this topic, the role of women in advertisements is analyzed. Next, the topic of female hygiene is discussed from a biological perspective. Following that, the reality of women in the United States suffering from the inaccessibility and unaffordability is unpacked. This lack of access and affordability of these products sends impoverished and homeless women down a negative cycle pattern. This is not able to be openly discussed due to the societal stigmas associated with female hygiene in the United States.

Advertisements

Advertisements are everywhere. According to *Forbes* (2017) a consumer is exposed to 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements a day. A consumer can walk down the street and see logos on people's sneakers, billboards for the 'most reliable' car, and moving advertisements for the latest Broadway show on a yellow taxi. All forms of advertisements are focused on one thing: persuasion. Persuading the consumer to generate interest in a product that leads to a purchase which forms a loyal relationship to the brand. Without the money spent, the company cannot exist. So how is it done? Placing their brand in every place possible, garnering visual attention, is one of the last steps of the process. The content of an advertisement is composed of the images, sounds, colors, and words used to create the advertisement. Each of those elements are purposefully constructed to generate an effective and impactful advertisement. Therefore, the focus is on theories in which advertisements use to persuade consumers.

Theories

Advertising theories allow consumers to analyze the content of an advertisement. These theories help explain the relationship between the advertisement and the audience. These theories will later be applied to the advertisements.

Semiotics

Semiotic theory centers on the relationship between symbols and interpreters. These objects and words form symbols that imply a meaning to the interpreter. In advertising, messages are both explicitly and implicitly sent through the combination of symbols, objects, and words. The two theorists most associated with theory are Saussure and Peirce. First, “In Saussure's linguistic system, a sign is a link between the signified (a concept) and the signifier (a sound pattern) both of which are psychological constructs having nonmaterial form rather than material substance” (Vickers, Faith, & Rossiter, 2013). This theory details how the senses the receiver links in the brain to form a well formulated concept. On the other hand, the “Peircean approach, which encompasses the triad of sign, signification, and interpretant. [...] also proposed the existence of three types of signs: iconic, indexical, and symbolic” (Greer & Cassidy, 2018, p. 5). This triad displays the interwoven relationship between the three concepts, whereas Saussure’s theory depends more on a two-way relationship. Semiotics explains how when a person looks outside and sees a tall brown tube with smaller brown tubes coming out of it and green paper-like shapes attached to it, they can identify those symbols as a tree. Yet, when hearing the word “tree” or seeing “tree” in the form of the written word, there is so much more that can come to mind. Explained by Eco (1997):

Take the term /dog/. The referent will certainly not be dog x standing by me while I am pronouncing the word for anyone who holds to the doctrine of the referent, the referent, in such a case, will be all existing dogs (and also all past and future dogs). But <<all existing dogs>> is not an object which can be perceived by the sense. It is a set, a class, a logical entity. (p. 66)

However, consider if someone has never seen a dog before, or at least not every type of dog. This introduces hindrances to the level of interpretation possible. (Yet, it is not to say the overall point could still be made without a complete background).

As with all things, there are barriers that can limit or inhibit the interpreter from fully understanding and receiving the message that the symbols hold at each level. Namely, “The extent to which a sign is comprehended is contingent on a number of factors that range from individual to social and cultural” (Greer & Cassidy, 2018). A person’s background—education, race, age—all build the frame of reference that processes and places new symbols:

In the case of /crime/ I might find that the corresponding cultural unit in another culture has a broader or more restricted range; in the case of /snow/ it might be found that for Eskimos there are in fact four cultural units which correspond to four different states of snow and which are conveyed by four expression-units. (Eco, 1997, p. 67)

Eco further develops an answer to a question about how culture and symbols impact perception.

In a business context, companies use symbols and semiotics as a whole to communicate and connect with the target audience (Ferguson & Greer, 2018). Even the

use of logos and slogans are marketing tools that rely on semiotics to be persuasive and create concepts to the consumer (Ferguson & Greer, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial for a company to understand the culture of the target audience. This way, there is the clearest possible perception when particular symbols and languages are used in an advertisement. Kourdis studied three Greek advertisements and analyzed their use of symbols through semiotic theory. Kourdis' conclusions illuminate to the reader the critical role that symbols play when combined to create an advertisement:

Plastic visual signs often participate to expressive forms of rhetoric, such as is synecdoche. Their polarized elements (for instance, light/dark) play a central role in intersemiosis where plastic visual signs are always present. Plastic visual signs, especially colours, can be used as symbols and indexes: green colour for nature and ecology, grey for roads, white for clouds. [...] This remark shows us the importance the advertisers place upon them and that plastic visual signs can be considered as a new and growing field in advertising based on cultural knowledge and cognitive procedures. (Zantides, 2014, p. 83)

Each choice a company makes to include certain words with certain typography and colors are built to make a bigger message. Each element should be looked at individually and carefully considered to better understand its potential implications.

