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Is Blood 'Normal'?:

A semiotic analysis of Bodyform's *#BloodNormal* campaign

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Abstract

Throughout history, and still today, menstruation has been viewed as a taboo topic, even by the advertising which sells menstrual protection products. The use of blue liquid as opposed to red, the emphasis on discretion, and the lack of the use of words such as 'blood', have all implied that periods are to be kept as secret as possible. However, in 2017, Bodyform released a campaign entitled *#BloodNormal*, which they claimed wanted to change attitudes and normalise the open discussion of periods without embarrassment. By conducting a semiotic analysis of Bodyform's campaign video, as well as their posts to their Instagram and Twitter platforms, this dissertation aims to find the hidden meanings within Bodyform's online representations and see to what extent Bodyform is truly committed to helping the social issue of menstruation as taboo. Through the analysis, three themes were found: (1) Pride and Bravery, (2) Fear and Taboo, and (3) Girling Women. This dissertation argues that, despite some encouraging aspects of their campaign, it is ultimately problematic for a corporation to take on a social role in attempting to break social taboos. With the assistance of Judith Williamson's famous book, *Decoding Advertising: Ideology and Meaning in Advertisements* (1978), the semiotic analysis finds that Bodyform may be utilising the social issue of menstruation as taboo in order to differentiate themselves from other sanitary protection companies, and attain brand loyalty from young girls and women.

Key words: semiotics, ideology, advertising, social media, taboo, stigma, corporate social responsibility, representation, postfeminism, menstruation

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1. Introduction

In October 2017, Bodyform, a company specialising in feminine protection products, released their *#BloodNormal* campaign. Bodyform is owned by Essity, a global hygiene and health company (Essity, 2018). Essity also own Bodyform's six global counterparts including Libresse, which is sold in parts of Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, Saba, which is sold in Mexico and Central America, and Nana, which is sold in the Middle East, among other areas. From this, it is clear that Essity's feminine protection products reach millions of women globally. The Bodyform campaign was released online through the company's website, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. The campaign's video advertisement, which came in a shorter thirty-second format (BodyformChannel, 2017) as well as a longer two-minute format (LibresseFinland, 2017), claims that 'blood is normal, showing it should be too' (BodyformChannel, 2017). The key moment of both videos is a shot in which red liquid is poured onto a sanitary towel. In pouring red, blood-like, liquid onto a sanitary towel, as opposed to the traditional blue liquid which is a staple of menstrual product advertisements, the company has seemingly aimed to normalise the idea of menstrual blood, as well as promote themselves as a socially aware organisation. However, the extent of their commitment to the cause is perhaps questionable.

Menstruation and menstrual products have been prominently on the public agenda in recent years with debates surrounding the government's 'tampon tax'. This tax applies to sanitary protection products, which are currently taxed at 5% in the UK (Gov., 2017). In 2015, the government voted against removing the tampon tax. This was met with backlash from women who claimed that sanitary protection is not a luxury, and that they should not be taxed for something they need. An example of this backlash is women who took to the

front of parliament wearing grey trousers, through which their menstrual blood, mixed with some fake blood, was visible (Howarth and Edge, 2015). In 2016, prime minister David Cameron was in talks with the European Union about removing the taxation completely, however, Brexit put these plans on hold (Gulland, 2017, p.1). So, the tampon tax remains. But, with this social issue of the taxation of feminine protection products having been brought to the fore, it is perhaps no surprise that Bodyform, under the global company Essity, has decided to capitalise on this and create a discussion surrounding menstrual blood and their supposed desire for its normality. So, why isn't menstrual blood already considered 'normal'?

Throughout history, attitudes towards menstruation have been largely negative, often associating menstruation with pollution, dirt and impurity. Although not all cultures hold these attitudes towards menstruation, and some even celebrate it, academics from disciplines such as psychology, communications and marketing have found that negative discourses surrounding menstruation are most prevalent, especially in the West (Kissling, 1996a, pp.482-483).

Perhaps one of the first claims of linking menstruation with impurity is from the Old Testament, which demonstrates how deeply rooted this attitude towards menstruation is. Coogan (2011) writes about a passage from the Old Testament by Leviticus. Leviticus linked 'abnormal' bodily fluid with taboo subjects of death and sex. He therefore proclaimed that individuals who are in physical contact with a person or animal who had lost a lot of blood, especially 'abnormal' menstrual blood, became impure (p.149). The menstruating woman in question would also inevitably be considered impure (Coogan, 2011, p.150). The idea that women are impure beings is reiterated in Ancient Greek science. Dean-Jones (1994) writes

about Greek philosophers and how some believed that due to women's recurring loss of blood, their bodies were colder than men's bodies, and therefore women were 'bad' (p.45). These polarised gendered values surrounding men and women's bodies continued through to the Middle Ages.

Although medieval culture may have utilised menstrual blood in positive ways, such as in medicinal recipes, medieval discourses of menstruation were largely negative. They saw it as a pollution, and 'a feature of the imperfect female body whose imperfections mirror the perfections of the male body' (McCracken, 2003, p.5). Masculinity was associated with control, including control over bodily fluids. Therefore, men who could control their bodily emissions, including, but not limited to, blood, achieved masculine sanctity (McCracken, 2003, p.4). Men seemingly controlled their bloodshed, as they only bled through the active act of going to battle, whereas women bled involuntarily through menstruation. This ability for women to bleed regularly, but not die, was seen as a threat to the heroic symbolism surrounding men's bloodshed through combat (McCracken, 2003, p.13). The discourse equating bodily fluids to control can also be found in Rabbinic Judaism. Hoffman (1996) explains how Rabbis regarded menstrual blood as a pollutant, as it is completely uncontrollable. In contrast, and similarly to medieval discourse, men do not bleed unless the bleeding is intended and controlled, as it is during circumcision (p.146, pp.153-154).

So, from a glimpse at these discourses surrounding menstruation throughout history, it can be understood where the denormalisation of menstrual blood may have stemmed from, and why it is ingrained into our Western society today. The way in which menstruation is represented in advertising in particular reiterates the idea that menstrual blood is a pollutant and unsanitary. As aforementioned, Bodyform's *#BloodNormal* campaign

seemingly attempts to subvert this common representation. This research will aim to analyse the extent of Bodyform's commitment to normalising the discussion of menstrual blood.

1.1. Research aims and objectives

The overall aim of this research is to carry out a semiotic analysis of Bodyform's *#BloodNormal* campaign, which will provide the grounds to see the extent of Bodyform's supposed commitment to normalising the discussion of menstrual blood. It aims to contribute to existing advertising research, particularly surrounding companies' adoption of social issues as marketing campaigns and as part of their corporate social responsibilities. It also aims to contribute to research surrounding social media and how it can be used to, in the case of Bodyform, present a political stance and communicate issues about women's health to an audience. In addition to analysing Bodyform's online representations of itself, and its stance on the social issue of menstrual blood as taboo, social media users' comments will be included in addition to the main semiotic analysis. Although an audience reception analysis will not be carried out and is not the overall aim of this research, the comments and reactions from online users may provide an extra insight into the successes or failures of Bodyform's campaign and some of the current attitudes towards the discussion of menstruation.

In order to focus the aims of this research, the following research question and sub-questions have been formulated:

(1) To what extent are Bodyform committed to their *#BloodNormal* campaign message of normalising discussions about menstruation?

- a) Are there inconsistencies in Bodyform's representation regarding their message in campaign posts versus their messages in posts outside of the campaign?
- b) What are the limitations of relying on corporations to fix deep rooted social issues?

2. Literature Review

The following section aims to contextualise this research within existing academic literature surrounding corporate social initiatives, social media, menstruation and critical works on advertising. The existing literature is so vast that it spans across multiple disciplines. The main discipline of interest in this research is media and communication studies, with a particular focus on marketing and advertising. As Bodyform is addressing a social issue, corporate social initiatives will be reviewed in order to gain an insight into why and how companies take up the purported role of 'activist' in their marketing campaigns. Political and feminist disciplines are also of interest due to Bodyform's campaign echoing feminist political activism. Anthropological studies and psychology will also be explored, so as to understand the reasons behind human behaviour when confronted with menstruation and why it is important for Bodyform to change these existing behaviours. As Bodyform's campaign was released solely on social media platforms, relatively new and ever-expanding media research surrounding social media will also be explored in order to gain understanding of different online social platforms, as well as their uses.

