

Internalizing the Taboo: Israeli Women Respond to Commercials for Feminine Hygiene Products¹

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Abstract

This paper presents and analyzes the findings relating to commercials for feminine hygiene products that emerged from an extensive feminist reception study which examined, for the first time, how Israeli women interpret images of women and femininity in TV commercials. Adopting a feminist and interpretive approach, the qualitative study was based on in-depth personal interviews with Israeli women from diverse cultural, economic, and social backgrounds.

Grounded theory methodology, employed for analysis of the interviews, revealed that many Jewish women in Israel, in particular those who are traditional or religious, are deeply disturbed by commercials for feminine hygiene products. The focus of their criticism was that intimate private matters which should be kept hidden are exposed to public view, thereby arousing embarrassment, shame, and even ridicule, especially when younger family members are present. In addition, the women were both critical and scornful of the customary advertising strategies that are employed systematically in these commercials.

The paper discusses all these findings in the Israeli socio-cultural context and attempts to identify different interpretive communities in the diverse population of Israeli women in respect to these texts.

Keywords: Feminist reception study; Israel; Social Taboo; Feminine Hygiene Products; Menses.

Introduction

A considerable body of literature deals with the perception of menses in different cultures. One major avenue of research relates to the messages about menses and the female body that are conveyed by commercials for feminine hygiene products. However, we are unaware of any studies that have focused on the other side of the interaction – the target audience of the advertising campaigns. In other words, a question that remains unanswered is how women perceive the messages in these commercials.

This paper presents the criticism of such promotional texts as expressed by Israeli women. Their views on the subject emerged unexpectedly from an extensive feminist reception study that examined, for the first time, how women in Israel interpret images of women and femininity in TV commercials. Many of them were found to be extremely critical of the use of the female body and bodily functions in a manner which exposes to public view issues that are meant to be private and intimate. In addition, they were both critical and scornful of the customary advertising strategies that are employed systematically in these commercials.

¹ This article is based on my doctoral dissertation supervised by Prof. Dafna Lemish. The author is thankful for her encouragement, meticulous comments and helpful suggestions.

The paper also reports on the attempt to identify the different interpretive communities in the diverse population of Israeli women in respect to this subject and to these texts.

We believe the current paper makes an important contribution to our knowledge of female interpretation of advertising images by addressing what appears to be a gap in the literature. Moreover, in view of the unique cultural and religious fabric of Jewish Israeli society, in which certain factors contribute to the enhancement and centrality of patriarchal values, as well as the mass penetration of television advertising into the lives of most Israelis in recent years, it is of particular interest to examine the significance of the women's critical attitudes. Their responses are likely to be an indication of how Israeli women contend with patriarchal and repressive cultural messages relating to their femininity.

The female body and female sexuality in commercials for feminine hygiene products

Advertising is a subject of special interest in feminist research. Although the genre is not held to document reality, it is thought to convey specific versions of it and to mirror Western capitalist and patriarchal ideology (Van Zoonen, 1994). In order to persuade people to buy products, commercials rely on existing social/cultural knowledge and make use of familiar concepts whose constructed meanings enable them easy entry into the minds of their target audience (Williamson, 1978). Thus, advertisements for hygiene products (soap, mouthwash, etc.) frame the body in the context of complex cultural beliefs about contamination (Douglas, 1966, cited in Kane 1997² ; Turner, 2003) warn us that others find body odor repulsive, and confirm apprehensions about being rejected by significant others or the fear of not being able to enjoy a close physical relationship. As part of the effort to prevent contamination, the individual is expected to be personally responsible for controlling body fluids.

Furthermore, the category of "feminine hygiene" reveals male/cultural intervention and shows that the female body requires some special rituals of cleanliness (Kane 1997). In fact, Western patriarchal society regards the female body as unstable, mercurial, and changeable, and therefore in need of policing (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993). This attitude is based on the dichotomy of binary thinking which associates the feminine with physicality, nature, and the private sphere, and takes a negative view of all those aspects allied with femininity (Cirksena and Cuklanz, 1992). Although the fear of dirtying the body and contaminating the home appears in many categories of television commercials, those for feminine hygiene products relate directly to biological differences, and are thus capable of conveying cultural perceptions of women: they suggest that women are biologically less clean and more contaminative than men.