In conclusion, theories of persuasion are used to convey messages to readers. The perception is that this all occurs quite naturally. The typical consumer may not think longer than a brief moment about why certain advertisements used a particular color, slogan, or symbol. However, on the corporate side of things, all of these choices are not arbitrary. Actually, in the advertising world, creation of advertisements are the exact

opposite of arbitrary. Each aspect is calculated and chosen with a particular target segment and outcome in mind. Next, this paper will look at how these choices have impacted women in advertisements.

Women in Advertisements

Gender is one of the demographics most commonly used when segmenting target markets for advertisements. Women are a major target group for advertisements: “Women influence 7 trillion dollars of spending in the US annually in this country and influence 83% of all consumer spending in the United States” (Arata, 2017, para. 2). Therefore, women are used in advertisements and are advertised to directly. The role that women play in advertisements can perpetuate stereotypes, reflect societal norms, and influence women’s decisions. This can have a significant impact on the real people watching and being influenced by these advertisements: “The general consensus [of experts] is that advertising reflects society in a distorted fashion, calling attention to and exaggerating some aspects of our lives and hiding others” (Patterson, O’Malley & Story, 2009, p. 10). Some issues that have arose include false perceptions of beauty, lack of inclusivity of all women, and limiting expectations and roles for women. One of the studies that is further discussed later references that studies of American television commercials conclude that women are more likely to be shown as sex objects and homemakers than males—who are depicted as employed, aggressive, and order-givers (Baumaan & De Laat, 2012, p. 536). Generally, there are a few overarching female roles played out in advertisements.

Stereotypes

A research study was composed to investigate female stereotypes, specifically in advertisements in the United Kingdom. Almost 4,000 advertisements from the ten most popular magazines were analyzed. The main purpose of this study is to measure frequency of female roles and compare female roles in the advertisements

(Plakoyiannaki, 2009, p. 1429). Her discoveries are:

First, the results indicated that women in British magazine advertisements were mainly portrayed in decorative roles (supporting the notion of retro-sexism). [...] The findings additionally suggested that male-oriented magazines seemed to promote women in decorative and traditional roles, while general audience magazines used female depictions of women shown equal to men.

(Plakoyiannaki, 2009, p. 1411)

The majority of the female roles are seen as decorative and retro-sexist. These terms suggest that the advertisements are not portraying the progress society has made in the goal of gender equality. These conclusions show the progress that has been made but, also, the amount of progress there is still left.

Age

Baumann and De Laat, 2012, performs a study to analyze the representation of different ages, intersected by gender, for television commercials. An analysis of 63 hours of prime time television over 18 months of programming from the top three television networks in Canada was done. The findings are:

Our multivariate analyses show that while there are significant gender differences, both younger women and younger men are shown in a diversity of contexts—

namely in employment and a variety of domestic contexts. Older men are portrayed more frequently on the job and with more job authority than other groups. In contrast, older women lack any clear occupational or familial roles and are the only group not associated with a socially valued schema. (Baumaan & De Laat, 2012, p. 514)

These conclusions suggest there is an underrepresentation of older people as a whole but specifically of women. Additionally, the roles that older women played in the advertisements differed from older males. This reinforces to the viewer that there are limits to not only age but also gender. Ultimately, “[...] advertising does not straightforwardly reflect social realities, but instead distorts reality to depict social distinctions in extreme terms” (Baumaan, De Laat, 2012, p. 536).

Femvertising

There is a newer wave of women in advertising called ‘femvertising’. This is a form of advertising that empowers the female, unlike the former and current stereotypes employed that gained notoriety in 2014. This style of advertising has come in response to the other advertisements that this paper has mentioned thusly. As advertisements fail to reflect the progress in society and place women in false stereotypes, women have begun to speak out. Akestam, Rosengren, & Dahlen (2017) “hypothesizes that femvertising (vs. traditional portrayals of females in advertising) will reduce ad reactance among a female target audience, and that this in turn will enhance ad and brand attitudes” (p. 802). This study specifically researched advertisements that broke from implementing more “traditional” female roles—homemaker, sex object, background role. The conclusion, “Marketers have much to gain from adapting a more proactive and mindful approach to

the female portrayals they use in their ads” (Akestam, Rosengren, & Dahlen, 2017, p. 802). This concept of Femvertising, especially since now analyzed in the world of advertising, could be applied to female hygiene advertisements, as this thesis will further explore.

