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An analysis of representations of women in Chinese menstrual product advertising

Name: Haichao Xu

Student number:

MA New Media

Supervisor:

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School of Media and Communication

University of Leeds

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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Contents | 1 |
| Abstract | 2 |
| Acknowledgments | 3 |
| List of tables and figures..... | 4 |
| Introduction | 5 |
| Basic background information..... | 5 |
| Research aims | 5 |
| The rationale | 6 |
| Structure of this research | 6 |
| Literature Review | 8 |
| Culture and menstruation..... | 8 |
| Feminism and media..... | 9 |
| Female Images in Advertising | 11 |
| History of menstrual product advertising | 13 |
| The regulations of menstrual product advertising in China..... | 16 |
| Methodology..... | 18 |
| Choice of samples..... | 18 |
| Method of analysis: visual analysis | 20 |
| Coding categories and analysis procedure..... | 23 |
| Ethical considerations and other limitations of methods | 24 |
| Findings and analysis | 26 |
| Research findings | 26 |
| Analysis of advertisement —The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2012 Ver.)..... | 27 |
| Analysis of advertisement —The More Natural, the Better | 31 |
| Analysis of advertisement — Live Healthy and Beautiful (2012 Ver.) | 33 |
| Analysis of advertisement — Just Different (ABC 20th Anniversary)..... | 35 |
| Discussion..... | 38 |
| Representations of Women in Chinese menstrual products advertisements..... | 38 |
| Implications for the further practice in advertising | 40 |
| Conclusion..... | 41 |
| Bibliography | 43 |
| Appendices | 52 |

Abstract

This research is an example of visual analysis, combining qualitative content analysis with semiotic analysis. It investigates how menstrual product advertisements in China portray women, and in particular, how these advertisements define women through the socially conscious influences embedded in their signs. This was accomplished by analysing 14 television commercials from China's two most popular menstrual product brands, SPACE7 and ABC, over the last fifteen years. The findings show that the images of women in Chinese menstrual product advertisements are consistent with the perfect female image in previous studies. These commercials utilise elements of nature, real-life scenarios and women's body language. And the signs of four representative advertisements were also analysed to understand the social ideologies embedded in the signs. This research found that the images of women represented by these signs still remain within patriarchal ideologies and menstrual taboos, which is consistent with previous studies. This research addresses the gap in academic research on the representation of women in menstrual product advertising in mainland China. As an introductory study, this research provides a reference for future research on this topic in developing countries. Future research could be an analysis of how women interpret this feminine image through audience research.

Acknowledgments

List of tables and figures

The tables for this dissertation were created based on sample collection and coding, and the original data is attached in the appendix.

Table 1. Sources used to collect data.

Table 2. SPACE7 and ABC TV commercials.

All images in this dissertation are screenshots of sample advertisements. The original sources of the advertisements are attached in the appendix.

Figure 1. Image 1 from The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2012 Ver.).

Figure 2. Image 2 from The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2012 Ver.).

Figure 3. Image 3 from The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2012 Ver.).

Figure 4. Image 4 from The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2012 Ver.).

Figure 5. Image 5 from The More Natural, the Better.

Figure 6. Image 6 from The More Natural, the Better.

Figure 7. Image 7 from Live Healthy and Beautiful (2012 Ver.).

Figure 8. Image 8 from Live Healthy and Beautiful (2012 Ver.).

Figure 9. Image 9 from Live Healthy and Beautiful (2012 Ver.).

Figure 10. Image 10 from Just Different (ABC 20th Anniversary).

Figure 11. Image 11 from Just Different (ABC 20th Anniversary).

Figure 12. Image 12 from Just Different (ABC 20th Anniversary).

Introduction

Basic background information

This research aims to shed light on how women are represented in Chinese menstrual product advertisements, exploring the links between the content of the advertisements and the portrayal of women, the social ideology underlying the content of the advertisements, and the relationship between the female images portrayed in the advertisements and the Chinese women in reality.

As an important medium of mass communication, the content of advertising has a significant influence on consumer awareness (Hackley, 2002). Moreover, advertising is viewed as a “super-ideology” (Elliott and Ritson, 2005, p. 197) that can permeate all aspects of society and thus have a massive and profound impact. And China, the world’s largest developing country, has 48.76 % of its population as women, for approximately 680 million people, making its menstrual products market extremely large (AskCI, 2021).

As a result, menstrual product advertising is both culturally and economically significant as a way of representing Chinese women. However, since the introduction of menstrual product advertising in mainland China in the 1980s, no academic research on the representation of women in menstrual product advertising in mainland China has been found (The Paper, 2020). This research could contribute to a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of how women are represented in Chinese menstrual product advertisements.

The study is based on four notions: menstruation and culture, which provides contextual support for the analysis through the socio-cultural relationship with menstruation; feminism, which provides theoretical support for the specific analysis of the study; the female image in advertising, which provides academic reference for the analysis of the study; and the history of menstrual product advertising, which provides academic reference for the study and helps to identify research gaps.

Research aims

The aim of this research is to analyse the representation of women in Chinese menstrual product advertisements over the last fifteen years. This research contributes to the gap in academic research by providing a critical analysis of the representation of women in television advertisements released by the

mainstream Chinese menstrual product brands SPACE7 and ABC over the last fifteen years, as well as enriching the research on the representation of Chinese women in advertisements. And this research is accomplished through a qualitative research approach.

This research uses a visual analysis combining qualitative content analysis and semiotic analysis to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How does the overall picture of women in Chinese menstrual product advertising look like?
- 2) How do the signs or symbols in Chinese menstrual product advertisements represent women and what are the iconic signs?
- 3) How is the dominant ideology of society consolidated and regenerated in the image of women in Chinese menstrual product advertising?

The rationale

The portrayal of women in advertising has long been a focus of feminist scholarship. Along with the three waves of the feminism movement, scholars from various countries have conducted numerous studies on the representations of women in advertising throughout history (Åkestam et al., 2017; Eisend, 2010; Drake, 2017; Zimmerman and Dahlberg, 2008; Lazar, 2011). Because of their unique and intense connection to women, menstrual product advertisements have become an essential medium for conveying the image of women. While research on the representation of women in menstrual product advertisements has become more common in Western countries and covers a wide range of advertising forms and research directions (Luke, 1997; Malefyt and McCabe, 2016; Campbell et al., 2021), there is no academic research on the representation of women in such advertisements can be found in mainland China. And, given China's large female population, as well as the country's long history and culture, it is both academically important and timely to analyse the representation of Chinese women in advertising from this perspective.

Structure of this research

This research consists of six chapters: The introduction provides a brief background to the study, its aims and methods, and its significance. The literature review provides a detailed literature collection and critical

overview of the key concepts, further identifying the research gap. The methodology details the research methods used in this study, the sample selection, coding process, and discussion of ethical considerations and methodological limitations. The findings and analysis present the results of the stereotypical content analysis and semiotic analysis of the four representative advertisements selected. The discussion links the research findings to the literature, discussing them in terms of several themes, and pointing out the practical implications of the research. The conclusion concludes the whole study, points out the limitations of the study and makes suggestions for further research.

Literature Review

Culture and menstruation

Menstruation, as a normal female physiological phenomenon, is the monthly flow of menstrual blood and tissue from a woman's uterus through her cervix and out of her body through her vagina (OWH, 2018). Although menstruation is a normal part of female physiology, there are still taboos against menstruation in both Eastern and Western cultures. Western societies have considered that menstruation should remain hidden in the forms of expression and communication about it (Laws, 1990). The discourse about menstruation is also considered to be associated with patriarchal control as well as male culture, with the discourse about menstruation received by young boys during their growth into mature men often conveying the belief in the inferior status of women (Delaney et al., 1988; Laws, 1990). While in society, menstruation is usually considered something that is not appropriate to talk about publicly, pregnancy, as another process related to a woman's reproductive health, is treated in an overtly positive manner (Lever et al., 1979). Euphemisms for menstruation, which are also expressions of menstrual taboos, can be found in almost any cultural context, such as in American culture, where it is commonly referred to as "my time of the moon" and "I'm under the weather" (Ernster, 1975, p.6), and "the arrival of my auntie" (Mou et al., 2018, p.436) in Chinese culture. Even in the Bible, menstruation is mentioned in terms of "the curse" that Eve received because of her "sin" (Hoffman, 2010, p.201). Menstruation, as a normal female physiological phenomenon, is portrayed negatively and the image of menstruating women is often skewed. "Filthy, sick, unbalanced, and ritually impure" (Daly, 2016, p.248) are the words commonly used to describe menstruating women.

Researches have also shown that the perception of menstruation as a "hygiene crisis" (Havens and Swenson, 1988, p.95) in the process of informing and popularising menstruation to the general public perpetuates menstrual taboos and further undermines young women's knowledge of menstruation (Whisnant et al., 1975). When combined with other menstrual taboos, they reinforce and contribute to negative attitudes toward menstruation and the transmission of menstrual taboos (White, 2012). A recent study has shown that although women's knowledge of menstruation has improved, this taboo is still conveyed through advertising and this hindrance to open discussion of the menstruation topic still potentially influences women's wellbeing negatively (Spadaro et al., 2017).