² Every society has rules concerning the way things should enter or leave the body. Although her focus is on traditional societies, her insights into the function of cultural and personal boundaries can also be applied to beliefs in modern societies.

The themes of such commercials have not changed since the invention of feminine hygiene products in the late 19th century. Influenced by dominant medical discourses regarding the female body, they play on associative links with hygiene, freedom, and concealment (Al-Khalidi, 2000).

Indeed, studies researching the nature and content of advertisements for feminine hygiene products report that over time, menses has been framed in Western society as a problem or genetic flaw. They reveal that a myth has been constructed around the menstrual period whereby it is not regarded as positive and natural, as an indication of a woman's fertility, sexual maturation, health, etc. Instead, it is seen as a hygienic crisis, as an uncomfortable dirty condition that is to be kept hidden and secret because of the disgrace and embarrassment that would ensue should it be discovered due to negligent protective measures. Advertisements, therefore, convey the message that if a woman purchases a particular product, it will "protect" her and free her from the restrictions and fears that are an inevitable part of the experience of menses. Such advertisements present a version of reality that accords with the dominant ideology: signifiers of femininity (in this case, the fact that women bleed once a month) are to be concealed, and women are responsible for keeping these shameful signs hidden.

These advertisements thus combine modern advertising techniques with the constricting age-old taboo against menstruating women which has been found in all cultures (Gillooly, 2004; Houppert, 1999; Roberts, 2004; Stubbs, 2008; Ussher, 1989), typically masking the "shame" as "freedom." Although by their very reference to menstruation they might appear to be breaking the silence around this subject, they are in fact perpetuating the taboo (e.g., Merskin, 1999; Park, 1996; Simes and Berg, 2001; Treneman, 1989). In addition, they suggest that a woman's attractiveness is related to a certain type of femininity of which "freshness" is a major element. The implication is that a woman who is liberated by the use of a particular feminine hygiene product can move freely around the public space, even though she is the object of attention and scrutinization (Kane, 1997).

Hence, these advertisements join in the prevailing cultural discourse on femininity which is grounded in belief in a biological determinism that gives priority to the male body and places a taboo on female sexuality. Messages of the sort conveyed by such advertisements are very likely to influence the way women perceive themselves, as identity is molded, *inter alia*, by conventional representations which help to delineate the borders between the self and others. Sex and gender, as defined by the physical features of the human body, seem to be an important factor in shaping female identity (Woodward, 2002). Friedman (1996) and Weideger (1978) maintain that even when this identity is just starting to emerge, the young girl is given cautionary social messages, guidelines that constrain her freedom, and social sanctions for expressions of feminine sexuality, all of which are associated with a sense of shame. The girl's menarche is a part of it (Costos et al., 2002; Gillooly, 2004; Lee, 2008; Stubbs, 2008).

It is important to note here that although commercial television was introduced into Israel in the early 1990s, no content analysis of local advertisements for feminine hygiene products (whether TV commercials or otherwise) has yet to be conducted. Nor are there any regulatory limitations relating to advertisements for these products in the electronic media.³

Feminist audience studies and women's interpretation of female images in advertisements

One of the prominent aspects of the feminist critique in media studies relates to the fact that women are forced to observe the female representations proffered by a culture that traditionally ignores the feminine viewpoint (Betterton, 1987). Reference is often made to Berger's (1972) claim that women are accustomed to constant representations of their own image and to seeing themselves through the male gaze, and thereby learn to regard themselves as the object of the gaze. Women observe the images with a divided consciousness: they view the world and themselves simultaneously.