2.1. Corporate Social Initiatives

In order to understand the potential reasons behind the Bodyform *#BloodNormal* campaign, literature from the political, feminist, marketing and advertising disciplines will be explored. In particular, corporate social responsibility (CSR), commodity feminism, and postfeminism are of interest in this section.

Since the 1980s, the government has implemented neoliberal ideas which, in turn, has encouraged private corporations to partake in CSR. Neoliberalism is the ideology that there should be a focus on the financial freedom of individuals, as well as freedom of private

property owners and businesses, for the improvement of the wellbeing of society, which is measured through the increase of wealth (Harvey, 2005, p.7). Neoliberalism aims to achieve this through creating conditions for a profitable market, such as generous tax breaks, deregulation and free-market capitalism (Harvey, 2005, p.7; Einstein, 2013, p.379; Stole, 2008, p.21). However, in this instance, what is relevant is that, through adopting neoliberal ideas and policies, the government has made cuts in services which help the community, such as initiatives to reduce pollution (Einstein, 2013, p.380). This left dealing with social issues to individuals. So, corporations took advantage of the situation by stepping in and partnering with non-profit organisations (Stole, 2008, p.21; Einstein, 2013, p.379; Berglund and Nakata, 2005, p.446; Adkins, 1999, p.17). It is widely debated as to whether the corporations are helping the non-profit organisations and social causes, or helping themselves, or successfully doing both. Marketing scholars Kotler and Lee (2005) define CSR as: 'a commitment to improve community well-being through [voluntary] business practices and contributions to corporate resources' (p.3). Also, a marketing scholar, Adkins (1999) defines CSR as 'the totality of a company's impact on society at home and abroad through stakeholders such as employees, investors and business partners' (p.17). From these definitions, it can be understood that CSR is positioned as the commitment to improve the community through a company's, and their stakeholders', actions. Therefore, corporate social initiatives (CSI) are the ways in which a company can carry out their commitments to their CSR.

Kotler and Lee (2005) explain that there are six major CSIs that can be undertaken by companies: cause promotions; cause-related marketing (CRM); corporate social marketing; corporate philanthropy; community volunteering and socially responsible business practices (pp.22-24). CRM can be defined by marketing scholars as: a seemingly mutually beneficial

partnership whereby the marketing of a product, service, brand, or company is tied to a social cause (Berglind and Nakata, 2005, p.443; Inoue and Kent, 2011, p.330; Adkins, 1999, p.9). Marketing scholar Einstein (2013) explains why some companies partner with certain charities over others. Women's issues are often a focus for companies as women are the biggest demographic for consumer goods. However, only certain charities are easily marketable. Charities such as breast cancer are most likely to benefit from CRM because there is a misperception that it is the highest killer in women, so consumers see it as a pressing cause (Einstein, 2013, p.379). Whereas causes to do with, for example, diarrhoea are less appealing to companies as they are difficult to 'glamorize' (Einstein, 2013, p.378). This is what makes the Bodyform campaign so unique; menstrual blood, which is heavily stigmatised, would arguably be one of the less glamorous bodily functions to campaign about, and yet Bodyform are seemingly attempting to normalise the discussion about it.

2.1.1. Commodity Feminism and Postfeminism

In relation to corporate social initiatives is the implementation of commodity feminism as CRM by companies. Commodity feminism is the use of feminist political discourses for market motivated reasons (Goldman et al., 1991, pp.333-334). However, the intentions behind the use of feminist discourses can be questionable in terms of its aims; is the company fighting for gender equality, or is it merely utilising feminism as a marketing strategy?

Sociology scholar Goldman et al. (1991) explain that since the 1970s, 'advertisers have tried to connect the value and meaning of women's emancipation to corporate products' and that through this, feminism becomes 'depoliticised' as it becomes merely a sequence of

signifiers that companies can utilise to their advantage; this is the process of commodity feminism (pp.335-336). These signifiers include images of 'independence, participation in the work force, individual freedom and self-control' (Goldman et al., 1991, p.337). Feminism becomes 'fetishized' and therefore commodified products, such as a pair of Nike shoes, become a symbol of feminism (Goldman et al., 1991, p.336). This fetishization of feminism is perhaps problematic as it may make individuals complaisant and feel as though they are achieving feminism's aims of gender equality through consumerism, as opposed to taking political action. Communication scholar McRobbie (2008) says that the way in which girls are taught to behave and conduct themselves has been offloaded from institutions such as family, education and medicine, and is now the responsibility of consumer culture. This is because the UK government has inadvertently displaced social responsibility onto corporations through deregulation, as mentioned earlier (p.532). So, if consumer culture has taken on the responsibility of shaping young girls into women, discourses within commercial culture are very important in that they should arguably provide girls with the information they need in order to grow into socially knowledgeable women.

Very closely linked with commodity feminism is postfeminism. The representations of women in advertising as 'assertive, in control and autonomous... while confidently embracing feminine practices' embody the postfeminist idea that feminism has achieved its goal of gender equality and that 'it is becoming a women's world, with a celebration of all things feminine' (Lazar, 2009, pp.371-372). A linguist Lazar (2009) identifies three themes of postfeminism: a focus on women's consumerist needs (p.376); celebration of femininity, which is understood by postfeminists as reclaiming feminine stereotypes such as the use of the colour pink (p.381), and an invitation for grown women to return to girlhood (p.390). From these themes, it could be understood that postfeminism is materialistic and believes

that women should embrace being 'girly', as well as caring about their appearance as feminine women. Returning to girlhood or being 'girly' and embracing feminine stereotypes is of course ultimately an individual's choice, but it could be problematic in that grown women may be treated as less able to carry out certain tasks if they perpetuate childlike qualities, which may have a detrimental effect on gender equality and how women are viewed. Relatedly to postfeminist marketing discourses, Murray (2013) analysed Dove's Campaign For Real Beauty, which seemed to have the aim of boosting women and girls' self-esteem, while selling them a Dove product for soft skin. Murray explains that feminists who supported the campaign saw it as positive change within a 'mediascape that is otherwise saturated with the dominant ideology of beauty', but reminds us that 'the feminist task is to realize social change that revolutionizes social structures, not support corporate strategies that seek audiences' brand attachment' (2013, p.97). Dove's postfeminist marketing technique, which claims all women are beautiful, could indeed be seen as progressive. However, it is ultimately selling a product for smoother skin, suggesting that if your skin is not smooth, you are not beautiful after all.

2.2. Social Media

As Bodyform's campaign existed solely on social media platforms, it is important to understand social media's uses. For the purposes of this research, Twitter and Instagram will be the main focus points due to Bodyform's frequent posting to these sites.

Firstly, public health and technology scholar Laestadius (2017) writes about how Instagram differs from Twitter. She explains that, since its launch in 2010, 'Instagram [has become] one of the most popular visual social media platforms in the world' and is most popular among

'teenagers and young adults' (pp.573-574). Although Twitter and Instagram are both social media sites, 'a post on Instagram is not the same as a tweet' (Laestadius, 2017, p.574). This is due to a number of factors. Firstly, each post on Instagram must include an image or video, whereas posts, or 'tweets', on Twitter could consist of only writing, but photos or videos can be added if a user wishes. Secondly, the mainly visual nature of Instagram allows for greater qualitative analysis as images and their accompanying text can be utilised to, not only make sense of data in the context of Instagram, but also read into the cultural meanings behind certain posts with the guidance of text captions (Laestadius, 2017, p.581).

While both Twitter and Instagram are considered forms of social media, Twitter is often seen as more of an 'information' network than 'social' (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2017, p.15). This may be due to Twitter's 'transformative effect on how information and news diffuse throughout society' (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2017, p.17), as it disseminates news to users but also allows users to comment on news, or tweet their own take on it. Something that Twitter and Instagram do have in common is that a user can follow another user and be able to view their content without needing the user to follow them back. In other words, both platforms can have a one-way flow of communication, as opposed to users sending information to and from each other in equal measure (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2017, p.21). This open nature of the social media sites will allow this research to view Bodyform's posts as they communicate their messages to their followers.