In conclusion, these typecasts place limits on women and impact people’s views on the gender. Over decades, their roles have changed. This research shows that the changes and improvements may not have progressed enough to properly reflect true roles in society. In the future, the trend of Femvertising is a promising avenue for the representation of women in advertisements. Next, this paper will discuss a topic that applies to women around the world; first, through the lens of biology and culture, then as an industry.

Female Hygiene

Each healthy woman experiences a monthly period for the majority of her life. A period occurs in a woman during the time of puberty; the onset of puberty has been starting earlier over time: “Over the past 15 years, girls have been starting puberty at younger ages” (Menstrual History, 2019, para. 1). From a biological perspective, a regular menstrual cycle is the mark of a healthy woman, if not pregnant. Hawkins and Matzuk (2008) states, “The basic biology of the menstrual cycle is a complex, coordinated sequence of events involving the hypothalamus, anterior pituitary, ovary, and endometrium. The menstrual cycle with all its complexities can be easily perturbed by environmental factors such as stress, extreme exercise, eating disorders, and obesity” (para. 1). This supports the notion that the menstrual cycle’s regular occurrence is a natural and healthy event in a woman’s life.

Naturally, female hygiene products are used by a woman when experiencing a menstrual cycle. These products serve the purpose of maintaining cleanliness and sanitation of the woman's body. Without these female hygiene products or with the misuse of them, women can contract infections (5 Risks, 2018), cervical cancer (Juneja, Seghal, Mitra, & Pandey, 2003), or even die (Brand, 2018). It seems obvious that a woman then would choose to use these products; yet, "two out of three had to go without feminine hygiene products at least once over the prior year" (Eastern Carolina Women's Center, 2019). The roots of this problem include not affording the product and not having access to the product.

Are these products really that expensive? Could they really cause such a financial burden? From a business and sales perspective, these products bring in significant financial profits. A woman in the United States is estimated to use over 16,800 female products in her lifetime (Weiss-Wolf, 2015). Since these products are essential to a woman's hygiene, there has not been a lack of sales. The female hygiene product industry brings in \$2 billion each year in the United States alone (Weiss-Wolf, 2015). There are also sales taxes on hygiene products in 37 states in America (Weiss-Wolf, 2015). "Women spend an average of \$7 per month on feminine hygiene products for 40 years of their lives. Each year, California women pay more than \$20 million in taxes on these items" (Kandil, 2016, para. 14). Not only are the products themselves a necessity needed to be budgeted for each month, but their price dramatically compounds over time due to state taxes on these products. Additionally, the use of food stamps is of course not applicable to these products. All of these things add to the barriers of a woman's access

to these products. The cost of these products can be a driving source of why women cannot afford them.

The impact that these costs have on women in the United States can be devastating. There is a great potential for the cost to compound and cause a domino effect in a woman's life. The main population segment that this is seen in is within two groups of women—women on the brink of poverty and homeless women. These women are at a disadvantage and have little opportunities to receive these products while in their position. While there are long-term solutions that can allow them to move into different living and economic positions, the menstrual cycle does not discriminate on which women experience it. All women do and need short-term and immediate solutions while it is occurring.

In the United States, a significant portion of women in America live in poverty or on the brink of it. One in three American women live in poverty or are at risk for poverty. This accounts for a total of 42 million women in the United States (Alter, 2014). This significant population of women struggle to meet their physical basic needs sending them in a depreciating cyclical track. These women are students, employees, and some are homeless.

To begin, what happens when a female student does not have menstrual products? Many female students do not have access to or the funds to buy female products causing them to miss classes and schools. This results in a lack of education and even potential academic penalties due to their absence. A former teacher in Virginia, Holly Seibold, “learned some girls skip school when they have their periods” (Chandler, 2017, para. 16). A student, Terrionna Thomas from Roosevelt STAY High School testified, “she found

herself questioning whether to go to school one day when her supply of sanitary pads was low and she was not sure she could make it through the day” (Chandler, 2017, para.18). The psychological aspect needs to also be taken into account. “Even more importantly, it can be devastating, emotionally draining and uncomfortable to be pulled out of society for days at a time” (Global Access to Hygiene, 2017, para. 9). A female student has to keep herself from her normal routines, embarrassed and ashamed for a healthy bodily function.