This idea led to the focusing of research attention, particularly in feminist audience studies, on the female experience of media consumption. Here ethnographic perspectives were represented by the ways in which women negotiate actively and productively with media content, that is, how they interpret, benefit from, and apply it in everyday life (e.g., Ang, 1985; Radway, 1984). The results indicated that women challenge media images and the patriarchal ideology by finding pleasure, either within the patriarchal power structure or in resistance to it, in a manner that may be empowering and liberating. That is to say, the popularity of a text among women does not mean that they endorse or accept the ideology it expresses ("Dominant/Preferred Reading" according to Hall, 1980), but is rather evidence of their claim to subjectivity, their particular female gaze on the text, even if it does not necessarily reject or protest it. Such feminist audience studies also stress the importance of distinguishing between women from different cultural and social backgrounds in order to examine the way in which they view and interpret cultural texts. Consequently, several investigations have sought to identify interpretive communities.⁴

A number of studies have indicated the role of the woman's age in developing a critical attitude toward advertising images. Thus, for example, in Currie's (1997) well-known research, girls aged 13-17 accepted the ideological (hegemonic/patriarchal) images of women in teen magazines as truths about femininity, and were powerless to question patriarchy and capitalism through alternative readings. Similarly, in a qualitative study comparing the responses of male and female American students to advertisements proffering a variety of images of women, Shields (1999, 2002) found a recurring pattern in women's responses which

³ Based on the rules of Second Authority for Television and Radio (Ethics in Television Commercials, 1994).

⁴ The term "interpretive community" is used in reception studies to indicate a group that shares a similar interpretation of a given text and a similar use of the media. The term helps to explain differences in interpretations.

included the story of a "journey" from adolescence to the present, indicating the gradual development of awareness and dispute with the underlying meanings of advertising messages.

In addition, Shields's research revealed that women were highly aware of the representations in advertisements, continually negotiating with the predominant idealized images of women. They were cognizant of the fact that the influence of the advertisements was in part conscious and in part subconscious, and all admitted that the female images had strongly affected their lives (in the past and present), impacting how they saw themselves, how they behaved, how they thought others perceived them, and how others behaved. The participants displayed a preference for a complex, multidimensional image of a woman who was not only attractive, but also active, responsible, assertive, independent, and intelligent. A major element of the influence attributed to advertising in this study related to its definition of the ideal woman: slender, perfect, youthful. According to Shields, women know they are seeing the female image through male eyes, yet are still influenced by it. Awareness of the message and impact of an advertisement, she concludes, does not help to reduce the internal conflicts women experience as a result of their divided consciousness.

The way in which women in Israel interpret female images in TV commercials has never previously been examined. Furthermore, no studies were found (in Israel or elsewhere) that focused specifically on women's interpretation of the images in commercials for feminine hygiene products.

The current study

This study analyzed personal in-depth interviews with 44 Israeli women. The interviews were conducted in the course of an extensive feminist reception study that examined, for the first time, how Israeli women interpret images of women and femininity in TV commercials. In order to obtain a maximal diversity of interpretations, the sample was drawn from different social and economic backgrounds representing a variety of profiles in contemporary Israeli society⁵. Theoretical sampling (using the snowball technique) was employed, with the number of participants determined in the course of data collection (Denzin, 1994). The interviews were conducted by the researcher between May, 2004 and October, 2005, and were recorded and transcribed in full. They took from 45 minutes to two hours, with most lasting for around 90 minutes.

The structure of the interview was flexible, beginning with an open format that became progressively structured. In the first stage, issues important to women in respect to advertising in general and television commercials in particular were discussed in order to obtain the participant's spontaneous responses. In the second stage, the interviewees were directed through the dialogue to the concrete subject of the

⁵ Important factors for this article are 'age' of the interviewees (18-29: 8; 30-39: 12; 40-49: 8; 50-59 : 8; 60+ : 8) and 'religious affiliation' (30 of the interviewees were secular women, 10 religious and 4 traditional).

representation of women in commercials and the degree to which they identified with these images. Finally, the participants were presented with five complex and sophisticated TV commercials which had been aired in Israel and which raised interesting questions about women, their social status, and their image in the media. A recall test of commercials was also conducted.⁶

The interviews were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. First, an analysis of each interview individually was conducted to derive initial themes. An integrative analysis was then performed in an attempt to identify themes contained in the whole body of interviews, define more complex content categories, and generate a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In defining the central categories, the number of relevant themes, their frequency in the transcripts, and their contribution to explaining the subject under study were all taken into account. Provision was also made for contradictory themes within the content categories, where the interviewees expressed conflicting ideas. This paper reports direct references of the interviewees to commercials for feminine hygiene products.⁷

Public de-familiarization of female sexuality

The findings reveal that harsh criticism was expressed by about a third of the interviewees, who spontaneously, and at their own initiative, mentioned commercials for feminine hygiene products. In light of the fact that advertisements for feminine hygiene products (pads, panty liners, tampons) constituted only 1.7 percent of all the commercials aired on the two Israeli commercial TV stations in the period during which the interviews were conducted,⁸ the spontaneous and systematic reference to them seems extremely significant.

