

It's Just a Little Blood:

A Comparative Analysis of the Communication of Menstruation in the U.S. and South Asia

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Abstract

This paper uses Critical Discourse Analysis to thematize and derive cultural meaning from menstrual product advertising in the U.S. and South Asia. This analysis found several salient data pieces that were used to build themes that added to the bigger picture of the culture surrounding menstruation in different countries. A thematization of the advertisements allowed myself to derive meaning from the artifacts and look at it in a context that reflects back on the culture the country the advertisement is from.

Introduction

By the time women reach menopause, on average she has had 500 menstrual cycles. This reality suggests that menstruation is a defining part of her life, and often influences behaviors, moods, and thoughts (Meyer, 2017). Menstruation is a natural cycle that on average women experience from as early as 11 or 12 until their 40s or 50s. While the physical effects of menstruation can be painful, intense and debilitating, the societal, cultural, and economic implications of periods can often be even more impactful.

Periods are also political. From the “pink tax” to the ways some religions and countries cast out menstruating women, the effects go far beyond the physiological experience. The average U.S. woman spends between \$150 and \$300 each year on feminine hygiene products alone. That number does not include medications and treatments some women have to use to manage symptoms (Meyer, 2017). Added to that financial cost are deep, entrenched patriarchal views, hiding, and shame. Despite women’s miraculous ability to create new life, women’s reproductive systems are often treated as unclean, lacking purity, or even dangerous to men.

These stigmas are not only witnessed in daily life, but often compounded by the effect of oppressive media.

This project explores the often discriminatory effects that media and popular culture can have on women and girls views and experienced of menstruation. Below, I review the literature surrounding the stigmas, visual portrayals, and media influences on a culture's overarching relationship with women's bodies and health. Then, I will analyze and compare the ways in which menstruation is communicated and treated in the United States and in South Asia (i.e., India and Nepal). The analysis will use a multi-media approach utilizing artifacts including advertisements for feminine hygiene products such as pads and tampons along with photographs and articles surrounding the cultural beliefs surrounding menstruation in certain areas of South Asia.

Literature Review

Before delving into the advertisements from the U.S. and South Asia, it is important to have a framework for the cultures of the U.S. and countries of South Asia including Nepal and India, especially in regards to women.

Women's Place in Society: U.S. and South Asia

Despite certain aspects of culture idealizing women, such as the Gods they represent, women's place in Indian society is not consistent with that. According to Bhagyalakshmi Jayaseela, "Mostly Indian women are controlled and conditioned by the dictates of their husbands and their family. Educated or illiterate, rich or poor they have to depend on their husbands for everything" (Jayaseela). India is a large country with many different practices and ideologies but it is important to note the prevalence of this mentality towards women in India.

Men take the prominent role in society with women being supporting characters whose very existence depends on men in their lives whether that is a father, brother, husband or son (Jayaseela). The constitution of India guarantees the equality of men and women in social, economical, and political spheres, however the culture surrounding gender equality is far from what is promised. “Age-old customs and traditions continue to denigrate women. They are treated like human machines and all their activities are expected to be confined to the male approved domains” (Jayaseela). Despite modernization in many realms of Indian culture and daily life, the domination of women still persists.

Until 2008, Nepal was a Hindu monarchy, this had heavy influences on the gender ideology in the culture (Birkenholtz, 435). The “Nepali Woman” faces pressure, political and social to conform to the Hindu-influenced belief that women are a single entity. This hold them to impossible standards and impacts their daily experience. Women are not to do anything without their father, husband, or sons in the death of her husband. Much like in India, women’s status on paper or in divine areas of life juxtapose their daily citizenship. “Despite the social and physical constraints that circumscribe Hindu women’s mobility and autonomy in their everyday lives, the Hindu tradition boasts ample images of powerful female figures, most notably in the form of its numerous goddesses, fierce and benevolent alike” (Birkenholtz, 439-440).

