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Pathologizing the Female Body:

An Analysis of a Commercial Menstrual Product Website

Negative views toward women's bodies have manifested themselves in different practices historically and cross-culturally—from the practice of female genital mutilation in many modern-day African nations (Abusharaf 23-24) to the ovariectomies performed by 19th century American doctors (Barker-Benfield 86). In the past decades, much attention has been paid to the manner in which the menstrual product industry portrays the female body and whether that portrayal serves a similar (although certainly not as severe) function as the aforementioned examples: to disempower women by pathologizing their bodies. The effect of these messages on adolescent girls has been central to many studies because, as noted by Professor of Women Studies at Oregon State University Janet Lee, “menarche is intertwined with sexuality” and adolescence is the time when, “young women become inserted and insert themselves into dominant patterns of sexuality” (Lee 84). By focusing on such themes as the language used to portray menstruation as failed reproduction, as a shameful experience that is accompanied by the fear of “getting caught,” and as something to be controlled, many researchers have concluded that menstrual product companies reinforce the view of menstruation as pathological. It has also repeatedly been argued that there is little likelihood that these companies will change their marketing strategies as they have been so effective. In an effort to see whether menstrual product websites might provide more positive messages than magazine and television advertisements, I analyzed

www.beinggirl.com (the *Always/Tampax/Alldays* website aimed at menarcheal and pre-menarcheal girls). Though I found that www.beinggirl.com did challenge the theme of menstruation as failed reproduction, overall the website reflected the findings of previous research by reinforcing the view of menstruation as something to be hidden and controlled.

Analyzing the menstrual product industry's use of language to depict menstruation as failed reproduction is certainly worthwhile in light of the powerful function of language in the process of shaping of identity and reality. As noted by linguist Suzanne Romaine, "Language is the primary means through which we understand the world and our place within it" (15). While it would be imprudent to give the language employed by the menstrual product industry a causal relationship to negative views of menstruation, it is clear that it does serve to reinforce existing perceptions; "Menstrual product advertisements do not initiate the notion that menstruation is dirty and needs to be hidden, the pervasive societal definitions do this and the advertisements for menstrual products simply reinforce and maintain these definitions" (Simes and Burg 468).

Naturally then, the use of words that pathologize women's bodies is worth considering. In her essay entitled "Egg and Sperm: A Scientific Fairy Tale," Emily Martin discusses how the language used in medical textbooks portrays menstruation as "failed reproduction"; it is a wasteful process compared the "remarkable" process of spermatogenesis (Martin 10-11). With reference to Martin's research, Marsha Rosengarten makes the connection between the language in medical textbooks and the language utilized in informational pamphlets distributed by menstrual product companies. The common use of the term "sheds," for instance, to describe what happens to the lining of the uterus during menstruation, compared to the term "manufacture" in

reference to spermatogenesis, is telling of the value placed on women's reproductive processes (Rosengarten 96). It is noteworthy that these terms continue to be used when, as Martin argues, spermatogenesis could just as easily be described as inefficient: a man will "waste" one trillion sperm for every baby he produces (327). Similarly, biologist Margie Profet posits that menstruation is not failed reproduction but rather a process for ridding the reproductive tract of sperm-borne pathogens (Clough 720). Though this theory is not widely accepted by the scientific community, it raises the question of what alternate or concurrent functions menstruation may have. In addition to depicting menstruation as wasteful, much research suggests that menstrual product companies heighten insecurities among women and girls through advertisements that convey embarrassment and fear.