A cross-sectional study of 416 undergraduate students in Hong Kong revealed that factors such as the mass media environment, traditional stereotypes, and Chinese dietary culture made teenagers view menstruation in a negative light (Wong et al., 2013). In China, which has long been influenced by Confucianism, Chinese people are more conservative and rarely discuss menstruation, due to its construction as an embarrassing topic. Mou, Yin and Wang's study (2018) also argues that in line with the general silence about menstruation in Chinese society, there is a scarcity of academic studies that research menstruation from a social science or humanities orientation, especially in mainland China. Further research is therefore needed to determine whether stereotypes of menstruating women have persisted in the Chinese mass media in recent years, and what impact their portrayal of menstruating women might have on society's perception of this group or this biological phenomenon as a whole.

Feminism and media

“Feminism is the movement to end the sexism, sexual exploitation, and oppression” (Hooks, 2000, p.1). The development of the feminist movements has influenced women's consciousness, and feminism has gradually penetrated and influenced many fields, including media studies, through several waves of feminist movements. The inheritance and development of feminism has had a significant impact on how academics, media workers, and media consumers think about and understand the connection between mass media products and gender issues, as well as “the images, narratives, and genre forms produced in the media culture industry” (Watkins and Emerson, 2000, p.152).

The mass media became a new field of debate during the second wave of the feminist movement, and a number of studies emerged in the 1970s on the analysis of the image of women shaped by the mass media, which offered a feminist critique of female stereotypes in the press, television and advertising (Watkins and Emerson, 2000). Through a study of housewives in post-World War II American society, *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1974) exposed and accused the sexist ideology propagated through the mass media within the United States at the time that women could achieve satisfaction through the role of wives and mothers alone without the need for higher education, political voice, and career life. “The symbolic annihilation of women” (Tuchman, 1978, p.150) is also a criticism of the entire process of depicting women in the media. This critique argues that the mass media, even including women's magazines, tended to portray

women in their domestic or sexual roles rather than in the roles of responsibility or power, which further reinforced the ideology of women's subordinate status under patriarchy, while at the same time, such a portrayal of women could have a negative impact on women's self-awareness of gender due to the important role of the mass media in shaping the dominant values of society (Tuchman, 1978). Furthermore, television advertisements aimed at women in the 1970s were often for household products and appliances or cosmetics designed to reinforce their identity as housewives and sexually attractive, which implied that the images of women portrayed in the mass media during this period were more what some people wanted them to be than what they really were (Watkins and Emerson, 2000; Tuchman et al., 1978).

Studies of media reception and audience also emerged during the second wave of the feminist movement. Meehan (1983) reveals the changing roles and status of women as reflected in television programmes by analysing the types and frequency of female characters, and criticises their continuous use of sexist representations of women to dwarf women and influence the audience's consciousness to create stereotypes of female inferiority. Laura Mulvey (1975, p.11) introduces the concept of the "male gaze" in feminist film theory by using psychoanalysis to reveal how the subconscious in a patriarchal society constitutes a form of cinematic expression. This viewpoint argues that popular cinema objectifies women and uses them as objects of male desire in order to satisfy the visual pleasure of male audiences while causing female audiences to constantly lose their female subjectivity and submit to patriarchal social concepts. While these media reception theories have made significant contributions, they have also suffered from ignoring the audience's subjectivity and treating them as passive recipients of media content (Watkins and Emerson, 2000). With the emergence of the "Encoding/Decoding" (Hall, 1980, p.128) theory, the audience's interpretations were taken into account, arguing that receivers actively decoded media content.

In post-feminism, there is a shift from objectification to subjectification in mass media culture, as traditional notions of gender and sexuality, which were criticised during the second wave of the feminist movement, were increasingly constructed through a discourse of choices for young women (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007). Women are no longer passive, silent objects under the male gaze in the sexualised representation of women in popular culture, but active subjects who voluntarily choose to present themselves as objects to satisfy their interests, and this change also means that patriarchal power operates from an external gaze to an internalised gaze on themselves (Tasker and Negra, 2005; Gill, 2007).

Female Images in Advertising

Advertising is becoming central to our social existence, and its influence is actually on a par with that of education and organised religion (Gill, 2007). As an important medium of mass communication, the content of advertising also plays an intrusive, shaping and reflective role in consumer consciousness (Hackley, 2002, p.212). Advertising has also been described as a “super-ideology” (Elliott and Ritson, 2005, p.197) due to its rhetorical richness, penetration into all aspects of everyday life, different forms of representation from journalism and film, ideological influence hidden under the function of the market, and the ability to have a huge impact on society in a short period of time. Furthermore, Rosalind Gill (2007) argues that because advertising possesses these characteristics, it has been the target of broader feminist criticism and discussion than other types of media content.

During the second wave of the feminist movement, there were many feminist critiques of the images of women represented in the mass media, which included stereotypes of the female body in advertisements, such as “glossy lips and matt complexion, unfocused eyes and flawless fingers” (Greer, 2009, p.68) or “no wrinkles, thin, tall, and long-legged” (Kilbourne, 2015). Another female stereotype that has also been criticised by feminists comes from the female identity dimension, namely the image and positioning of the “mother, housewife, sexy and attractive woman” (Winship, 1980, p.211) inscribed in advertising, while in reality there is a gap between the stereotypes in advertising and the real-life roles of women in many contexts. The stereotype of women as sexual objects is also heavily criticised. As Mulvey (1975, p.11) argues, the male deterministic gaze projects its fantasies onto the female figure, thus portraying a female appearance full of strong visual and erotic influences, which means that “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed”.

The image of women in post-feminist advertising began to take on a new dimension as feminism progressed. For example, the emphasis on “the emancipated new femininity” (Lazar, 2011, p.38), which argues that women should be free to display their bodies rather than as objects to be looked at, and that the interpretation of the image is defined by women themselves, as well as that woman should be free to choose and create a diverse and individual aesthetic. “Fem-vertising” (Powell, 2014) is another term that became popular in 2014, advocating for the critique and questioning of traditional female stereotypes portrayed in advertising,

bringing the discussion of female stereotypes related to identity roles, professions, and personal characteristics into the public eye (Åkestam et al., 2017). With femvertising as its label, the contemporary advertising movement has changed the history of advertising that has followed social norms and stereotypes, breaking down the biased image of women in advertising and, most importantly, being proactive in this challenge (Åkestam et al., 2017; Eisend, 2010). Drake's (2017) research further indicates that female consumers have more positive attitudes and purchase intentions towards advertisements or brands with female empowerment themes. However, the persistence of stereotypical images of women has resulted in advertisements that, despite attempts at positive portrayal, have not yet fully broken free from the constraints of female identity. These images are still being critiqued, and many modern women believe that their portrayal in advertising is unrealistic and inaccurate (Zimmerman and Dahlberg, 2008). Previous research has revealed that the significant political, economic and social advances made by women have given them more power than in the past, which in turn has led to more diverse and proactive demands and feelings in marketing, and a preference for advertising that presents a positive image of women (Sivulka, 2009; SheKonws Media, 2016). Through a critical discourse analysis of the beauty advertisements in a Singapore publication, Lazar (2011) also critiqued how such emancipation in the advertisements, based on consumerism as empowerment, can mislead and limit women from realising their true femininity. The advertisements have also been critiqued for creating a new appealing marketing discourse by using feminist language in disguise, preventing young women from realising their consumerist nature and instead reinforcing gender hierarchies with an underlying ideology (Gengler, 2011).

In China, there has also emerged a new feminine image of the "modern Chinese woman" (Hung et al., 2007, p.1038), with empirical research indicating that Chinese women desire a tender image with depth, and the depth stems from the learning, thinking, and workplace experiences that help modern Chinese women achieve self-development. Hung et al. (2007) also discovered that Chinese adult women avoid overt sexual displays in their portrayal and seek to combine femininity with inner moral qualities in an attempt to create a unique image of modern Chinese women. Other studies have revealed that Chinese adolescents pursue the image of an independent and confident urban elite type of woman without aspiring to a gentle and quiet image, and also criticise the skinny female image in advertising (Ng and Chan, 2014; 2015).

As advertising continues to evolve, the cultural content embedded in it has an increasingly deep-rooted influence on our society and culture. Taking advertisements relating to women, as an example, many of them contain references to inter-gender power and the control people have over their own bodies or lives. Barthel (1989, p.191) further argues that “objectification is not an isolated woman’s problem but a social fact for all, and part and parcel of consumer society”. He argues that people should actively shape advertising to fit reality rather than being shaped, and focus on the formation of advertising rather than only on what it presents (Barthel, 1989). As an important type of advertising for and about women, it is necessary to analyse how women are represented, how these representations are formed and the impact they have on society. While there have been various studies on the image of women in advertising in mainland China, few have addressed the image of women in sanitary napkin advertising, and a search of the literature revealed no studies that have systematically analysed the representations of women in sanitary towels advertising in mainland China. From this perspective, there is also a pressing need to investigate the full scope of research on the image of women in mainstream menstrual advertising and their formation in mainland China.