While women in the U.S. have more rights and privileges than the women in South Asia, they are not safe from the oppression of patriarchy. While some women have been able to break through the glass ceiling in arenas like business or politics, most did not do it with the help of feminine values, but rather much of their power comes from perpetrating patriarchy. In addition to this there still is not equity, there has never been a woman president, men make up more

leadership positions and typically make much more money than their women counterparts.

Oppression is not always so obvious.

Menstruation in Advertising

Menstruation has been covered by many communication and women studies scholars but most of these articles focus on the communication surrounding menstrual taboos or marketing of feminine hygiene products in the US. However, researcher Jungwon Lee conducted a cross-cultural study of the TV advertising campaigns for sanitary napkins in the U.S. and in South Korea. Lee noticed that South Korea's White [a feminine hygiene brand] ad never spoke of menstruation aloud, it was alluded to as "it" or "that day" (Lee, 7). In the US ad for Kotex [a feminine hygiene brand], the word "period" is said making it clear what the advertisement is for. Lee notes that the Kotex ad from the US portrayed an illustrated scene of a woman dancing and playing with a "red dot" meant to signify menstruation, it dehumanizes the woman by making her a cartoon and she lacks expression. However it portrays this faceless cartoon as strong with her hand on her hip displaying that she is in control, not the "red dot."

In the White advertisement, the woman is in white, very conservatively dressed and sitting the entire time. The attire not only is meant to show the cleanness of the brand but also the level of purity of the woman. The advertisement focuses on cleanliness in the narration as well which adds to the connotation that menstruation is dirty. The passiveness she displays shows a discomfort talking about menstruation (Lee 9-11). The conclusions Lee came to are not unexpected, the US is known for being riskier in advertising as many other countries are highly censored or regulated. This not only represents the advertising industry in the countries but also the cultures that cultivate those rules and tendencies.

Menstruation advertising is largely filled with messages about protection (Malefyt & McCabe). Protection is for keeping someone or something safe, the connotation around it is something to be avoided not a natural part of a woman's life. Menstruation is still seen by many as messy, dirty, and gross. Yet that is not the message U.S. girls tend to get from their mothers. "Women fear showing evidence of wearing pads and staining clothes and sheets, yet attempt to make menstruation a positive experience for their daughters" (Malefyt & McCabe). In this study by Malefyt and McCabe, women participants said they wish advertisements would show a greater respect for women bodies and treat menstruation as a natural occurrence. They said the "embodied experience of menstruation differs from depictions of periods in advertising for feminine hygiene products" (Malefyt & McCabe).

Theory

My research question and analysis is guided by two theories: (1) Genderlect and (2) Muted Group. Genderlect theory is a means to describe the communication between the genders in a cross cultural format. The theory not only looks at how different genders communicate with each other but also the connection of how the way people say certain things or express ideas is linked to their gender identity (Littlejohn & Foss). Muted Group Theory examines the way that the communication of dominant groups mutes or suppresses the words and or ideas of subordinate groups (Littlejohn & Foss). These two theories are very applicable to this research as it deals with gender, language, and women in subordinate roles within society.

Research Question

Access to US advertisements for pads and tampons is readily available, advertisements from the primary countries in this study, India and Nepal, are not as prevalent. To supplement the

advertisements the researcher will also utilize journalism and photographs as artifacts in the study. This literature review will help fill the gap in the conversations and communication research surrounding menstruation. Not enough research is being done on a topic that affects half of the world's population directly, and everyone on the planet indirectly (if someone has a mother, then they have been affected by menstruation).

The taboo and discomfort surrounding menstruation and talking about it has caused a spiral of silence that has made the effects and realities of what it means to be a woman in the world very invisible.

The goal of this paper is to analyze and identify common themes among the imagery used in menstruation media. Driven by two primary theories, Muted Group and Genderlect, I explore further the following research question:

RQ: How does the communication surrounding menstruation represent or misrepresent the culture surrounding menstruation in the US and in South Asia?