What happens when a female employee does not have menstrual products? Two-thirds of women work minimum wage jobs, many of whom do not have paid sick days (National Women’s Law Center, 2014). Yet, if a woman does not have the proper health products during menstruation, she will need to miss work. This results in women missing paid work days and, ultimately, collecting less money each month. This leaves them with even less money to buy health products with next month. These cycles impact thousands of women in the United States. A menstrual cycle occurs monthly, and these financial burdens compound greatly.

Next, what happens when a homeless woman has her period? Homeless women struggle to find access to female hygiene products. Kandil (2016) quotes Gina Jackson, the Orange County regional director for an anti-poverty organization: “[she] discovered that feminine hygiene products are among the most requested items at food pantries and homeless shelters — but organizations rarely have enough pads, tampons and liners to meet the needs of their clients” (para. 5). Some homeless women try to improvise with secondary products such as toilet paper, but these products are insufficient and put the women at risk for health issues. Miller (2017) reports:

Many people improvise by using toilet paper and paper towels as makeshift pads and tampons, but these paper based products found in public restrooms are often already soiled, as so many people pass through public restrooms, touching toilet paper and paper towels with dirty hands. (para. 4)

Homeless women are at a greater health risk because of the lack of cleanliness. A *Huffington Post* article shares of the difficult situation homeless women are in, “Compounding the issue is the fact that clean showers are also scarce, and not washing during menstruation can lead to infections” (Goldberg, 2017, para. 2). Homeless women often have to settle with waiting out their time of the month, hoping to receive a different pair of clothes soon after.

The evidence shows that there is a problem with the way things currently occur in the United States and globally. Research has been conducted to discover why women may not have access to the proper menstrual products. For example, the United Nations has spoken out about the issue of females’ inaccessibility to proper sanitation. The UN agrees that the issue of female menstruation is a taboo in most cultures. The Chief of UN Human Rights Office Economic and Social and Social Issues Section, Jyoti Sanghera, stated, “Stigma around menstruation and menstrual hygiene is a violation of several human rights, most importantly of the right to human dignity” (OHCHR, 2014, para. 5). This argues that the concern on female health should be considered in a high regard. This hinders women from being able to seek out certain outlets for help and relief. Those who can afford the products rarely need to address or begin to understand how many people there are that need these products desperately. The stigma silences the shameful.

Perception of Menstruation

To begin, the previous section of this paper outlines how there can be a negative perception, socially and culturally, surrounding the concept of menstruation. The following sections are designed to further support this with research.

Terror Management Theory

To begin, Terror Management Theory is explained by Burke, Martens, and Faucher (2010) as, “to help explain the ubiquitous need for meaning and self-esteem—that they may arise in part in an effort to secure oneself psychologically from concerns stemming from the awareness of mortality” (p. 155). Understanding this concept, Erchull (2013) uncovers how this theory links to female hygiene: “Terror Management Theory has led to suggestions that humans may distance themselves from menstruation in order to avoid reminders of their own corporeality and mortality, and the objectification of women has received empirical support as one means to do so” (p. 32).

The name becomes quite self-revealing. Humans tend to avoid their own mortality or even as Erchull explains, their own ‘corporeality’. Therefore, there is a natural idealization and sexualizing of a woman, focusing on the positive and preferred aspects of a woman. The distancing pushes away some of the practical functions of a woman, “Women’s bodies are often treated as objects of beauty to be admired; at the same time, women’s bodies are also often reviled with respect to their more functional natures” (Erchull, 2013). Roberts and Waters, 2004, list lactation, menstruation, and gestation as examples (Erchull, 2013). An analysis of 240 menstrual product advertisements published in *Seventeen* and *Cosmopolitan* over 12 years was examined for evidence of distancing through objectification (Erchull, 2013). The way the distancing through

objectification was measured was through noting and weighing when certain symbols or suggestions were made in an advertisement. The overarching themes included observing if the woman was portrayed as flawless, if the advertisement focused on one specific body part, especially if a sexually indicative part, and if the woman was viewed as sexually available. In conclusion, the results were significant. While the use of sexuality was less common than expected, the use of idealization of women through their clothes and the use of focusing on certain body parts over the body as a whole, proved to be consistent in the majority of the advertisements. This is consistent with distancing according to Terror Management Theory.

