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Adolescence, Advertising, and the Ideology of Menstruation

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Since the 1920s, American advertisers have recognized the taboo associated with menstruation and have incorporated messages about the social consequences of "showing" into feminine hygiene advertising. In order to answer the research question "do advertisements that target girls perpetuate or dispel myths and taboos associated with menstruation?" a content analysis was conducted on ten years of feminine hygiene advertising in Seventeen *and* Teen *magazines (1987–1997). Categories included an analysis of the setting and the themes used in the advertisements. The findings suggest that the ads do rely on headlines and themes that hearken to the past. However, unlike earlier studies that found the ads present menstruation as a "hygienic crisis," focusing on shame, physical discomfort, and fears, this study found something more encouraging—that the body copy of these ads is working to dispel these myths. Racial representation in ads, however, remains troublesome as black models are rarely shown unaccompanied by white models. These findings are important to researchers, advertising practitioners, and consumers as magazine advertising has become a key agent of socialization for adolescent girls.*

Every culture has myths about menstruation. In premodern times it was believed a menstruating woman could cause "meat to go bad, wine to turn, and bread dough to fall" (Thuren, 1994, p. 217–228). Mothers, aunts, storytellers, and community leaders passed down these myths from one generation to the next. Today, many young women continue to believe that they will lose their virginity by inserting a tampon. Advertisements for feminine hygiene products that target pre-adolescent and adolescent girls frequently employ headlines that reinforce this belief.

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The central argument of this paper is that modern advertisements for feminine hygiene products still reflect, in part, some of the centuries-old myths and taboos associated with women's bodies. Employing the concepts of ideology (Hall, 1973, 1982, 1986, 1989) and Condit's (1994) critique of concordance, this study presents the findings of a content analysis of advertisements for feminine hygiene products in *Seventeen* and *Teen* magazines. Previous studies have found that feminine hygiene ads in *Seventeen* presented menstruation as something to be feared as well as a hygienic crisis that encouraged guilt, diminished self-esteem, and focused on the importance of peer support over that of adults. The current study suggests that there has been a change in the content of these advertisements. Specifically, this study challenges the traditional concept of menarche as a strictly developmental event—a "pre-given object of biology"—and suggests that much of the lore surrounding menstruation is a historical and cultural construction built from the fundamental characteristics of taboo (Lovering, 1995, p. 14).

The Ideology of Menstruation

The information advertisers use to construct messages has behind it the weight of the dominant culture, i.e., its ideology. Hall (1986, p. 28) defines ideology as "the mental frameworks—the languages, concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out, and render intelligible the way society works." Becker (1984, p. 69) adds that ideology "governs the way we perceive our world and ourselves; it controls what we see as 'natural' or 'obvious.' " Claims about what is natural (and thereby inevitable) serve ideology well because they are seen as the outcome of nature rather than culture. Examples include distinctions made to support racism, such as alleged superiority of one group over another based on intelligence, or within sexism the assumption that males are inherently more rational than females. Therefore, what is thought of as normal and natural is a central part of the "terrain of hegemony" (Croteau & Hoynes, 1997, p. 171). Ideology, thereby, has to do with the tools of a social system (language, imagery, institutions) that influence thought and serve to stabilize beliefs among the masses and reinforce their subordinate place in the social system.

An important elaboration on the framework of traditional ideological criticism of media content is Condit's (1994) "critique of concordance" (p. 211). As is the case in dominant ideology criticism, this perspective is also politically motivated. However, Condit's model takes into consideration

the conditions of late-capitalism, such as the nature of consumer society being one that has producers, advertisers, and consumers, all with particular interests in the production and outcome of a particular product. In addition, this perspective takes a judgmental (rather than oppositional) reading of the text under study, seeks to gain an understanding of how one or more positions of power gain relative dominance, and recognizes the "plurivocal set of interests" in modern life (Condit, 1995, p. 226). Therefore, controllers of information are those with power in modern society. This power is often articulated by the social construction of meaning through language.

