

“Becoming a woman, a complete woman, takes time.”: Menstruation Manuals for Girls as Material-Discursive Apparatuses

Hannah Taylor and Melissa Stone

Abstract: There is presently a lack of work in rhetorical studies and technical communication dedicated to menstrual health technologies and texts broadly and from the perspective of young girls specifically. Given that menstrual experiences are intertwined with material-discursive realities, more rhetorical work about menstruation is needed. This article analyzes four corporate menstruation manuals that span from the early 19th century to the present. We located these texts through the History of Medicine Archives at Duke University and from our own collections. Findings show that these manuals were distributed to girls and young women via schools and other public institutions like medical offices, churches, and workplaces. We find that these manuals can act as norming devices that enforce standardized and sometimes oppressive notions of menstruation. As a result, our article posits that menstruation is a material-discursive phenomenon that begins even before menarche; consequently, menstruators are implicated in rhetorical ecologies of menstruation from an early age.

Keywords: [Menstruation manuals](#), [girlhood studies](#), [feminist rhetorics](#), [agential realism](#), [rhetorical ecology](#)

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“Becoming a woman, a complete woman, takes time. Your body must go through certain changes—gradual changes, wonderful changes. And so does your mind, your spirit.” (*Accent on You...*)

The Material-Discursive Impact of Menstruation Manuals

A girl's first period—known as menarche—is imbued with great social, cultural, and personal meaning. The epigraph that opens this article is a testament to menarche's meaning. Pulled from a 1966 menstruation manual from Tampax, a prominent brand of tampons produced by Proctor & Gamble since the 1930s, the quote speaks to the pervasive idea that menarche symbolizes the moment when a girl transitions into womanhood. Scholars interested in menstruation studies have argued that the first display of menstrual blood for the American girl is entangled with material and cultural conditions—economic, familial, social—at home,

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in the workplace, and in society at large (Brumberg 102). These entanglements also include educational manuals about menstruation and what these manuals mean for the physical and social development of girls. Presently, there is no shortage of information online about periods; a simple internet search produces thousands of results that offer advice on how to navigate menstruation. Despite the relative accessibility of educational information online, new print menstruation manuals and books are published every year. Due to this abundance of information, this article aims to understand how menstruation manuals are included in the material-discursive cultures of girlhood. In doing so, we consider the importance of the production of menstruation manuals through their complicated existence as artifacts that can at once be helpful apparatuses for discovering one's body and norming devices that position menstruation management as a one-size-fits-all experience.

By the end of the late modern period in the United States, many girls were provided with information about their first menses through institutional menstruation manuals. By and large, menstruation manuals are distinct from puberty books, which seek to describe the broad range of physical and emotional changes that occur during adolescence. Instead, menstruation manuals exclusively focus on menstruation and all its specifics. These manuals were primarily distributed via public institutions, like schools, medical offices, churches, and workplaces.¹ Early examples of these manuals were produced by “feminine hygiene” companies like Kotex, Tampax, Always, and even the Walt Disney Company.² These corporations created manuals to distribute to girls with the hopes of creating loyal consumers. Menstruation manuals arose out of increased social demand for hygiene. At the time, these manuals also reflected a growing scientific understanding of menstruation—one that feminist historian Sharra Vostral explains emphasizes knowledge produced by public health officials and medical professionals. As a result, according to Vostal and Sharon Mazzarella, many popular manuals produced since the late modern period in the US are tied to corporations that present menstruation as a gendered hygienic crisis in need of mitigation through a combination of strict personal responsibility practices, a reliance on institutional systems, and in relation to entrenched gender essentialisms.

The bodily norms perpetuated by these manuals, we contend, have material impacts on the lived experiences of menstruating girls. To further discuss the material impacts of these bodily norms, this article analyzes four menstruation manuals or menstruation sections of puberty manuals produced since the 1930s—*Facts About Menstruation that Every Woman Should Know* (Kimberly-Clark Corporation, 1936), *Accent on You...Your Personal Questions Answered about Menstruation* (Tampax Incorporated, 1966), *The Perils of Puberty* (Planned Parenthood, 1974), and *The Care and Keeping of You 1: The Body Book for Younger Girls* (American Girl Corporation, 1998). We find that these manuals, especially those from the 1930s-1970s, potentially act as norming devices that encourage a standardized notion of menstruation (Woods; Wood). As a result, our article posits that menstruation is a material-discursive phenomenon that menstruators are implicated in from an early age. To analyze how these manuals co-produce the lived experiences of girls, our

¹ For more on these patterns of distributions, see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Sharon, and Sharra Vostral's work.

² *The Story of Menstruation* (1946), an animated short by Walt Disney, was distributed in schools alongside Kotex's 1948 manual *Very Personally Yours*. While Stone (2021) notes the film was progressive in its use of the word “vagina” and approach to menstruation, it still reinforced modernist hygiene anxieties that upheld class, gender, and racial hierarchies (p. 14).

article explores the following questions: 1) How do menstruation manuals participate in the everyday realities of young menstruators? 2) What are the material-discursive implications of the relationships produced amongst menstruators, the manuals, and other human and non-human entities? To answer these questions, we first establish the connections between our interdisciplinary theoretical approach; we take this approach because we are attentive to how both material and discursive formations are intertwined in the rhetorical processes of menstruation. In essence, our interdisciplinary approach shows how meaning is made across relationships with material entities and through sociocultural practices related to menstruation.

