

**A STUDY EXPLORING ISI-XHOSA WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AND MEANING-  
MAKING AROUND THE PORTRAYAL OF MENSTRUATION AND MENSTRUAL  
PRODUCTS IN TELEVISION ADVERTISEMENTS**

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## ABSTRACT

Menstruation can be defined as the cyclic shedding of the uterine wall in response to the production of hormones from the ovaries. Although menstruation is experienced as both a positive and negative phenomenon, the dominant view remains a negative one. Menstruation has been stigmatised across most cultures, and culturally constructed as something that needs to be hidden, and hygienically managed, and a source of shame and embarrassment. It is also seen as a dirty process and a source of discomfort, illness and emotional instability. Dominant cultural constructions of menstruation in advertisements convey the message that through the purchase of particular menstrual products, women will be “protected”, “fresh”, and thus the cultural beliefs of a hygiene crisis, concealment and secrecy are perpetuated. This study explored isi-Xhosa speaking women’s experiences and meaning-making related to the portrayal of menstruation and menstrual products in television advertisements. Active audience theory, a branch of media theory, formed the theoretical framework for this study. This research adopted a qualitative approach, and made use of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore participants’ personal experiences. Three focus groups were conducted in English, consisting of 5 participants per focus group. Research began with two focus groups until saturation was reached. Participants were shown two television advertisements of two major South African companies (Kotex and Always) who sell menstrual products, as a means of stimulating discussion. The findings indicated that there were major discrepancies between what was portrayed in menstrual product advertisements and the reality of participants’ experiences; there was an exaggerated emphasis on checking behaviours; menstrual product advertisements avoided displaying the discomfort associated with menstruation; advertisements heightened the fear around leaking and emphasised hygiene and remaining clean. The positive finding to emerge was participants’ view that menstrual product advertisements served as a means of education, in the context where they were often misinformed about menstruation or provided with minimal or no information. This study extended on a previous study conducted at a different South African university, and contributed to the literature in this area within the South African context. All ethical guidelines stipulated by the University of the Western Cape were strictly adhered to.

## DECLARATION

I declare that the research *A study exploring isi-Xhosa women's experiences and meaning-making around the portrayal of menstruation and menstrual products in television advertisements* is my own work. It has not been submitted before for any degree, or examination at any other university. All the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.



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## Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the meanings and experiences that women ascribe to the portrayal of menstruation and menstrual products in television advertisements.

Menstruation can be defined as the cyclic shedding of the uterine wall in response to the production of hormones from the ovaries (Anjum et al., 2010), and lasts for an average of 3-5 days (Lawan, Yusuf & Musa, 2010). Menarche, the first menstrual period, is a unique female biological marker of reproductive maturity (Liu, Chen & Peng, 2012). Culture has been identified in the literature as influencing the meanings women ascribe to menstruation and their experiences of this phenomenon (White, 2013; Aflaq & Jami, 2012; Liu, Chen & Peng, 2012). Culture functions as an “inherited” lens of shared concepts, rules, and meanings through which members of a group or society perceive the world in which they live and that guides their behaviour. Culture includes language, religion, social conventions, gender roles and values (Liu et al., 2012).

Dominant cultural constructions around menstruation are reflected in the portrayal of menstruation and the women depicted as menstruating in television advertisements (Erchull, 2013; Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009; Merskin, 1999). According to Fairclough (2001) cited in Mullany (2004), television advertisements constitute messages that reflect the ideology of the dominant culture. The dominant cultural construction of menstruation is that it is dirty and shameful, and women are taught that they need to conceal any sign of menstruation (Erchull, 2013). Advertisements therefore convey the message that if a woman purchases a particular product, it will “protect” her, keep her “fresh”, and thereby prevent exposure and ensuing embarrassment (Barak-Brandes, 2011). Ayers (2011) looked at the evolution of Kotex (a brand of menstrual products) advertising and how ideas surrounding menstruation were portrayed and sold to women. It was found that the advertisements generally depicted menstruation as rendering women impure or dirty, and it therefore had to be hidden (Ayers, 2011).



South Africa is characterised by a culturally diverse population and Black South Africans belong to one of four ethnic groups namely, Nguni, Shangaan-Tsonga, Sotho and Venda. The Nguni ethnic/cultural group is the largest in the country and consists of both the ama-Xhosa and ama-Zulu cultural group, with ama-Xhosa South Africans being the larger group. Very few South African studies have focused specifically on women's experiences of menstrual product advertisements and the meanings women ascribe to them, with most studies having been conducted in first world countries (Erchull, 2013; Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009; Lee, 2008; Merskin, 1999), making this an area in need of further exploration.

In traditional ama-Xhosa culture, cattle is of central importance in measuring wealth and for its part in ama-Xhosa customs and traditions. Menstruating women are considered contaminated and are not allowed near cattle during this period (Carver, 2007). Shrouded in cultural taboos about sex and sexuality, historically Xhosa women were not allowed to speak about menstruation to any one, as the sharing of these stories was a sign of disrespect and shame (Tutani & Rankin, 2000). They were restricted in their behaviour and daily routine, and were prevented from taking part in certain domestic activities, including cooking (Tutani & Rankin, 2000). Specific ama-Xhosa menstrual practices include the cultural taboo on discussing menstruation in the presence of men and the traditional practice of *intonjane*, which is very rarely still practiced (Mtuze, 2004). *Intonjane* is the practice whereby a girl reaching menarche is secluded for up to a month behind a rush mat partition in a hut strewn with grass (Mtuze, 2004).

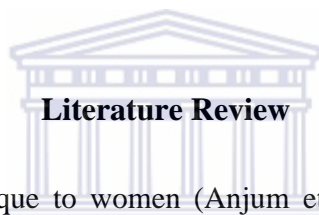
Within a cultural group wealthy in its traditional belief system, navigating an issue such as menstruation is not an easy one, as it is something considered private, and managed only through silence and concealment (Guzana, 2000; Tutani & Rankin, 2000).

## **Aims and Objectives**

This research study aims to explore the meanings ama-Xhosa women attach to the portrayal of menstruation in television advertising, and how it relates to their experience of menstruation.

The objectives of this research study consider the following:

- (i) To explore women's experience of the portrayal of menstruation in advertisements on television from the perspective of ama-Xhosa South African women.
  
- (ii) To explore the meanings women ascribe to the portrayal of menstruation in advertising on television from the perspective of ama-Xhosa South African women.



### **Literature Review**

Menstruation is a phenomenon unique to women (Anjum et al., 2010) and signals reproductive maturity (Dhingra, Manhas, Kohli & Mushtaq, 2007). Existing literature emphasises the role of culture as influencing the experience of menstruation, which will be discussed.

The negative view toward menstruation has been perpetuated through culture, passing on from one generation to the next, sustaining its long history as a phenomenon that is taboo (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Aflaq & Jami, 2012).

### **Cultural taboos and the experience of menstruation**

Cultural menstrual practices often take the form of prescriptions or taboos, which are activities one should do during menstruation or proscriptions, which are activities one should not do during menstruation (Marván & Trujillo, 2010).

Studies have found that menstrual taboos have a significant impact on women's experience of menstruation. Liu et al. (2012) reported on a study conducted on menstruating Taiwanese women who were found to avoid particular substances and behaviours, such as cold and raw food, exercise

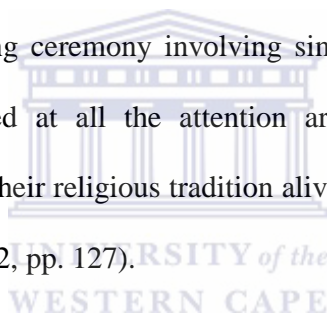
and bath tubs. These women were aware of the menstrual taboos, doubted its underlying truth, but observed the taboo behaviours anyway (Liu et al., 2012). Similarly in a study conducted by Marván and Trujillo (2010) on a sample of rural and urban Mexican women, rural Mexican women reported a number of activities that they believed they could not partake in whilst menstruating including carrying heavy objects, drinking cold beverages and eating sour foods. Urban women were of the belief that hot beverages and spicy food needed to be avoided (Marván & Trujillo, 2010). Further international literature suggests that in Turkey, 10-13 women out of 100 believe in menstrual taboos such as if a menstruating woman kneads dough or cans food, it will spoil (Çevirme, Çevirme, Karaoğlu, Uğurlu, & Korkmaz, 2010). In their study conducted on Turkish married women exploring perceptions and experiences of menstruation, Çevirme et al. (2010) found that one-third of the women believed that they shouldn't sit on the doorstep during menstruation as it would bring bad luck and poverty, with a number of them acting according to this belief.