Goffman's Stigma

Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) discuss the mark of menstruation as a social stigma. This article defines stigma in accordance with Goffman's definition: "the word stigma refers to any stain or mark that sets some people apart from others; it conveys the information that those people have a defect of body or character that spoils their appearance or identity" (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 9). The three criteria to define and categorize this stigma include abnormalities of the body, blemishes on one's character or integrity, and symbols of marginalized cultures (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). This journal argues that menstruation checks all three of Goffman's boxes of criteria of stigma. A woman's menstrual blood is viewed as the last acceptable and most disgusting bodily excretion, over, "saliva, urine, and tears" (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 10). This contributed to the abomination of the body portion. Secondly, as quoted by Roberts in Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler's report (2013) "were able to demonstrate empirically that even reminders of menstrual blood (e.g., tampons)

can lead to avoidance and social distancing, which suggests that menstrual blood may serve as a blemish on women's character" (p. 10). The reaction of others, even those of which the woman is closest to, can be negative towards any signs that a woman is menstruating. This fleshes out parallel to a response to a flaw in one's personality. Lastly, menstruation applies solely to the female gender, making them a distinct 'tribe' or social group.

Johnston-Robledo, Chrisler (2013) links the perpetuation of this stigma partially to advertisements for female hygiene products:

Ads for menstrual products have contributed to the communication taboo by emphasizing secrecy, avoidance of embarrassment, and freshness (Coutts and Berg 1993; Delaney et al. 1987; Houppert 1999; Merskin 1999). Allegorical images, such as flowers and hearts, and blue rather than reddish liquid, have been used euphemistically to promote secrecy and delicacy (Merskin 1999). Ads play on women's fear of being discovered as menstruating because discovery means stigma. (Coutts and Berg 1993), (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 11)

This stigma results in women feeling shame causing them to conceal and hide this part of themselves. One of the biggest impacts shame has is silencing women, "Finally, menstrual stigma is perpetuated indirectly through silence. Menstruation is typically avoided in conversation, except under certain circumstances (e.g., in private with female friends and relatives, in a health education or biology class, in a doctor's office)" (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). This paper argues that this stigmatized silence is one that is perpetuated through female hygiene advertisements and is one of the major reasons why women are suffering in the United States.

Educational Pamphlets in American Public Schools

Charlesworth (2001) investigates the educational pamphlets that females are given in American public schools about menstruation. This time can be both formative and socially awkward for female students. For some, it can even be the first time that they are hearing that blood will come out of their vagina once a month for the majority of their life. This visual statement is not intended to be crass, but rather to help the reader of this thesis be aware of the shocking and confusing nature of the information that this pamphlet awakens young women to. Charlesworth (2001) supports this: “In general, menstrual and puberty education lessons are the only rituals in which American adolescents mark their transformation from child to young adult” (p. 2). This lesson is defined and explained by Charlesworth (2001) as a lesson during the school day in which boys and girls are separated for lessons on puberty and their changing bodies. She also notes that teachers are not necessarily trained in health or puberty education; additionally, her studies show that puberty and menstruation lessons have not changed significantly over the past five decades (Charlesworth, 2001).

The results found two narratives that the pamphlets told the readers. The first narrative involves the scientific and biological explanation of menstruation which has a distant tone. The second narrative personifies the woman undergoing puberty and relays the experiences she will have. These two narratives presented both the factual and personal interpretation of the change. Charlesworth’s (2001) analysis finds two paradoxes with this:

The first paradox suggests that biologically, menstruation is important but that culturally, a menstruator must behave as she would any other day and even ignore

her menstrual cycle, thus negating the importance of menstruation. The second paradox suggests that biologically, menstruation is natural and normal but that culturally, a menstruator must do everything she can to keep anything relating to her menstrual cycle concealed, thus negating the naturalness and normalcy attributed to menstruation. Essentially, these paradoxical constructions leave readers with little choice but to accept a cultural narrative that positions women's bodies as abnormal. (p. 3)

The role of the menstruator does not match the normalcy and necessity that puberty and menstruation should have, as explained by the biological narrative. This teaches shame to women at a young age. Culture overrides the biological.

Overall, this topic of female hygiene proves to cause a disruption in culture. This taboo nature around the topic can have a damaging impact on women. It is vital that this topic is studied and better understood. Following this foundational background information, this paper will discover how female hygiene advertisements actually portray menstruation.

Analysis of Female Hygiene Advertisements

In the United States, Tampax is the most popularly purchased tampon brand (Most Popular Tampon Brand, 2018). This thesis will investigate some artifacts, commercials and print advertisements, from this campaign. The use of symbols and languages are all an application of semiotics to convey a persuasive message. The following will analyze Tampax advertisements of several media—one from the 1990s, a campaign from only 10 years ago, and one that is two years old.