Methodology

I will be using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with variety of theoretical lenses to analyze and identify common themes among the imagery used in menstruation advertising in the U.S. and in South Asia (India and Nepal). For this study I found advertisements for feminine hygiene products from the U.S. and from India and Nepal. U.S. advertisements were readily available while searches for advertisements from India and Nepal yielded minimal results. In Google I searched "Menstruation Ads," "Period Ads," "Tampon Ads," "Pad Ads," and "Feminine Hygiene Ads" followed by U.S., India, and Nepal to find the

advertisements. Then I coded the images and advertisements using an emergent thematic analysis that involved looking for frequent and/or salient elements in the data.

Analysis

The question guiding this analysis is How does the communication surrounding menstruation represent or misrepresent the culture surrounding menstruation in the US and in South Asia? There are four themes outlined below that stood out as salient during the analysis of the data, some of the themes are larger and contain sub themes as well.

Presence and Absence of Feminine Hygiene Advertisements in Global Media

The search for data itself was very telling of the culture surrounding menstruation. In the search for U.S. advertisements, Google Images was covered in bright and colorful images of women jumping around in shorts and skirts and climbing over obstacles in leggings. The image results for advertisements in South Asian countries brought up a much more random seeming array of photos. From posters from documentaries about menstruation in India to pictures of protests, actual advertisements were sparse. This in itself is telling of the dialogue, or lack there of on menstruation in that part of the world from a media level. In the U.S. discussions surrounding menstruation, there is a stigma but it is not out of place to see an ad for tampons on the side of a bus or on a prominent television network. Based on the research, in South Asia that sort of commonplace sighting would not be expected.

The Prominence of Sports in U.S. Advertising for Feminine Hygiene Products

A predominant theme that stuck out among the U.S. advertisements was the prominence of sports in the dialogue and imagery surrounding menstruation. Women playing tennis in short white shirts? Holding a soccer ball and power posing? These images, and images like them,

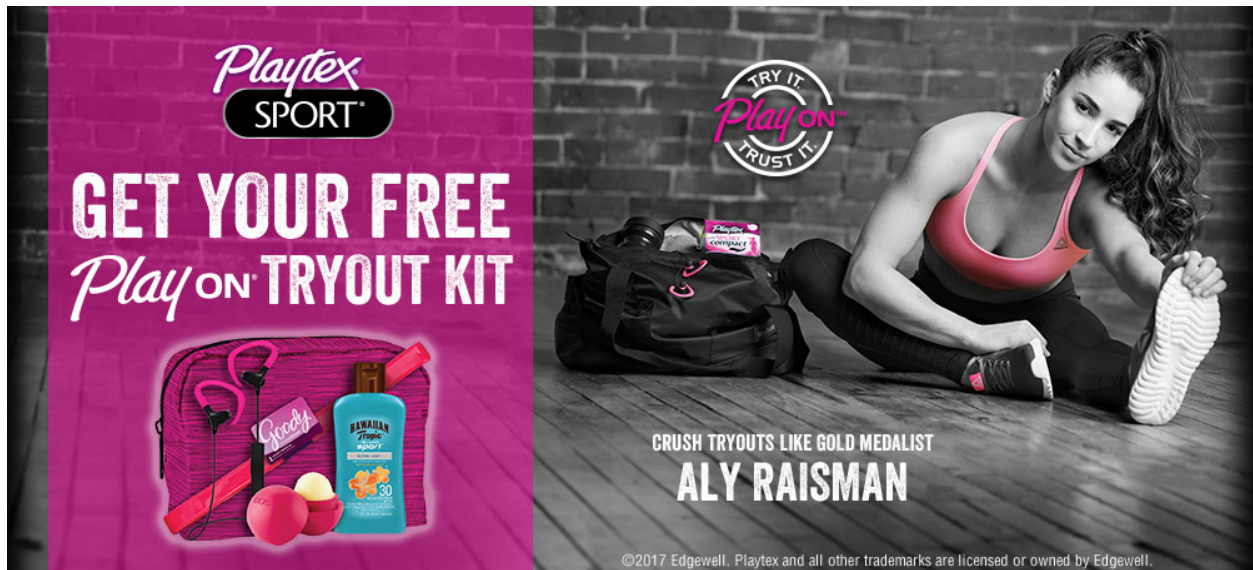
cover the feminine hygiene advertisements and tell the story that with (insert tampon brand here) sports are a breeze and any girl can keep playing without worrying about leaking onto their new tennis skirt.