In Africa, the traditional Igbo society of south east Nigeria is rich in mythology and superstitions relating to different aspects of life, including menstruation. Umeora and Egwuatu (2009) conducted a study assessing the perceptions of menstruation among the rural Igbo women and the cultural restrictions imposed on them during menstruation. Igbo women who made use of old cloths, towels and rags while menstruating reported that these sanitary materials had to be buried because “many witches go around for human blood and they can destroy you if they use your blood for witchcraft. In fact, infertility results from this” (Umeora & Egwuatu, 2009, p. 111). In one of the villages, menstruating women were not allowed to visit a particular section of the village stream for fear of contamination of the stream, or to attend traditional gatherings especially where village court trials were in session and judgement were pending (Umeora & Egwuatu, 2009). These traditional restrictions, of which there are many, impact negatively on womanhood – demeaning their self-image and self-esteem, precipitating a feeling of shame and undermining the physiological significance of the phenomenon (Umeora & Egwuatu, 2009). The exclusion of menstruating women is not merely an expression of cultural constructions of femininity as inferior, but is also a custom in

certain cultures where menstruating women are physically excluded and relegated to menstruation huts (Cicurel & Sharaby, 2007).

These studies show that menstrual taboos have a substantial impact on behaviour, and reinforce the negative construction of menstruation as dirty, and the experience thereof as shameful.

There are also positive constructions of menstruation – as a sign of fertility and symbolising entry into womanhood. Some cultures have elaborate celebrations when a girl reaches menarche. In a study conducted by Dunnivant (2009), a Hindu participant shared openly about her experience of menarche which was filled with pride as she was accepted into the community. She tells of her mother’s excitement around the fact that she was finally a “woman”. The participant further revealed that her aunts, grandmothers, and older female family friends were called to their home to do an *aarathi*. This was a religious blessing ceremony involving singing songs of worship to God. The participant felt terribly embarrassed at all the attention around her menarche, but expressed happiness that her mother had kept their religious tradition alive, which was regarded as “something special” (Dunnivant & Roberts, 2012, pp. 127).



### **Menstruation and religion**

A significant subset of culture is religion. The four dominant religions in the world, namely, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Judaism construct menstruation as polluting, menstruating women as impure, and her spirituality as impaired for the duration of the menstrual period (Guterman, Mehta & Gibbs, 2008; Kustiani & Hunt, 2012). This has implications for women who ascribe to these religions in terms of their experience of menstruation and the meanings they attach to it. Among people of the Islamic, Hindu and Judaic faith, menstruation is considered contaminating and menstruating women are constructed as impure and restricted from participating in certain religious activities (Aflaq & Jami, 2012). This includes visiting holy places and touching religious texts or iconography (Aflaq & Jami, 2012). These exclusionary practices can lead to women experiencing menstruation as a curse and oppressive (Merskin, 1999).

Dunnavant and Roberts (2012) conducted a study on 340 women in the United States of America, who ascribed to the religious teachings of either Judaism, Islam or Hinduism. In the supporting literature, they state that each religious tradition restricts menstruating women from engaging in sexual intimacy, from active participation in their religious practices, and each requires women to take some form of a ritual bath when bleeding has stopped (Dunnavant & Roberts, 2012). Orthodox Jewish law prohibits a married woman from touching her husband, passing objects to him, sharing a bed or seat with him without an object between them, wearing clothes that do not cover her entirely, wearing perfume, singing, or from sexually enticing her husband in any way (Dunnavant & Roberts, 2012; Steinberg, 1997). Islamic law limits a menstruating woman's practice of her faith. Menstruating women are prohibited from performing the five daily prayers, from visiting a mosque, abstinence from fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, and no touching or direct recitation of the Quran (Guterman et al., 2008). She is also prohibited in engaging in any sexual acts with her husband (Dunnavant & Roberts, 2012). According to traditional Hindu belief, the menstruating woman is polluted. They may not comb their hair, bath, or touch water or fire sources (Guterman et al., 2008). In addition to being prohibited from engaging in sexual contact with her husband, menstruating Hindu women are restricted from sharing spaces in which idols, gods and goddesses are housed, thereby prohibiting them from engaging in the active practice of their religion (Nagarajan, 2007).

Similar exclusionary practices are encountered in traditional societies. In Ethiopia for example, menstruating women are considered impure and relegated to a traditional menstruation or purification hut (*margam gojo*), where the woman is outcast from her community until such a time that her menstruation ends. However, as noted by Cicurel and Sharaby (2007), in spite of the presence of *margams* and its function as exclusion and subordination of menstruating women, the women themselves have extracted from the custom a sense of empowerment, and see the period of menstruation as a time of rest and spiritual fulfilment. Although women in western cultural contexts have not been confined to menstrual huts, they have been portrayed as unstable, out of control and at the mercy of their hormones during menstruation (Burrows & Johnson, 2005). Furthermore, women

are seen as debilitated and unable to adequately partake in their vocational duties during the menstrual period. As such, though not physically relegated, women still experience a degree of exclusion in their occupations while menstruating. This exclusion has served to further reinforce women's expectations of negative responses and the necessity of concealment and secrecy when menstruating (Roberts, Goldenberg, Power & Pyszczynski, 2002).

### **Cultural influence on education surrounding menstruation**

Existing literature suggests that the nature of the information provided to girls influences their experience of menarche and menstruation (Shanbhag et al., 2012; McMahon et al., 2011; Chang, Hayter & Lin, 2011)

White (2013) investigated menstrual knowledge and attitudes toward menstruation of early adolescent girls in the USA. It was found that girls in the study lacked menstrual knowledge and preparation. As a result, they viewed menstruation negatively and had a susceptibility to experiencing feelings of shame about their reproductive functions, and low self-esteem (White, 2013). Studies conducted on Taiwanese, British and Chinese adolescent girls (Liu et al., 2012; Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Yeung, Tang & Lee, 2005), as well as Pakistani university students (Anjum et al., 2010) all yielded similar findings. Girls and women experience menstruation with much shame, embarrassment and concealment. The issue of secrecy was also common particularly in the school context. Girls felt the need to hide physical signs of menstruation from others, and were seen as different or odd by boys, while menstruating (Burrows & Johnson, 2005). Females in the above studies saw menstrual blood as dirty and distasteful and when menstruating, their bodies were in need of careful hygienic management (Burrows & Johnson, 2005).

In Africa, young girls in poor, rural settings often receive minimal instruction on what menstruation is and how it can be managed. They thus experience menstruation as frightening, confusing and shame-inducing (McMahon et al., 2011). In a study conducted among primary schoolgirls in Kenya it was found that the topic of menstruation was associated with negative feelings of shame, fear,

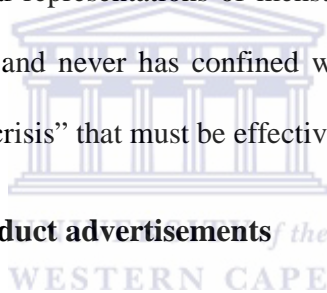
distraction, confusion and powerlessness. Girls struggled to articulate the source of their shame, but often mentioned unwanted attention from classmates, and a general feeling that menstruation was understood as something bad. Girls noted a societal expectation to maintain secrecy about menstruation (McMahon et al., 2011). Girls feared that they'd begin menstruating while at school or in public, and feared blood stains on their uniforms, being looked at "differently" or being stigmatised by peers (McMahon et al., 2011). According to Malusu and Zani (2014), it was common in African tradition for young girls to be educated about menstruation by their grandmothers, rather than by their parents. However, many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa have been eroded by the loss of grandmothers to HIV/AIDS, leaving vacant an important knowledge gap, filled only partially by schools (Malusu & Zani, 2014). A study conducted by Jewitt and Ryley (2014) however, presented divergent findings. It was reported that 80% of girls learned about menstruation from their teachers. Similarly, Mason and colleagues (2013) found that both female and male teachers were responsible for providing information about menstruation. Despite strong views on the need to maintain secrecy about menstruation from males in particular, there was no negative feedback from girls who were taught by a male. Similarly, Jewitt and Ryley (2014) found that although male teachers expressed some reluctance, they remained willing to speak about menstruation, and could potentially play an important role in helping girls feel more comfortable about attending school when menstruating. No negative feedback was reported from girls who did discuss menstruation in the presence of a male teacher (Jewitt & Ryley, 2014).