Interestingly enough, this issue was of little concern to the older participants. In fact, the oldest women who referred to such advertisements were in their early 50s. It seems reasonable to assume that advertisements for feminine hygiene products primarily draw the attention of women in their reproductive years, who are indeed the target audience, as they see them as relevant to their lives and therefore assume the stance of the subject presented in these commercials (see Althusser's [1971] term "hailing"; see also Nava [1997], who employs the term in the context of consumerism).⁹

Some women appear to find it difficult to contend with the fact that the commercials deal openly with the menstrual period, which they consider an intimate feminine matter. They expressed the concern that public

⁶ The participants were asked to illustrate statements they made in the interview by citing examples of commercials they had seen and remembered. Their descriptions of the commercials contained motifs that were clearly subjective and interpretative.

⁷ Other findings of the study are discussed in separate papers.

⁸ The data was collected from the Ifat Advertising Control system by Revital Rosenbaum of the Media Department of Adler-Chomsky-Warshavsky Advertising.

⁹ Althusser (1971) employs the terms "interpellation" and "hailing" to describe the construction of the subject by the media. "Hailing" refers to the fact that every media act requires making contact with the addressees, that is, they must be "hailed." If they respond, it means they have recognized that the call is addressed to them. They can then participate in it and accept the social stance it presents, or alternatively refuse to participate if they do not accept that stance.

advertising of this sort might be detrimental to them, detracting from respect for women and making them an object of derision.

Mor (30),¹⁰ for example, stated:

All the pads and tampons, all the hygiene products...it's good because they tell you about the product and what kinds there are...but I don't know if I want to learn about that from TV. I would prefer it if a friend told me, if my mother told me, if my sister told me. I would prefer it to be a shared intimate experience and [to feel] that I'm a woman and this is unique to me and not to men, and that afterwards every stupid stand-up comic didn't make jokes about "with wings," "without wings." That's why - it's so confusing because it's controversial: on the one hand it's good that they [men] know about these things and on the other hand they use it to our disadvantage...and then all sorts of ridicule comes with it...it projects itself onto other things.

Indeed, it has often been claimed that the electronic media brings the space behind the scenes onto center stage by directly presenting emotion, experience, and intimacy, omitting the dimension of mediation. Among other things, this allows for open public discussion of social taboos and issues that were previously reserved for the private space. In certain cases, the borders between the public and the private are deliberately blurred as a form of provocation aimed at increasing public awareness (Winship, 2000). In respect to commercials for feminine hygiene products, however, it seems that Israeli women consider the blurring of the borders to be problematic and dysfunctional.

In the context of the criticism of public presentation of the menses, women of all ages who defined themselves as traditional or religious stated they felt uncomfortable viewing the commercials in the company of younger family members, whether children or adolescents. In the words of Leah (traditional, 43), for instance: "They show all these...tampons to children, and then my daughter asks me, 'What's she sticking in there? What's that?'...So they ask more questions, and that bothers me very much."

Similarly, Yael (religious, 51) explained:

Some commercials are just disgusting to look at, and little children see them too...More intimate commercials, they're not for young kids...Even when you're sitting with them at this age and watching television, commercials like that come on and it's a little embarrassing...Every commercial for pads, tampons, all those things. It's true they have to know about it, but not at such an early age. Six or seven year olds don't need to know all that...For example, they show commercials for tampons, and once I saw one with a woman riding in a car ... and she didn't have any problem sticking the tampon in...I didn't really enjoy that.

¹⁰ The names of the participants have been changed. The age of each appears in parentheses.