A second common theme in menstrual product advertising is the portrayal of menstruation as shameful and dirty; menstruating is something you should avoid "getting caught" doing. While some critics of these advertisements have found evidence of positive messages, the majority of the research gathered reveals, "unsettling similarities between the messages of contemporary and early ads for menstrual products" (Park 150). The extent to which menstrual products were taboo in the past is exemplified by a 1920's Kotex marketing strategy: a system was created wherein women could buy Kotex products by putting money in a special discreet container that was separate from the register so as to avoid embarrassing interactions with the clerk (Weiner 27). In her analysis of a ten-year sampling of menstrual product advertisements in two popular teen magazines, Debra Merskin asserts, "what the product stands for is more important than what it is" (943). The results of Merskin's content analysis study suggest that the products advertised stand primarily for reifying the idea that menstruation must be kept secret to avoid embarrassment. Ninety-Four

percent of the advertisements examined in her study were found to use the fear of “being found out” as a central theme. Slogans like “No one Ever Has to Know You Have Your Period” for *Stayfree Ultra Thin* tampons and “Libra Fluer Tampons: Don’t Get Caught with Anything Else” imply that secrecy is fundamental and that getting caught on your period is shameful (Merskin 951, Rosengarten 93). In a similar study, researchers noted how the use of language like “better protection,” “prevent accidents,” and “cleaner and drier” suggest that women need protection from their own bodies; that the nature of menstruation is inherently dirty and shameful (Simes and Burg 458).

Additionally, the reluctance of companies to use the terms “menstruation, menstrual flow, and menstrual product” and to opt instead for euphemisms like “feminine hygiene” is indicative of the public reticence surrounding menstruation (Weiner 28). A study published in the November 2002 issue of The Journal of Early Adolescence found that only one out of the twenty-eight educational booklets examined used the term “menarche” and that “[e]ven the terms *menstruation* and *ovulation* were not used in every booklet” (Erchull et al 469). However, some critics contend that advertisements in this area are evolving. For instance, the majority of the 83% of advertisements in Merskin’s study that focused on “fear and uncertainty” were aimed as refuting the myth that the use of tampons results in the loss of virginity (953).

In an innovative *Kotex* campaign launched in 2000, a red dot is used to represent menstruation and the word period—never before used in a U.S. TV commercial—graphically and assertively replaced the euphemisms commonly used in other advertisements (Weiner 27). Unfortunately, the research reviewed suggests that most advertisements still embody themes from the past. Shame and secrecy, however, are not the only implicit messages communicated by the menstrual product industry.

Menstruation as something that needs to be controlled in order to secure freedom is another central focus of advertisements. It is obvious that the menstrual product industry has a vested interest in promoting the systematic control of the menstrual cycle; the more women believe they need certain products, the more they will buy them, and the more the company will profit. The messages that stress the importance of control serve, as Foucault would argue, to discipline the body in order to control it. Foucault never discussed his ideas on dominance and control in reference to women's lives in particular, however, his ideas on "docile bodies" can be applied to a woman's strict control of her period (Foucault 183). The messages promoting control train women to systematically manage their menstrual cycles: a woman must buy specific products for certain levels of blood flow that are to be used for a set number of hours.

This kind of discipline depends on the view of the female body as deficient in its natural state—a norm that can be seen in such contemporary practices as the application of makeup by many women. As Sandra Bartky points out in Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression, advertisements for beauty products are centered on the presumption that, "a woman's face, unpainted, is defective" (Bartky 71). Likewise, menstrual product advertisements suggest that menstruation must be systematically controlled for a woman to be as "free" and in "full possession" of her body as men are, otherwise she will be deficient (Rosengarten 99). The names of several major menstrual product brands are prime examples of the industry's use of this theme. The brand name *Always*, for instance, proposes that a woman *always* be in control of her cycle (Simes and Burg 462). Still others like *Carefree* and *Stayfree* encourage a woman to secure her freedom by purchasing their products, "indicating that her liberation [is] at stake in selecting a menstrual product" (Park 157). Portraying menstruation as a "hygienic crisis" that must be controlled

clearly does not encourage women to view their menstrual cycles as positive (Simes and Burg 456, Merskin 942). However, it is not expected that for-profit menstrual product companies will promote advertising campaigns that discontinue the use of these derogatory themes if such campaigns are not in their financial interests.