Limited studies could be located in South Africa focusing on menstruation. One of the few studies investigating this topic (Steenkamp, 2012) focused on the experience of menstruation among isi-Xhosa speaking black South African women. The study found that menstruation signalled the onset of virginity testing to ensure that girls remained virgins prior to marriage. This was experienced by the women in the study as invasive and intrusive. In addition, the study found that menarche was appraised as a dangerous period due to risk of pregnancy and that menstruation was experienced as a period of vulnerability, as repulsive and as tainting one's character.



Cronjé and Kritzinger (1991) focused their study on attitudes towards and management of menstruation in Afrikaans-speaking university students. It was found that women with severe menstrual symptoms did not seek medical care for fear of it becoming public knowledge that they were menstruating, a lack of knowledge of effective medication and a firm acceptance of menstruation along with its discomfort based on religious and cultural beliefs. Women's beliefs surrounding the acceptance of menstruation included that it was a privilege of child-bearing, without menstruation a woman would be incapable of bearing children, and that it was a part of God's will for a woman's life.

In reviewing the literature, representations of menstruation was predominantly negative (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013) and the common experiences of secrecy, embarrassment and shame reflect current dominant western social and cultural representations of menstruation (Burrows & Johnson, 2005). Although western culture does not and never has confined women to menstrual huts, advertisers market menstruation as a "hygienic crisis" that must be effectively managed with their products.



### **Menstruation and menstrual product advertisements**

Television advertisements are among the most influential of all media products in the world (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). Advertising has come to be referred to as a social thermometer, or as Active Audience Theory posits (the theoretical framework of this study), the "mirror of society" which reflects the thoughts and beliefs of the dominant culture (Robinson, 2009). Research findings indicate that themes of secrecy and shame are common in advertisements for menstrual products and that menstruation is frequently portrayed as a hygiene crisis that needs to be carefully managed through the use of the products being advertised (Erchull, 2013).

In a study conducted by Del Saz-Rubio and Pennock-Speck (2009), a collection of 26 Spanish and 27 British menstrual product television advertisements from 2002 to 2008 were analysed. Among the advertisements were those of leading brands such as Always, Carefree, Ob and Tampax. Advertisers were found to focus on bad body odour, not feeling fresh and clean, an inability to sleep,



not feeling dry enough, restricted physical exercise, having to deal with leaks during menstruation, and not being able to wear particular clothes for fear that leaks may be visible. Advertisers therefore perpetuated the negative beliefs and experiences of menstruation (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). With a strong focus on sanitation and hygiene, television advertisements illustrate a solution to the negative aspects through purchase and use of their products (Barak-Brandes, 2011).

According to Barak-Brandes (2011), prevailing literature has predominantly focused on the messages about menstruation conveyed by menstrual product advertisements, with less attention to how these messages are interpreted by the target audience. In one of the few studies on this topic, Barak-Brandes (2011) conducted a study on Israeli women examining how Israeli women interpret images of women in advertisements for menstrual products. It was found that some women found it difficult to contend with the fact that the advertisements dealt openly with menstruation which they considered an intimate, private matter. They felt that the advertisements allowed for open public discussion of social taboos and issues that were previously reserved for the private space. A sense of discomfort was also expressed in viewing menstrual product advertisements in the company of males who felt that they (males) did not need to see sanitary pads. They described the experience as embarrassing and unpleasant, as well as something shameful which ought to be hidden (Barak-Brandes, 2011). In their study on the attitudes of American women towards menstruation, Dunnivant and Roberts (2012) highlight the most prominent features of American culture and its message to women about menstruation. It is stated that through use of advertising and marketing, menstruation is portrayed as dirty and contaminating, that secrecy is imperative, and through use of obfuscation and euphemisms, that open and transparent dialogue about menstruation would be embarrassing and shameful (Dunnivant & Roberts, 2012). The Western culture may not confine menstruating women to menstrual huts, but menstruation continues to be advertised as a hygienic emergency that must be managed quietly and effectively (Erchull, 2013). This illustrates how cultural constructions of menstruation, portrayed in television advertisements, influence women's experiences of menstruation.

## **Shame and embarrassment around menstruation**

Shame and embarrassment are at the core of the negative attitudes toward menstruation, in a number of cultures in which they have been studied (Chrisler, Marván, Gorman & Rossini, 2015), and is frequently portrayed this way in popular culture and media (Rosewarne, 2012). In a study conducted by Chrisler and colleagues (2015), it was found that women's appreciation of their bodies, predicted feelings of well-being and positivity. These women were less likely to believe that there are activities that women should and should not do while menstruating, that menstruation affects women's daily lives, and that menstruation is both embarrassing and annoying (Chrisler et al., 2015).

According to Roberts (2004), women have been socialised into concealing the biological functioning of their bodies. Women are pressured into hiding their menstrual cycles, with the marketing and selling of menstrual products emphasising a sanitised, and deodorised body (Roberts, 2004). Roberts (2004) further posits that this emphasis is especially evident in cultural beliefs surrounding menstruation. This study found that women who viewed their bodies negatively (body shame), endorsed more negative emotions such as disgust toward their own menstruation. Furthermore, this study asserted that the cultural construction of menstruation is disgusting, shameful, and polluting, leading to experiences of menstruation as embarrassing and shameful.

Márvan and Molina-Abolnik (2012) focused on menarche, the information girls received at this point, and their subsequent preparedness for menarche. The study found that beliefs about menstruation are not restricted to instruction from mothers only, but that exposure to popular media provides imagery depicting menstruation as a shameful bodily crisis and a secret event. The media, and menstrual product advertisements in particular, stress the importance of keeping clean, avoiding soiled clothes, and purchasing the correct products (Márvan & Molina-Abolnik, 2012). Television advertisements also support and perpetuate certain beliefs which have resulted in a culture of shame and concealment surrounding menstruation. Márvan and Molina-Abolnik (2012) assert girls should

be encouraged to feel more comfortable with their bodies, and be taught that menstruation is a natural process.

Jewitt and Ryley (2014) explored the possible linkages between the influence of menstruation and access to sanitary products on schoolgirl absenteeism. Conducted in Kisumu, Kenya, field-based accounts obtained were reminiscent of other studies in which similar emotional and practical difficulties pertaining to managing and hiding menstruation were unearthed (Malusi & Zani, 2014; Mason et al., 2013; McMahon et al., 2011). In many of the schools visited, the lack of privacy offered by toilets caused embarrassment for menstruating girls. Another cause of embarrassment and shame as reported by the girls was the fear of menstrual fluid leaking and visibly staining girls' clothes. According to a teacher at one of the schools studied stated that menstruating girls commonly spent most of their time outside washing their soiled uniforms (many girls only have one school uniform, often made in pale-coloured fabric), instead of being in class. Girls feared being teased by male students or stigmatised if their menstruating status was revealed (Jewitt & Ryley, 2014). A key factor, as identified by Jewitt and Ryley (2014), contributing to menstrual embarrassment within in the particular study location seems to be the role of wider cultural taboos which prevents open discussion of the topic in many Kenyan family settings. This silence leaves many girls with a view of menstruation as something shameful (Jewitt & Ryley, 2014; Mason et al., 2013).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that will be used for this study is active audience theory, a branch of media theory.

### **Active audience theory**

This study focuses on women's experiences of media representations of menstruation and menstruating women and how they make meaning from these representations. Since the focus is on the portrayals or representations in the media, this study draws on media theory, specifically active audience theory, as its theoretical framework (Buckingham, 1998). Media theory focuses on the content, history and effects of the mass media.

In terms of media theory, Robinson (2009) argues that media theorists construe the media as a 'mirror of society' and as having the power of social influence. In the "mirror of society" view, the media is seen as reflecting the thoughts and beliefs of the dominant culture or the society in which it is embedded. The social influence view is grounded in the assumption that the media have the ability to influence audience members' attitudes towards what is being portrayed or represented in the media. The latter is the most common approach to studies focusing on media representation (Robinson, 2009).