This control that Bodyform has over their posts allows them to not only represent themselves, but perform who they are. Hall (1997) defines representation as 'using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people' (p.15). So, Bodyform will utilise language and images on social media in order

to represent their brand in a meaningful way. Performance is slightly different in that it focusses on the way in which someone performs in order to obtain a specific reaction, whereas representation is about the production process. Social media 'are constructed social and relational spaces where identity is created, and where, above all, 'we act'' (Mazali, 2011, p.290). Goffman (1956) writes about performance of the self and how people can act in a calculated way in order to try and obtain a specific response, (p.3). Therefore, any posts presented by Bodyform could be called 'performances' whereby their message may be feigned in order to present themselves in a way that they feel may be desirable by audiences. This ability to 'perform' an identity to audiences is seen to have both positive and negative effects.

Iosifidis (2011) is pessimistic about social media, explaining that it could be seen as a new space for debate and participation, but could also be a space for manipulation and social control where online users broadcast their views, but do not engage with each other to form a community consensus (p.622, p.627). While this could be the case in some instances, recent online activism has proven otherwise. Bivens and Cole (2018) write about 'grotesque protest' and specifically reference a Canadian poet's post of a photo on the social media site Instagram, in which she 'wears grey sweatpants and a white tank top and lies on a bed... the sheets of her bed were stained with fake menstrual blood and matched a fake crimson stain on her sweatpants' (p.11). Instagram removed the post for violating community guidelines. The poet said that by Instagram removing her post, they provided her with the 'exact response [her] work was created to critique'; that women's bodies are disciplined and erased from view (Bivens and Cole, 2018, pp.12-13). In 2016, women protested with the aim of making a point that women are reclaiming their bodies. In response to Indiana governor Mike Pence, who approved restrictions on abortion, women utilised 'grotesque protest' in a

humorous way, by creating the hashtag '#PeriodsForPence' on the social networking site Twitter. Women were encouraged to send their used 'tampons, pads, period underwear' to government officials to report themselves for having a 'miscarriage without knowledge' (Bivens and Cole, 2018, p.15). This use of sarcastic hyperbole, that women 'cannot in fact understand their own bodies', is a shocking way to protest laws which govern what women can and cannot do with their bodies (Bivens and Cole, 2018, pp.15-16). Also, the use of social media to rally forces together perhaps shows how powerful posting online can be in bringing communities together.

2.3. Menstruation

The literature surrounding menstruation is vast and covers multiple different disciplines. This section will aim to explore the taboos and stigmas attached to menstruation in order to understand how negative connotations are developed and maintained. Also, this section will explore different types of media that communicate women's health information, such as books and adverts, in order to gain understanding of the, often damaging, ways in which information about bodily functions are communicated to women.

2.3.1. Dirt, Taboo and Stigma

As mentioned, throughout history, a woman's bodily function of menstruation has been stigmatised as being dirty, unhygienic and as a pollution, which has arguably led to the negative attitudes that many women have of their own menstrual cycle. Perhaps due to menstruation still being considered taboo in contemporary society, women have been led to feel embarrassment, shame and fear surrounding menses. They are also often viewed as

victims of their own bodies, as if they are ruled by their physical and emotional states during the menstruation period, which, combined with the idea that they are dirty, can contribute to the view that women are an inferior group (Roberts et al., 2002, pp.131-132; O'Keefe, 2006, pp.536-538; Park, 1996, pp.150-154; Bobel, 2008, p.740).

Mary Douglas was a highly established scholar in anthropology. In her book *Purity and Danger* (2002), she explores the concepts of pollution and taboo. She defines 'taboo' as a belief system which depends on a community consensus in order to prevail and, if contested, threatens specific dangers to individuals (xiii). From this, it can be understood that people do not want to be associated, or in contact, with 'taboos' for fear of themselves being harmed mentally or physically. Similar to 'taboo' is 'stigma'. Stigma can be understood as 'any stain or mark that sets someone apart from others; it conveys the information that those people have a defect of body or of character that spoils their appearance or identity' (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2013, p.9). Similarly, Goffman (1963) categorises stigma into three categories. But, for the purposes of this research, only two are applicable: 'abominations of the body', such as deformities and 'blemishes of individual character', such as weak will (p.4). Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) reference research conducted by social psychologists which found stigma to fall into the categories of 'peril', 'visibility' and 'controllability' (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2013, p.10). Although 'visibility', which is similar to Goffman's (1963) 'abominations of the body', can be considered a convention of stigma, Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) explain that menstruation is 'more like a hidden than a visible stigma', but this is due to 'women [going] to a great deal of effort to conceal it' (p.11).

Psychology scholars Roberts et al. (2002) conducted a qualitative study surrounding the stigma attached to menstruation, and whether a woman displaying a visible sign that she is menstruating would mentally or physically deter participants from her (p.132). The woman in question 'accidentally' dropped a tampon from her bag in front of half of the participants. In front of the other half, she dropped a control item, a hair clip. The participants were then asked about how they viewed the woman, who they thought was merely their partner as part of a different experiment (Roberts et al., 2002, pp.134-135). Overall, the study found that 'she was viewed as less competent, less likeable, and tended to be both psychologically and physically avoided' after seeing her drop the tampon. These feelings were not felt as strongly by participants who saw the hair clip (Roberts et al., 2002, p.136). The participants had a seemingly presupposed stigma attached to menstruation. This study can be linked to the research conducted by Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013). This is because seeing the tampon may have reminded participants of the woman's lack of 'control' over her menstrual blood and the symbol of the tampon is a 'visible' reminder of the blood. This could be concerning because Kissling (1996a) argues that 'how a society deals with menstruation can reveal a great deal about how that society views women' (p.482), so, in this case, society's view of women has the potential to be quite negative.

As menstrual blood is largely viewed as 'taboo' and 'dirty', it can become an effective weapon. Sociology scholar O'Keefe (2006) writes about 'The Troubles', a thirty-year period of civil war in the twentieth century in Northern Ireland, where its Catholic inhabitants attempted to resist the mainly unionist Protestant and British state's hold of their counties (p.535; Punch, 2012, pp.59-60). In Northern Ireland, Catholic women were taught that talking about bodily fluids was shameful. Because of this, British forces utilised gendered abuse strategies against the Catholic protesters, raiding their homes and rifling through

their underwear and sanitary products in order to embarrass them (O'Keefe, 2006, pp.538-540). However, the stigma attached to menstrual blood came to benefit Catholic protesters as they reclaimed their bodily functions. Women who were arrested and held in Armagh prison commenced a 'dirty protest' in 1980, following a faecal dirty protest carried out by their male counterparts. However, instead of faeces, the women smeared their menstrual blood on the walls of their cells. As they lived in a society which saw menstrual blood as the 'ultimate form of dirt'. The protest was seen as so shocking, disruptive and disgusting that prison wardens refused to touch the prisoners. Because of this, the women were not physically abused like they had been prior to the protest (O'Keefe, 2006, pp.545-547).

From the above literature, it can be understood that the taboo attached to menstruation tends to inform individuals' negative opinions of menstruating women. The negative opinions allow for effective protest because the taboo attached to menstruation is so strong, as was seen in O'Keefe's (2006) example. As aforementioned, forms of 'grotesque protest', which have recently taken place on social media platforms, show that the taboo is still rife and still used as a weapon for change. Bodyform's *#BloodNormal* campaign seems to echo these protests by being the first feminine protection brand to show red liquid on a sanitary towel. In doing this, Bodyform is utilising the taboo of menstrual blood as a way to create a conversation about how problematic it is that women are stigmatised and made to feel dirty for menstruating.

2.3.2. Health Communication

Despite advances in science, and therefore advances in our understandings of our bodies, stigma and taboo surrounding menstruation still prevail today. Douglas (2002) explains that it is the 'controllers of opinion' who decide what is and isn't taboo (p.xiii). So, it could be

argued that those who shape our opinions and shape the way in which we perceive our society enforce these feelings of taboo and stigma when it comes to women's menstrual blood. Although each individual may have a number of factors that influence their opinions, the media is perhaps the most predominant influencer of opinion in contemporary society. 'The media' includes many different mediums. Mediums that will be discussed in this section are books, magazines and advertising which discuss women's health.