According to many researchers, it is unlikely that the menstrual product industry will significantly reevaluate its marketing strategies as its primary function is to generate profit. The underlying motive behind the advertisements and educational booklets produced by the menstrual product industry is, after all, to “prepare girls to be consumers” (Erchull et al 470). As Merskin points out:

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 (954).

With menarche occurring earlier and menopause occurring later, women will have an average of 500 menstrual cycles in their lifetimes (Weiner 28). This is clearly an incentive for the industry to continue using the methods of advertising that have been effective in the past. Such methods, as the research reviewed suggests, serve to pathologize menstruation by depicting it as a wasteful process; something to hide, be ashamed of, and control. However, there is hope that new public relations movements, particularly websites, will construct a more positive message for women and girls about their bodies. As public relations consultant Richard Weiner notes, “One hopeful sign is the Web sites, which are the new frontier” (28).

Methods

Because websites are not be subject to the same strict standards that television and magazine advertisements are, I had hoped that their content would challenge the

themes of wastefulness, secrecy, and control through a more candid and thorough approach to the issues surrounding menarche and menstruation. Under the presupposition that adolescent girls will seek alternate sources of information about menstruation before turning to adults, the content of such websites could be critical to the development of a girl's perception of her body (Merskin 955). In my analysis of www.beingirl.com, the "teen" link on the *Always/Tampax/Alldays* website, I focused on content that either supported or refuted the research conducted on print and television advertisements. I deemed www.beingirl.com an appropriate website to analyze because of the prominence and popularity of its affiliated brand names. I specifically looked for messages and language implying failed reproduction and/or wastefulness, shame, secrecy, and the fear of "getting caught," and control as a means to secure freedom (especially when accompanied by suggestions to buy specific products). To do this, I focused on the sections of the website aimed at explaining the physiological processes of menstruation, frequently asked questions/question and answer pages, and any links related to school. Again, while some of the website's content portrayed menstruation in a positive light, the overall tone connoted secrecy and shame.

Menstruation as Wasteful/Failed Reproduction

Although language that depicts menstruation as wasteful and/or failed reproduction was present, messages promoting the celebration of menarche were more prevalent. For instance, in the section entitled "The Scoop: How to Deal," menstruation is explained primarily as the failure of the egg to be fertilized. Not only does the term "How to *Deal*" have a negative connotation (as if menstruation is a problem that must be dealt with), passivity and waste are implied through language like, "the egg doesn't *get fertilized*," "*unneeded* tissue," and "that number *decreases...only* 400 or 500 will

ripen” (BeingGirl, emphasis mine). The commonly used term “shed” is also used to describe what happens to the uterine lining “if the egg is not fertilized.”

However, as hoped, positive messages are also prominent. In the question and answer message board “Ask Iris,” Dr. Iris Prager, a Ph. D. in Health Education and former professor of human sexuality at George Mason University and The Pennsylvania State University, answers questions about topics from vaginal discharge to relationships with boys and popularity (BeingGirl). Placing menstruation within the larger context of puberty by including more taboo language associated with menstruation (i.e. “vaginal discharge” and “blood clots”) as well as the social and emotional issues common to this period of development is in itself a positive change. In response to the numerous questions regarding why women menstruate and how girls should react to menarche, Dr. Prager offers a positive outlook toward menstruation through encouraging messages like, “[w]omen shouldn’t ‘curse’ their periods, they should celebrate them!” (BeingGirl). In a message posted to answer the question of whether there was a way to “stop my period altogether,” Dr. Prager affirms, “[y]our period is a normal part of growing up. It is an indicator that you are healthy and that you are maturing into a woman” also calling menarche “a huge ‘rite of passage” (BeingGirl). This deviation from the standard view of menstruation as a biological process occurring when reproduction fails certainly strays from the trends found in educational booklets and other promotional materials. Unfortunately, the plethora of messages conveying secrecy and control through the use of specific products outnumber those that promote a positive view of menstruation.