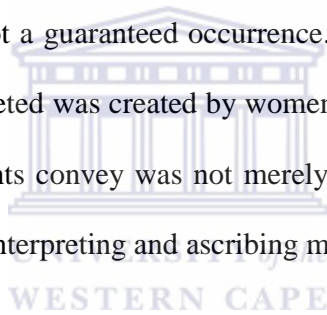
In active audience theory, audiences are thought of as active readers rather than passive recipients. What this means is that audiences do not just simply respond to the portrayals that they see, but rather engage in an active process of interpretation and evaluation of the information in the portrayals (Buckingham, 1998),

Within media theory it is believed that the media depict some of the dominant stereotypes present in society, and in doing so, can contribute to the maintenance of particular cultural ideologies (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003) Therefore, the portrayal of menstruation in the media as a hygiene crisis, something to be concealed, and a phenomenon declaring women unfit for a period of time each

month reflects the ideologies present in society. However, in terms of active audience theory, people do not passively accept these media messages (Robinson, 2009).

According to Hall (1997), audiences have the ability to draw on their own contexts, history, culture, experiences, and knowledge when making sense of what is shown to them by the media. This means that when confronted with menstrual product advertising, women draw on their history in interpreting and making meaning. Women are therefore active recipients in their experience of the portrayal of menstruation and menstruating women in television advertisements, but through the interpretation thereof, assign to it their own meaning.

As this study sought to explore women's experiences of the portrayal of menstruation in television advertisements, the active audience theory posited that the experiences of these advertisements reported as largely negative, was not a guaranteed occurrence. Instead the way in which menstrual product advertisements were interpreted was created by women themselves. Therefore the messages that menstrual product advertisements convey was not merely flung at a passive audience, instead this audience held an active role of interpreting and ascribing meaning.



## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This research project adopted a qualitative approach, drawing on the interpretive paradigm to develop an in-depth understanding of isi-Xhosa speaking women's experiences of the portrayal of menstruation in television advertisements and the meanings they attach to it. Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world where the researcher studies things in their natural settings and attempts to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed in this study to explore and capture participants meaning-making around menstruation and to explore in detail how participants make sense of their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA explores the participants' personal experience of menstruation, the portrayal of menstrual product advertisements and the way in which meaning was attached to these experiences. IPA was thus best suited for this study as it is concerned with human lived experience, and posits that experience can be understood via an examination of the meanings which people impress upon it (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

### **Participants**

Once clearance was obtained from the Higher Degrees Committee at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), fifteen participants were recruited for this study through purposive and snowball sampling. Participants were English-speaking women from the ama-Xhosa cultural group who are students at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). In aid of purposive sampling, the main goal of the researcher is to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest, which will best enable the research question to be answered. The researcher thus made use of an inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criterion was: (i) participants must be female, aged between 19 and 25 years (ii) students at UWC (iii) part of the ama-Xhosa cultural group (iv) conversant in English. As a result of limited response to advertising, snowball sampling was used to identify

further prospective participants. The researcher asked participants to identify others who may be suitable for inclusion and would be likely to agree to participate.

A sample size of five participants per focus group was utilised. This takes into account the distinctive feature of IPA where there is a commitment to a detailed interpretative account of the cases included, and the recognition that this can only realistically be done on a very small sample (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Participants were recruited by advertising the nature and aims of the research: (i) on student notice boards and (ii) to students attending lectures with the prior consent of the lecturer concerned. Students were invited to contact the researcher if they were interested in participating. The response rate through use of advertising the study on student noticeboards was poor. As a result, the researcher made use of the latter recruitment method which attracted a higher response. Potential participants were provided with an information sheet which clearly stipulated the inclusion criteria, aims and objectives of the research, as well as information regarding the dissemination of data collected. The researcher then made contact with potential participants, and focus group interviews were scheduled.

### **Data collection**

Data was collected by means of three focus groups. A consideration was made for the use of more focus groups if saturation was not reached, however, three focus groups proved to be sufficient. The focus groups were conducted in English with the use of prompt questions, and comprised of five participants each. A translator fluent in isiXhosa was present during the focus group interviews to clarify any isiXhosa words or phrases mentioned.

The researcher showed the participants two television advertisements so as to facilitate discussion. Participants were forewarned that the advertisements may be experienced as slightly sensitive in nature, and that they were allowed to withdraw at any point. The advertisements were that of two major companies in South Africa selling menstrual products, namely, Always and Kotex. The Kotex

advertisement (international) was shown first and started with the phrase – “leakage freakage”. The advertisement identifies three exaggerated rules for women to follow in order to avoid this mortification: “always wear black”, “remain close to the bathroom”, and “avoid white seats”. The advertisement goes on to describe the Kotex product, and its ability to eliminate all fear women may have of “leakage freakage”. The Always advertisement (national) focuses on the schoolgirl whose day is constantly disrupted by having to check that she hasn’t stained her school uniform while menstruating. The classroom full of girls all dance and sing in unison, with lyrics comprising of “in the bus, in the class, every hour I check”. The focal word – “check” is repeated throughout, followed by “I cover, I hide, I check”. Once the Always product is introduced, the focal words become “no check”, emphasising the difference made if the product is used (“I dance, I walk, I play, no check”). The advertisement further emphasises a total of eight hours that the schoolgirl and women in general, need not “check”, thus allowing for limited disruption throughout their day.

The focus group discussions were an average duration of 50 minutes per focus group. Focus group discussions took place in the psychology department, as campus was the most convenient meeting place for participants.

The researcher facilitated the focus group discussions, with the assistance of the researcher’s peer as co-facilitator. The interview schedule served as the basis for a conversation (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008), with questions phrased in an open-ended manner. The focus of the interviews was on exploring participants’ personal experiences of the menstrual product advertisements shown. Experiences shared by participants’ guided further questions, with further probing into discussion when participants’ left statements unclear.

During the data collection process, the researcher reviewed each focus group interview, taking note of dominant themes that emerged and used this information to inform subsequent interviews.

Rationale for focus groups: A focus group can be described as a group of people who share a similar type of experience, but is not constituted as an existing social group. Focus groups were chosen as



the method of data collection as it held the ability to generate discussion, and encourage the expression of views through group interaction in ways that interviews did not (Kreuger & Casey, 2000). Similarly, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) assert that focus groups allow multiple voices to be heard at one sitting, thus drawing a larger sample into a smaller number of data collection events.

As this study aimed to explore the meanings women attach to the portrayal of menstruation in television advertising, and how it relates to their experience of menstruation, the topic of discussion can be regarded by some as that of a personal nature and could evoke a sense of discomfort. Therefore, Bloor, Frankland, Thomas and Robson (2001) assert that focus groups are particularly appropriate when working with a group of people who may not be comfortable with participating in a one-on-one interview with a stranger, and would contribute more effectively in a group. Furthermore, the use of focus groups allowed a space in which the women could get together and create meaning of menstruation and the portrayal of menstrual product advertisements among themselves, rather than individually (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Verbatim transcription is the process of converting audio recorded material into text (King & Horrocks, 2010). The verbatim transcription of focus group discussions was the first step in the analytical process, and allowed the researcher to get closer and more familiar with the data (Langdrige, 2004). Audio recordings and transcriptions were stored on a password protected computer.

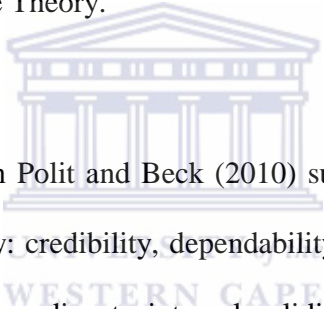
### **Data analysis**

According to Smith et al. (2009), the analytic process in IPA focuses its attention on the participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences. Analysis in IPA is described as an iterative and inductive cycle, with the researcher's primary concern being the lived experience of the participants' and the meaning which the participant makes of that lived experience. The end result however, is always an account of how the researcher thinks the participant is thinking (Smith et al., 2009).

The process of data analysis followed the procedures of IPA. Preliminary analysis was started after each interview to identify emerging concepts and categories and these guided the way questions were asked in subsequent focus group interviews. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached.