To note, television advertisements are run during programming that fits the commercial's target demographic. However, due to the vast, general audience that can view a television commercial, this may cause hesitation to use certain language and symbols about menstruation on television.

In the mid-1990s, Tampax released a commercial for their new product, Tampax Compak tampons. The commercial opens with a modern remake of Billie Holiday's song, "Ain't nobody's business if I Do", repeating in the background. There are various women shown throughout the commercial. They are all Caucasian women moving to the beat of the music. They are shown in their natural habitat. Some interesting shots show women in gowns, one woman in a bikini, and a group of women wearing bathing suits while running slowly on the beach. The advertisement is selling the lifestyle of the woman who uses these products, rather than the actual products. Additionally, all of the women are shown in recreational roles, none in a workplace setting. Even the shot of the women running on the beach pays a homage to the popular show of the time, *Baywatch*. It could be argued that this implies a sexual appeal to the women. Especially for an advertisement of a health product, not many informative facts about the product or bodily health are shared. Additionally, the word "period" was not even used. Rather, the voice over included sentences such as, "Nobody knows you are carrying it or wearing it" (Tampax Compak Tampons, 2016). This message tells women that their periods should be kept a secret. It implies that there would be shame or a negative reaction if someone knew they had a tampon on their person. Overall, this enforces the message that periods are better when left unspoken.

As addressed earlier, euphemistic and symbolic language is used throughout the female hygiene industry. One of Tampax's most popular campaigns that aired in 2009 was titled, "Outsmart Mother Nature." This campaign uses similar symbols across the campaign. To begin, the campaign name itself already presents an interesting take on periods. The euphemistic personification of a period as "Mother Nature" highlights taboos and off-limit speech in this industry. Periods should be a cause for celebration as a mark of health and potential fertility. Yet, this campaign title is laced with the negative connotation that receiving one's period is not to be enjoyed. This campaign title suggests deceiving biology to avoid getting a period.

The first artifact is a commercial run by the campaign titled, "Photoshoot", for the purposes of this thesis (Bacianna, 2009). The commercial begins with loud club music playing and the audience sees many silver and white images across the screen. Everyone in the commercial is wearing tight, white clothing. The scene opens to a set of a photoshoot with a man and a woman sitting on a couch. All of a sudden, the music abruptly cuts off and a woman in a green tweed suit holding a pink and red present steps onto the scene. The woman is referred to by the model as "Mother Nature" and the gift has a tag on it that reads "Mother Nature's Monthly Gift." Mother Nature harps on the inconvenience of having a period and the limiting side effects of a period. However, the model rebuts saying that with her new product, Tampax Pearl, her period will not interrupt her life (Bacianna, 2009). The commercial ends with a digital image of the product and the narrator repeating the campaign slogan, "Outsmart Mother Nature."

As a note, no direct mention of the product's benefits or information about a woman's health is mentioned. While this advertising campaign was seen as progressive

even for its time, the symbols and implications reinforce stereotypes about both women and periods. This commercial aligns with this research, “Many girls report shame about being seen with a menstrual product or, worse yet, about bleeding through clothing, and some adolescent girls report that they are embarrassed simply by the fact that they menstruate” (Schooler, Ward, Merriweather, & Caruthers, 2005, p. 324). Overall, this commercial promoted that hygiene products and menstrual cycles should be kept hidden away and are a hindrance to one’s life.

In this commercial, the viewer sees many layers of euphemisms; the use of symbols and metaphors are extremely present in this commercial. Yet, these symbols are not used to leave a deep and ambiguous interpretation per the viewer’s discretion. These symbols have clear and definitive meanings. Semiotics theories can be applied by using the relationship of culture and society to build a framework for how the symbols are perceived by the referent. To begin, the woman called “Mother Nature” represents the giver of a period, which is often attributed in culture to Mother Nature. Additionally, the gift that Mother Nature carries is representative of a woman’s period. The fashion in the commercial portrays a clean and undefiled image. A study on females in commercials details:

Consistent with prior research, disidentifying clothing was commonly used in the advertisements. Depicted women were often dressed in tight and/or white clothing. Prior research has contextualized the use of disidentifiers as a means of maintaining secrecy and avoiding shame since the advertised products are not visible under tight clothing and will prevent leaks that could soil white clothes. (Erchull, 2013, p. 37)

The white clothes are used to show that a woman has the freedom to wear white, showing a woman is not menstruating at the present time.