History of menstrual product advertising

The advertising of disposable feminine hygiene products has undergone many changes over the last century. Despite the availability of disposable sanitary towels in Western societies by the end of the nineteenth century, many women were still making their own menstrual hygiene products, such as reusable rags, by the early twentieth century (Jones, 1979, p.39). Advertisements for disposable sanitary towels during this period were targeted at women of the wealthy class and advertised the product’s hygienic status over reusable rags as well as its compatibility with this group’s social status rather than its usefulness for women’s daily activities (Jones, 1979; Park, 1996). For example, Canfield described its product as “highly endorsed by London Physicians” (Park, 1996, p.150).

The feminine menstrual product advertising in the 1920s was in a scientific style, attempting to present facts about menstruation in as innocuous a manner as possible, allowing the reader to develop an innate, intimate understanding of the product and draw their own conclusions (Merskin, 1999). With health and hygiene as an important feminine concern during this period, a Kotex advertisement with the headline “Meets the Most Exacting Needs” and the text “toilet essentials for active school girls... guards against emergencies” was

extremely highly regarded (Park, 1996; Marchand, 1985, pp.21–22). At this time, women’s biological difference from men was constructed as a key source of their inferior status to men and a factor that naturalised their social inferiority and location in the private sphere of home. Mandziuk (2010) argues in his study of Kotex advertisements from 1921 to 1926 that the paradox created by the intersection of commercial interests and physiological hygiene in the early twentieth century was reinforced by advertisements that suggested women should display their bodies while emphasising the concealment of the menstrual process. The advertising of feminine hygiene products from the 1920s to the 1930s was also associated with women’s economic health, in which “wives and mothers were informed of their duty to help their men get and keep jobs” (Park, 1996, p.154), and this further perpetuated the gender hierarchy in the workplace and the social positioning of women in the home. In the 1930s and 1940s, the personal products industry, exemplified by Tampax, Inc., and Campana Corporation, established a new educational division, which began offering free, off-the-shelf instructional programs on “menstrual health” (Brumberg, 1997, p.47) to mothers, teachers, parent-teacher associations, and Girl Scouts. And this education was inclusive of the menstrual taboo, which argued that both menstruation itself and the use of menstrual products should be kept secret, otherwise it would become a form of humiliation (Merskin, 1999; Houppert, 1995).

The demand for women in the workplace during the World War II led to another change in advertising for menstrual products, from an emphasis on women’s physical hygiene and health to a concern for women’s mental and social well-being (Park, 1996). Tampax’s 1948 tampon campaign, with the headline “Swim any day of the month with Tampax”, included themes of product innovation that liberated women and energised the menstruating female state, as well as a marketing focus on the “no odor” and invisibility of tampons, emphasising the relief of women from embarrassment (Park, 1996, p.158). Subsequently, in the 1950s, sanitary napkin manufacturers produced training kits along with books from school nurses to provide female teenagers with guidance on how to become a woman, and it was at this time that purchase and loyalty to the brand emerged (Mou et al., 2018; Merskin, 1999).

From the 1960s to the 1990s, developments in menstrual products provided menstruating women with a broader range of options, while advertising for menstrual products also changed (Merskin, 1999). In Havens and Swenson’s (1988) study of the content of print advertisements for women’s menstrual products that appeared in *Seventeen* magazine between 1976 and 1986, the scientific approach and athletic approach to

advertising for menstrual products were analysed. The athletic approach to advertising featured young women participating in physical activities such as dancing and swimming, with the energy and confidence women felt after using the product as its marketing focus, commonly seen in tampon advertising, whereas the scientific approach involved specific descriptions of product details and performance, such as the wings and size of sanitary pads (Havens and Swenson, 1988). Many advertisements for menstrual products also imbue menstrual products with beautiful emotions through the use of images such as flowers and hearts, attempting to help women escape the embarrassment of menstruation through this kind of symbolism (Merskin, 1999; Brumberg, 1997). However, these different advertising styles have actually continued to exploit the menstrual taboo and young girls' anxiety and fear of their first period in various ways to distract from the perception of the real situation of menstruation (Merskin, 1999). There were also advertisements that demonstrated the function of a product by using a blue or purple liquid to represent menstrual blood, which actually reinforced women's negative feelings about the normal biological phenomenon of menstruation (Luke, 1997).

Menstrual product advertising in the twenty-first century continues to perpetuate the taboo culture of menstruation (Campbell et al., 2021). Del Saz-Rubio and Pennock-Speck (2009) revealed that female characters in advertisements are often portrayed as omnipotent, able to carry out all kinds of activities during their periods without any influence, by analysing menstrual product advertisements in the UK and Spain from 2002 to 2008. Malefyt and McCabe (2016) argue in their analysis of Stayfree advertisements from the 1970s to the 2010s that there is still a discourse of protection in the advertisements, with an implicit ideology of gender inequality, which reinforces a culture of shame and concealment. The analysis also reveals a shift from an image of women needing to be protected from the harm of menstruation to a female empowerment image. Research has also highlighted a trend towards "menstrual liberation" (Radnor, 2017) in advertising discourse about menstruation and menstruating women. For example, Bodyform's Blood Normal campaign depicted real menstrual blood for the first time, and Always's #LikeAGirl campaign received widespread acclaim for redefining menstruation and gender representation (Kiefer, 2017; Marketing Society, 2016).

Disposable menstrual products were not available in China until the 1980s, and were mostly imported from foreign brands (Qingzhu, 2017). The first menstrual product advertisement in mainland China was for o.b. tampons in 1985, with a dashing, smiling young woman on a swing and the slogan "Bringing me comfort

and confidence” (NetEase, 2010). This tampon advertisement was a smashing success in terms of both publicity and sales. In awarding the advertisement, NetEase (2010) argued that it had become an anti-ideological product for many young urbanites at a time when social attitudes toward female physiology were still conservative in the early days of economic reform and opening up, and that support for the product actually conveyed the urgent need for open-mindedness. Tampons, however, were still too radical for China and fell silent after a brief explosion, after which sanitary napkins began to become the preferred choice of modern Chinese women, and by the 1990s, sanitary napkin advertising became active with the popularity of their use (Qingzhu, 2017). Since menstrual product advertising is an important window for the expression of women’s image, no research has been found in the literature that specifically analyses the image of women in such advertising in mainland China, and the majority of the existing research focuses on the marketing and branding strategies of menstrual product advertising. This study aims to contribute to the study of the representations of women in menstrual product advertisements in mainland China.

The regulations of menstrual product advertising in China

Advertising regulations, more than the socio-cultural environment, have a direct impact on the production and broadcast of advertising (Nelson and Paek, 2008). Boddewyn (1985) argues that advertising regulations can be classified as self-discipline, industry self-regulation, and government regulation, while from a business behaviour perspective, they can be differentiated into self-regulation, voluntary adherence, and legal compliance, and these various types of advertising regulation are complementary. The economic, cultural, and political situation of a society influences the development of advertising regulations, which in turn reflect changes in the social environment (Gao, 2005; Boddewyn, 1982). For reasons such as consumer protection, advertising regulations focus on objective issues such as falsity and deception in advertising, as well as subjective issues relating to taste and human dignity in advertising that are difficult to define, and some studies have shown that advertising regulations have improved the quality of advertising messages (Boddewyn, 1982; Mueller, 2011; Kassarian and Kassarian, 1988). Representations of sexuality, gender, and sexism as subjective issues often follow codes specified or recommended by a country’s advertising self-regulation agency (Nelson and Paek, 2008; de Mooij, 2010).

Advertising regulations differ by country, as do the emphasis and extent to which subjective issues are regulated by advertising self-regulation agencies (Nelson and Paek, 2008). Advertising regulations in China are dominated by government regulation and supplemented by self-regulation, and as the government places greater emphasis on industry self-regulation, the influence of self-regulation on advertising is growing (Gao, 2007). The China Advertising Association (CAA), China's "only national advertising trade organisation" (Gao, 2007, p.316) led by the State Administration for Industry and Commerce, announced the implementation of the Self-Regulation Rules for Sanitary Towel Advertising in 2007, marking the first time the CAA imposed industry self-regulation on specific products' advertising (China Advertising Association, 2016). Although the Self-regulation Rules state that "sanitary towel advertisements should be broadcast on television or radio at times other than meal times," which appears to replicate the taboo of menstruation in Chinese society, it also states that "sanitary towel advertisements must respect the human dignity of women and cannot contain content that is detrimental to the image of women," which is a positive and powerful guide to the representation of women and women's reproductive health (China Advertising Association, 2016). As an important influencing factor in the presentation of menstrual product advertisements, it is necessary to include China's advertising regulations in this research to provide a more comprehensive critical analysis of the image of women in menstrual product advertisements in mainland China by analysing the relationships that exist between advertising regulations, the social environment, and the sanitary towel advertisements.

Methodology

Choice of samples

While there are many different types of menstrual products, the product category for this research was narrowed down to sanitary towels because they are the most widely used in China. Sanitary towels have the largest share of the Chinese hygiene market, with research showing that sanitary towel consumption in China reached 119.9 billion in 2019, accounting for 89.6% of the market (AskCI, 2021). Furthermore, although disposable sanitary towels were introduced to the Chinese market in the 1980s, between the late 1980s and the beginning of the 21st century, the Chinese sanitary products market was going through a process from the introduction of expensive foreign brands to the emergence and growth of domestic brands (The Paper, 2020). The habit of using disposable sanitary towel among Chinese consumers has gradually developed over this decade, while these sanitary products have also become widespread in China during this period. Around 2005, Chinese consumers' consumption demands for sanitary products began to shift from price to value, such as branding, at which point sanitary napkin advertising entered the public eye and attracted extensive attention (The Paper, 2020). Therefore, the sample for this study is comprised of advertisements released by mainstream sanitary towels brands in mainland China during the period 2005-2020.