Events and objects in life do not, inherently, have meaning. Rather, through social agreement, meaning is created. In modern society, the medium for signification is language. Through language, social practices are organized into symbolic products and meaning is made. Hall (1982, p. 64) argues that the media are among the principle locations for making meaning. Williamson (1978) posits that "modern advertising teaches us to consume not the product, but its sign." Therefore, what the product stands for is more important than what it is. Advertisements for feminine hygiene products can be considered "powerful weapons in an ideological battle for control of women's sexuality" (Kane, 1990, p. 82). Given that the ideology of freshness is crucial to this battle, the war is waged is through the construction of meaning.

Due to the physical constraints of the media in which they appear, advertisements are capable of rapidly defining a situation. In fact, it is critical to the success of an ad that it make an immediate connection to the intended audience by drawing upon shared meanings. By doing so, ads confer status, reinforce dominant belief systems, and, through signification, communicate fundamental information. The tools used to do so are called referent systems (Williamson, 1978, pp. 17–19). Referent systems are part of the body of knowledge from which advertisers and audiences draw their materials and turn these into messages that reflect the views of the dominant society (Jhally, 1990, p. 32). These frames of reference are particularly important in understanding the socialization of adolescents who are in the process of constructing meaning for the world around them.

As a conduit for personal information, advertising represents *a* version of reality, one that is vitally connected to the dominant ideology. According to Frith (1995), an advertisement is "both a marketing tool and a cultural artifact" (p. 185). As the dominant view of menstruation equates it with being unclean, the message communicated to young women is one that endorses "women's medications" and "woman's products." Menarche is then portrayed as a "hygienic, rather than a maturational, crisis" (Whisnant & Zegans, 1975, p. 809). However, if femininity is thought of as a commodity (Goldman, 1992), and is available through purchase, then it is

also possible to conceal femininity through purchase. This positioning of menstruation as something to be kept secret reinforces the view that, at least for part of every month, women and girls should be kept from public view.

The Public Body

Societies have beliefs about separating, classifying, and organizing to create social structures designed to withstand natural disasters, punish transgressions, and demarcate differences. In many cases it is necessary to exaggerate differences in order to create a semblance of order. Inspired by fear, taboos help order a society. A taboo "expresses itself essentially in prohibitions and restrictions" and can be defined as "forbidden and excluded persons, acts, words, thoughts, and things that supposedly threaten a group's welfare and survival and are, therefore, used to that group's advantage" (Voigt, 1984, p. 97). The "curse" is a taboo that presents menstruating women as "filthy, sick, unbalanced, and ritually impure" (Daly, 1978/1990, p. 248).

Nearly every religious and cultural tradition stigmatizes menstruating women. For Western societies, the popular reference to menstruation as "the curse" began with the biblical telling of it being inflicted on Eve because of her sin. The words of Leviticus 15: 19–33 speak directly to the fear of women's blood as the root of evil (Hoffman, 1995).

Taboos and folk tales that surround a young woman's period cross cultural and historical boundaries. The belief that menstrual blood is dirty and toxic can be traced to the writings of the early Greeks and Romans (Allen & Fortino, 1983; Delaney et al., 1988; Knight, 1991) as well as to many other cultures. For example, in Persia, a menstruating girl or woman was thought to be possessed by a demon. In Rome, she was believed capable of destroying entire crops and wilting plants if she walked by them (Mahoney, 1988).

These myths are not cast entirely in the distant past, however. For example, in 1923 a British school board published a report that identified the "strains" schooling imposed on growing girls, and suggested that girls have less energy than boys due, at least in part, to a lower level of specific gravity in their blood" (Dyhouse, 1981, 133). In 1982, during a United Nations debate on the Falkland Islands, a diplomat stated that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's actions had to be understood in the "context of the glandular system of women" (Hoffman, 1995, 201).

Menstruation has historically been, and is currently, used as justification for preventing girls and women from fully participating in society, justifying control over them in general and over their sexuality in particular.