Initially, transcriptions were read and re-read a number of times in order to become as familiar as possible with participants' accounts. Key aspects in the transcripts were identified and coded. Codes with similar content were grouped together to form preliminary categories. These categories were then compared with each other to identify themes that were present across the transcripts as well as themes that were distinct. All possible themes which emerged were identified, and then further explored and honed in. Identification of themes was also guided by the study's theoretical framework which is Active Audience Theory.

### **Validity/Trustworthiness**



Lincoln and Guba (1985) as cited in Polit and Beck (2010) suggested four criteria for developing trustworthiness of a qualitative study: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. The credibility of this study (corresponding to internal validity) was achieved through prolonged engagement with participants, researcher reflexivity, and member checking. Member checking is the process of verifying information with the group of participants. This allowed participants an opportunity to correct errors of fact or errors of interpretation (Simon, 2011). Dependability (corresponding to reliability) was ensured through use of an audit trail, which was checked by the researcher's supervisor. An audit trail is a detailed chronology of research activities and processes, influences on the data collection and analysis, emerging themes, and analytic memos (Morrow, 2005). Confirmability (corresponding to objectivity) was guaranteed through use of similar procedures used to accomplish the goal of dependability. These procedures included an audit trail to account for adequacy of findings, which was done by the researcher, and the management of subjectivity, which was done by the researcher and researcher's supervisor collaboratively.

## **Reflexivity**

In order for the researcher to deal with biases and assumptions that came from their own life experiences or in interactions with research participants, which often tend to be emotion-laden, the researcher attempted to navigate this endeavour reflexively (Morrow, 2005). This was achieved through use of a journal in which personal feelings regarding the focus group discussion just conducted, was reflected upon. The researcher kept an ongoing record of their experiences, and reactions, and remained actively aware of any assumptions or biases which may have arisen (Morrow, 2005).

To provide the reader with a sense of the researcher's background:

I am a Muslim woman, culturally termed "Malay". Menarche within my religion and culture is seen as a significant point in a girl's life as it marks the point at which she now bears her own sins, and is required to fulfil all compulsory religious obligations such as fasting and praying five times a day. Menstruation in Islam is seen as a private matter which needs to be managed modestly and quietly, always out of sight of the males within one's home. Girls are taught to pay more attention to cleanliness during this period, and to remain hygienic in the most subtle way possible. Menarche also marked an entry into puberty, and often became the point at which fathers became stricter with regard to interaction with the opposite sex.

During menstruation, a woman is unable to partake in prayer and worship, and may not visit a mosque. This exclusion may lead to feelings of resentment, as I experienced whilst on a spiritual journey to Saudi Arabia. Menstruating meant that I was unable to neither partake in any spiritual endeavours nor visit the mosque with my family. I was also unable to touch or read the Quran. At what was the height of spirituality as I had never experienced before, my menstruation came to serve as a barrier between absolute engagement on the holiest grounds. My exclusion and subsequent isolation left me feeling inferior and pitied.

For the purpose of this study, as a Muslim, I remained aware that participants' religion and culture would be different to that of my own. Wearing a scarf, which physically displayed my association to the Islamic faith, at times impeded the recruitment process, as possible participants displayed a reluctance to speak to me. This was constantly reflected upon, as well as its possible impact on the study acknowledged. I met with my supervisor regularly to discuss issues of this nature, spoke to peers, and kept a self-reflective journal from the commencement to the completion of the study (Morrow, 2005).

### **Ethics considerations**

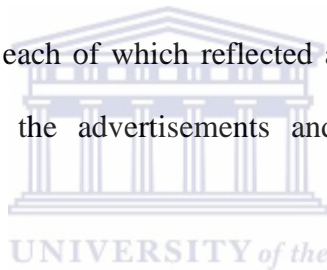
The ethical guidelines stipulated by the UWC were strictly adhered to by the researcher. The study ensured that no harm was brought upon the participants in any way. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study and what their roles entailed. Participants were made aware that they were not obligated to reply to any question should they be uncomfortable, and was able to discontinue their participation in the study at any time, without the fear of negative consequences for doing so. Voluntary and informed consent was obtained by means of each participant signing a consent form. Informed consent included obtaining the permission to record the focus groups, writing up of thesis using the information, as well as the dissemination of that information. Participants were also required to sign a focus group confidentiality binding form, which ensured that all information shared during the focus group interview remained confidential among participants. Participants' right to confidentiality will be respected, and pseudonyms will be used in the transcriptions of data, as well as dissemination of findings.

## **Results and Discussion**

The aim of this study was to explore the meanings women attach to the portrayal of menstruation in television advertising, and how it relates to their experience of menstruation. Participants' narratives revealed both positive and negative themes and these reflected the main superordinate categories. The first superordinate category that emerged was the discrepancy between what was displayed in the menstrual product advertisements and participants' reality. The second category was the impact of the advertisements on participants' experience of their menstruation.

### **Superordinate theme 1: The discrepancy between what is displayed in menstrual product advertisements, and reality**

There were four negative themes, each of which reflected appraisals around the discrepancies between what was portrayed in the advertisements and the reality of the participants' experiences.



#### **Exaggerated emphasis on behaviours associated with menstruation and what is advertised**

One of the themes identified in this study involved participants' appraisals that the menstrual product advertisements did not reflect their lived experience of menstruation. Disparity was found between the way in which menstruation was portrayed in menstrual product advertisements, and the way in which participants experienced their own menstrual period. Participants commented on the local advertisement shown, and reported its representation of young girls menstruating as inaccurate. Participants' reported their experiences as very different to that which is seen in menstrual product advertisements, and there was the appraisal that advertisements "sugar-coated" menstruation and portrayed the phenomenon more positively than experienced by most.

For example, Thato stated that:

“They portray it like oh, if you use this pad, then everything will be fine. But it’s not like that. Obviously it’s not like that.”

Thato felt that the advertisements did not resonate with her own experience of menstruation, and did not feel that use of the particular menstrual products advertised would alter this.

Zikhona shared similar sentiments:

“What I see on TV is so opposite to what I feel. I don’t think that this could be a very positive effect, because it almost presents an ideal that doesn’t actually exist and that never will for most women on earth. It results in this feeling of, maybe confusion or this inner conflict of feeling like there is something wrong with you if you cannot be like what is portrayed on TV or feel like that.”

The present theme was thus salient for most participants, who felt that menstrual product advertisements were incongruent with their experience of menstruation. There was an overwhelming sense that menstruation was inaccurately portrayed as an overly positive and cheerful experience – contradicting most participants’ experiences. Instead, participants reported experiencing pain and increased discomfort, which was rarely evident in advertisements. Existing literature supports the present study’s finding that menstruation was often experienced as a painful and uncomfortable time for women (Aflaq & Jami, 2012; Liu et al., 2012; Sharma, Malhotra, Taneja, & Saha, 2008). For example, Marván, Cortés-Iniestra and González (2005) reported on a study conducted by the World Health Organisation in which more than 5000 women from 10 countries were surveyed. Women in all studies said they experience negative mood changes and physical discomfort associated with menstruation. This included heavy blood loss, as well as an avoidance of work both outside and inside the home during their menstruation. Similar results were found in a study by Burrows and Johnson (2005) in the

United Kingdom. Menstruation was associated with physical discomfort, mood swings, and headaches.

Yagnik (2012) highlights another central aspect present in the current theme. Yagnik (2012) argues that menstruation is negatively portrayed in television advertisements, and non-representative of their menstrual experience, because menstrual product advertisements' core function is merely to sell a product. It is further stated that menstrual product companies will do what is required to sell their product, albeit reinforcing existing taboos around menstruation or exaggerating the already negative perception society holds of the menstruating woman (Yagnik, 2012). Yagnik's (2012) study was conducted in India and aimed to ascertain whether menstrual product advertisements constructed or perpetuated a negative image of menstruation or not. Results of the study revealed that menstrual product companies created advertisements that reflected the prevailing stereotypes about menstruation, and presented menstruation in a non-relatable manner to women, with positivity, liberation and empowerment found through use of the target product (Yagnik, 2012).

The present study thus highlights the disparity in menstruation as experienced by participants, and menstruation as portrayed in menstrual product advertisements. Girls and women struggled to relate to advertisements as it was not representative of their experience of menstruation and the impact of the advertisements' target products.