Firstly, it is important to understand that women's bodies were not, and perhaps are still not, completely openly discussed. Women's studies scholar Bobel (2008) writes about the Women's Health Movement which began in the late 1960s, and is still happening today, in America. However, her study can 'illuminate beyond its geographic frame' due to the fact that issues regarding women's health span the globe (Bobel, 2008, p.739). Bobel (2008) explains how the Women's Health Movement gained momentum in the late twentieth-century, as feminist activists came to believe that 'the medical system, designed and serviced primarily by men, ignores women's unique bodily experiences and thus fails to provide care that meets women's needs' (p.740). Around this time, a group of women in Boston founded the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (BWHBC). They felt that women's health issues, particularly menstruation, were not addressed by the medical system to the extent that women felt adequacy informed about their own bodies. This is partially blamed on the 'social construction of menstruation as a shameful process' (Bobel, 2008, p.740) and therefore too taboo to address effectively. The BWHBC researched women's health issues themselves and published their own handbooks for women to read, and later published a detailed book titled *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971) (Bobel, 2006, p.332; Bobel, 2008, pp.740-741; Sobonsky, 2013, p.217).

Advertisements for menstrual sanitary products play a role in the social construction of attitudes, values and beliefs surrounding women's health, as they communicate to audiences how to confront menses (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2013, p.11). Kissling (1996a) found advertisements for sanitary products to be repressive. She explains sanitary product adverts emphasise the importance of concealment and how well the product can hide the smell and sight of a woman bleeding. She argues that the emphasis advertisements have on the secrecy of a period influences women to feel shameful about their menses (Kissling, 1996a, pp.483-484). As well as concealment, Roberts et al. (2002) explain that advertisers market menstruation as a 'hygienic crisis' that their products can help manage, again by concealing odours and visibility of blood (p.132).

Philosophy scholar Park (1996) has explored the marketing of menstrual products throughout modern culture. Park observed that, in the twentieth century, adverts in newspapers marketed menstrual products in three ways: alongside cosmetics as a beauty product, insinuating women's physical appearance needs fixing; alongside cold medicines as a health product, insinuating women are ill; or alongside floor wax as a housekeeping product, insinuating women are unclean (Park, 1996, p.161). She reinforces the point that women are considered unclean with a specific use of the term 'panty shield' by advertisers, implying that a woman's underwear needs protection from the woman (Park, 1996, p.161).

4. Critical Studies of Advertising

As the aim of this research is to analyse Bodyform's advertising campaign, this section will explore literature on how adverts can be analysed in order to find their underlying meanings. Although the chosen method for this research, semiotic analysis, will be further

explained in the methodology section, it is important to explore the ways in which advertising can create meanings as well as the ways in which this meaning can be found.

Firstly, it must be understood what advertising does and how it does it. Advertising scholar Twitchell (1996) explains that advertising adds meaning to objects that consumers may not otherwise crave (pp.11-12). Especially in the case of everyday items, advertising loads them with value in order to appeal to consumers over other brands that sell the same item (Twitchell, 2002, p.173). So, in the case of feminine protection products, Bodyform create their brand identity and product value through advertising in order to separate themselves from other feminine protection brands.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1980) writes about the production and consumption of cultural texts, such as advertising. He explains that 'reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language' (Hall, 1980, p.131). This means that producers of media texts have to mediate reality through constructed representations in order to present them to an audience. This is called 'encoding'. An audience will then do the 'decoding' of this representation, whereby they read the text and its meanings in their own way. The decoding of texts involves denotation and connotation. Hall (1980) explains that 'denotation' is the 'literal meaning' of the text which is 'universally recognised', whereas connotation is a further understanding of the text which refers to 'less fixed and therefore more... changeable, associative meanings, which clearly vary from instance to instance' (pp.132-133). So, if, in an advert, a woman is seen putting a sanitary towel into her bag, what is denoted by the sanitary towel may be that the woman is on her period, as it is perhaps universally recognised that menstruating women need sanitary towels. Then, what could be connoted by this scene is that she may be experiencing premenstrual syndrome

and may therefore be empathetically read as being emotional. Alternatively, as was explored earlier, some may attach a stigma to her, as a menstruating woman, and be deterred by her handling a sanitary towel. So, connotations are not fixed and certain texts may connote different meanings to different people, so they are polysemic; they can have multiple meanings. This is why, when analysing advertising, it is important to remember that no reading of an advert is a final or definitive reading.

Judith Williamson, a highly regarded advertising scholar and author of *Decoding Advertising* (1978), writes about how advertisements can be analysed in order to find their constructed meanings and ideologies. Much like Twitchell (1996), she says that 'advertisements are one of the most important cultural factors moulding and reflecting our life today' as they can take products and make them 'mean something to us' through their representations (Williamson, 1978, p.11). A large section of her book refers to semiology, the analysis method for this research, which is the science of signs. Williamson's (1978) methods of analysing advertising will feature heavily within the findings section of this research as her work will inform the analysing process. Her work will be explored in more detail in the next section.

Methodology

The nature of the research in this project is qualitative. As opposed to quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data, qualitative research focusses on language and communication, and searches for meanings within cultural, historical, economic and political contexts in order to, for example, find out how a media artefact has been socially constructed (Brennen, 2013, pp.4-5, pp.14-15). The qualitative research approach which has been chosen is semiotic analysis, which is the science of signs. Semiotics is a constructionist approach. Constructionism is the belief that the material world around us does not convey meaning on its own. It is only through our language systems, which represent concepts of the material world, that meaning is socially constructed (Hall, 1997, p.25). This is understood further through the understanding of semiotics which was first developed by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.

As this research will be informed by semiotics, it is important to understand the key terminology and concepts involved. Culler (1976) writes about Saussure's work. Saussure argued that things in the material world, such as people, objects, sounds and hand gestures, are all signs (Culler, 1976, p.90). A sign is made up of two parts: the signifier and the signified. A signifier is the 'form', which could be an object, and the signified is the mental concept that an individual may think of upon seeing or thinking of the object (Culler, 1976, p.96). For example, a signifier could be blood. It is red, it is a liquid. What is signified by this could be pain, death, or surgery. Philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1885) developed Saussure's work and argued that there are three signs: index, icon and token – also known as symbol. These three different types of signs mean that the relationship between signifier and signified can differ. An index sign is something that signifies its object just by being very

connected with it (Peirce, 1885, p.226). So, blood could be an index sign of a wound. An iconic sign is difficult to distinguish from its object (Peirce, 1885, p.226). So, a photograph or drawing could be an iconic sign due to its intense likeness to the material object. Finally, the symbolic sign is more arbitrary, as there is no obvious reason for the relationship between signifier and signified (Peirce, 1885, p.226). For example, the word 'blood' is a symbolic sign. There is no natural reason why these letters together signify the object of blood to us.

Symbolic signs have merely been decided upon through social consensus and habit. What is signified by a signifier may differ from person to person, culture to culture. What an individual derives from a signifier will depend on their 'contextual knowledge of living in a particular culture at a specific place and time' (Brennen, 2013, p.196). For example, the English word 'blood' may mean nothing to an only French-speaking person. Whereas the French word for blood, 'sang', will signify to them the concept of the object, blood.

As aforementioned, advertising scholar Judith Williamson is well known for her book *Decoding Advertisements* (1978). Amongst her identifications of different advertising analysis techniques, she writes about ideology. Ideology is an extension of the understanding of semiotics and signs that Saussure and Peirce put forward. It also links with Hall's (1980) explanation of denotation and connotation, which was explored in the previous section, because advertising will hold ideologies that can be found through connotations of meaning within the text. Williamson (1978) explains that ideology is timeless and is the 'constant reproduction of ideas' which are 'used or referred to 'because' they 'already' exist in society' (p.112). Ideology makes assumptions and we do not question them because they seem to have existed forever within our knowledge that we hold about the society we live in (Williamson, 1978, pp.48-50). Williamson uses the example of the ideology of 'freedom'. The naturalised idea of freedom allows advertising to sell a product

to us and we believe we have the freedom to choose which product we want to buy (Williamson, 1978, p.48). Just as texts signify different meanings to different people, ideologies will also differ from culture to culture, as perhaps not every culture will have the same naturalised outlook on, for example, freedom, as Western society. Ideology systems can also be referred to as 'Referent Systems', as advertising refers to existing outside ideologies in order to create meaning within their advert (Williamson, 1978, p.17).

Williamson's work will heavily inform the semiotic analysis process in this research. Her ways of analysing advertising will help to distinguish the meanings behind Bodyform's choice of signs within their *#BloodNormal* campaign and whether these meanings help or hinder their supposed aim of destigmatising discussions about menstruation.