The view that monthly bleeding is a biological defect is appropriate to a social system in which men control women's behavior. Bureaucratic regimes often "subject women's bodies to more control than men's" (Shilling, 1993, p. 38). Martin (1987/1989) suggests that this is so because women are expected to manage and conceal menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause in institutions "whose organization of time and space takes little cognizance of them" (p. 94).

The Private Body

Puberty—the biological process—is a time of ambivalence. There is embarrassment and excitement; it is "nasty" and yet remains a "sweet secret" signifying the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Either way, it is affirmation of femaleness, as Anne Frank's diary entry suggests:

> Each time I have a period—and that has only been three times—I have the feeling that in spite of all the pain, unpleasantness, and nastiness, I have a sweet secret, and that is why, although it is nothing but a nuisance to me in a way, I always long for the time that I shall feel that secret within me again. (Frank, 1952, p. 30)

Most American girls begin menstruating around age 13, although some begin as early as nine (Steinberg, 1985, p. 44). Changes in nutrition (better-nourished girls are able to maintain body fat), growth hormones added to chicken and beef, and electricity (bodies, when exposed to a sufficient amount of light will enter puberty earlier) all contribute to this process (Pipher, 1994, p. 53). An already anxious time, most American girls are dealing with their first period at the same time they're trying to adjust to seventh grade (Mann, 1994, p. 173).

Although the parent/child relationship is a complicated one, research suggests that much of the fear associated with menses comes from the lack of input from parents (Thornburg, 1975; Whisnant & Zegans, 1975; Chess, Thomas, & Cameron, 1976; Konopka, 1985; Gainotti, 1986; Prendergast, 1989; Koff & Rierdan, 1995). When there is parental involvement the information typically comes from the mother (Fox, 1980; Gainotti, 1986). This is the case not only in the United States, but also in other countries such as Bangladesh (Haq, 1984), the U.K. (Konopka, 1985), Italy (Gainotti, 1986), and Spain (Thuren, 1994). Scholars (Konopka, 1985; Stoltzman, 1986; Gainotti, 1986; Brumberg, 1997) have suggested that mothers often react after the fact, rather than preparing their daughters for the event, resulting in uncertainty and even trauma—an experience that reinforces the fundamental nature of taboo—bleeding, pain, fear, and the unknown. In her analysis of adolescent girls, Konopka (1985, p. 48) relays the story of a fifteen-year-old girl:

> Yes, I remember, I was twelve years old when I first menstruated. I was outside riding my bike and I fell and when I got up I was just bloody all over. I thought I had hurt myself or something. So I went home and I was crying and everything. My mom didn't know what was wrong with me till she couldn't stop the bleeding and then she found out where it was coming from. She said "okay" and sat me down and we had my little talk.

Over the past century the focus on menarche has gone from reproduction to appearances. According to Brumberg (1997) "modern mothers typically stress the importance of outside appearances for their daughters: keeping clean, avoiding soiled clothes and purchasing the right 'equipment.' Hygiene, not sexuality, is the focus of most maternal discussions with girls" (p. 30). Coupled with messages that reinforce the beauty ideal of thinness, the physiological changes associated with menstruation also influence a girl's developing body image.

Certainly, confusion about bodily changes is typical of adolescence. However, control of activities associated with that process is central to the socialization of adolescent girls. Menstruation clearly offers the opportunity for the dominant culture to direct the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of girls, and to influence consumer decision-making. Coming-of-age thereby becomes a "process to be worked out in the marketplace rather than at home" (Brumberg, 1997, p. 41).

A History of Feminine Hygiene Advertising

Early feminine hygiene advertisements presented products in a scientific way, focusing on the value and convenience of their brand. Facts were presented as inoffensively as possible, leaving the reader to come to her own conclusions about the product. An innate and intimate understanding of the subject was assumed. In the 1920s, the first Kotex ads appear when "menstruation finally burst out of the closet" (Brumberg, 1997, p. 46). In many of the ads mothers and daughters had conversations and professional nurses gave advice. An early Kotex ad featured a young woman skating. The headline reads, "Meets the Most Exacting Needs" while the copy shyly mentions that "toilet essentials for active school girls . . . guards against emergencies" and has been accepted "as the most satisfactory article of its kind" (Marchand, 1985, pp. 21–22).