### **Menstrual product advertisements and its avoidance in displaying the discomfort associated with menstruation**

Although identified as a common practice during menstruation, participants felt that menstrual product advertisements overstated the act of checking, and portrayed it as burdensome and a nuisance to a woman's day. An advertisement shown to participants during data collection focused on a class of schoolgirls whose school day was constantly

disturbed as a result of having to “check” their clothes for menstrual staining. In the advertisement, the girls describe how they need to check following each activity, including when travelling on the bus, while in the classroom, and on the playground. Further emphasis on the nuisance of checking comes afore in the repetition of the word “check” in the advertisement – an indication somewhat of the ceaseless task that is checking.

One of the themes encountered involved participants’ experience of their menstruation as painful, and a time of increased discomfort. Advertisements however, present menstruation as a time when women are happy, joyful and maintain their usual routine and activity.

For example, Lerato commented:

“In the adverts they make it seem like everything is fine when you use pads, you’re pain free, you won’t feel any pain but in reality that’s not the case. They advertise the happy part of being on your periods”.

Vuyokazi shared this sentiment when stating that:

“It is just too ridiculous, I’m not going to dance when I am feeling pain, I am not going to jump up and dance. What they see on TV is so opposite to what they feel”.

Participants reported that these advertisements did not portray the reality of menstruation nor women’s experience thereof. The advertisements were referred to as “superficial” – never really delving into the true experience of the menstruating woman physiologically and emotionally, as well as the impact of menstruation on her daily functioning.

“They don’t get to the core of what really happens and how it really makes you feel. They don’t put feelings into it.”

A few participants openly expressed the symptoms of their pain and discomfort during menstruation, which included severe lower abdominal cramps, fainting and vomiting. These



participants expressed a low mood during this time, frustration, irritability and a desire to be left alone. Thuli further voiced her concern about the pain accompanying menstruation and the manner in which advertisements understate this:

“They work so hard to take the odour away, why don’t they invent maybe something that will take the pain away? Like they just forget about the pain”.

Furthermore, Nosipho felt that advertisements placed an emphasis on their products ensuring a “happy” period, with girls/women in the advertisements exuding cheerfulness, excitement and joy. The physical pain and discomfort were often not portrayed, even though it was experienced by the large majority.

“They don’t go to the fact that it hurts, my stomach gets sore, I get a headache. They never go into all of the symptoms, like what it does to the body and therefore your mood and your mind and how you feel. It is very superficial.”

Participants reacted strongly to the concept of “checking” following the local advertisement basing its script primarily around school girls bothered by the incessant need to check their clothes while menstruating. Although most participants agreed that they did check their clothes and seats while menstruating to ensure that they had not soiled, the act of checking was not constant and repetitive. Participants thus expressed that they were able to relate, but what the advert depicted was exaggerated.

“The reality is not like that, we don’t check, check, check, always check check”.

Lindiwe strongly felt that:

“It doesn’t matter how safe they claim the product to be, but I always feel there’s, you always want to check.”

Thandi shared a similar view by stating that:

“You always check whether it’s safe or not, you always check, because you have that thing of feeling so insecure. For instance, I like going out and it’s not nice to go out when you have your periods and you know you have to keep checking”.

“What we see on TV is so opposite to what we feel. It almost represents an ideal that doesn’t actually exist and that never will for most women on earth, you know, so then it results in this feeling of, maybe confusion or this inner conflict or feeling like there is something wrong with you if you cannot be like what is portrayed on TV”.

Participants reported an unspoken code which exists among females with regard to checking. They shared that if a menstruating female were to leave the company of other females, her clothes would quietly be checked before she walked away to ensure that she had not leaked and soiled. Xolani however, trusts the product that she uses and as a result, only checks once or twice or a day.

Vuyokazi shared her experience of being more attentive to her menstrual flow and checking more often, after having indulged in milk. She was informed by her mother and grandmother that drinking milk or overconsumption of dairy products significantly increases one’s blood flow. In spite of her ambivalence towards believing myths, Vuyokazi reported that she preferred to avoid milk completely during menstruation, and felt safer doing so.

The present study also found that menstrual product advertisements exaggerate the frequency of checking through excessive displays thereof in their advertisements. The target product is then portrayed in such a manner that the audience is encouraged to believe that through use of the product in question, checking need not occur as frequently and that protection from staining is guaranteed for a greater length of time.

Similar to this, Merskin (1999) found that menstrual product advertisements portray women involved in physical activity, yet at the same time, use their advertisements to serve as reminders

that an active life is only possible through purchase of a particular brand. If this brand is not used, the female viewer is left with a sense of risking humiliation and disgrace if they were to leak or stain their clothing (Merskin, 1999). Yeung, Tang and Lee (2005) further posit that menstrual product advertisements frequently emphasise the possibility of staining or leaking, which women perceive as embarrassing, and a situation they fear experiencing.

Most existing literature (Charlesworth, 2012; Dunnivant & Roberts, 2013; Roberts, 2004; Rosewarne, 2012) however, focused on the staining of clothes during menstruation as opposed to the act of checking. This may serve as a plausible reason as to why menstrual product companies exaggerate “checking” – as a means of reinforcing and perpetuating the fear women have around leaking and staining their clothes. This is supported by a study conducted by McMahon et al. (2011) who found that adolescent girls feared menstruating while at school or in public due to possible blood stains appearing on their school uniforms or clothes, and subsequently being looked at “differently” or being stigmatised by their peers. These findings were corroborated by Mason and colleagues (2012) who conducted a study on a sample of 120 girls between the ages of 14 and 16, in rural Western Kenya. It was revealed that the fear of leaking was a key issue for the girls, who had to improvise with cloth and material when menstruating, as their families had little means of purchasing sanitary pads. Using such material heightened girls’ thoughts around staining due to the lack of absorbency (Mason et al., 2012). A fear present in girls’ and women far and wide, Merskin (1999) so profoundly states – “The advertisements reminded women that the ultimate humiliation would be any indication that they’re menstruating” (pp. 947).

### **The happy part of being on your period is advertised**

Participants strongly felt that menstrual product advertisements did not adequately portray their experience of menstruation. Instead, its only function was the marketing and selling of the products, as well as boosting and maintaining brand image.

Nosipho expressed her view by stating that:

“I don’t think that the adverts they really portray and obviously I know that they’re doing it because they want to sell the brand but they don’t...they just trying to sell their product”.

Vuyokazi was of similar opinion and stated that:

“They’re trying to sell a product, they make it seem like where their product will make your experience better. But it is all for commercial purposes.”

Participants thus perceived menstrual product advertisements as deceptive, with very little interest in women’s menstrual health, but merely aimed to sell their product.

In the present study, participants reported that advertisements portrayed menstruation in a superficial and overly positive manner. Participants experienced the advertisements as placing excessive emphasis on women being happy, cheerful, pain-free and beaming with confidence during menstruation. Participants further shared that advertisements viewed menstruation merely as a biological function needing to be managed, as opposed to the emotional and psychological component that accompanies the experience. Advertisers tend to steer clear from delving too deeply into the reality of menstruation as experienced by most women, its symptomatology and effect on daily functioning.

This finding is supported by results of a study conducted by Erchull (2013), where it was found that menstrual product advertisements often portrayed women and girls participating in their normal activities, cheerfully, as a result of the freedom and comfort the target product offers. Del Saz-Rubio and Pennock-Speck (2009) however, present contradictory findings. In their study, it was found that advertisers are well aware of the symptoms and inconveniences traditionally associated with menstruation, and exploit them to their benefit. Del Saz-Rubio and

Pennock-Speck (2009) further posit that menstrual product companies seek to establish a kind of camaraderie with the audience by suggesting that they, the advertisers, share the same worries and concerns about menstruation as consumers do.

## **Superordinate theme 2: Impact of advertisements on participants' experience of menstruation**

### **Advertisements heighten the fear around leaking**

In addition to the adverts placing emphasis on the act of “checking”, its portrayal of menstruation also fuelled the fear of leaking. Participants expressed that the advertisements heightened their fear around leaking, often by depicting the disastrous results if a leak occurred and clothes or seating areas were blood stained. Participants were of the opinion that the advertisements shown perpetuated pre-existing stigma and misconceptions around menstruation being dirty and an unhygienic bodily function. As a result, participants expressed great anxiety around leaking, and the embarrassment that would ensue if it were to occur.