The advertisement above shows a woman covered in what appears to be dirt, climbing a wall which one could assume to be part of some sort of obstacle race. The text overlay reads, “At a moment like this, I’m glad I use New Tampax Pearl Active.” By showing the model doing an athletic activity while “using” one of their tampons it shows that the product can hold up even on a woman’s most important competition days.

Even the words used to name the products are based on sports or physical activity. The Tampax advertisement above added “Active” to the product name to show beyond the images that this is a tampon for the woman who is always moving. Adding “Active” or other words to the advertisement help the branding be consistent and create a better story for the consumer.

Many brands follow this same trend by creating products and campaigns based around being active or athletic during menstruation. The way that brands choose to portray this narrative differs, but the importance of sports in feminine hygiene advertising is consistent across U.S. brands.



The advertisement above shows Olympic gold medalist, Aly Raisman, stretching and warming up. Using an famous athlete as the model adds to the story that not only is this a product for women who are active in sports, but that the best of the best trust it. Like the Tampax advertisement, Playtex uses the word “SPORT” to position their product as a trusted choice for athletes. In this case, the also utilize the slogan “Try it. Trust it. Play on.” to demonstrate that Playtex should be the trusted go-to for playing sports while menstruating.



Aly Raisman is not the only celebrity athlete to become the face for a feminine hygiene campaign, U.S. soccer star Alex Morgan is seen in the advertisement below arms crossed in her Nike apparel with an illustration of a woman playing soccer with a pearl. The text reads “Reaching Goals with Alex Morgan.” Like the previous examples, this advertisement uses a variety of means to paint the picture that this product is the best choice for active women, the “active” added to the product name, the celebrity endorsement/name recognition, using “goals” as a soccer reference and nod to the narrative that with Tampax Pearl Active, menstruating will not stop the ability to reach goals. All of these small components add up to this story that equates success in athletics to what tampon someone uses.

In just a small sampling of U.S. feminine hygiene advertisements, over 50% showcased a women playing, preparing for, or celebrating some kind of physical activity or sport. The South Asian pieces I sampled showed no kind of physical activity or narrative of women in sports.

This not only speaks to decisions of the advertiser but also to larger cultural implications of women in athletics. In the U.S. not only is it normal for little girls to play sports, it is often encouraged. Whether they play soccer, tennis, track, basketball, or t-ball, those activities for young girls are not inherently linked with being feminine or masculine (there are of course stereotypes and constraints on what sports women can/should play).

For decades, women's sports have become mainstream, while professional women athletes are not payed the same as men or not always given equal treatment, there are teams and there are options for women. That is more than can be said for many countries. The U.S. is a leader in women’s sports, just look at the success of the U.S. women’s soccer team and U.S.’s

women's performance in nearly every Olympic category. It is apparent that U.S. culture values women in athletics more than some other cultures, Title IX is an example of that. Title IX (1972) states that everyone regardless of sex should be provided equal access to any program that receives Federal financial assistance, including sports. The Women's Sports Foundation emphasized the importance of Title IX to women in sports:

Before Title IX, one in 27 girls played sports. Today that number is two in five. While we still have far to go before every girl has equal access to sports, especially girls of color, it is clear that we are making headway. This summer at the 2016 Rio Olympics, the world watched as woman after woman broke barriers, shattered records and won titles across a multitude of sports.

This quote shows the important changes the U.S. has made and the number of women involved in sports today, many reaching the highest level. With two in five girls playing sports it is not surprising that so many advertisements for tampons and pads make sports the subject. Sports are a relatable and effective means of showing the versatility and trustworthiness of a product. If it works when someone is jumping, kicking, climbing, and moving it will work when someone is just sitting at work.

Sports have not always been available for women to participate in so it may seem like sport's place in this type of media is more modern, this is not the case. For decades athletic endeavors have been at the forefront of feminine hygiene product advertising.



The cluster of three advertisements above may look different than the other advertisements above from the last decade, but the themes they display are identical. Each shows a various form of active lifestyle and has a quote or short paragraph describing how the product helps them feel confident to do the active things they love.