In the 1930s and 1940s companies such as Tampax, Inc., Kimberly-Clark and others established educational divisions. These groups supplied teachers, mothers, and PTAs with information, ready-made programs of "instruction on 'menstrual health'" (Brumberg, 1997, p. 47). Simultaneously the sanitary protection industry took care to remind girls that "menstruation was naughty," serving as irrepressible evidence of sexuality, news

of its arrival and departure had to be kept "under wraps" (Houppert, 1995). Shame and secrecy were key words used in the copy—a tampon, for example, was called Fibs. The advertisements reminded women that the "ultimate humiliation would be any indication that they're menstruating" (Houppert, 1995). A 1934 booklet presented "The Voice of Experience," discouraging hot or cold baths during menstruation as well as a ban on swimming, horseback riding, lifting heavy weights, "athletic dancing," or arduous household duties (Delaney et al., 1988, p. 94). If a girl were to defy these guidelines, the guide warned, she risked a prolapsed uterus.

For those who grew up in the 1950s, booklets from school nurses and counselors, films produced by Kotex and Modess, and "training kits" from manufacturers provided tips on becoming a woman. Of course the true message behind these materials was to buy and be loyal to *a* brand. According to Delaney et al. (1988), "we were meant to deodorize, sanitize, remove any evidence and hide all shame. Above all *cover it up*! *Hide yourself*" (Italics original).

Young women who reached menarche in the 1960s and 1970s were able to use different kinds of products than were previously available. Prior to this time pads were bulky and were usually pinned to belts or other suspension devices. In addition, advertising took on a new face. Although autonomy among teenage girls was encouraged, angst was simultaneously stimulated, as Brumberg (1997) points out:

> Advertisements for sanitary protection consistently played to adolescent awkwardness, concern about peers, and the embarrassing specter of soiled clothes. For young girls who were already self-conscious and uncertain about their maturing bodies, the right sanitary product, used correctly, was promoted as the most important form of social insurance. (p. 49)

Since early times, advertisers have given hygiene products a social persona with euphemistic names. Even today, when advertising is considerably more direct, even constipation is referred to as "not being regular." Advertisers have created some of the most brilliant affectations for feminine hygiene. For example, women are addressed with talk about "that time of the month" and "not feeling fresh." Treneman (1989) notes that "the language of the ads is often coy and euphemistic to the point of being adolescent" (pp. 160–161). Allegorical images (such as hearts and flowers) are associated with feminine hygiene products in order to signify freshness and delicacy. Even the names of products reflect an attempt to reassure, even liberate, girls and women from the burdens of menstruation. For example, they can *Always Rely* on *New Freedom* and *Stayfree*.

Over time, however, the underlying message of these ads has remained constant, playing on both hopes and fears—hopes that a woman will not have to change her ordinary life too much during "that time" and fears of

being betrayed by her body. Yet, the fact that women bleed has remained hidden in ads. As a social construction, femininity involves the cultivation of a body that does not leak.

In 1988, Havens and Swenson conducted the first study designed to look specifically at the content of print advertisements that target teen and pre-teen girls. By analyzing a sample of advertisements that appeared in *Seventeen* magazine between 1976 and 1986 the researchers found that advertisements continued to present menstruation as a "hygienic crisis." They reached this conclusion by analyzing the design of the ads (approach) as well as the text, context, and tone of copy and images contained within the advertisements. At the time of their study, the most common design had changed from a scientific approach (data, drawings, schemata) to one that showed girls in more athletic roles. However, as this study was done several years ago and some categories may no longer be salient, the present study expanded upon both the categories and amount of data analyzed. The following research question guided the present study: Overall, do advertisements that target girls perpetuate or dispel myths and taboos associated with menstruation?