Now that these symbols have been defined, this paper will explore them at a greater scope. The use of the character of Mother Nature already presents some issues. This commercial suggests that Mother Nature is the reason why women have their periods. In reality, of course, a period is a biological occurrence and healthy event in a woman's life. In addition, the use of the period as a gift is ironic and sarcastic. The fact that a normally pleasant thing, a gift, is associated with a period enforces a contrasting view, assuming women do not want their periods. Additionally, the use of the color white suggests that women do not have the freedom to wear white on their periods. This also is a color that suggests that a woman would fear bleeding out when wearing white while menstruating. Ultimately, these interpretations of the symbols impact the way a woman views her period and her body.

Not only are the unspoken symbols in this commercial powerful, but the actual dialogue is as well. The dialogue begins with the character Mother Nature asking the question, "Having fun anyone?" The model responds with a strong push back saying, "Mother Nature, not now." Mother Nature presents the gift to the model, telling her it is time for her monthly period and tells the model, "I think we better stop this right now." With an attitude the model responds, "Actually, we can stay." She responds by saying that she has Tampax Pearl, the new tampon that will keep her secure throughout her period. The narrator then states that their product is in a new applicator invented by Tampax and repeats the slogan, "Outsmart Mother Nature." The exchange between the characters is not a pleasant one. Mother Nature enters the scene with the intention of

ruining the model's day and making her upset; Mother Nature even seems disappointed when she does not receive a poor reaction from the model. This implies to the consumer that getting one's period is something to dread. Mother Nature also attempts to hinder the model's work and regular activity. This also suggests that women are limited when menstruating, not able to continue on with their routine. This commercial tries to empower women through their product but misses the mark. While this is a noble attempt, no health information or actual facts about the product or its effectiveness is shared. Instead of actually informing the consumer about the qualities of the product that are beneficial, Tampax solely says that this product will help you "outsmart" your period.

Secondly, the next artifact is a print advertisement titled "Serena." This advertisement shows a tennis court with famous tennis player, Williams, smacking a tennis ball through Mother Nature's monthly gift. Mother Nature has a shocked look on her face as a flaming hole is left through her present to Williams.

To begin with a symbol analysis, similarly to the commercial, the same symbols of Mother Nature and the monthly gift are used. While the model in the "Photoshoot" commercial showed attitude to Mother Nature, this print advertisement shows Williams meeting her period with anger and ferocity. Instead of embracing the product to empower her abilities during menstruation, this advertisement places a negative emotion towards periods. Tampax positions their product as the escape from any negative side effects, implying that periods are limiting. Ultimately, their product is being used as a defense mechanism instead of a helpful tool. Additionally, Williams is the celebrity spokesperson for this campaign. Her image adds value to the campaign as a strong woman who is very successful and well-known in her field. Her outfit is an all-white tennis look in the

advertisement. This also suggests that she is “clean” or not menstruating, because she is not worried about blood leaking onto her garments. Ultimately, these symbols build a negative disposition around periods.

Furthermore, the language in the “Serena” artifact portrays a slightly different, more positive connotation than the images and symbols. The advertisement copy reads, “A champion like Serena Williams doesn’t let Mother Nature’s Monthly Gift interrupt her game. That’s why she trusts Tampax Pearl plastic with a new and improved LeakGuard braid” (Kissling, 2010). This text presents the product as a solution to women that empowers them to continue on with their activities. Surprisingly, the text contrasts the photo by not imposing limitations on a woman due to her menstruation. However, the copy writing does not provide any health information about the product. Overall, the language of this advertisement sends a message that this product is a solution that can allow a woman to maintain her everyday activities.

Finally, a look at Tampax’s most recent campaign from 2017 will mark the progress made in the advertisement field. The new Tampax campaign is titled “Power Over Periods.” Initially, the mere use of the word ‘period’ speaks volumes about the progress made so far. Additionally, the phrase used implies empowerment to women. It does personify the period as a battle to be won or an enemy to be fought. Yet, the women, ultimately, is encouraged and uplifted through this slogan. The main commercial played for this campaign highlights diversity of women’s races. A woman is featured talking to a friend on an apartment building stoop then riding a bike through the city. A shot of her from behind focuses on her rear end to show off the lack of blood stains or underwear lines. Then, a digital image of a tampon appears on the screen to show the direction the

braided tail. Water droplets represent blood flow and the “leak guard protection” the tampon provides. The advertisement has upbeat, happy music playing in the background. The voiceover champions the slogan: power over periods. Then, gives the choice back to women: if women choose Tampax, they can have a successful period (Power Over Periods, 2017). While the word “period” being used is a great triumph, the lack of benefits and health issues being addressed is oblique. The water droplets graphic used do not represent a period well. A woman’s needs are not addressed though this campaign.