The sanitary towels brands selected for this research are from the top 10 sanitary towels brands in China released by Chinese Brand Research Institute, which is a combination of consumer voting, brand awareness, company size, business situation and other data (CNPP, 2020). They are Sofy, Whisper, SPACE7, Laurier, ABC, Kotex, Ladycare, Anerle, FREE and Freemore. Based on the brands' country of origin and ranking data, SPACE7 and ABC, two of the top five brands on the list that were born entirely in mainland China and whose sanitary towel advertising was also born entirely in a mainland Chinese context, were chosen as the sample brands for this research to analyse the representation of women in menstrual product advertising in China. SPACE7 was founded in 2002 in Fujian, China, and ABC was founded in 1998 in Guangdong, China. Both came from areas that were geographically among the first to be influenced by the reform and opening up. To date, they have a large market share and a strong brand influence in China as local brands.

Because of the increasing diversity of media presentation formats from 2005 to 2020, the sanitary towel advertisements for SPACE7 and ABC chosen for this research were all productions that were officially released by the brands and labelled as TV commercials (in fact, the most recent TV commercials for both brands were released via the internet). The sample advertisements for this research were all downloaded from websites by using the brands' keyword search, and the mainstream Chinese video websites from which the data was sourced are listed in Table 1. The filtered sample consisted of 14 TV commercials, seven for each brand, after excluding relevant user-generated advertisements and brand-derived short videos and taking into account factors such as the potential loss of data storage for brands. The advertisements listed in Table 2 are the specifics of the samples obtained following the filtering process.

| Website Name | Website address |
|---------------|---|
| Tencent Video | https://v.qq.com |
| Youku | https://www.youku.com |
| Bilibili | https://www.bilibili.com |
| Sohu | https://tv.sohu.com |

Table 1. Sources used to collect data.

| SPACE7 | ABC |
|---|---|
| The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2005 Ver.) | Live Healthy and Beautiful (2012 Ver.) |
| The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2012 Ver.) | Live Healthy and Beautiful (2013 Ver.) |
| SPACE7 Bizarre Gymnastics | Live Healthy and Beautiful (2014 Ver.) |
| Discover the Multidimensional You | Change for perfection |
| The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2018 Ver.) | Just Different (ABC 20th Anniversary) |
| SPACE7 Ultra Thin - Breathable | ABC Comfort, Light and Thin (2019 Ver.) |
| The More Natural, the Better. | ABC Comfort, Light and Thin (2020 Ver.) |

Table 2. SPACE7 and ABC TV commercials.

Method of analysis: visual analysis

This research employed visual analysis to analyse a selected sample of sanitary towel advertisements using a combination of qualitative content analysis and semiotic. Qualitative content analysis was first used to code the obvious elements of the advertisements, followed by semiotics to provide a more in-depth analysis of a few representative advertisements in terms of content and meaning.

Content analysis is a research method that measures the frequency of the occurrence of something in a selected sample of mass media artefacts, which may include gendered stereotypes, and negative or positive representations of women (Berger, 1991). As an important research method for studying themes such as racism and the image of women in media productions, content analysis is used to analyse the narratives of television programmes or films, various types of interviews, the content of newspapers or magazines, and advertising (Macnamara, 2005). Qualitative content analysis, which incorporates the audience, context, and other factors behind mass media content in order to analyse their audience meanings in depth, has been widely praised by feminist researchers (Macnamara, 2005; Neuman, 1997; Newbold et al., 2002). A qualitative content analysis approach was used in this research to analyse the relationship between the

selected sanitary towel advertisements and their potential meanings, based on the perception that the texts have multiple meanings, and that the frequency of a particular occurrence, such as a gendered stereotype can impact on the range of meanings available to the audience (Macnamara, 2005). It therefore allows the researcher the opportunity to attempt to decode the multiple possible meanings of media content for the audience.

To provide a focused portrayal of the selected brands' sanitary towel advertisements for the period 2005-2020, I coded the sample advertisements. The data was collected and analysed in order to better understand menstrual product advertising in mainland China from 2005 to 2020, as well as to support the subsequent semiotic analysis.

Advertising, as a type of mass media artefact in which different cultures collide, is created on the assumption that signs may have multiple meanings (Solik, 2014). Visual advertising images contain many signs, and these signs are created and presented in such a way that they not only form the ideology of the advertisement, but also complement social perceptions and have a more profound impact, so that their meaning cannot be comprehended simply by the elements that they obviously represent (Solik, 2014; Dyer, 1982). And semiotics, as "the study of signs" (Nöth, 2011, p.289), has been combined by a number of researchers with content analysis to analyse advertising. (Aiello and Parry, 2019; Leiss et al., 1990; McQuarrie and Mick, 1992).

Semiotics, as the "science which studies the role of signs as part of social life" (Chandler, 2021), is concerned with signs, the formation of signs and the interpretation of signs (de Saussure, 1983; Aiello and Parry, 2019). A sign is defined as something that represents something other than itself or something that is given meaning, and the sign can be a word, an image, a colour, a sound, or an action, along with many other things (Chandler, 2021; Aiello and Parry, 2019). The linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce developed the two main models for the study of signs (Chandler, 2021). The former uses signifier and signified to study the form of signs and their representation, while the latter understands signs through the three levels of Representamen, Interpretant, and Object (de Saussure, 1983; Chandler, 2021). With the development and enrichment of semiotic theory, Roland Barthes built on this foundation to

promote semiotics as an influential approach to cultural studies in the late 1960s, further enriching the application of semiotics to the analysis of visual images (Chandler, 2021).

As the key concepts of semiotic analysis, Roland Barthes' theory of Denotation, Connotation and Myth provides a multi-layered approach to the analysis of visual images in advertising (Dyer, 1982). He contends that the first level of understanding signs is denotation, which refers to the sign itself and its "literal meaning" (Barthes, 1977, p.166), whereas the second level is connotation, which refers to the latent meaning of the sign, a level of interpretation that is extended to understanding signs through codes or conventions (Barthes, 1972; Dyer, 1982). While denotation in advertising images refers to the uncoded and manifest message or content, connotation in advertising images is concerned with the encoding of iconic content that is rooted in and influenced by various social, cultural, and historical contexts (Dyer, 1982; Chandler, 2021). Barthes' concept of myth provides a more in-depth understanding of signs by studying them in relation to the ideology of the time. Myths serve as the basis for the emergence of symbols and codes, which in turn rely on them to consolidate and naturalise the dominant ideologies such as the culture and values of society, and this naturalisation is concealed and powerful (Barthes, 1977; Chandler, 2021).

In this research, four advertisements from the sample were chosen for semiotic analysis to provide insight into the visual elements and how menstrual product advertisements represent women in China. The four TV commercials are: the first commercials released by each of the two brands following the CAA's self-regulation rules for sanitary napkin advertising, namely *The Comfort is Mine to Decide* (2012 Ver.) and *Live Healthy and Beautiful* (2012 Ver.), as well as the two commercials released by the two brands to commemorate their 20th anniversary, namely *The More Natural, the Better* and *Just Different*. The semiotic analysis of these four advertisements is primarily based on Barthes' theory and draws on specific approaches from previous studies (Dyer,1982; Rose,2016; Aiello and Parry, 2019; Ardhiyanto and Manuel Son, 2019) to analyse the advertisement visual images and the signs they contain, and through the dimensions of denotation, connotation and myth to analyse how Chinese menstrual product advertisements have portrayed the image of women.

Coding categories and analysis procedure

After checking the content of the sample advertisements and referencing codes from Mishra (2017), Dyer (1982), and Rose (2016), the coding categories for the qualitative content analysis were created. These coding categories are as follows:

Appearance:

Sex: female only; male and female.

Age: young, middle-aged, old.

Skin: fair, dull; smooth, wrinkled.

Body: thin, fat, tall, short; eyes, lips, hands, legs, hips, etc.

Looks: beautiful, lovely, lively and others; special, ordinary.

Role: daughter, mother; student, housewife, office lady, etc.

Manner:

Expression/emotion: Happy, blissful, confident, sad, painful, etc.

Pose: vibrant, relaxed, leaning, snuggling, curled up, etc.

Clothes: formal, informal; stylish, elegant, etc.

Colour: pink, blue, purple, yellow, etc.

Music: Joyful, soothing, exciting, etc.

Scene:

Props: flowers, trees, musical instruments, pets, beds, etc.

Settings: real, wishful, dreamlike, etc.

Activity:

body movement; positional communication, etc.

Aspects of the semiotic analysis were referred to Dyer's (1982) and Rose's studies and the following aspects were developed to analyse how menstrual product advertising represents women:

The denotative: elements based on the previous coding categories, as well as the voiceover or text appearing in the advertising images; the concept of "anchorage" (Barthes, 1977, p.38) was referred to illustrate the multiple meanings of the text, and the concept of "diegesis" (Rose, 2016, p.121) was introduced for the overview.