METHOD

In order to answer the research question, feminine hygiene advertising was content analyzed over a ten-year period (1987-1997) in two of the top-selling magazines for pre-adolescent and adolescent girls (*Seventeen* and *Teen*).[2] All issues of the magazines were available. A 25 percent sample was taken, yielding 3 randomly selected issues per year per magazine for a total of 33 issues of each magazines. A total of 144 ads for pads, tampons, and panti-liners was collected. After 33 duplicate advertisements were removed, 94 ads were analyzed.[3] The author and a graduate student coded all advertisements for feminine hygiene products. An average intercoder reliability rate of 96 percent was achieved (Holsti, 1969).

If we accept the idea that advertisements reflect the dominant ideology of the society that produces them, it is important to look at the entire advertisement in terms of overall design (approach), written text, visuals

[2] *Seventeen* magazine has the highest circulation of magazines targeted toward adolescent girls. *Standard Rate & Data Service* (May 1997) circulation 2,442,090. Peirce (1990) states that the ideology of *Seventeen* magazine is concerned primarily with a girl's "appearance, household activities, romance, and dating." *Teen* is the next most popular magazine with a circulation of 1,327,893 *Standard Rate & Data Service* (May 1997).

[3] Given that the goal of advertising is repetition, it is important to account for duplicate ads when studying the impact of repetition for building brand awareness. However, as the focus of this study is content, duplicates were removed.

(such as cartoons or models), and context (setting of the ad). Therefore, as in the Haven's and Swenson (1988) study, each ad was analyzed for overall approach, text, context, and tone, moving from a general to a specific level of analysis.

In the Havens and Swenson (1988) study two central designs were key to the coding the advertisements: scientific or athletic. A scientific design included depictions of special designs (wings), schematics of a pad or tampon, special coverings (shields), or sizes (slim). Athletic ads featured young women engaged in activities such as attending ballet class, swimming, bicycling, and gymnastics. A preliminary review of ads for the current study revealed that these two designs were insuffient for studying today's advertisements. Two additional designs were added to this coding category: stationary figure and no figure at all. In the case of the stationary figure, the model is simply standing, sitting, or otherwise posed, but not engaged in an activity. The no-figure ads were text-only (such a question-and-answer columns) or cartoons.

Several other coding categories were also added: method of presentation (cartoon, photograph), specific product features discussed (comfort, ease of use, no bulk), and race of models. The previous study presented nearly all of the findings as narrative. The findings section of the current study presents the findings in descriptively in frequencies and percents.

Consistent with the Havens and Swenson (1988) study, the written *text* of each ad was analyzed for the primary communication goal (fear, freedom, peace of mind, secrecy). *Context* was the setting of the ad—where the action was situated. Examples of this approach include making practical arrangements, being worried or embarrassed at school, feeling ill or being ''found out'' as a menstruating female in general or in the classroom specifically. The *tone* identified whether the ''voice'' of the ad was written in a conversational style, used a role model, was humorous, or exuded self-confidence.

Descriptive Analysis

In terms of products advertised, most of the ads were for tampons (54 percent), followed by pads (38 percent), and panti-liners (8 percent). The original study reported an advertising array of 44 percent for pads, 43 percent for tampons, and 13 percent for panti-liners (Havens & Swenson, 1988, p. 91).

The most common advertising design was not scientific or athletic. Rather, no models or figures were used in half (50 percent) of the advertise-

ments (as shown in Table I). Instead these ads used cartoons and question-and-answer formats. Many were entirely text. For example, *Always* offered a Question & Answer section called "*Always* Answers" and "*Always* Cares." Others used cartoon figures in mock discussions.