This is made clear when Thozama shares her experience:

“When you first start your period, you’re encouraged that you must be clean, like keep yourselves clean, people don’t need to know that you’re doing this thing. So that’s where the self-consciousness come from, where like you feel like if you leak and then you feel really bad as if it’s your fault. And it’s really not.

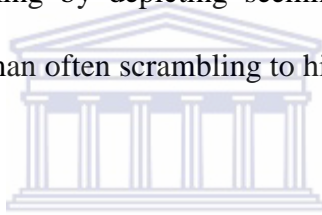
Nosipho further adds:

“If you leak like, that means for a girl, that would be the most embarrassing thing in the world. Walking around with the stain of blood, that would be so embarrassing. I swear I would cry”.

Masipa accounted a similar experience:

“I know it’s weird, I even like I always make sure I have a jacket or a scarf if I’m on my period, just in case I leak. Like it’s bad. It’s very bad... I’m so embarrassed like when I do leak sometimes, it’s such, it is quite a big thing. And for me I really feel like maybe I should have done something to prevent it”.

Participants shared a sense of embarrassment and shame around the thought of leaking while menstruating and staining their clothes. This experience was described as humiliating and one in which girls/women often blamed themselves for being unhygienic and careless, even though this was not the case. The present study thus found that menstrual product advertisements exacerbated this fear around leaking by depicting seemingly awkward situations in which leaking occurred, with the girl/woman often scrambling to hide the stains from the sight of those around her.



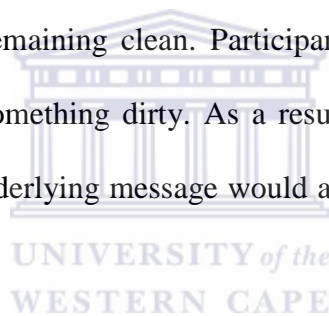
In a recent study conducted by Marván and Alcalá-Herrera (2014), among Mexican adolescents, it was found that girls continued to show embarrassment about menstruation and believed that they had to keep it a secret. Marván and Alcalá-Herrera (2014) believe secrecy around menstruation remains rife in Western societies and are promoted by popular culture. In this case, advertisements may be seen as one of these mediums in which secrecy is promoted. By leaking, the girl/woman’s active menstruation is exposed, accompanied by the perception that she is dirty and unhygienic as a result of having leaked.

Research has shown that women fear being “discovered” and thus humiliated, through odour or staining their clothes (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; McMahon et al., 2011; Shanbhag et al., 2012). It has been stated that leaking becomes a visible emblem of women’s contamination and shame, and symbolises a lapse in the societally mandated responsibility of all women to conceal evidence of menstruation and to prevent ensuing embarrassment (Roberts et al., 2002). Marván,

Cortés-Iniestra and González (2005) state that menstruation is seen as a private concern, and is considered shameful if clothing stained with menstrual blood was seen in public. Furthermore, women often feel that menstruation should not be discussed and that women should hide the fact that they are menstruating. Similar results were found in a study conducted by McMahon and colleagues (2011) amongst a sample of schoolgirls in rural Kenya. Girls reported an immense fear around getting their menstruation while at school or in public. They feared having blood stains on their uniforms and being looked at “differently” or being stigmatised by peers (McMahon et al., 2011).

### **Emphasis on hygiene and remaining clean**

Part and parcel of the experience of the menstrual product advertisements was an emphasis by all participants on hygiene and remaining clean. Participants expressed their concern around menstruation being regarded as something dirty. As a result, it was agreed that whatever the nature of the advertisement, an underlying message would always emphasise good hygiene and remaining clean and fresh.



Ruth shared her experience growing up:

“I didn’t want to play with the other girls because I was afraid, you know, I was afraid maybe I smell, maybe it’s smelling, I didn’t know... It’s a personal thing, even though people don’t know it, you just feel ‘I feel dirty’, like I’m smelling.”

Ruth also described a restriction placed on her while menstruating which added to her belief that she was dirty while menstruating:

“When you are on your periods you are not supposed to, you’re not allowed to cook. Okay fine, menstruation, it’s normal yes, but you are dirty, it’s dirty. It’s like you’re going to contaminate the food or whatever.”

Most participants experienced menstrual product advertisements as underscoring hygiene and remaining clean in some way. Whether this was directly or subtly portrayed, advertisements aimed to inculcate in its audience the belief that through purchase of the target menstrual product, the consumer will experience their menstruation in a more hygienic and sanitary way. This finding is supported by Kissling (2006) who states that menstrual product advertisements sell “remedies for the illness” with a focus on coping with the hygiene crisis. She further says that the focus is on “freshness” and how the product offered will preserve it against the threat posed by menstruation. In most ads, menstruation is always a problem. It is a hygiene crisis that one must clean up, more often, in secret (Kissling, 2006). Márvan and Molina-Abolnik (2012) conducted a study amongst a sample of 405 Mexican adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15. They found that exposure to media and advertisements provided imagery depicting menstruation as a hygiene crisis and as a secret event. The importance of keeping clean and avoiding soiled clothes was stressed. Márvan and Molina-Abolnik (2012) also put forth that menstrual product advertisements support and perpetuate a culture of concealment surrounding menstruation, where girls and women believe it to be important that their menstruation status remain a secret.

Similarly, research conducted by Erchull (2013) has shown that themes of shame and secrecy are common in menstrual product advertisements, with menstruation frequently being portrayed as a hygiene crisis that needs to be carefully managed through the use of the products being advertised.

### **Positive impact: Menstrual product advertisements as educational**

Despite the overwhelming negative experience of menstrual product advertisements, a positive superordinate theme did emerge. A few participants recounted how growing up, discussions around menarche and menstrual education were avoided. The topic was verbal taboo and concealed with secrecy. As a result, menstrual product advertisements served as a means of



informing young girls about menstruation and the necessary hygienic care which accompanied it.

“When you get your periods you’re usually at school or like when I had my first period, I was at school and I was a mess. I didn’t know what to do. So I feel they’re educating school girls because the minute an Always advert...and as a school girl you want to watch and instantly you’re educated even at home some girls, the mothers or sisters are very private. They don’t talk about stuff like that.”

In consensus, Thato agreed and said:

“It’s true. So once you see an advert you know when you get your periods, you know you need pads, you need to keep clean. You know stuff like that.”

Participants experienced the discussion of menstruation as a taboo topic within the home. Elderly females, most commonly, mothers and aunts, avoided speaking about menstruation. As a result, participants were left uninformed, and ill-prepared to manage their menstruation effectively. Participants thus shared that menstrual product advertisements provided them with useful information not only pertaining to the physiological aspect of menstruation, but also on the array of products available. These findings correspond to the findings of a study conducted by White (2013) in the USA amongst adolescent girls. It was found that mothers serve as the primary source of information, but when it comes to menstrual education, they limit open communication and urge secrecy among their daughters. White (2013) thus agrees that girls have come to depend on the menstrual product industry for instruction on menarche and menstruation on the whole. This finding was supported by a study conducted in India; a country severely overpopulated, characterised by scarce resources, and high levels of poverty and illiteracy. It was found that much of the emphasis in menstrual product advertisements was on educating women about the benefits of using sanitary towels, and providing information about

the product (Yagnik, 2012). Existing research also found that mothers did not share their personal experiences of menstruation with their daughters. The majority did not discuss it, nor provided their daughters with information regarding the sanitary products to be used. (Costos, Ackerman & Paradis, 2002). Not finding adequate help resulted in girls turning to menstrual product manufacturers who provided information through advertisements and pamphlets as part of their marketing strategy (Aflaq & Jami, 2012).



## Conclusion

This study endeavoured to explore the experiences of isi-Xhosa women in relation to the portrayal of menstruation and menstrual products in television advertisements. This study further sought to elucidate the meanings isi-Xhosa women ascribe to the portrayal of menstruation and menstrual products in television advertisements. A motivation for the study was the dearth of literature on the topic in the South African context. The cultural group being researched shared rich cultural anecdotes and experiences, which provided the researcher with a depth of understanding and insight.