In addition to the embarrassment evidenced by these statements, they reveal another interesting fact: the women refer to commercials that show the actual insertion of a tampon. This is a figment of their imagination, as no commercials for feminine hygiene products ever openly present this intimate act. By the same token, they never show blood, demonstrating the absorbency of their product by placing a tampon in clear water or pouring a blue liquid onto a pad (Treneman, 1989). Thus the participants' remarks appear to be an indication of their uneasy sense that the commercials reveal a "woman's secret."

Like Yael above, several of the religious women described these commercials as "disgusting." As Tovi (47) remarked:

To say nothing of all the commercials for the different types of tampons and pads and panty liners, and the whole family is sitting there watching and there's nothing left today...everything is out in the open. They spew it out in your face and it's awful...I come from the religious sector, but I don't think I'm a religious fanatic...It's just disgusting! Inappropriate!...It bothers me personally and even more so if I'm sitting with a ten-year-old boy who has to see sanitary pads (which shouldn't interest him), or a teenage boy, or even a 24-year-old man. It's unfitting, embarrassing, unpleasant. It's not that I think the whole subject is embarrassing and unpleasant – not at all. But you don't have to show everything. Like you wouldn't see a woman giving birth on television, even though birth is incredible and wonderful... Some things just shouldn't be shown!

All these comments reflect the perception of female sexuality, of which the menses is an integral part, as something shameful which ought to be kept hidden. This is in line with the feminist discourse on how Western thinking turns the woman into the "other," someone who "diverges from the norm." According to the feminist critique, the woman is perceived as the binary opposite of the man, who is taken to be the norm, the standard by which everything is judged, so that anything defined "feminine" is seen to be negative or inferior (Greene and Kahn, 1985; Schur, 1984). In this spirit, De Beauvoir (1949/1974) claimed that because the significance of the woman is determined by men, she is relegated to the role of "the opposite sex," a non-essential "other," whereas the man is free to define the meaning of his own existence. Cultural feminism in particular related to the fact that women in Western society are identified with physicality, nature, emotion, and irrationality, while the male body, soul, and mind serve as the human standards. Consequently, the female body and essence are inevitably seen as diverging from the norm (Cirksena and Cuklanz, 1992). Images of the female body as dangerous, rapacious, and controlled primarily by emotions are presented as the opposite of the self-disciplined rational male mind. Thus, the female body is always the "other": mysterious, unrestrained, and a threat that challenges the patriarchal world order by means of distraction, seduction, or capitulation to sexual passion, leading to a failure of will or even death

(Bordo, 1993). According to feminist theoreticians, as a result of this male fear, the woman's body came to represent something that had to be overseen and controlled, and was therefore conceived as an object of supervision, discipline, and oppression, that is, it was subject to social domination (Bartky, 1990; Davis, 1997; Wolf, 1992).

Similarly, Young (1990) maintains that the body was central to the way in which dominant groups (i.e., white middle-class Western men) categorized different sectors of the population (e.g., women, homosexuals, the elderly, the disabled, etc.) as "others" low on the aesthetic scale they devised. As a result, they not only created a distinction between themselves and these sectors, but also afforded themselves a status of control and superiority. As the discourse on the female body and sexuality was instigated by men, the role of feminine sexuality was delineated in light of male needs, making it very difficult for women to define themselves according to their own criteria (Bem, 1993; Wyman and Dionisopoulous, 2000). The same male outlook viewed menses as problematic and repulsive (Greer, 1971).

In order to understand why religious and traditional Israeli women in particular find commercials for feminine hygiene products disgusting, one must be aware that menses (known in religious terms as Nidah, from the word for banishment) is considered unclean in Judaism. Religious texts throughout the generations refer to the menstrual period as impure and to the need for men to keep their distance from a woman at this time of the month and to take care not to touch her or even look at her. This attitude continues to be perpetuated in modern books of the religious commandments that are to be observed as a matter of course. The contemporary religious feminist movement regards this view of menses as a sign that the man is the representative Jew in traditional Jewish literature. The role and worth of women is determined, and constrained, primarily as befits male interests, needs, and judgment. Not only does the Torah itself address men alone directly, with few exceptions, but even in the literature that came later, women continued to be referred to as an object rather than a subject, that is, as "they." As the classic image of the woman in Jewish tradition was shaped by the Sages (the early authors of rabbinic literature) in their commentaries on Biblical texts, her very essence was defined by men in their terms and according to their value system (Ross, 2004).