A stationary figure appeared in nearly as many advertisements (42 percent). Examples of this approach include a girl sitting on a front porch, looking out a window or sitting in a park. Seven percent of the ads portrayed young women in the athletic design. In these ads, girls typically wore leotards, leggings, or tight, and usually white, clothing. In some cases the ads focused on the buttocks. For example, an ad for *Always UltraPlus* had the headline "Introducing the no-worry no-show maxi" and another *Always* ad featured the bottom half of four women all wearing leotards and asked the question, "Pop Quiz: Who's Wearing the Tampon." In another ad, girls were shown at the beach, riding bicycles, at a pool party with guys, and frolicking at the beach.

Only 1 percent of the ads used a scientific design. A *Stayfree Ultra Plus* pad ad, for example, showed a schemata of the product with the headline, "We Just Reduced the Accident Rate in America," suggesting the severity of the offense.

Text, Context, and Tone

A deeper analysis of the advertisements requires an examination of the ad's text, content, and tone. *Text* is the dominant "voice" of the ad—what the headline or key topic of the advertisement emphasized as the communication goal. As Table II shows, the ads contained multiple texts. For example, *Fear and uncertainty* was the textual goal mentioned most often in the copy (83 percent). The *fear* appeal typically focused on virginity and the desire to retain it. In a *Tampax* ad, a young woman asks, "Are You Sure I'll Still Be A Virgin?" And another says, "Yes, You'll Still be A Virgin. No, We Won't Laugh." *Uncertainty* also focused on fear of discomfort and product risk. A *Tampax* ad, for example, shows girls talking

Table I

Design	Frequency	Percent
No figure used	47	50
Stationary figure	39	42
Athletic	7	7
Scientific	1	1
Total	94	100

Table II

Textual Element Used	Frequency	Percent[a]
Fear	78	83
Secrecy	36	38
Freedom	25	24
Peace of Mind	13	14
Comfort	11	12
Other	4	4

[a]Numbers do not total 100% as ads mentioned several features.

(at the beach) and one asks, ''Are they hard to put in?'' or a scene in the girl's bathroom where one girl asks another ''Are You Sure It Won't Hurt?''

Secrecy was frequently communicated in the ads (38 percent). An example is the headline for *Stayfree Ultra Thin* Tampons: ''No one Ever Has to Know You Have Your Period.'' In a *Tampax* ad, a young woman is shown in ballet class, speaking to a friend. She says, ''Everyone will know I'm wearing a pad!'' Not to worry, however, tampons to the rescue. *Freedom* was the communication goal in one-quarter of the ads. An example is the ad for *O.B.* that featured a young woman in a swimsuit and the headline ''Keep it simple and set yourself free.'' The copy describes how *O.B.* is designed to free a girl from applicators and bulk.

Peace of Mind/Trust was also emphasized (14 percent). In fact, *Trust is Tampax* is the slogan used by this major advertiser. In one of their ads, trust is emphasized as two girls are shown bicycling and wearing tight, white jeans. In another, three girls and two young men are in a pool and the subhead reads, ''Trust—It's knowing no one will ever know you've got your period. Period.''

The *context* of ads focused on practical concerns about ''showing,'' of being found out, about locating supplies ''just in case,'' and having to leave class and explain why. Most ads (94 percent) focused specifically on being ''found out'' in class. For example, an ad for *Playtex Portables* (shown fitting into the pocket of a tight pair of jeans) has the headline ''It's New It's Neat and So Discreet.'' A *Stayfree* pad ad shows a young woman contemplating the answer to a test question withthe headline ''Inside Info: 571,977 girls took the three-hour long SAT last year. So your mind is on the math, not on your maxi, there's worry free Stayfree.''

General concerns about signs of one's period showing were also contextual cues (60 percent). For example, *Always Slenders for Teens* recognizes first day of high school jitters with the headline ''Smooth Moves for the Back-to-School Blues.'' *Tampax* tampons point out that ''You May Do A lot of Things to Get Noticed. Wearing a Pad Shouldn't Be One of Them.''

The copy elaborates on this by pointing out that if a girl wears a pad, "you may just be announcing to everyone that you have your period. No matter how thin or 'discreet' they say they've made pads, can they stand up to a pair of leggings?"