The theoretical framework employed was Active Audience Theory, a branch of Media Theory. A key premise of the theory is that audiences are seen as active agents in the process of interpreting and evaluating what is seen on television, rather than passive recipients. This theory proved to be relevant in the context of the study as participants expressed incongruence between their reality of menstruation and what was portrayed in menstrual product advertisements. The discrepancy lends itself to the media's depiction of dominant societal stereotypes and cultural ideologies which portrays menstruation as a shameful hygiene crisis, and a phenomenon in need of constant monitoring and concealment. Active Audience Theory aligned well with participants' disapproval of what is presented in television advertisements, and their assertion that these media messages are not merely accepted, but instead interrogated and created meaning through use of their culture, experiences and knowledge.

In the study's comprehensive analysis and interpretation of participants' meaning-making process, it was found that there is a vast discrepancy between what is displayed in menstrual product advertisements, and what participants' actually experienced. There was an overt emphasis and disparity between behaviours associated with menstruation as experienced by participants, and what was portrayed in advertisements. This included advertisements' avoidance in accurately depicting the discomfort associated with menstruation, and instead,

highlighting the “happy” component of menstruation. Participants struggled to relate to this, as the menstrual symptoms illustrated were in direct contrast to what they felt and experienced. Despite the overwhelming negative experience of menstrual product advertisements, participants’ expressed that these advertisements were often educational and provided them with information (at a younger age) which they did not receive from other sources. Due to the secrecy and shame menstruation is cloaked in, it remains an unspoken topic, particularly within the home.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

Although it was the aim of this study to focus particularly on women from the isi-Xhosa culture, this may leave untapped the experiences and influences of other cultural groups. For future study, different cultural groups could be considered for inclusion, or a diverse sample of participants from a number of cultural groups.

Most participants were students within the social sciences. This field of specialty equips students to think and engage very critically, and often provides a platform for opinion and debate. This may have resulted in participants receiving the advertisements with a critical eye, and responding academically, as opposed to personally. It is recommended that future studies focus on women outside of an institution of learning, where responses may have been less critical, as well as ensuring that participants range across university faculties.

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## Appendices



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## Appendix 1: INFORMATION SHEET

*[This information sheet provides a brief description of the project you will be a part of. If you have any further questions, please contact Labeeqah Jaffer on the contact details provided below]*

**Project Title:** A study exploring women's experiences and the meaning-making related to the portrayal of menstruation in television advertisements

### **What is this study about?**

This is a research project being conducted by Labeeqah Jaffer at the University of the Western Cape. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because as a female, your experience of menstruation and the way in which menstrual products are advertised could be of great value to this study. The purpose of this research project is to explore women's experiences and the way in which they make meaning of menstrual product television advertisements. This research project will also explore the influence of culture on experiences of menstruation, and the way in which menstruation has been culturally constructed. This knowledge is being sought due to an absence of literature in this area of study in South Africa.

### **What will I be asked to do if I agree to participate?**

You will be asked to be part of a focus group and participate in a discussion with 5-7 other females who will also be UWC students. This focus group interview will begin with the screening of two menstrual product television advertisements. The researcher will ask you to share your thoughts and opinions about the advertisements. This will facilitate the discussion onto more personal accounts of your own experience of menstruation. The focus group interview will take place at UWC, and is estimated to last for 45 minutes to an hour.

### **Would my participation in this study be kept confidential?**

We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality and identity, a pseudonym will be used. The data collected in the focus group interviews will be audio recorded as a means of analyzing the focus group interview data. The recordings will be kept on a password protected computer that only I will have access to. The transcriptions of the focus group interviews will also be kept on a password protected computer that will only be accessible to myself, my supervisor and an independent researcher. The independent researcher will check that my transcriptions of the focus group interview match that which was actually said, increasing the validity of the study. Your name will not be used in the transcriptions, or in any parts of the research project. Each focus group interview member will be assigned a number to ensure that no names are revealed throughout the process. Your identity will be protected to the highest degree possible in the event that a report or article is written from the findings of this study.

### **What are the risks of this research?**

Due to the personal nature of menstruation, you may experience feelings of embarrassment or discomfort.



### **What are the benefits of this research?**

The results of this study may help you gain a deeper understanding of the experience of menstruation and the way in which menstrual products are advertised on television. It may also serve as a forum of support while engaging with the experiences of other participants. Your participation will help the investigator learn more about the area of study, hope that in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the way in which our experience of menstruation is culturally constructed.

### **Do I have to be in this research and may I stop participating at any time?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, there will be no negative consequences for doing so, you will not be penalised, or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. You are not obligated to reply to any question should you be uncomfortable.

### **Is any assistance available if I am negatively affected by participating in this study?**

If the content of the focus group interview makes you feel uncomfortable or elicit negative feelings, appropriate debriefing will be provided.

### **What if I have questions?**

This research is being conducted by Labeeqah Jaffer (Department of Psychology) at the University of the Western Cape. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Labeeqah Jaffer at: Room 2.428 in the Psychology Department. Alternatively, you can send an email to [2811265@uwc.ac.za](mailto:2811265@uwc.ac.za)

Should you have any questions regarding this study and your rights as a research participant or if you wish to report any problems you have experienced related to the study, please contact:

**Head of Department:** Dr. M. Andipatin ([mandipatin@uwc.ac.za](mailto:mandipatin@uwc.ac.za) / 021 959 2283)

**Dean of the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences:** Prof. J. Frantz ([jfrantz@uwc.ac.za](mailto:jfrantz@uwc.ac.za) / 021 959 2163)

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**This research has been approved by the University of the Western Cape's Senate Research Committee and Ethics Committee.**





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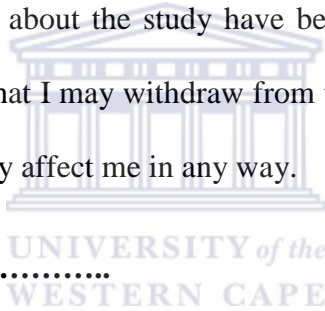
*Tel: +27 959 2283*

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## **Appendix 2: CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Research Project:** A study exploring women’s experiences and the meaning-making related to the portrayal of menstruation in television advertisements

The study has been described to me in language that I understand and I freely and voluntarily agree to participate. My questions about the study have been answered. I understand that my identity will not be disclosed and that I may withdraw from the study without giving a reason at any time and this will not negatively affect me in any way.



**Participant’s name**.....

**Participant’s signature**.....

**Witness**.....

**Date**.....

Should you have any questions regarding this study or wish to report any problems you have experienced related to the study, please contact the study coordinator:

**Study Coordinator’s Name:** Labeeqah Jaffer

**University of the Western Cape**

**Private Bag X17, Belville 7535**

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## **Appendix 3: FOCUS GROUP CONFIDENTIALITY BINDING FORM**

**Title of Research Project:** A study exploring women’s experiences and the meaning-making related to the portrayal of menstruation in television advertisements

The study has been described to me in language that I understand and I freely and voluntarily agree to participate. My questions about the study have been answered. I understand that my identity will not be disclosed and that I may withdraw from the study without giving a reason at any time and this will not negatively affect me in any way. I agree to be audio-taped during my participation in the study. I also agree not to disclose any information that was discussed during the group discussion.

**Participant’s name.....**

**Participant’s signature.....**

**Witness’s name.....**

**Witness’s signature.....**

**Date.....**



**UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE**

**FACULTY OF COMMUNITY AND HEALTH SCIENCES**

**Department of Psychology**

**Appendix 4: Focus group interview schedule**

**Title:** A study exploring women's experiences and the meaning-making around the portrayal of menstruation and menstrual products in television advertisements

**Student Name:** Labeeqah Jaffer

**Student Number:** 2811265



Two television advertisements by two leading menstrual product companies in South Africa will be shown to participants at the start of each focus group. Below are the questions that will be asked by the researcher thereafter.

1. Tell me about your thoughts and feelings after viewing the advertisements
2. Does the advertisement in any way speak to your experience of menstruation? How so?
3. How do you feel when you view advertisements around menstruation?
4. What was your experience of the advertisements?
5. How do you view your own menstrual cycle after viewing these advertisements?
6. What does your menstruation mean to you?
7. How do you experience your menstruation as a young woman in 21<sup>st</sup> century?