The distaste and embarrassment expressed by religious and traditional women in our sample might also be attributed to the obvious lack of modesty represented by commercials for feminine hygiene products. Modesty is a concept that is deeply rooted in Judaism, although its meaning has changed over time and it is conceived differently by the ultra-Orthodox than by the modern Orthodox, with the women in the current study representing the latter community. Whereas modesty initially referred to humility and good deeds, the Sages added the notion of modesty in the moral sense (i.e., in relations between men and women), creating an association between the term and women and making it an integral part of the woman's

essence. Female modesty came to be seen as a basic quality that sets the woman apart and demands explicit behavioral standards. It is the opposite of standing out, so that anything that might be construed as a woman drawing attention to herself is considered immodest and inappropriate.

Thus, in line with the contention of Williamson (1978) that advertising relies on existing knowledge and makes use of familiar concepts in order to get its message across more effectively, it would seem that commercials for feminine hygiene products perpetuate common cultural myths, making it difficult for women to object to their messages or view them with a critical eye. Furthermore, in the spirit of Butler's (1990, 1993) claim that the distinction between the male and female body is the arbitrary product of a certain social order and that women adopt the cultural scenarios of their gender, it might be said that many of the participants in our study have internalized the dominant patriarchal social discourse that regards the female body and sexuality as "divergent." This appears to apply particularly to the religious and traditional interviewees, who have internalized the dominant patriarchal perception of femininity, menses, and modesty in Judaism. Consequently, they saw menses as especially intimate, and perhaps also disgusting, and therefore something that should be kept concealed. As a result, they believed commercials that deal publicly with feminine hygiene products do not uphold the value of modesty, were embarrassed by these visual representations, spoke out against them, and would be happier if there was no such phenomena.

A ridiculous advertising strategy

Another criticism voiced by many participants contained a judgmental attitude toward the advertising strategy employed in commercials for feminine hygiene products and the unsuccessful attempts of advertising executives to persuade women to buy them. Some interviewees, like Ziva (32) described the strategy as old-fashioned: "Not that it's an invasion of privacy, but like the commercials for Tampax and O.B. tampons, they're all the same...What's left to say about this whole business, what can you do that's new?" Similarly, Sapir (31) remarked: "You see a group of women talking about some tampon they use, about some pad, like it's the latest invention. Before this pad there was a different pad...it's nothing new."

A further aspect of this judgmental attitude relates to the commercials being dishonest and ridiculous, as they claim that the products seemingly turn the menstrual period into a pleasant and liberating experience. Avital (42), for instance, stated:

A little while ago there was actually an ad for sanitary pads that made me laugh. There are lots of ads where you're floating and walking and so on which make it into some joyous experience while we suffer from this baloney every month. Then there was this commercial that took this idea and did a parody of those ads, and that one got to me. It really made me laugh.

In a similar spirit, Chen (22) remarked: "Those ads for feminine hygiene products are utterly ridiculous, as if your period was such fun...I, for one, suffer, so who do they think they're kidding?" And according to Lynette (45): "Some commercials are just funny and I don't even like to watch them. They're the ones for sanitary pads...I don't like them. What's all the nonsense? There's nothing comfortable about it. It's ridiculous."

Interestingly enough, a small number of participants spoke favorably of the advertising strategy employed in several of the commercials in which a woman addresses them directly. Tali (26), for example, noted: "I think they were the first to have women simply talk about the product...Maybe Kotex too?...these tampons? They also did that from the beginning...They didn't use models, just ordinary women of different ages, from different backgrounds. That was nice."