Menstruation and Secrecy

In agreement with the findings of research centered on print and television advertising, the content of www.beinggir.com portrays menstruation as something to be

shrouded in secrecy in order to avoid drawing the attention of others. Many articles within the website promote the fear of “getting caught” by offering tips on how to hide menstrual products while in school. In response to the question “How can I carry pads/tampons to the school bathroom?” Dr. Prager suggests, “[b]e creative...[y]our sock, shoes, pants pocket, glasses case, bra, etc.” and “check out...where emergency menstrual products are kept” (BeingGirl). Dr. Prager even praises the initiative taken by a school-aged girl to assemble a “Period Emergency Kit” further establishing menstruation as a hygienic crisis worthy of *emergency* precautionary measures. By suggesting such highly discreet methods for hiding menstrual products in school, the website encourages girls to conceal any evidence of their periods; clearly such methods would not be needed if menstruation were not perceived so much as a social stigma as a naturally occurring sign of health. This kind of negative attitude toward women’s bodies is also perpetuated though the emphasis on controlling menstruation, not surprisingly, through the purchase of *Always/Tampax/Alldays* products.

Menstruation, Control, and Product Advertisement

That messages promoting the systematic control of menstruation are in the interests of menstrual product companies is undeniable. Influence over women’s perceptions of menstruation is critical if companies are to successfully market products that are not necessary (i.e. panty liners). Several examples from the website illustrate how messages promoting strict management when it comes to “feminine hygiene” are intrinsically linked to the marketing of menstrual products. In response to the question of how one might avoid “accidents” in school, Dr. Prager exclaims “[b]e prepared!” recommending that girls strive to “prevent such an occurrence as best you can” (BeingGirl). This message is then followed by the suggestion, “wear a panty liner daily” (BeingGirl). In a separate article entitled, “Stop That Smell!” it is advised that

girls, “change them [pads] more frequently. Or you can try using tampons” (BeingGirl). In these excerpts, menstrual products are marketed by promoting shame and a constant state of anxiety; if a woman is not in control of her cycle at all times, she risks being found out. This strategy is even more blatant in the advice given in response to a girl’s frustration with the complexity of period management: “You may find that you are more comfortable if you use tampons. Check out the products section of www.beinggirl.com to learn about the options available to you for feminine protection” (BeingGirl). The content of this message, coupled with the use of the term “protection” implies that a girl must be protected from her own body, and demonstrates how the content of this website is inherently tainted by corporate interests.

Discussion/Potential Implications and Applications

In this specific analysis, the initial research question of whether websites would indeed challenge the themes of wastefulness, secrecy, and control was answered negatively. While some positive messages were conveyed, the majority of this particular menstrual product company’s marketing strategies served to pathologize menstruation and, consequently, to disempower women. Because this analysis was subject to my own interpretation and was conducted on only one of the many websites in this category, my findings are limited. A future study could include a more in-depth analysis of a larger sampling of websites and also have more than one interpreter/decoder of the content. However, if this website is seen as a microcosm for the menstrual product industry as a whole, the content in www.beinggirl.com supports the argument that the industry perpetuates the cultural mores that establish menstruation as a condition to hide, be ashamed of, and control. In doing this, the industry is providing a homogenous view of how women should “deal” with their bodies; a view that endorses negative perceptions of menstruation and sexuality. Because of its

commercial nature, it is implausible that the industry will make any considerable changes in its marketing techniques. Although it is frustrating that so many negative messages are being transmitted, the implications of this analysis are not all negative. In the absence of more positive and diverse images of the female body in advertising we, as individuals and communities, can act to promote a sense of confidence in the girls we interact with. We can talk to both girls and boys more candidly to dispel the taboos surrounding menstruation. These kinds of personal initiatives are critical if the movement for women's equality and empowerment is to move forward.

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