The Nature of Protection or The Protection of Nature: A Paradox in U.S. Advertisements

As stated in the Introduction, Menstruating is a natural occurrence that most women experience. If someone knew absolutely nothing about menstruation and all they ever saw was advertisements, they likely would not come to the conclusion that menstruation is a natural and welcomed occurrence. In fact it would probably be just the opposite. No U.S. advertisement I found presented menstruation as natural or something to embrace. Instead, images of “beating” and “overcoming” menstruation dominate the images. Instead of a natural and life giving monthly occurrence, menstruation is treated as a monthly inconvenience women face and need to deal with. From the rhetoric used to the photos themselves, there seems to be no place for periods in U.S. society.

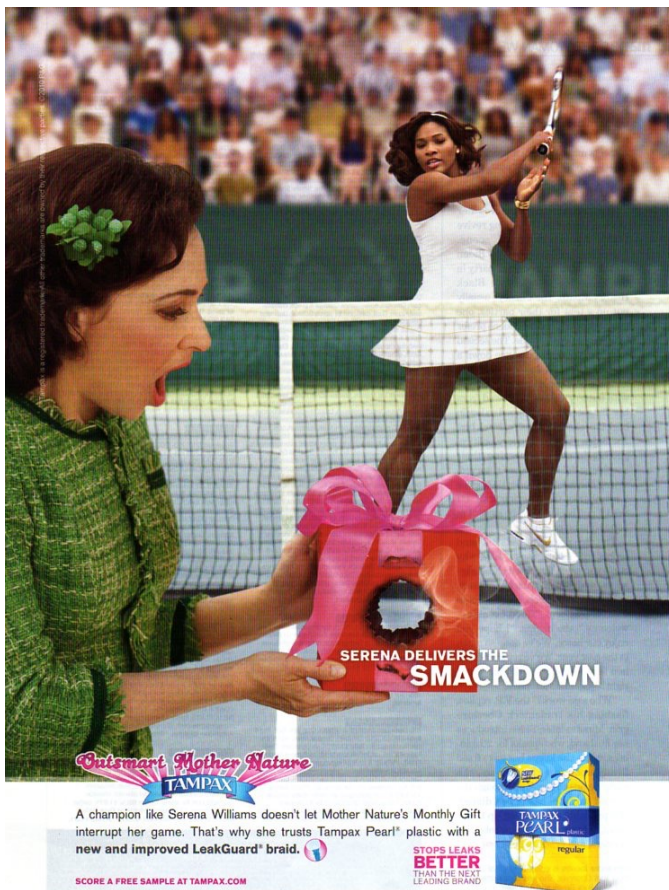
Personification of Menstruation

There are many colloquialisms for menstruation, “period,” “time of the month,” “Aunt Flo,” the list goes on. Since society and media often mirror one another it is not surprising that advertisers would pick up some of this lingo in their campaigns. However, what is interesting is the way menstruation itself has become personified further in advertising than just names. As stated above, there seems to be an obsession to “outsmart” and “protect against” menstruation. It is much easier to fight against something that is not within yourself so companies take menstruation and pull it away from the woman and turn it into its own entity.

The Tampax campaign featuring “Mother Nature” bearing “gifts” is one of the most memorable of all the advertisements I sampled and also a perfect demonstration of advertisers treating menstruation as something to shun or shut down. Featuring tennis legend Serena Williams, the first advertisement shows a green clad woman appearing on the tennis court to bring Serena her “monthly gift” in a little red box tied with a bow.



The advertisement, above, shows Serena sending a ball flying towards “Mother Nature” and reads, “Serena Slams Mother Nature” and above the tiny box of tampons on the right corner, “Outsmart Mother Nature.” This image displays the theme of athletics prominence in advertisements as well as taking it a step further by personifying menstruation into something that can be defeated.



In advertisements that seems to follow up on the previous, the left shows Serena's tennis ball leaving a smoking hole in the "gift" while the right shows "Mother Nature" being escorted off the court as Serena celebrates "Outsmarting Mother Nature." This campaign has a very clear message that menstruation is something that can keep women from success and to defeat it means Tampax is the solution to the "problem."