Hand (2017) explains that there is 'relatively little qualitative research' around the 'visual phenomena' of social media and that on sites, such as Instagram, studies tend to focus more on quantitative patterns of behaviour due to the vast number of images online, rather than visual content (p.216). So, through utilising semiotic analysis to analyse the visual data found on Bodyform's social media sites, this research intends to increase the amount of research surrounding the visual nature of social media as a platform for, in this case, corporations. It is important to remember that, as semiology is interpretive and readings are based on an individual's cultural context and knowledge, any readings of the campaign will be subjective and therefore may not be representative of the population's interpretations as a whole. However, being within the target demographic for the campaign, young females, my reading of the data is arguably relevant as it could lead to some insight on the extent to which Bodyform fulfil their aims of destigmatisation.

As the campaign is solely on social media, both Bodyform's Twitter and Instagram content is public to these platforms' users. This means that users can interact with Bodyform's posts, by replying to a tweet, commenting on an Instagram post, or 'liking', 'favouriting', or 'retweeting' these posts. So, this allows for further insight into how the campaign is being commented on by online users. Although, again, this will not be representative of a population, and is not the main focus of this research, it will complement the semiotic analysis in terms of seeing the extent that others think Bodyform is truly attempting to break the taboo of menstruation. In using tweets and comments from Instagram and Twitter users, some issues of ethics arise.

Beninger (2017) explains that when it comes to social media, some researchers believe that due to the public nature of these online platforms, data can be collected and researched 'without the need for informed consent', whereas others believe that informed consent should always be sought for because, although on a public forum, online users may not have posted with the intent of being academically analysed (p.58). However, Beninger explains that:

'existing ethical guidelines express that researchers should ensure no one knows who has said what in a report (i.e. anonymity) and that participant information should be securely stored and shared (i.e. confidentiality)' (2017, p.58)

So, due to the nature of online search facilities, such as Google, where a tweet could be searched for and found within seconds (Beninger, 2017, p.58), the only screenshots that will be used in this research will be Instagram posts and tweets which are posted directly from Bodyform's social media accounts. Any tweets or comments made by other users will not be screenshotted but will be paraphrased in order to protect their identities. If, in any of the

screenshots of Bodyform's posts, users' names can be seen, usernames will be covered so that their profiles cannot be found outside of the context in which the users initially intended.

Data Collection

The samples were collected from Bodyform's Twitter and Instagram accounts, @bodyform and @bodyformuk, over a specific time-frame of three months. As the campaign was released on October 17th 2017, it felt important to gather data from just before the campaign was released as well as two months after the release date in order to see how their campaign developed over time. This timeframe also allowed for the collection of non-campaign specific posts in order to look for any inconsistencies in relation to Bodyform's *#BloodNormal* campaign initiatives of destigmatisation. The timeframe of posts spans from their first post in October to their last post in December 2017. Posts from both Bodyform's Instagram and Twitter were collected through screenshots in order to archive them between these dates in case of any changes to their posts, for example a post being deleted (Mayr and Weller, 2017, p.108). This includes the campaign's main component, the video advertisement, which appeared on their Twitter, Instagram and YouTube pages.

So, through the semiotic analysis of Bodyform's online representation, themes will be found and grouped together in order to understand the underlying meanings behind Bodyform's campaign posts. From the themes and meanings found, it can be determined to what extent Bodyform's campaign is truly trying to normalise the discussion of menstruation and put an end to the taboo.

4. Findings and Analysis

Through the semiotic analysis of both Bodyform's social media and their main campaign video, certain themes were uncovered. This section will explain how these themes were uncovered through semiotic analysis, as well as explore the meanings that these themes have in relation to Bodyform's social aim of breaking taboo.

4.1. 'Periods are normal... but be discreet about it': Pride and Bravery vs. Fear and Taboo

Perhaps the most prevalent theme that runs throughout Bodyform's social media posts and campaign is the theme of pride and bravery. There are consistent messages that 'nothing should hold us back' and that 'periods are normal' and 'showing them should be too'. But, there are also themes of taboo, as well as fear, that run through Bodyform's messages outside of the *#BloodNormal* campaign. Firstly, the theme of pride and bravery will be discussed.

4.1.1. Pride and Bravery

A photo of a scene, which appears both in the *#BloodNormal* campaign video (Libressefinland, 2017) and on the social media platforms (Bodyform UK 2017; Bodyform 2017), shows a drawing of a female warrior in battle [Fig.1]. The background in the photo is a wooden surface, on which can be seen a cup of pens, a tissue with a fountain pen resting on top of it, inkwells, a half-eaten apple, and the main feature of the photo, which is a black and white drawing of a female warrior. These indexical signs signify that a person has been drawing at this table. Although the drawing appears unfinished, as there is a lack of colour and the pens and ink which drew it are still out on the table, a few signs within it stand out. Within the drawing, on the left-hand side is a creature which signifies a shark, due to the signifiers of sharp teeth, gills and a fin on its back pointed upwards. To the right of the

creature is a female warrior. The warrior is female due to the signifiers of shapely legs, long hair in a plait trailing from the back of her head, and stereotypically feminine facial features such as full lips and a rounded jaw. She seems to have a helmet on her head, which connotes the ideology of war. She has a furrowed brow and gritted teeth, signifying anger, and her arm is seen touching the shark-like creature, appearing to be attacking it. Her arm and leg have lines on them which appear to be dripping and due to the written language within the drawing, 'no blood should hold us back', it can be assumed that the lines are cuts and that the female warrior is bleeding. As these signs are recognisable to their real-life counterparts, the drawing itself is considered an iconic sign (Peirce, 1885, p.226).

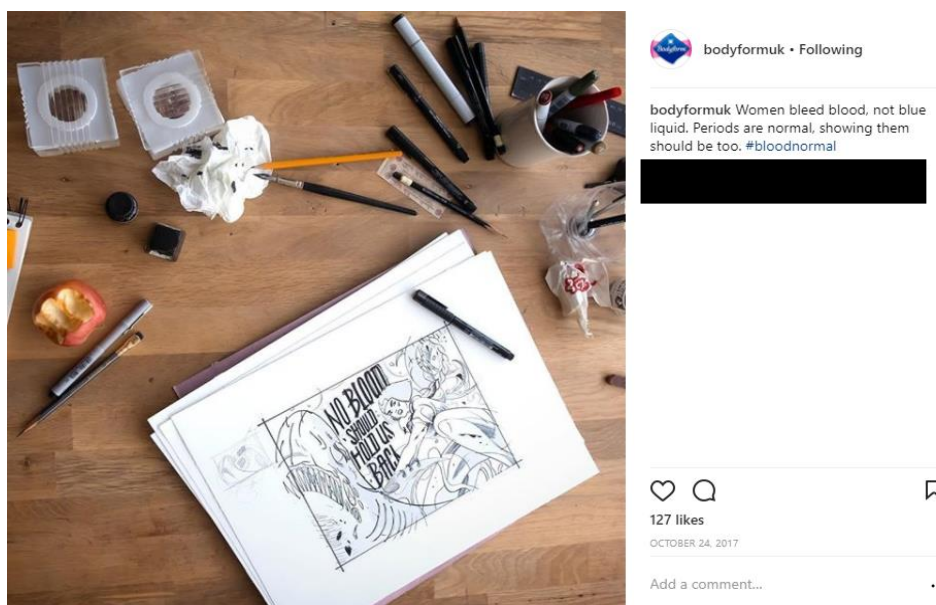


Figure 1: @bodyformuk

Her helmet, the fight and her wounds all connote the ideology of war. The ideology of war, which is a referent system (Williamson, 1978, p.17) in our society, is perhaps a metaphor for the war on the taboo attached to the discussion of menstrual blood. It is reminiscent of the resistant protests which were explored earlier, such as the 'dirty protest' carried out in

Ireland and the 'grotesque protest' which was arranged through Twitter, both of which saw menstrual blood as an advantage as opposed to a hindrance (O'Keefe, 2006, p.547; Bivens and Cole, 2018, pp.15-16). The words 'no blood should hold us back', which are featured within the drawing, hold two meanings in this context. The 'blood' refers to the warrior's wounds as she will continue to fight in spite of them, but 'blood' also refers to menstrual blood that Bodyform are arguing should not 'hold us back'. It could be argued that Williamson's (1978) concept of 'totemism' is relevant here. 'Totemism' is where the subject, the audience, becomes signified within the advert (Williamson, 1978, p.50). So, with the assistance of the inclusive pronoun 'us', the female warrior signifies the women who will be viewing this post, women that will not be held back by menstrual blood, or the taboo attached to it. The imagery of women fighting connotes the ideology of feminist bravery and freedom of speech, that women have the right to own their bodies and be proud to talk about them, menstruating or not. However, this message in the image was not received well by all, with a user commenting sarcastically beneath the post, explaining that they do not need to be told that they bleed, they already know. So, perhaps to some, the connotations of bravery are patronising.