These responses suggest that women's personal experience of the menstrual period makes the subject uncomfortable for them in a manner that reflects the negative perception of menses in society. In addition, they display awareness (and generally blunt criticism) of the artificial and unrealistic picture presented of feminine hygiene, comparing it with their experience of menses and the use of the products advertised. Their comments question the basic "truth" of the advertising slogans and promises, and bear witness to their familiarity with the genre of commercials as consumers in a society where advertisements are ubiquitous. They are aware that the content of the commercials has been produced and constructed to contain persuasive elements aimed at convincing them to buy the product (much like the "critical interpretation" strategy displayed by the participants in the study by Hirschman and Thompson, 1997). Indeed, the interviewees might be said to evidence "advertising literacy" (e.g., O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998), which is often a sign of distance and a suspicious critical attitude toward promotional texts.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper presents and analyzes the findings relating to commercials for feminine hygiene products that emerged from a feminist reception study which examined how Israeli women interpret images of women and femininity in TV commercials. The results suggest that Jewish women in Israel, particular those who are traditional or religious, might be deeply disturbed by commercials for feminine hygiene products because they relate to intimate feminine bodily experiences. The focus of the criticism was that intimate private matters which should be kept hidden are exposed to public view, thereby arousing embarrassment, shame, and even ridicule, especially when younger family members are present.

Although this response would seem to indicate a critical distance from the common images of femininity, it actually demonstrates the internalization of the dominant patriarchal discourse which views the female

body and femininity as a divergence from the norm, an "otherness" that should be concealed. In other words, the participants' harsh criticism of commercials for feminine hygiene products implies acceptance of the dominant social discourse which tells women that their body is inferior and defective, rather than constituting a challenge to this discourse or an attempt to confront it. The criticism therefore supports the claim that the shame and guilt typical of menses myths are internalized by women (Gillooly, 2004; Houppert, 1999; Roberts, 2004; Stubbs, 2008; Ussher, 1989) so that they themselves perpetuate the taboo (Weideger, 1978) and become agents of patriarchal repression.

Accordingly, the women in our study can not be said to have evidenced a critical or subversive reading of the commercials for feminine hygiene products, but a preferred reading (Hall, 1980) in line with the dominant ideology, the patriarchal fear of the "feminine" and the myths it has produced. The fact that older women had no problem with these commercials, and indeed made no reference to them in the interviews, lends further support to this contention. Women past menopause can be expected to feel closer to the male "norm," that is, to be remote enough from the experience of female "otherness" not to sense the guilt and "shame" of their gender.

Another approach that might shed light on this discussion is postcolonial thinking, which deals with the gap between the critique of colonialism and the colonialist discourse and its justifications. One of the major themes of postcolonial studies is the transition from a binary to a hybrid perspective of identities. Fanon ([1952] 1967) relates to the mechanism of imitation evinced by the subjects of colonial oppression. Envious of their rulers, they seek to rid themselves of their inferiority by attempting to resemble their masters. Thus, as a result of their life circumstances, they begin to develop a "dual consciousness" which enables them to view reality from their status on the fringes of society and through the eyes of their colonial rulers simultaneously. The remarks of our interviewees, especially women from the modern Orthodox sector, might also be seen in terms of the concepts of imitation and dual consciousness: the women perceive the indications of female sexuality and identity through "colonial" (male) eyes, and consequently regard them as disgusting and unworthy, preferring to hide them from public view so that they can more closely resemble their oppressors, as it were.

Furthermore, second-wave feminism was harshly critical of women's images in the media. It was argued that these images accentuate and glorify physical appearance in a manner that creates the illusion of an objective and attainable model of perfection (Cortese, 1999; Wolf, 1992). Such homogeneous images were said to function as standards by which women were not only judged and measured, but also judged and measured themselves, adopting them and modifying themselves accordingly (Bordo, 1993), a fact that could have harmful implications (Botta, 1999; Harrison, 2000). It also seems that in a cultural context in which there is an ample evidence of sexualization and objectification of women (Cortese, 1999; McNair,

2002) as in Israel (e.g., First, 1998; Lemish, 2002), women who have internalized these cultural standards might feel disgust and negative feelings toward menstruate body (Chrisler, 2004).