An Emphasis on Clothing Protection

One of the main themes in the advertisements I sampled was the way certain feminine hygiene products are helpful and trustworthy for protecting clothes. There is an emphasis on the products allowing women to feel confident to wear their "shortest of shorts" or lightest pants with no fears of leaks. Clothes are something a lot of women think about while menstruating. Nearly every girl had to tie a sweatshirt around her waist to cover up the fact that she bled

through her jeans at one point or another. So it makes sense that advertisements would want to tap into that vulnerability and lack of confidence, but why is it necessary to focus so much on the look instead of how to make women feel better when they are menstruating.



The advertisement above shows the model in heels and purple shorts posing and the small text reads “Up to 100% Leak-Free Periods” and below it “Wear what you want.” This implies that without Tampax Radiant Always Collection, women cannot wear what they want for fear of leaking. While leaking can be embarrassing or uncomfortable, much of this discomfort and embarrassment is likely influenced by the media we consume that tells us that the right products prevent those type of accidents.

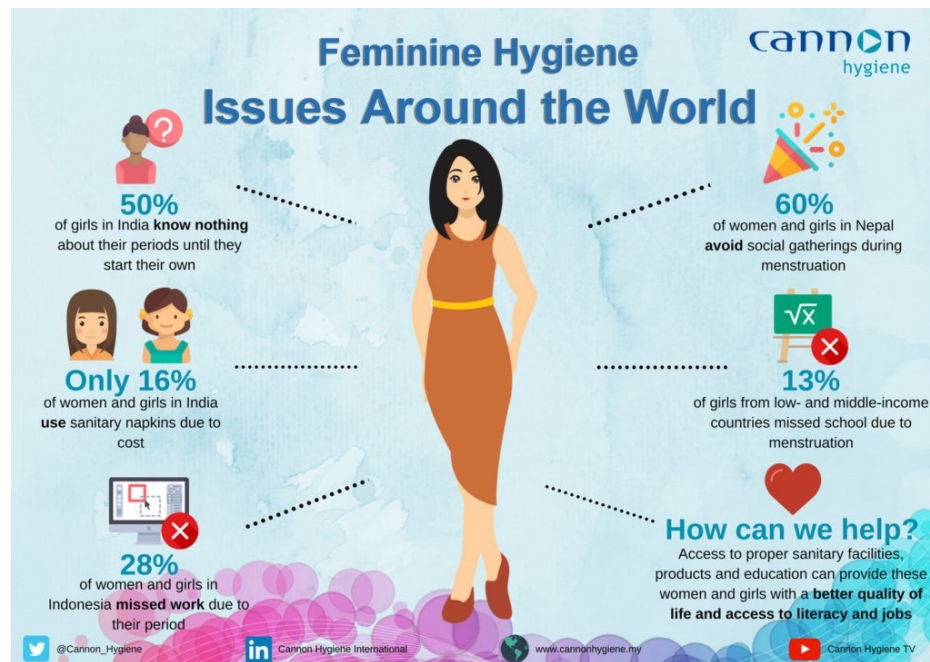


The two advertisements above are very fashion focused, each with their own spin on the same message: keep your period invisible. One thing that stands out among these advertisements, and all others that include talk of protecting clothing, there is a strong negativity around menstruation being noticeable. Whether it is talking about a stain on a pair of polka dot pants, a line from a pad, a loud tampon or pad wrapper, or a tampon string showing out of a swimsuit, all of these things are described as some of the most embarrassing things a woman can endure. In reality, what they are actually enduring is a natural cycle that happens to most women each month.

South Asian Feminine Hygiene Advertisements are Rooted in Education not Branding

At first glance it would be easy to confuse the feminine hygiene advertisements from India and Nepal with the diagrams in a textbook, this is due to their educational nature. In U.S. advertising, and life in general, brands are very important. People trust certain brands for certain

things, brands are attributed to people's identities based on the clothes they wear and the things they buy. U.S. marketing of feminine hygiene products are no different, the image results were dominated by a select handful of brands, the majority of which were recognizable immediately by their logo and aesthetic. Possibly it's the U.S.'s capitalist and materialistic culture that attributes to this importance on branding. Maybe it's just that the South Asian countries have not reached the level where the concern can be anything beyond basic education surrounding menstruation.