The connotative: the relationship between elements and society, culture, etc. Further analysis of denotation was also carried out through both "metonymic" and "synecdochal" (Rose, 2016, p.121) classifications.

The myth: the underlying ideology.

The semiotic analysis of individual advertisements is based on the structure of the analysis of advertisements, television programmes and films developed by Barthes (1977) in his book *The Rhetoric of the image*. A brief description of the advertisement will be provided first, followed by the identification of the key signs in the advertisement, an analysis of the relationship between the signs and society and culture, and finally the identification of the underlying ideology that influences how the signs work. The detailed analytical approach will refer to the key points discussed in previous studies (Dyers, 1982; Hoffman, 1979; Bell and Milic, 2002; Rose, 2016; Aiello and Parry, 2019). From the surface to the insights, it will investigate how Chinese menstrual hygiene product advertisements construct and reinforce the image of women.

Ethical considerations and other limitations of methods

Given that no human participants were involved in the research methodology, and the research data are free public resources available on the internet via links, and that these resources are published and viewed with the publisher's permission, there is little concern about ethical considerations.

There are several limitations to the methodology of this study. The first limitation was the research sample's limited size. Subject to factors such as data storage conditions and changes in the brands' development plans, the sample of TV commercials collected that met the study's requirements was only 14. Despite the fact that

the decision to only investigate the TV commercials of two local Chinese sanitary towel brands was made after considering the scope of this research, it did have the potential to impact the representativeness of the findings.

The second limitation is researcher bias. Although knowledge of the Chinese context in which the advertisements are placed helps to ensure the accuracy of the analysis in this research, bias inherent in human coding is unavoidable because the entire research process was completed by one person.

Furthermore, because audience responses could enrich the knowledge of representation in advertising, the lack of audience research also reflects the limitations of this research as a study of coding and interpretation only.

Findings and analysis

Research findings

This chapter begins with qualitative content findings, through the frequency of elements appearing to provide a descriptive analysis of the overall presentation of Chinese menstrual product advertising and the key aspects of its portrayal of women. A semiotic analysis was then conducted on four sanitary towel advertisements from SPACE7 and ABC, two mainstream local Chinese sanitary brands, and other advertisements in the sample were also included in the analysis as references. The subsequent discussion chapter relates the analysis in this chapter to the literature.

The findings revealed that although the CAA issued industry self-regulation rules for sanitary towel advertising in 2007, television commercials produced by sanitary towel brands would be in use for several years until 2012, and it was not until after 2012 that there were more frequent iterations of advertising for mainstream Chinese sanitary towel brands, which is in line with the previously mentioned temporal changes in the demands and consumption perceptions of Chinese consumers of menstrual products.

Overall, all of the advertisements featured women in major roles, with some featuring men in supporting roles to complement the personality traits of the female characters (21.4%, n=3). A second gender-related finding was that while the majority of these advertisements focused on Asian women, white and black women also appeared in the TV commercials (7%, n=1).

The physical characteristics of the women in the sample advertisements were nearly identical, that was, beautiful young women with fair, smooth skin and slim figures. The age range of the actors in the advertisements corresponds to the narrow age range that previous research has shown to be frequently between the ages of 18 and 35 (Dyer, 1982). Furthermore, a number of the advertisements in the sample featured close-ups of women's hips with an emphasis on them in terms of the presentation of the female body (35.7%, n=5). As for the presentation of female identity, the majority of the female characters in the advertisements were ordinary women in urban life, and their specific roles in life were presented in the advertisements in a variety of forms.

The key words for the female character traits they present were almost always happy, confident, and elegant, as well as the facial expressions of those presented in the advertisements were always positive and gleeful (92.8%, n=13). In line with this, the poses of the women in the advertisements were all vibrant and relaxed. Clothing is also an important element that complements the representation of the female characters' identities and personalities, and the women in the advertisements were all dressed in stylish and casual clothes or elegant uniforms. And apart from the elements surrounding the female characters, the majority of the sample sanitary towel advertisements were in pink tones (64.2%, n=9), while those without a distinct colour pattern utilised softer colours such as sky blue, pale yellow, and light purple; and the background music was almost all joyful.

The results also revealed that there were no obvious high frequency props in mainstream Chinese sanitary towel advertising, but the majority of these props are directly related to the representation of female images, as evidenced by the analysis of specific advertisements. In terms of the scenes in the sanitary towel advertisements, some were entirely real-life scenes (42.8 %, n=6), some were dream-like scenes (28.5%, n=4), and some were a combination of both. The findings indicated that mainstream advertising of menstrual products in China took both a scientific approach and a campaign approach, which were the same approaches mentioned in Havens and Swenson's (1988) study, and has showed a tendency to combine both approaches in the use of a single advertisement.

In general, the image of women in mainstream Chinese sanitary towel advertising can be initially summarised as happy, confident, young, pretty women with perfect bodies, who can still move freely during their periods and complete their duties with quality and quantity. The style of mainstream sanitary towel advertising in China can be summarised as positive, emotionally-oriented, predominantly in pink tones, and with a relatively homogeneous presentation of advertising content.

Analysis of advertisement —The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2012 Ver.)

As SPACE7's first advertisement following the CAA's self-regulation rule, this commercial represented menstruation and various aspects of menstruating women in several scenarios. The main character in the advertisement is Xu Lu, a popular Chinese youth actress who was also the brand's face at the time. The advertisement portrays different scenes from everyday life, with the protagonist moving among them to

represent the various daily activities of women during menstruation and their changing moods. Each scene is accompanied by a voiceover that adds to the narrative's meaning. Following the previous scenes, the protagonist appears on a virtual giant sanitary napkin surrounded by pink balloons. The brand logo and the protagonist holding the product are shown in the final scene.

The advertisement begins with a large virtual calendar, with each calendar square representing a real-life scenario and the SPACE7 product in the centre (as shown in Figure 1). The image appears without text or voiceover, only a soundtrack that sounds like an alarm clock ringing in the background. The signs in Figure 1 are: the calendar, the various scenes built on the calendar, the SPACE7 sanitary towel avatar and its products, the alarm bell-like soundtrack, and the minimised protagonist of the advertisement. The calendar in the commercial is a metonymic sign, as it is associated with the menstrual cycle. The alarm bell is used as a reminder of an event or a point in time, but in this case, it connotes the start of the menstrual cycle as background music. And the protagonist's movement through these scenes built on the virtual calendar represents a woman going through her menstrual cycle. This visual presentation is a manifestation of the menstrual taboo, which is not explicitly stated, and no phenomenon or action directly related to the menstrual cycle appears, but is conveyed implicitly through a number of signs. Considered as a topic to be avoided in society, menstruation is a taboo that in fact reflects patriarchal control, which is reflected in this advertising image (Laws, 1990).



Figure 1. Image 1 from The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2012 Ver.).

Figures 2 and 3 depict menstruating women, with Figure 2 depicting the female protagonist in a pink dress, sitting on a chair, surrounded by a group of men offering gifts and two jealous women not far away, and the voiceover saying “the gift must be of my choice” In Figure 3, the female protagonist is sitting in a box that is being pushed outside by a group of men to a park-like setting, with the voiceover saying “the boys must do as I say”. The pink dress in Figure 2 is not only about clothes, but also about fashion in its shape and soft femininity in its colour, whereas the box in Figure 3 represents the need for women to be wrapped and protected during menstruation, and the use of these signs actually implies a stereotype of women. The gift and the men surrounded by her in Figure 2 are the symbols of female empowerment, which is also expressed in Figure 3. The gift connotes a woman’s right to choose, whereas the men’s actions and positions in relation to the female protagonist challenge the patriarchal ideology of men’s superiority over women (Delaney et al., 1988; Laws, 1990; Malefyt and McCabe 2016). And the voiceover in both scenes serves as a diegesis of the images, conveying the same values. It is worth noting that the park-like scene is not only a common representation of nature in sanitary towel advertising, but it also implies the liberation of the female as the only outdoor scene in this advertisement.



Figure 2. Image 2 from The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2012 Ver.).



Figure 3. Image 3 from The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2012 Ver.).

Figure 4 represents a similar revolt against the status of men and women. The female character is drawn in a much larger frame than the males, and she appears above the men in a top-down perspective. The woman is shown punching the men with a slightly fierce expression, while the men are terrified. At this point, the voiceover says, “I should let my temper out,” which is consistent with the signs’ denotation. The position and acting relationship between the men and the women, the facial expression, is a humorous way of conveying an appeal to the position of women through a representation of the status of men and women, and it also represents the need to release the fluctuating emotions that may exist during menstruation. However, this representation of a somewhat violent expression is also creating a new, more violent female stereotype.



Figure 4. Image 4 from The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2012 Ver.).

It should also be noted that as the face of SPACE7, Xu Lu has become an iconic symbol in her own right. She has a wide range of influence as a popular actress with a large fan base, and with the brand she is endorsing having an absolute market advantage, the advertising content that results would have a huge impact.