Another image which appears across the campaign is an image of two girls passing a sanitary towel to each other [Fig.2]. Within the still image, which features on the Instagram and Twitter, is a classroom setting. This is signified by the wooden desks laid out in rows, a chalk board on the wall at the front of the room with a podium-like desk in front of it. The backs of girls and a boy can be seen, insinuating that this is a mixed gender school. In the foreground, white arms extend from either side of the image. Between them, they hold a Bodyform sanitary towel in its pink wrapping. The gender of these people is unclear as there are no obvious signifiers which connote gender; neither is wearing a female signifier of nail

varnish, for example. However, one may assume that they are both girls and one is helping the other by providing a pad. By passing the pad to each other across the classroom, it is clear that they are not attempting to conceal the pad from others. The caption reads: 'why should we hide our pads up our sleeves? There's nothing to hide'. Again, Bodyform utilise inclusive pronouns which connote the ideology of women coming together as one brave force. This is signified again in the photo, as the sanitary towel connects the hands together, signifying unity. In response to the caption, an Instagram user agreed with the message, perhaps showing that the meaning behind the photo is effective in expressing the need for change.

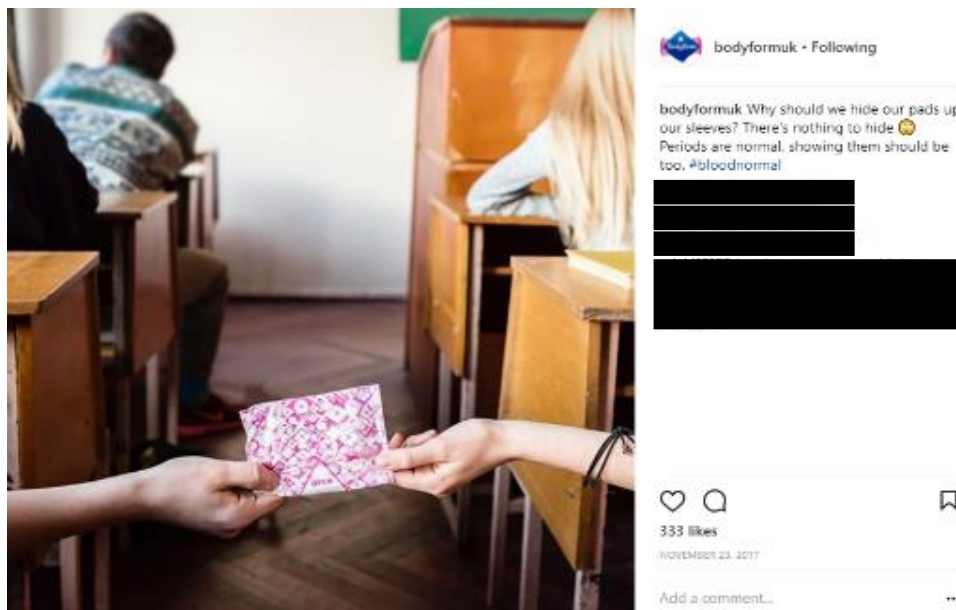


Figure 2: @bodyformuk

The classroom setting is significant in terms of Bodyform's corporate social responsibility. As has been explored, the implementation of neoliberal ideology by the government has led to cuts within the community. So, corporations have taken advantage of the situation and utilised 'pro-social marketing campaigns [to] take over where government has dropped the

ball' (Einstein, 2013, p.379). In relation to this, McRobbie (2008) explains that institutions, such as education, have offloaded the responsibility of teaching girls how to conduct themselves to consumer culture (p.532). In using the signs of a classroom, which connote the ideology of education, it could be argued that Bodyform are insinuating their role of educating young women and teaching them that, when it comes to periods, they should conduct themselves in a proud way and not hide that they are menstruating because it is nothing to be ashamed of. Taking on this role of educating people does not end with girls, as Bodyform have also seemingly made an effort to educate men and boys.

An interesting aspect of the *#BloodNormal* campaign is the inclusion of males. It is relatively unusual to see males handling sanitary products in feminine protection adverts. In 2014, Bodyform's competitor Always released a campaign video entitled *#LikeAGirl* which employed feminist ideology as it encouraged the rethinking of what it means to do something 'like a girl', as the phrase normally has negative connotations due to girls often being stereotyped as 'weak'. The campaign video (Always, 2014) features a man and a young boy, discussing the characteristics of girls. However, they are never seen discussing periods or handling sanitary products. Even in Bodyform's own advert entitled *Blood* (BodyformChannel, 2016), which features many different women partaking in sport, despite the various bleeding cuts and grazes they've acquired, no men or actual sanitary products are present. But, in both the *#BloodNormal* video and on their social media, Bodyform feature males touching and buying sanitary towels.

The first inclusion of a male that will be explored features in the video advert. The scene is the video version of the classroom still image that has just been discussed. The scene contains the same signs as the still image: the desks, the chalk board and the mixed gender

class, which all connote the education ideology. What is clear in the video, that was not clear in the still image, is the gender of the people passing the sanitary towel between them. The sanitary towel is passed by a girl, to a male student, who then passes it on to another girl. So, the pad is mediated by the boy. The boy can be seen handing the pad to the girl, and then moving his gaze towards the front of the classroom. His facial expression is relatively indifferent, his eyebrows are not raised or furrowed and his mouth is slightly open but he is not smiling or frowning. This signifies that he does not find handling the pad amusing, or disgusting. It could be argued that this signifies that he just finds it 'normal'. Similarly, the girl receiving the pad from him signifies a similar feeling as she does not present any facial expressions that may signify embarrassment, such as laughing or blushing. Roberts et al.'s (2002) study, found that women, who are known to be menstruating, tend to be 'psychologically and physically avoided' (p.136). So, the use of a boy as a mediator in this scene subverts these findings and represents menstruating as 'normal'. Also, communication scholar Kissling (1996b) carried out interviews with girls between the ages of 12-16 (p.295). She found that these girls preferred to use slang and euphemisms when it comes to talking about periods, such as 'on the rag', especially as they believe boys won't know what they're talking about (Kissling, 1996b, pp.298-299). It seems that Bodyform are aiming to improve, not only boys' attitudes towards menstruation, but also girls' feelings about boys knowing they are menstruating.

Another example of a male featured in the campaign video, as well as on the social media sites, is a scene which depicts a man buying a packet of sanitary towels [Fig.3]. He picks up a packet of Bodyform sanitary towels and places them on the shop counter. Behind him, through the shop windows, is darkness, which signifies that it may be quite late in the evening. Although it is not explicitly stated, the man buying sanitary towels late at night

perhaps signifies that his girlfriend, mother, friend or sister may have started their period and so he has gone to the shop to buy some sanitary pads for them. On Bodyform's Twitter and Instagram, a still image shows him placing the packet on the shop counter. The accompanying caption reads: 'milk, bread, pads #bloodnormal' [Fig.3]. Williamson (1978) writes about 'product as signified' where an advertised product does not have meaning until an object that already means something to us transfers its value to it (pp.32-35). In this instance, 'milk' and 'bread' are relatively mundane objects that are part of a weekly shop. So, in positioning the word 'pads' in the same list, the mundane meaning of bread and milk transfers to 'pads', so the sanitary towels come to mean mundane, or just 'normal', as well. To refer back to Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013), the way in which sanitary products are advertised will play a role in the construction of attitudes towards menstruation (p.11). Also, it is the 'controllers of opinion' who decide what is and isn't taboo (Douglas, 2002, p.xiii), So, by including men in their campaign, Bodyform are presenting the idea that menstruation is not a taboo to be deterred by but is something normal to be proud of. This post received particularly positive comments, with users expressing their happiness at seeing a man in a sanitary protection advert.



Figure 3: @bodyform

4.1.2. Fear and Taboo

Despite Bodyform utilising signs which connote pride and bravery, there are also signs in Bodyform's online representation which connote fear and taboo. These signs are found in posts which are both in the *#BloodNormal* campaign itself, and outside of it, which may mean that Bodyform have contradicted their campaign messages of pride and bravery and normalisation.