The above advertisement was one of the first advertisements that came up in image searches from South Asia. While U.S. advertisements had the intent to sell a product, this and many others from South Asia seem to be selling an ideology or a piece of knowledge. Cannon Hygiene, the logo in the top right corner is a UK based sanitation company, does not sell feminine hygiene products but their business is in helping develop sanitation systems in other countries. If someone took away the logo in the corner, this is merely educational and if it's target audience is

a consumer and just ordinary people there is no service that Cannon could be paid for. However, if this was facing a more corporate or governmental audience, it could be seen as trying to sell the services of Cannon.

Virginity in South Asia's Advertising of Tampons

Preserving virginity is not something that is a common theme in modern U.S. advertising for pads and tampons. While some ads when Tampons had just come out hinted at virginity, the advertisements of South Asia lead the viewer to believe that virginity is of high importance to the cultures there. The advertisement below is almost comical with the floating tampon the size of the woman's head, but more interesting than that is the word "VIRGINITY" in block letters in a corner bubble.



Similarly to the advertisements above that provided education for feminine hygiene issues, this ad, above, shows the viewer that Stayfree has more information regarding virginity and tampon use and it's something they have in mind. While this may sound crazy that the concept of tampons making girls no longer "virgins" needs to be explained, but based on the controlling

culture surrounding women in aspects of South Asian society discussed above, maybe it is not as shocking as it initially seems.

Discussion

Recap:

This study set out to analyze the advertisements related to menstruation in the United States as well as that of South Asian Countries such as India and Nepal. Through the lens of Genderlect Theory and Muted Group Theory, advertisements were coded for themes and analyzed following Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. This analysis found several salient data pieces that were used to build themes that added to the bigger picture of the culture surrounding menstruation in different countries. A thematization of the advertisements allowed myself to derive meaning from the artifacts and look at it in a context that reflects back on the culture the country the advertisement is from.

Implications:

In the future, it may be useful to use this research to create campaigns that can be more empowering towards menstruating women and offer solutions to the challenges menstruating women face instead of creating new problems.

This research could be useful for newer menstrual product brands to differentiate themselves from competitors as well as to use the things other companies have done before to propel themselves as a better option for women.

With menstruation being a international development crisis, this research could help global aid organizations create advertisements in other countries that would empower women

and greater society to embrace and accept menstruation, de-stigmatize it and help girls gain easier access to menstrual care products.

Limitations:

While using google images gave me an easy to digest view at advertisements, there were limitations in what was available, particularly from South Asia. With access to print publications from South Asia, there would have been more data to work with and may shed a clearer light on where advertisements for menstrual products appear in publications and their absence as well. Due to the variable amount of advertisements it was difficult to find an equal sample size from each country, in a ideal scenario the sample sizes for both would be larger.

Looking Ahead:

There are many topics surrounding advertising of menstruation that need further study including the advertising field. A potential next step could be to conduct interviews on women in different countries and ask them about their experience as a menstruating woman as well as how they view their menstrual cycle. It would be interest to dive more into the absence of acceptance of menstruation as natural in advertising and look at those origins as well as companies that are trying to change that narrative. This could provide more insight into how a change of narrative can change women's own perspective.

In addition, this research could be expanded to other countries with strict media censorship as well as those where women are very oppressed. It would also be interesting to look at countries more similar to the U.S. like Australia, The U.K. or Canada to see the nuances of the ways each countries tackles advertisements for menstrual products.

Pictures only tell part of the story, to see the faces behind the advertisement and the money behind the campaigns would offer a better look behind the curtain of who is creating these images and who is capitalizing off of it. All of this information would be crucial. Ideally a deeper analysis would take place on the history and makeup of the companies and their leadership, this would allow for a more full picture.

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