Another important component of an ad is the *tone*—does the copy lecture, instruct, use humor or a role model to communicate? Who addresses the reader? In nearly all of the ads (86 percent) the tone was conversational. A *Tampax* tampon ad showed two young women discussing virginity. The copy reads:

> I really wanted to use tampons but heard you had to be, you know, 'experienced.' I talked to my friend Lisa. Her mom was a nurse so I figured she'd know. Lisa told me she'd been using Petal Soft Plastic Applicator Tampax tampons since her very first period and she's a virgin. In fact, you can use them at any age and still be a virgin.

Twelve percent of these ads used humor as the approach. An example is an ad for *Always with Channels* that features cartoon illustrations in social and classroom settings. In a recent version, the female character, Trish, apparently keeps leaving the movie theater because she's with the cutest guy but is terrified to leave to check her pad because someone might steal him while she's away. At the same time he is wondering why girls insist on aisle seats—does he have bad breath? Is the concession stand guy cuter than he is? This was followed by ads that featured the testimonials of role models (1 percent).

Other important communication elements are the *product features* described in the ads. These are important given that one particular feature, or combination of features, can often be the final persuasive element that that results in a product being purchased—essentially the "reason-why" appeal of the advertising copy.

Table III (following page) shows that product comfort (46 percent) was presented most often. An example of comfort was a *Tampax* tampon ad where Jade M.−16 (years) says, "It's a little like your first bra. After a

Table III

Product Features	Frequency	Percent[a]
Comfort	78	83
Lack of Bulk	51	54
Ease of Use	41	44
Biodegradeable	19	20
Convenience	12	9
Protection	11	8
Other	7	6

[a]Numbers do not total 100% as ads mentioned several features.

while you forget you're even wearing it." A *Playtex* ad compares one brand of tampons that have a cardboard applicator to that of the *Playtex* plastic—the headline reads: "Hardware. Software."

Ease of use (44 percent) was found in nearly half of the ads. In a *Playtex* ad the copy reads, "I thought tampons would be hard to use." Lack of bulk was an important consideration to the young women in another ad where one says to the other, "I hate pads—they're like wearing diapers." Another ad, for *Tampax,* shows a picture of Charcy E., age 18 from Merrimack College who says, "No, the tampon can't get lost, all you lose are those diapers." Roughly half of the ads (43 percent) mentioned ease of use as well as lack of bulk. Protection followed (12 percent) with an example being a *New Freedom* pad ad that described the "unique Center Protection System that helps direct fluid to the center then traps it there in a highly absorbent inner core."

The race of the models appearing in the ads was also coded. The data reveal that 94 percent include both an African American and a white model(s), 84 percent of the ads contain only white models, and 16 percent include African American models. Thus, black models are seldom shown unless they are accompanied by white models.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The focus of this paper has been an exploration of beliefs surrounding the social aspects of menstruation as well as how these beliefs are communicated to pre-adolescent and adolescent girls through modern advertising. The research question asked: do advertisements that target girls perpetuate or dispel myths and taboos associated with menstruation? The findings of this work suggest the ads present both positive and negative information to girls. Examples include advertisements with headlines that identify girl's fears of others finding out that they're menstruating or those that directly address the fear of losing one's virginity by inserting a tampon. However, the body of copy of most ads then works to dispel these fears and concerns, even if the solution is to buy a particular brand.

The overall findings of the study suggest that tampons are now the primary product being advertised to girls. This could represent changing views about the appropriateness of using tampons (i.e. one's virginity will not be threatened) as well as the plethora of product line-extensions available in today's market. There are slenders, lights, and tulip-shaped tampons specifically designed with teen girls in mind. In terms of the ads themselves, most do not use models, or, if there is a model, she is simply talking in a conversational, matter-of-fact way. Granted, the primary texts focus on

fear and uncertainty, but they also appear to be working to ameliorate these very natural feelings.