There are major issues with the way that female hygiene products are advertised even in the United States. America’s biggest tampon company, Tampax, has changed methods of advertising over the years. In the late 1990s, the campaigns portrayed women as focused on social or housework. Women were bogged down by negative social stigmas attached to their periods. The theme of shame and lack of directness saturated the media form. In the late 2000s, symbolism and personification showed progress but lacked a true addressing of the issue. In the late 2010s, today, there is a more empowering speech to the commercials. Yet, there is still room to improve. As commercials focus more on the true issues and incorporate the woman’s perspective into the creation process, advertisements will be more effective in meeting women’s needs, which could lead to better sales.

Currently, there has been progress in the female hygiene product industry. Some advertisements are beginning to recognize small stereotyping and encourage female empowerment. On another hand, some companies have taken a very liberated view of third wave feminism and call for empowerment via lack of any hygiene products. This paper would like to find a middle ground between the taboo saturated and euphemism

filled advertisements and the radical and emotive wave emerging currently. Growing in the Femvertising movement is a potential solution. Ultimately, proper information about health, products without shame for the body or a healthy menstruation is ideal.

In conclusion, it is clear that there are euphemisms and taboos surrounding the topic of menstruation. Research has shown:

We demonstrate, in our review of the psychological literature concerning attitudes and experiences of predominantly American girls and women, that the stigmatized status of menstruation has important consequences for their health, sexuality, and well-being. We argue that the stigma of menstruation both reflects and contributes to women's lower social status and conclude with suggestions for ways to resist the stigma. (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 9)

The symbols and language in the Tampax campaign send a negative message to women about their period. The solution to this issue can be advertisements that better reflect the biological realities, health benefits, and positive elements of menstruation.

Suggestions

First, the most obvious solution is to create a different type of advertisement campaign. A campaign that is not afraid to address and name the actual female organs that the products impact is a great start. Explaining and detailing the critical health of a woman's vagina and its parts and functions are crucial. From there, explaining the health risks and benefits of different products is vital. This appeal to logos should be the forefront message or at least the supporting evidence of every single female hygiene advertisement. Additionally, more information about the products should be shared. Actual information about the materials the products are made out of, the direct benefits

and differences between products would make a strong foundation for an advertisement campaign. This does not discount appeals to ethos or pathos. However, a valid argument is needed with each advertisement.

Secondly, there needs to be a way to eliminate taboo within the culture. The symbols, personification, and metaphors within reinforce taboos. For too long, female hygiene advertisements have beat-around-the-bush. All of the symbolism and imagery creates a mysterious veil around the product. Men and women feel uncomfortable speaking freely about it because even the media does not. The most appropriate time to discuss this topic, during a female hygiene product commercial, does not even feature a transparent conversation about this normal bodily function. A more direct approach to the mere names to the products would cut down on this taboo.

Lastly, a major solution to this advertisement conundrum could be by hiring women to create these advertisements, work for the advertising agencies, and for the companies selling these products. Berman (2014) details about how most executives at major corporations do not have women in roles of upper leadership: “The lack of women executives may help explain why some products and marketing campaigns are so out of touch” (para. 7). Even an interview from a woman who worked as a marketing manager at Proctor and Gamble (P&G) said, “Many of the men she worked with on feminine care products used data and market research to help make decisions about how the company’s tampons should work” (Berman, 2014, para. 16). The *Huffington Post* concludes, “The lack of women executives may help explain why some products and marketing campaigns are so out of touch” (Berman, 2014, para. 6). Understanding that a diverse

management team for a corporation can bring valued perspective and a realistic approach to advertising campaigns is key.

Conclusion

In conclusion, advertising agencies should rely on direct and informative methods of advertisements. Removing the shame and taboo out of a healthy bodily function is the first step. Further, understanding the target audience's desires and needs is another. Just like any other advertisement campaign, the women buying these products desire to know the benefits of one type over another. Adding an emotive appeal or a creative method to the advertisement is not wrong. This thesis does not suggest for a dull advertisement. However, this paper hopes that there is a balance—a campaign designed to care for and inform women while meeting their body's needs.

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