Figure 4: @bodyformuk

Perhaps the most prominent image in the entire *#BloodNormal* campaign is the image of thick red liquid being poured onto a sanitary towel [Fig.4]. This specific scene is the most prominent as it appeared across a vast array of large news outlets, including BBC News (BBC News, 2017), The Daily Mail (Chan, 2017) and The Independent (Petter, 2017). The scene shows a pink Bodyform sanitary towel packet laid next to a sanitary towel, which lies in the centre of the shot. Both objects lie on a pale blue surface. The colour blue is arguably used in many hospitals, and therefore could connote a sterile environment. In the foreground, a white arm appears which is wearing an item of clothing which has white sleeves. The hand is

holding a test tube which contains the red liquid and it pours the liquid onto the sanitary towel. Red liquid in itself would not necessarily signify blood; in other contexts, for example, it could signify red wine. However, in this context, the combined signifiers of a sanitary towel and the red liquid signify the concept of menstruation. There are signifiers which arguably prevent us from imagining menstruation in the real-life context of a woman bleeding. This is because, despite not being able to see the whole item of clothing, the white sleeve, in conjunction with the test tube and sterile blue background, signifies a lab coat. It is arguable, that these signifieds come together to signify the referent system (Williamson, 1978, p.17) of modern science and experimentation. The 'experimentation' that the science signs signify could be a metaphor for the social experimentation that Bodyform are partaking in by utilising red liquid instead of blue. Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) explain that feminine protection brands often utilise blue liquid instead of red in order to 'promote secrecy and delicacy' (p.11). The lack of red liquid in adverts could be because, as Weiner (2004) has explained, advertisers may be 'embarrassed to be associated with bleeding' (p.28). The use of blue liquid can be seen in the adverts of Bodyform's competitors such as Tampax and Always. Tampax show a digitised diagram of their tampons absorbing blue liquid (Tampax UK, 2016) and Always show a woman pouring blue liquid onto one of their sanitary towels (Always, 2013). So, Bodyform are seemingly subverting the norm and are representing this through the signs of experimentation.

However, this scene could have a detrimental impact on the campaign. This is because test tubes and science laboratories often signify the unknown, as experiments are carried out on cells and diseases. Referring back to Douglas (2002), taboo is seen as something that could cause harm to individuals (p.xiii). In opposition to the, perhaps hopeful, connotation of

experimentation, the referent system of modern science could connote a risk of contamination and danger, meaning that the red liquid in the scene is feared as opposed to embraced as 'normal'. Park (1996) found that sanitary products in the twentieth century were often sold alongside medicines in magazines, insinuating that women were ill when menstruating (p.161). The science referent system problematically insinuates a similar concept, insinuating that menstruating women are test subjects. So, this scene seems to enhance the taboo surrounding menstruation as opposed to alleviate it. The comments on the post vary in response, with some expressing that they believe it is too much for an advert, or too taboo, and some even saying it is the equivalent of toilet roll adverts beginning to use feces. However, the overall response in the comments does seem to be positive, with users expressing that they are happy that a sanitary protection company has finally decided to use red liquid.

Perhaps the reasoning behind the use of a modern science referent system was the creation of the idea of a sterile environment as a way to make the 'blood' more palatable to large newspapers who published the image. As has been explored, periods are often perceived as 'dirty' (O'Keefe, 2006, p.547). So, by placing the taboo sign, the menstrual 'blood', within a sign system that connotes cleanliness, it is then perhaps deemed acceptable to be shown throughout the world's media. This, in turn, assists the publicity of Bodyform's advertising campaign. So, it is debatable as to whether this scene was made strategically with the campaign's publicity in mind, as opposed to the mission to destigmatise discussions about menstruation. Another factor which raises questions about the composition of this scene is a point raised by Williamson (1978). When it comes to everyday products, there are many different brands that produce, essentially, the same product and therefore need to stand

out from the masses. Williamson (1978) explains the process of 'differentiation' where brands do something different, within their advertising, that their competitors are not doing in order to stand out (p.25). It could be argued that Bodyform are doing just this; they are the first of their competitors to utilise red liquid as opposed to blue. They therefore stand out from the crowd, so much so that it was covered by large newspapers. From this, their motives behind the *#BloodNormal* campaign could be questioned as they could have decided to use red liquid as a way to boost their brand name, while only appearing to have a moral compass in terms of the social issue of menstruation as taboo.

Aside from the *#BloodNormal* campaign, Bodyform's social media includes posts which arguably contradict the campaign's message. For example, on both their Twitter and Instagram, Bodyform promote their new 'Black Liner'. The Black Liner is a black sanitary towel. Bodyform posted a brief video about it to their Twitter and Instagram. The digitised video features an all-black background. The word 'black' is written in bold capital letters. Underneath it, the days of the week slide in and out of the frame. These symbolic signs (Peirce, 1885, p.226), signify that the black liner can be worn any day of the week. Then, the video cuts and the Bodyform Black Liner packet is shown. Underneath it are the words: 'designed to be discreet'. The word 'discreet' contradicts Bodyform's message in their *#BloodNormal* campaign. The signs explored earlier, which connoted ideologies of pride and normalisation and encouraged young women to 'fight' the taboo of menstruation, all seem irrelevant in Bodyform presenting this post. The encouragement of using black sanitary towels so that they are more 'discreet' in black clothing connotes fear, shame and embarrassment surrounding menstruation.

Another example of the encouragement of discretion is Bodyform's sanitary towel tins which are given away with promotional packs. A post on their Instagram shows a pair of hands placing a pad into one of the tins. The hands are wearing rings and nail varnish. These, stereotypically feminine, signifiers signify that these are a woman's hands. The act of a woman placing the towel in the tin connotes the ideology of menstruation as taboo, as it physically shows a woman attempting to hide the signifier, the sanitary towel, that connotes her own menstruation. Although it could be argued that these tins are purely for storage and transportation purposes, it could be counterargued that the sanitary towel itself already comes in a protective wrapping, so there is perhaps no real need for the tin other than concealment.

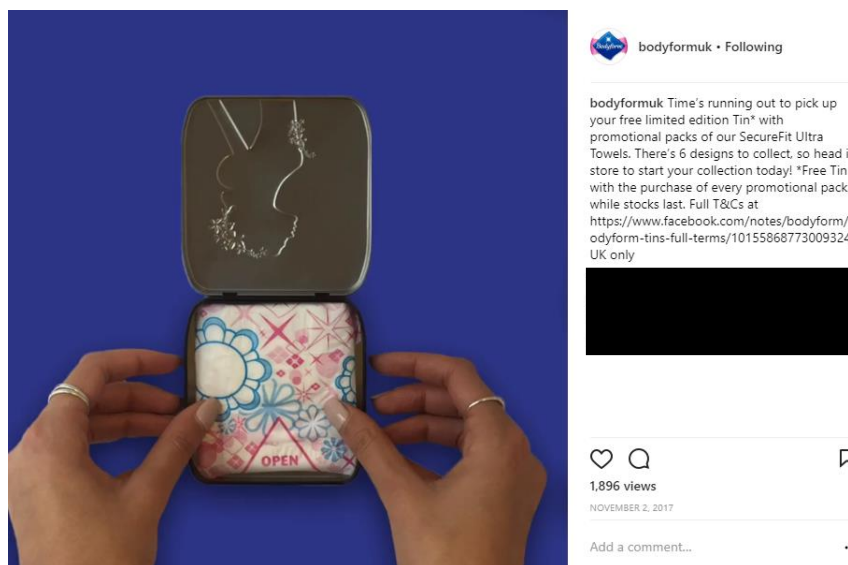


Figure 5: @bodyformuk

Sociologists Gill and Elias (2014) critically analysed 'love your body', or 'LYB' discourses. LYB discourses are 'positive, affirmative, seemingly feminist-inflected media messages, targeted exclusively at girls and women, that exhort us to believe we are beautiful' (p.180). However, some companies will paradoxically utilise facilities, such as photoshop, in order to maintain

the dissatisfaction that women have with their own bodies. This, in turn, ensures the continuation of their products selling (Gill and Elias, 2014, p.184). It seems that Bodyform are taking on a similar discourse to LYB discourses. Their *#BloodNormal* campaign seemingly aims to encourage women to be proud and unashamed of their periods and fight the taboo surrounding menstruation. However, posts outside of the campaign, such as the Black Liner and the sanitary towel tins, arguably paradoxically insinuate that menstruation is something to keep discreet and unknown to others. It follows conventions of sanitary product advertising that Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) have pointed out; that adverts 'play on women's fear of being discovered as menstruating because discovery means stigma' (p.11) in order to sell products. This links with John Berger's influential work in his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972). On promotional culture, Berger (1972) writes, 'the publicity image steals her love of herself as she is, and offers it back to her for the price of the product' (p.134). So, Bodyform 'steal' a woman's feelings of comfort and normality she associates with her period, by insinuating it needs to be concealed with these posts about discretion, and then sells products, such as the Black Liner and tins, to the woman in order for her to regain her feelings of comfort and normality.