If what Hall (1973, 1982, 1986, 1989) and Condit (1994) suggest is true, that the media present a vision of the world constructed to support the dominant structure—one based on consumerism—then the current array of feminine hygiene advertisements targeted toward adolescent girls does serve to reinforce an ideology that helps to define social roles and the subsequent relegation of girls and women to private space. In many ways the bodies of girls and women are given meaning that suggests that there are times when they are unattractive (if they are not thin or not young) or are unclean (when they menstruate). Future research could explore, through in-depth personal interviews, experiences of girls and women associated with menstruation.

If one looks to advertising for some indication of social change, it is not likely to be found. If for no other reason, advertisers are bound to the interests of the client, who is tied to the interests of the corporation who produces the products. However, accommodating the interests of these stakeholders is an important component of ideological criticism of the media. Modern feminine hygiene ads do seem to reflect elements of social change as they relate to girls' developing bodies. Given the many myths associated with menstruation, the private does become public. This approach is consistent with the tenets of ideology that suggest one's view of the world around them is a product of the dominant social system.

Although not the primary focus of the study, another area of concern was racial representation. At first the data revealed the racial balance to be fairly representative of both white's and black's relative proportion of the population. However, black models were rarely shown unaccompanied by white models, suggesting that, in advertising at least, whites are playing supervisory roles over blacks. What is also unfortunate is that most of the magazines targeted to teen girls are targeted to a white audience. Given that non-white girls have few functional alternatives, they are still not seeing themselves included in the wider culture, and not as a part of the teen culture represented in these magazines.

Clearly, knowledge about how the female body functions has become more widespread, yet feminine hygiene advertising continues to present a world akin to the past. It may be a world where girls are permitted to ride bicycles when they menstruate; yet the ads serve as reminders that an active life is only possible through purchase of a specific brand. Otherwise, young women risk humiliation and disgrace if any signs of their femaleness should seep through their clothing.

The ideology of American culture suggests that evidence of femininity, that fact that women bleed, is best kept hidden. Girls are responsible for

hiding this shame as well as the accouterments of this activity. According to Hoffman (1995, p. 201), in male-dominated cultures the most successful women are those who best "sublimate their femaleness, they minimize monthly discomforts, fluctuations, flashes and cramps." This suppression of signs and symptoms is evident in modern advertisements for feminine hygiene products.

Although few of us like to admit it, as consumers we have become increasingly dependent on advertising for information. This is particularly true of adolescent girls who have fewer resources for gaining private information, prefer the counsel of their peers, or may prefer not to confide in women older than themselves. In this way, advertising has become a forum for discussing personal matters, a kind of social guide. It is important that we recognize that much of the point of the advertising is to cultivate brand loyalty, that through the ads girls not only learn about the functioning of their bodies but also how particular products are meant to help meet the needs of their developing bodies.

Despite the presence of advertising in broadcast and other media and liberalization of body-related thinking, "menstruation has not been redefined as something positive" (Havens & Swenson, 1988). In American life, Puritanical notions of impurity, shame, and fear have been used to physiologically control the activities of girls and women. Menstruation has been socially constructed as a problem—something shameful and dirty. However, by revealing the myths associated with this very natural function, girls can come to see that their social and private space has been regulated by their bodily functions. The findings of this study suggest that, over the past ten years, advertisements for feminine hygiene products are evolving. They are now beginning to address the concerns and fears of young women in a more direct manner. Yes it's messy. Yes, it's unpleasant. Yes, it is embarrassing when someone finds out. No, women don't secrete blue liquids. Yet, the nature of these ads suggests ways for girls to feel more secure in light of the social system in which they live. If young girls are given positive information about their bodies, they can begin to see themselves and their physical changes in a positive light. Perhaps due to the availability of birth control, the significance of a girl's period has changed, but the weight of the culture remains behind how this event is perceived and how her sense of self develops. Self-esteem becomes intimately connected with body image, one increasingly prescribed by the media.

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