The findings of the current study display both similarities and differences to the results of previous feminist reception studies of female images in advertising. On the one hand, as in earlier studies, the women in our sample demonstrated a "female gaze" by their spontaneous critical reference to the images of women in commercials for feminine hygiene products and the reasons they gave for their disapproval. On the other hand, however, their comments do not support the contention that women object to the patriarchal ideology conveyed through media images (Ang, 1996; Shields, 1999). The findings also run counter to the results reported by Shields (1999, 2002), whereby adult women begin to resist the female images in advertising and reject the preferred reading encoded in promotional texts. Although the older women did not attribute importance to commercials for feminine hygiene products, not even mentioning them, this would seem to be related more to the fact that they no longer experience menses than to their age. This explanation is supported by the spontaneous reference to these commercials of other adult women of reproductive age, or near the end of this period, who chose to relate to them at their own initiative.

The findings are of particular interest in view of the fact that the dichotomy between "public" and "private" has been a central issue in feminist thinking and action, albeit the attitude toward it has changed over the years. It might be argued that the very fact that commercials for feminine hygiene products bring the private female world into the public sphere is a reflection of feminist thinking or a challenge to society. This would be in keeping with second wave feminism's call to eradicate the gender distinction between the public and private, as these concepts derive from the existing political power structure and dominant ideologies, such as patriarchy. The findings might also be seen from the vantage point of third wave feminism which lobbied for an end to associating women with the private sphere and men with the public sphere, and objected to stamping as non-political any concerns perceived to be "trivial." These should also be public issues, they claimed (Silveirinha, 2007). In this spirit, it could also be said that commercials for feminine hygiene products are an unmistakable declaration that women differ from men because "that's just how women are," without any element of a gender-based hierarchy.

Nevertheless, it must be stressed that critical or feminist readings of this sort were not found in the study. None of the interviewees indicated that the commercials' public discourse on an intimate private matter was liberating for them personally, or for women in general. Instead, their comments appear to be closer to the post-feminist argument that the slogan "the personal is the political" and merging the private with the public is not the way to achieve equality (e.g., Walter, 1998).

In view of Foucault's (1977) contention that meaning is made through discourse, and that the power of a discourse is dependent on its acceptance as truth in given historical circumstances, the findings presented

here should be considered in the social and cultural context of Israel. Certain factors in Israel contribute to the enhancement and centrality of patriarchal values. These include the religious establishment, the preeminence of the military, and the persisting security problems. Moreover, the normative expectation that women be responsible for bearing and raising children and keeping the home serves to perpetuate gender inequality and silence the feminist voice (Herzog, 2002). This context may explain the women's internalization of the male/macho/patriarchal discourse on menses. They therefore view the menstrual period as an inconvenience, and commercials for feminine hygiene products as disgusting and embarrassing, as exposure of a taboo that should not be dealt with in a public forum such as TV commercials.

To conclude, the findings suggest that commercials for feminine hygiene products appear to divide Israeli women into different interpretive communities along two axes. The first is age, which creates a distinction between women who still experience a monthly menstrual period and older women who do not, and are therefore less interested in or bothered by these commercials and more indifferent to their messages. Younger women criticize the commercials mainly for their public display of intimate feminine matters and the fear of attracting male ridicule. The second axis is religious belief, which generates a distinction between secular women, whose criticism of the commercials is less harsh, and traditional and religious women who are severely critical of them because of the issue of modesty and the canonical Jewish attitude toward menses.

Furthermore, the interviewees evidence what might be called an integrated reading of the commercials which displays varying degrees of awareness and criticism, combining different types of seemingly contradictory readings: sophisticated/oppositional and naïve/hegemonic (Liebes and Ribak, 1991). While this integrated reading contains criticism on the level of the overt messages and the rhetoric or persuasive strategy, the same criticism and accompanying awareness is lacking on the level of the covert messages. In other words, this type of reading implies blindness to the patriarchal ideology communicated by the advertisements, again indicating internalization of the hegemonic order.

This study is limited due to its small sample size and specific cultural context. In light of the fact that menses taboos exist in every culture, it would be interesting for future research to examine whether the results reported here derive from the specific Jewish Israeli context or whether they reflect a global phenomenon. If it is indeed global, does it display the same features in Israel and elsewhere or do cultural differences come into play as well? Within the context of Israel, it would also be a value to conduct a content analysis of advertisements for feminine hygiene products in the local media, a challenge yet to be taken up, in order to see whether the motifs found in other cultures are in evidence in Israel as well.

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