4.2. Girling Women

Throughout the Bodyform *#BloodNormal* campaign video and social media posts, signs appear which connote an aspect of postfeminist ideology, 'girling' women. Lazar (2009) is a linguist with a specialisation in feminist discourse studies. She explains the, perhaps detrimental, concept of 'girling' women, and how it invites women to 'return to the time of their girlhood' and 'emphasizes youthfulness as a time of fun' (Lazar, 2009, p.390). These signs found in the campaign will be explored and their meanings explained.

The first example of girling women which will be explored is a scene from the *#BloodNormal* campaign video (Libressefinland, 2017). Within the scene, a girl lies on a bed and reads from a book to a girl who is lying next to her. Light comes in from the window behind them which is covered by a very thin white curtain. The white curtain and light brighten the space around them. The signifiers, the colour white and the light entering the room, signify purity and innocence. This signification of purity is perhaps reiterated through the appearance of the girls. They both appear to be young teenagers and are without make-up. Their bare faces, juxtaposed with the white light around them, again signify purity, as they are in their natural states, and are comfortable to be around one another like this. The meaning behind these connotations is the ideology of innocent girlhood as well as the concept of a 'sleepover', which is an activity typically young women will partake in. Williamson (1978) writes about the 'objective correlative' in advertising, whereby the juxtaposition of signs together in adverts will attach ideas or feelings to the product (pp.30-31). So, by representing the young women in the campaign advert in this way, perhaps the ideology of girlhood will attach to Bodyform products, creating the sense that their sanitary towels will

accompany young women through girlhood just as childhood friends do. It could be argued, then, that appealing to young women in this way will create brand loyalty from a young age.

Another example of girling women is an Instagram image which was posted on both Bodyform's Instagram and Twitter. A white woman's arm wearing a pink long-sleeved top is wrapped around a black woman's arm wearing a green long-sleeved top. The use of two women of different races may signify the unity of women, no matter their differences, which connotes feminist ideology of women working together for gender equality.

However, a more postfeminist ideology emerges as their hands come together and their pinkie fingers are wrapped around one another's. This hand gesture of interlocking pinkie fingers connotes the childhood act of a 'pinkie promise' where a promise is secured through locking fingers. And so, through behaving in this child-like manner, this image seems to connote the girling women aspect of postfeminist ideology.

The use of these girling signs perhaps show that Bodyform are aiming their marketing more towards young girls. As aforementioned, it could be due to marketing purposes in that they are aiming to achieve brand loyalty from a young age. However, it could have a moral purpose, as young women are often found to find menstruation more abnormal and embarrassing to discuss than older women (Kissling, 1996a, p.490). In this sense, Bodyform may be fulfilling their social role of encouraging young women to openly discuss menstruation.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to contribute to the media and communications discipline, with a more specific focus on marketing and social media. Through analysing the Bodyform *#BloodNormal* campaign, the aim was to find out the extent to which Bodyform were committed to normalising the discussion of menstruation. The main research question was: **(1)** To what extent are Bodyform committed to their *#BloodNormal* campaign message of normalising discussions about menstruation? Two sub-questions were also formulated: **(a)** Are there inconsistencies in Bodyform's representation regarding their message in campaign posts versus their messages in posts outside of the campaign? **(b)** What are the limitations of relying on corporations to fix deep rooted social issues? In order to see whether these research questions have been answered, the points made throughout this research will be reflected upon.

5.1. Summary of Findings

This research began by reviewing the relevant literature around marketing, social media, menstruation and advertising. Firstly, corporate social initiatives were explored in order to understand how and why corporations, such as Bodyform, market themselves using social issues. Then, the focus turned to social media, discussing the attributes that Twitter and Instagram have as well as the ability for social media to organise activism. Literature surrounding menstruation, including taboo and health communication, aided the understanding of how taboo and stigma are formed and how sanitary protection adverts can reaffirm the taboo surrounding menstruation. Finally, critical studies of advertising were discussed to understand the process of advertising attributing meaning to objects and how this meaning can be analysed. The findings revealed both seemingly positive and

detrimental representations of menstruation within the *#BloodNormal* campaign. Three themes were identified:

(1) 'Pride and Bravery' focussed on the signs and ideologies within the campaign which represented an openness to the discussion of menstruation. The theme found signs reminiscent of previously discussed menstrual activism, corporations taking over from education institutions and including men to encourage the destigmatisation of menstruation in both genders.

(2) 'Fear and Taboo' focussed on the signs and ideologies, both within the campaign and outside of it, which represented the taboo and stigma often found in sanitary protection advertising, such as the focus on discretion and seeing menstruation as something to be feared.

(3) 'Girling Women' focussed on Bodyform's emphasis of youth, both in the campaign and outside of it.

Overall, it seems that Bodyform's *#BloodNormal* campaign has, to a certain extent, represented the social issue of menstrual taboo. By being the first feminine protection corporation to subvert the blue liquid norm within sanitary protection adverts, they have arguably 'broken the mould' by showing red liquid which symbolises blood. As was discussed, the image was in large newspapers, and Bodyform's social media posts have gained mainly supportive comments which, in themselves, have perhaps shown that Bodyform has opened the discussion about menstruation. Also, in utilising postfeminist signs of 'girling' women, Bodyform are seemingly targeting younger girls who are often more embarrassed to speak about menstruation than older women.

However, inconsistencies were found inside and outside of the *#BloodNormal* campaign. Signs were found which connoted ideas of discretion and concealment, which contradicts the message that the campaign was trying to represent. Their 'Black Liner' especially connoted paradoxical ideologies, encouraging women to conceal any trace of their pads. Also, despite the use of red liquid being a seemingly rebellious act, Williamson's (1978) concept of 'differentiation' (p.25) could show that Bodyform may have utilised it with the desire of standing out from other sanitary protection product brands.

It seems that Bodyform may have achieved their campaign objective, to normalise menstrual blood, to the extent that they created a discussion that perhaps was not being had so openly. However, it also seems that ultimately, there are limitations to a corporation attempting to 'fix' a deep rooted social issue. Ultimately, Bodyform is owned by the global corporation, Essity. So, although they utilised the social campaign, their business does go on, and selling contradictory products which promote concealment, such as Black Liners and pad tins, perhaps prove their overall desire to make money as a corporation, as opposed to being solely responsible for fixing social issues. Due to this, it seems unhelpful and unsustainable to rely on corporations to take over from institutions, such as education, in teaching, in this case, young women how to conduct themselves.

5.2. Possible Recommendations

To conclude, future research in this area could focus on audience reception, in order to see the extent of the campaign's impact on online users. In particular, it would be interesting to see the reaction of men and boys, especially as Bodyform featured men in the campaign. It could also be important to see how young girls respond to this campaign's message to see whether it alters their, often embarrassed, feelings of talking about menstruation.

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Appendix

1. Images from Bodyform's Social Media:

Figure 1. *Bodyform UK*. 2017. [Instagram]. [Accessed 10 January 2018]. Available from:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/BaowEmJnMJL/?taken-by=bodyformuk>

Figure 2. *Bodyform UK*. 2017. [Instagram]. [Accessed 10 January 2018]. Available from:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Bb1pp7HH6Al/?taken-by=bodyformuk>

Figure 3. *Bodyform*. 2017. [Twitter]. [Accessed 10 January 2018]. Available from:

<https://twitter.com/bodyform/status/927963032042508289>

Figure 4. *Bodyform UK*. 2017. [Instagram]. [Accessed 10 January 2018]. Available from:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/BaWbKR0HLVF/?taken-by=bodyformuk>

Figure 5. *Bodyform UK*. 2017. [Instagram]. [Accessed 10 January 2018]. Available from:

https://www.instagram.com/p/Ba_czW0ngzE/?taken-by=bodyformuk