Following the CAA's requirement that sanitary towel advertising respect women's dignity, SPACE7 can be seen to have made some attempts in its advertisements, which are also a reflection of the gradual rise of women's consciousness in China in the early twentieth century. As the title of the commercial suggests, "the comfort is mine to decide". On the whole, while this commercial still reinforces female stereotypes, it makes a bold breakthrough in confronting women's emotional demands during menstruation and raising women's social status.

Analysis of advertisement —The More Natural, the Better.

This latest campaign for SPACE7 features the current face, Yang Chaoyue, a popular young female idol in China, known as her pure and natural beauty. *The More Natural, the Better* has taken a more scientific approach to its advertisement than the previous one (Havens and Swenson, 1988). The main focus is on the manufacturing process and performance of the sanitary towel product by presenting flowers, grass, trees, fruits, and deer as nature symbols, as well as the protagonist's interaction with these plants and animals. The voiceover is also entirely dedicated to the natural ingredients used in the manufacturing of the sanitary towel products. Aside from the voiceover, the advertisement is accompanied by a soundtrack with English lyrics about the emotions one can feel when being in nature.

The advertisement begins with a female protagonist dressed professionally entering an office building's lift. Because both the seventh floor of the lift and SPACE7 contain the number 7, the seventh button of the lift is designed SPACE7 and is specially decorated with green leaves. When she presses the button, the lift transports her to nature, and when she steps out, her professional outfit has been replaced by a white dress, and her hairstyle has been transformed from a ponytail to a draped hairdo (as shown in Figure 5). As she explores nature, caresses flowers and trees, and encounters deer in the forest (as shown in Figure 6), the

background music sings: “Now it’s time to meet a new world! I’m excited, and I am free...Amazing! I feel so good! I’m flying! Wanna say yes, wanna do it for today!”

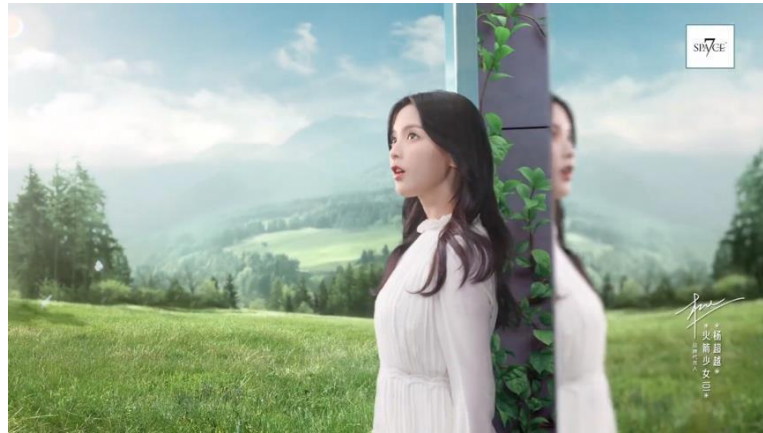


Figure 5. Image 5 from The More Natural, the Better.

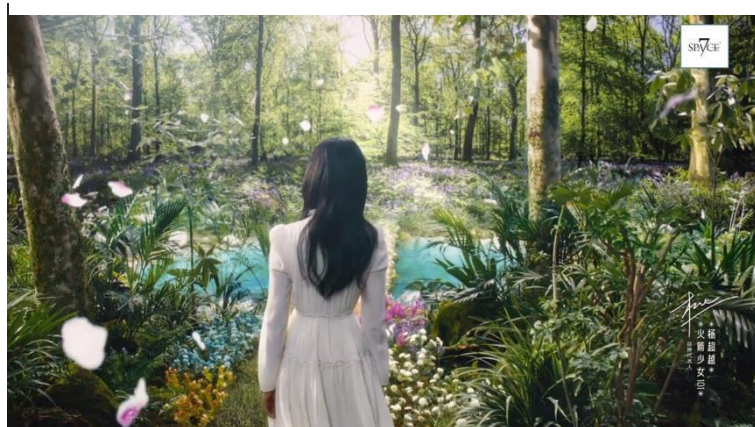


Figure 6. Image 6 from The More Natural, the Better.

The protagonist’s identity in the real world is represented by the workplace look, whereas the white dress and draped hairstyle act as a set of anchorage that both associates with the product’s natural ingredients, connotes the inner world of women’s desire for freedom and liberation, and is also a conveyance of the female image of purity and beauty from the patriarchal male perspective (Mulvey, 1975). Flowers, trees, and deer are iconic symbols of nature that connote beautiful emotions and an atmosphere of elegance in order to conceal the real situation of women during menstruation, which is still mainly attributable to menstrual taboos in society. Since menstruation is viewed as embarrassing and impure, it aggravates women’s anxiety about the physical phenomenon of menstruation (Merskin, 1999). The cheerful background English song that appears after the transition to the natural scene serves as an important symbol in the presentation of the

advertisement, creating a positive atmosphere and connoting the mental and physical liberation of women through the lyrics (Dyer, 1982).

Therefore, the temporal changes in SPACE7's sanitary towel advertisements are visible. As a mainstream menstrual product brand in China, its advertising has not changed in terms of emphasising menstrual taboos, albeit in a slightly different way, over the last fifteen years. Second, the emphasis on female consciousness has shifted backward. Whereas earlier advertisements made audacious attempts to represent the awakening of female consciousness and the dismantling of female stereotypes, the most recent advertisements have become less representative in this regard. While *The More Natural, the Better* has changed its colour palette, another TV commercial, also released in 2020, still emphasises femininity with a pink-toned visual presentation.

Analysis of advertisement — Live Healthy and Beautiful (2012 Ver.)

The first sanitary towel TV commercial for ABC, *Live Healthy and Beautiful (2012 Ver.)*, was released in accordance with the CAA's self-regulation rules and received an overwhelming response. Except for three images of menstrual products that appear at the end of the film when the brand logo and slogan are displayed, there is no description of the sanitary towel product in this commercial. There is also no main character and no female face appears from beginning to end, but rather a series of scenes from the lives of women presented through close-ups of their bottoms. The hips of the women, their clothing, and the background scenes in which they carry out their activities become the campaign's iconic signs. Along with the image, the ABC brand slogan, with the letters A, B, and C, is shown, and the song "I'm standing right in the future...one step to heaven...here we are" is sung as the soundtrack throughout the commercial. ABC (2012) believed that by presenting a series of wonderful life scenes, all people would feel the comfort, freshness, and peace of mind that ABC sanitary towels provide to women, resulting in more women having the courage to show their beauty and live a healthy and beautiful life.

In the advertisement image shown in Figure 7, a woman dressed in white is busy in the kitchen, and the text "Always Being Comfortable" is the diegesis of this image. The cooking pot, as one of the signs, associates domestic work with women, and the plain white outfit is even less likely to correspond to what is actually worn for work in the kitchen, which is nearly impossible in real life due to grease when cooking, etc

(Zimmerman and Dahlberg, 2008). Although the image's text is intended to convey a cosy atmosphere, the content connotes a stereotype of women as being confined to domestic matters, reflecting social perceptions of women's roles in the family (Winship, 1980).



Figure 7. Image 7 from Live Healthy and Beautiful (2012 Ver.).

Figure 8 portrays a woman hula-hooping outdoors in a white short culotte, with the text “Always Being Clean” serving as the diegesis of this image. The white culottes convey the message that ABC sanitary towels help menstruating women stay clean, but actually they connote negative feelings about the normal physiological phenomenon of menstruation, and hula hooping is also a concealment of the real menstruating woman's situation, all of which are due to the social perception of menstruation as a negative factor (Mandziuk, 2010; Merskin, 1999; Malefyt and McCabe, 2016). Furthermore, presenting a woman's private parts from the bottom up is an extremely disrespectful way of portraying women.



Figure 8. Image 8 from Live Healthy and Beautiful (2012 Ver.).

In the image shown in Figure 9, women are shown as male admirers cheering outside the stadium, and the text “Always Being Cheerful” is the diegesis of this image. Although there are images of women going on picnics or playing sports before and after this image to convey the freedom and energy of women, the presence of this image still indicates the advertisement's core ideology in which women appear as subordinates or decorations to men. The image's diegesis also attempts to conceal the embarrassment of menstruation by conveying a positive emotion, but instead restricts women's emotional release.



Figure 9. Image 9 from Live Healthy and Beautiful (2012 Ver.).

Images of women in various professional outfits with the text “Always Being Confident” and images of women in various gowns with the text “Always Being Charming” also appear in the advertisement. While these texts convey the multifaceted emotions of women, the majority of them create a new stereotype of the female image, defining women as the ones who must be in a positive mood at all times and must remain beautiful and elegant. The advertising content portrays the female characters as unaffected even during their periods through a variety of activities, in line with the findings of Del Saz-Rubio and Pennock-Speck's (2009) study. While the close-up of the hips used to present menstruation as one of the features of this television commercial can be seen to some extent as a woman's right to display her body. However, when combined with the filming angle, this is the consequence of the “male gaze” (Mulvey, 1975, p.11).

Analysis of advertisement — Just Different (ABC 20th Anniversary)

As ABC's 20th anniversary TV commercial, “Just Different” is still featured as a group portrait and the text in the frame continues to follow the sentence pattern beginning with the letters A, B, and C. The women's body movements in the advertisement are nearly identical, in that they walk head-on towards the camera.

The content of the advertisement is primarily represented by the different colours, different texts in the picture, and the appearance of the women to which they correspond to emphasise the theme of the advertisement.

When compared to previous ABC advertisements, this one has more expressions in the text such as the words cute, creative, colour, clear, and cool, all of which begin with the letter C. The left half of the ad demonstrates the ABC sanitary towel product with the words cute on the outer packaging and text, while the right half showcases various types of women. The women in the scenes featuring creative and cool (as shown in Figures 10 and 11) have unusual hairstyles and outfits, and do not resemble the type of women commonly seen in similar advertisements in China that meet popular aesthetics. The short dyed blue hair represents creativity, while the unique hairstyles and gothic make-up represent cool. The hairstyles and make-up, as well as the distinctive cut of clothing and oddly shaped accessories worn by the women in the advertisements, are all incompatible with the traditional image of the ideal woman (Greer, 2009). These signs connote a challenge to the popular aesthetic system and reflect the new era's awakening of female consciousness.



Figure 10. Image 10 from Just Different (ABC 20th Anniversary)



Figure 11. Image 11 from Just Different (ABC 20th Anniversary)

The advertising image that conveys the meaning of colour (as shown in Figure 12) shows a black woman, which is unusual in sanitary towel advertising in mainland China. The black woman in the image is dressed in a variety of colours that represent colour. As an iconic symbol in this image, the black woman herself can be seen as an anchorage. The black woman is both an interpretation of colour and an embodiment of the value of race and colour equality, while her presence in a television commercial aimed primarily at Asian women reflects a female perspective on women's equality worldwide, regardless of race and colour.

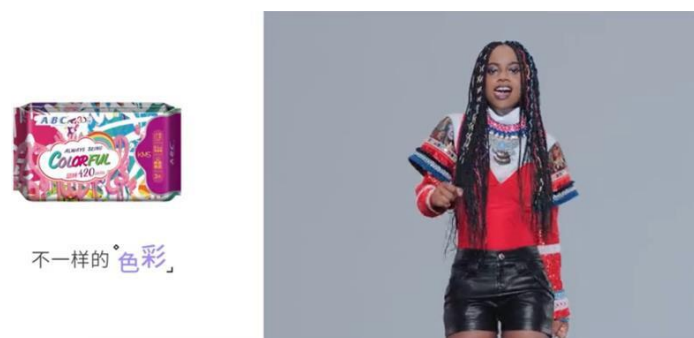


Figure 12. Image 12 from Just Different (ABC 20th Anniversary)

However, representations of key points such as cute and clever in advertisements continue to fall within the traditional framework of the female image, and all the women in the images appear with smiling expressions. In general, Just Different makes some advances in enhancing women's images and conveying feminist ideology, but its emphasis on positive emotions reinforces the menstrual taboo.

ABC's sanitary towel advertisements have made some conceptual advances in the representation of women over time, with the diverse female images in the advertisements being more relevant to the current all-ages female sanitary towel users in mainland China. However, it is doubtful that this positive trend will continue, as one of the ABC advertisements in the sample named *ABC Comfort, Light and Thin*, which was released in 2020, not only chose a young girl icon as the protagonist, but also adopted a very traditional athletic approach, which could be interpreted as a step backwards in the representation of women.

Discussion

This chapter linked the content in the findings and analysis chapter to the literature review for discussion in order to address the research questions. Combined with the themes from the literature review, some of the findings from this research on the representation of women in the Chinese context are compared with previous research and some discussion of the limitations of this research is provided.

Representations of Women in Chinese menstrual products advertisements

The representation of women in Chinese sanitary napkin advertising can be discussed in the following three aspects.

The first is the signs used to represent women. According to the findings of this research, advertisements for menstrual products in China frequently use young, beautiful women, cheerful facial expressions, hips, flowers, trees, and the colour pink to represent female images. These signs are consistent with the common elements in Western countries' menstrual product advertising in previous studies (Park, 1996; Bromberg, 1997; Merskin, 1999; Malefyt and McCabe, 2016; Mou et al., 2018). Through these signs or symbols, the demand for the enhancement of women's social status is conveyed, the emotional fluctuations of menstruating women are confronted, but the advertising emphasises the reinforcement of menstrual taboos and the entrenchment of patriarchal social ideologies at the same time (Mandziuk, 2010). Furthermore, it is necessary to realise that the advertisers' attempts to create an image of female empowerment through these symbols is also a means of attracting female consumers, and that the subsequent consumer empowerment produced can further mislead and limit women's perceptions of true femininity (Gengler, 2011; Lazar, 2011; Drake, 2017).

The second is that the representations of women are rooted in traditional Chinese culture. From ancient to modern times, menstrual taboos have been embedded in various social ideologies, and menstruation as a normal female physiological phenomenon is frequently associated with female purity, both physical and spiritual (Lever et al., 1979; Laws, 1990; Daly, 2016). This taboo was especially strong in the Chinese context, with menstruating women even regarded as misfortune and forbidden from leaving the house in ancient China (The paper, 2020). The patriarchal ideology of male superiority over women is another factor

that has influenced the representation of women in traditional culture (Delaney et al., 1988; Laws, 1990; Tuchman, 1978; Gill, 2007). Women are viewed as subservient to men, are judged by men, and their rights and power are also stripped away (Mulvey, 1975; Tuchman, 1978). Some stereotypical images of women are based on what men believe women to be, rather than what women define themselves (Mulvey, 1975). Even though some of the worst customs and malicious smears about menstruation and women are nearly disappeared in contemporary China due to the deep-rooted influence of traditional culture on perceptions, menstruation is still rarely discussed publicly and some stereotypes about menstruation and menstruating women are still inevitably present in media products and even in some people's perceptions (Lever et al., 1979; Wong et al., 2013; The Paper, 2020).

The representations of women in Chinese menstrual products advertising identified in the research findings were young, beautiful, flawless skin, perfect figure, always energetic, positive personality, etc. These findings on the representation of women are consistent with the summary of the ideal woman in previous studies (Winship, 1980; Greer, 2009; Kilbourne, 2015). Moreover, presenting positive emotions in advertisements is also in line with marketing techniques that increase consumers' purchase desire (Drake, 2017).

The third is the delay in the representation of the female image. Women's social status in China has risen significantly in recent decades. The new generation of Chinese women is gradually taking the topic of menstruation seriously, and discussions about menstruation have begun to appear on social media (Qingzhu, 2017). Feminism's popularity in China, as well as the awakening of women's consciousness, has led women to reconsider and redefine the image of women. This research, however, discovered that the development of the representation of women in Chinese menstrual product advertisements has lagged far behind the current pace in women's consciousness.

This gap is also reflected in the differences in the representation of women in menstrual product advertising between China and Western countries. While there is a trend towards "menstrual liberation" (Radnor, 2017) and realistic depictions of menstrual blood in menstrual product advertising in Western countries, Chinese menstrual product advertising remains more conservative (Kiefer, 2017; Campbell et al., 2021).

The last is that the representation of women in menstrual product advertising is influenced by China's advertising regulations. Although the CAA's self-regulatory rules for sanitary towel advertising include limitations such as "sanitary towel advertisements should be broadcast on television or radio at times other than meal times," and "sanitary towel advertisements should not be placed in media or programmes aimed at children," the requirement to respect the human dignity of women is somewhat beneficial (China Advertising Association, 2016). The SPACE7 advertisements in 2012 analysed in this study were guided by the self-regulatory rules in their attempts to represent women, and the ABC advertisements were also influenced by the self-regulatory rules to refrain from shooting advertisements from a disrespectful perspective.

Implications for the further practice in advertising

Menstrual product advertisements, as an important mass media product that represents the image of women, can, if used correctly, present the true image of women to society, assist the public in correctly understanding women's physiology, convey positive social values about women, reflect contemporary women's aspirations, and educate adolescent girls. However, as shown in this research, menstrual product advertisements in China not only fail to serve these purposes, but also reflect stereotypes and traditional values about women, reinforcing misconceptions about menstruating women and using menstrual taboos to increase the anxiety of women, particularly pre-menarche women.

However, through this research's analysis of the image of women in mainstream Chinese sanitary napkin brands' advertisements over the past fifteen years, it is possible to gain a clearer understanding of how women are represented in such advertisements, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the advertisements in representing the image of women, allowing women to better understand how the image of women in advertisements will affect them in real life, and also to make more targeted suggestions to the image of women in future advertisements for menstrual products or even other advertisements in China. And for those aspects that are advisable, such as the appeal to the emotional release of menstruating women conveyed in the SPACE7's TV commercial in 2012, could be maintained and refined in the presentation.

Conclusion

This research has achieved the research objective of critically analysing the representation of women in Chinese menstrual product advertisements over the past fifteen years. It has answered the research question of what the overall image of women is in Chinese menstrual product advertising; how women are represented in Chinese menstrual product advertisements by signs or symbols and what the iconic signs are; how the dominant ideology of society is consolidated and regenerated in the image of women in Chinese menstrual product advertising. It has contributed to filling the gap in academic research on the representation of women in Chinese menstrual product advertising.

The findings were obtained through qualitative content analysis by coding the 14 advertisements in the sample to obtain a picture of the image of women in Chinese menstrual product advertisements over the last fifteen years, that of young, beautiful, perfectly shaped women who are always positive and vibrant, and omnipotent even during menstruation. The semiotic analysis of the four selected advertisements then identified the signs commonly used to represent women, such as flowers, trees and hips, and analysed the possible connotations of these signs, such as flowers implying naturalness and a beautiful emotion, as well as the embedded social ideology of these signs, such as the fact that the beautiful emotion expressed by flowers actually stems from the menstrual taboo in society.

Although this research has some academic significance, it does have some limitations. In terms of methodology, this research only used qualitative content analysis to draw a picture of women's images in Chinese menstrual product advertisements, and the sample size chosen was relatively small. Although this decision was made after considering the scope of the research, it could have an impact on the representativeness of the findings. A more accurate picture could have been obtained if a quantitative approach had been used to increase the sample size. In terms of research content, this research is merely an introductory study into how menstrual product advertising represents women in China. However, it has been found during the sample collection process that there were niche sanitary towel brands in mainland China that have produced aggressive advertisements that redefine the image of women. There is also a scarcity of audience research, as Chinese women's comments and expectations of the image of women in menstrual product advertisements could be a valuable supplement to purely sample-based analysis studies.

Based on the conclusions of the limitations of the research, future research could analyse the image of women in the advertisements of mainstream foreign menstrual product brands in mainland China and further analyse how their advertising work in China differs, could analyse the audience's interpretation of the image of women in menstrual product advertisements through focus groups or interviews, or it could explore future trends in the representation of women in menstrual product advertisements in China by analysing the emerging sanitary towel brand advertising campaigns, etc.

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Appendices

Appendices 1-14 are the sources of all the sample advertisements used in this research and Appendix 15 is the coded data for the qualitative content analysis of this research. The ethics form and risk assessment form are attached at the end.

Appendix 1:

SPACE7 2005. The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2005 Ver.). [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: <https://b23.tv/4XSQS3>.

Appendix 2:

SPACE7 2012. The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2012 Ver.). [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: <https://b23.tv/r4KKxM>.

Appendix 3:

SPACE7 2016. SPACE7 Bizarre Gymnastics. [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: <https://v.qq.com/x/page/y0305m6x7ie.html>.

Appendix 4:

SPACE7 2017. Discover the Multidimensional You. [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMjg1OTc1MTcxMg==.html?spm=a2hcb.profile.app.5~5!2~5~5!3~5!2~5~5!5~A.

Appendix 5:

SPACE7 2018. The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2018 Ver.). [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: <https://v.qq.com/x/page/x08244awcuj.html>.

Appendix 6:

SPACE7 2020a. SPACE7 Ultra Thin - Breathable. [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: <https://v.qq.com/x/page/l31559ucayd.html>.

Appendix 7:

SPACE7 2020b. The More Natural, the Better. [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: <https://b23.tv/g4hrJ6>.

Appendix 8:

ABC 2012. Live Healthy and Beautiful (2012 Ver.). [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: <https://b23.tv/qBWGSM>.

Appendix 9:

ABC 2013. Live Healthy and Beautiful (2013 Ver.). [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNTg0NTUzMDMy.html?

Appendix 10:

ABC 2014. Live Healthy and Beautiful (2014 Ver.). [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: <https://v.qq.com/x/page/z0134vm0vhc.html>.

Appendix 11:

ABC 2017. Change for perfection. [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: <https://tv.sohu.com/v/dXMvMzI2OTc4OTk1Lzk0NjAxODMwLnNodG1s.html>.

Appendix 12:

ABC 2018. Just Different (ABC 20th Anniversary). [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: <https://v.qq.com/x/page/b0732wml8p1.html>.

Appendix 13:

ABC 2019. ABC Comfort, Light and Thin (2019 Ver.). [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: <https://b23.tv/c43n9t>.

Appendix 14:

ABC 2020. ABC Comfort, Light and Thin (2020 Ver.). [Accessed 15 September 2021]. Available from: <https://v.qq.com/x/page/d3156sxovqm.html>.

Appendix 15:

| Brand | Year | Title | Appearance | Manner | Scene | Activity |
|--------|------|---|--|--|---|--|
| SPACE7 | 2005 | The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2005 Ver.) | Female; young; fair and smooth; thin; beautiful, lovely and lively, ordinary; no apparent role. | happy, confident; vibrant, relaxed; informal, stylish; pink; joyful. | Headphones, sofa, clothes, scooter; real, dreamlike | Listening to songs, shopping, exercising (athletic?) |
| | 2012 | The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2012 Ver.) | Female and male; young; fair and smooth; thins; beautiful, lively and lovely, ordinary; no apparent role. | happy, confident; vibrant; informal, stylish; pink, yellow; joyful | Gifts, flowers, bicycles, clothes, balloons; wishful, dreamlike | Studying, bonding, tantrums, sports, trips to the park, big towel floats |
| | 2016 | SPACE7 Bizarre Gymnastics | Female; young; smooth and fair; thin; beautiful, lively and lovely, ordinary; no apparent role | blissful; relaxed, vibrant; informal; blue, purple; joyful | Bed; real | Movement; sleep with eyes closed; narration by cartoon character |
| | 2017 | Discover the Multidimensional You | Female; young; fair and smooth; thin, hip closeup; beautiful and lively and cool, special; star. | happy, confident; vibrant, relaxed; in/formal, elegant, stylish, home; black, pink, blue; exciting | Red carpet, photo booth, cat, guitar, stage; real | Red carpet walking, filming (work), home leisure, performing (hobby) |
| | 2018 | The Comfort is Mine to Decide (2018 Ver.) | Female; young; fair and smooth; thin; beautiful, lovely and lively, ordinary; no apparent role. | happy, confident; vibrant; informal, stylish; pink; joyful | Cartoon scene, clouds; real, dreamlike | Sightseeing and fun; interacting with cartoon characters |
| | 2020 | SPACE7 Ultra Thin - Breathable | Female; young; fair and smooth; thin; beautiful, lovely and lively, ordinary; no apparent role. | Happy and confident; vibrant, relaxed; informal, stylish; pink; exciting | Sofa, microphone, stage; real, wishful | Dream show, falling; trigger interaction with tampons |
| | 2020 | The More Natural, the Better. | Female; young; fair and smooth; thin, close-up in the palm of the hand; beautiful, ordinary; office lady | Happy, blissful; relaxed; informal, stylish; green; joyful | Foliage trees, lawns, flowers, fruit, deer; real, dreamlike | Going to work and interacting with nature |
| ABC | 2012 | Live Healthy and Beautiful (2012 Ver.) | Female; young; fair and smooth; thin, close-up of hip; beautiful, lively and elegant, ordinary; housewife, urban woman | Happy and confident; vibrant, relaxed; in/formal, elegant, stylish; unobtrusive colour; joyful | Kitchenware, jump rope, hula hoop, picnic, bowling, (work) carrier bag, line cards; real | Cooking, sports, social picnics, work, gigs |
| | 2013 | Live Healthy and Beautiful (2013 Ver.) | Female; young; fair and smooth; thin, close-up of hip; beautiful, lively and elegant, ordinary; housewife, urban woman | Happy and confident; vibrant, relaxed; in/formal, elegant, stylish; unobtrusive colour; joyful | Picnic, desk and chair, luggage, road car, violin, tambourine; real | Picnics, work, travel, recreation (street), shows, dancing |
| | 2014 | Live Healthy and Beautiful (2014 Ver.) | Female; young; fair and smooth; thin; beautiful, lively and elegant, ordinary; housewife, urban woman | Happy and confident; relaxed; informal, elegant, stylish; pink; joyful | Coffee cup, cafe; real | Casual (protagonist perspective centre) |
| | 2017 | Change for perfection | Female and male; young; fair and smooth; thin, tall, leg closeup; beautiful lively elegant, ordinary; urban women | Happy and confident; vibrant, relaxed; in/formal, elegant, stylish; unobtrusive colour ; joyful | Mobile phones, cameras, flowers, butterflies, meeting rooms, sports headphones, basketballs; real | Hangout, work, sport |
| | 2018 | Just Different (ABC 20th Anniversary) | Female; young, middle-aged; fair, dark (different races); thin, close-up of face, ordinary; no apparent role | Happy and confident; vibrant, relaxed; in/formal, elegant, stylish; pink, blue, yellow; joyful | Earrings, hats, glasses, books; dreamlike | Just waving |
| | 2019 | ABC Comfort, Light and Thin (2019 Ver.) | Female; young; fair and smooth; thin, tall; beautiful and elegant, special; no apparent role | Confident; relaxed; elegant; formal, elegant; pink, blue; smoothing | Chiffon (butterfly), sanitary napkin; dreamlike | Gymnastics |
| | 2020 | ABC Comfort, Light and Thin (2020 Ver.) | Female; young; fair and smooth; thin, close-up of buttocks; beautiful, lovely and lively, ordinary; no apparent role | Happy and confident; vibrant, relaxed; informal, elegant, stylish; pink, blue, yellow, green; joyful | Calendar, rafflecopter, bass, microphone headphones, sofa, pillow, piano; dreamlike | Play, sing, dance and rest at home |

Appendix 16:

Module Level Ethical Review Form (MLERF)

COMM5600M Dissertation and Research Methods