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Analyzing Menstruation Manuals for Girls

To analyze our archive of menstruation manuals, we diffractively read three theoretical approaches—agential realism, rhetorical ecology, and girlhood studies—through one another to show how these manuals are not passive objects that simply transmit information about menstruation but rather actively participate in the becoming of girls.

Agential Realism Framework

Agential realism, as theorized by feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad, is a diffractive methodology of analysis that aims to radically rethink agency and its overall materializing potential (230). We argue that through a diffractive methodology, of analysis that aims to radically rethink agency and its overall materializing potential (230). We argue that through a diffractive methodology of analysis that aims to radically rethink agency and its overall materializing potential, menstruation emerges as a complex ontology constituted in the *intra-activity*³ of menstruating girls, instruction manuals, and the sociocultural views of menstruation. Our diffractive analysis considers how menstruation manuals are at once predicated on problematic features but still provide positive potential for menstruating girls. Diffractive analysis focuses on processes of difference and how these differences overlap, or are entangled, to co-produce meaning. To diffractively analyze our archive of manuals, we treat them not as isolated texts but rather as entangled phenomena that emerge through their material, cultural, historical, and discursive *intra-actions*. In other words, these manuals *intra-act* not only with the girls who read them but also with the knowledges and sociocultural values presented in them, the technologies they reference, and the spaces and places in which they are presented to girls. Ultimately, our diffractive analysis shows how these manuals participate in the ongoing becoming of girls through their *intra-actions* with one another.

3 *Intra-actions*, unlike interactions, emphasize that entities emerge through relationships rather than existing beforehand—for example, menstruating bodies, menstrual technologies, and sociocultural ideas co-produce one another. Diffractive analysis makes these entangled co-emergences visible.

A Rhetorical Ecology Approach

In conjunction with agential realism, our analysis relies on a rhetorical ecology approach to analyzing our archive of manuals. Formalized by Jenny Rice (previously Edbauer) in her landmark essay, a rhetorical ecology approach recognizes that rhetorical acts are not contained within specific, isolated situations but rather are part of broader flows of discourse, affect, materiality, and power that circulate through a network. This is much like the agential realist concept of *intra-action*. In other words, rhetorical meaning isn't fixed—it is distributed and emergent within material-discursive entanglements. A rhetorical ecology approach, while similar to agential realism, allows us to be directly attentive to the rhetorical dimensions of the manuals we analyze. For instance, we show how our archive of manuals target their audience, the context of their distribution, and their design features. Since rhetorical acts don't happen in isolation, we also consider how the manuals fit into larger discourses about menstruation and girlhood; and, conversely, how these larger discourses are entangled with the production of the manuals. We analyze our archive of manuals as part of the rhetorical ecology of girlhood so we can reimagine girls' relationships with menstruation in their "temporal, historical, and lived fluxes" (Edbauer 9).

A Material-Discursive Approach to Girlhood Studies

We also build on existing girlhood studies scholarship alongside agential realism and rhetorical ecologies because we argue that like rhetorical practices, girlhood is not fixed; it is an active identity that is constantly becoming in relation to material-discursive forces. One of those material-discursive forces are menstruation manuals. For example, Mazarella highlights how puberty manuals, often produced by corporations, present menstruation as both a natural change and as a trivial experience, which contributes to how girls come to understand their bodies. Similarly, Hannah Froom explains the responses of midcentury women in the United Kingdom to the Menstruation Directive⁴ focusing specifically on their girlhood recollections of the emotions and sensations of using menstrual management technologies. Joan Brumberg connects menstruation to the modernist hygienic crises in the United States, linking it to young women's increased public participation in the late nineteenth century. Menstruation studies scholar Chris Bobel critiques the menstrual management movement's impact on girls in the Global South, arguing that Western values of respectability and productivity reinforce stigma rather than dismantle it. Importantly, Pamela J. Bettis and Natalie G. Adams's collection, *Geographies of Girlhood*, explores the daily material experiences of girls in specific communities with discursive practices. While these scholars provide strong additions to critical-cultural research on the relationship between girlhood and menstruation, we find that not nearly enough exists beyond what we have cited here. Building on this research, our findings show that menstruation manuals are not the neutral, objective tools we often consider them to be.

4 Created in 1996 by postgraduate student Alia Al-Khalidi in collaboration with the Mass Observance Project, the Menstruation Directive draws on the recorded experiences of 238 cisgender women, covering topics from first menses and sex education to menstrual management, advertising, VAT, menopause, and premenstrual tension (Froom).

Menstruation Manuals as Apparatuses

To show how these manuals co-produce the experiences of girlhood menstruation we analyze them as apparatuses. Commonly understood as a neutral tool, apparatuses are often used to measure, observe, or objectively perform tasks. However, Barad argues that an apparatus is not just a tool, nor is it neutral or passive. An apparatus in the agential realist sense is a dynamic process involving material-discursive practices that actively co-produce reality by enforcing boundaries. Simply put, apparatuses are active agents with ethical implications. For our analysis of menstruation manuals, this means that we are specifically attuned to how these manuals do not just present neutral information but rather co-produce meanings of menstruation by setting bodily standards, suggesting menstruation management practices, and persuading girls to interpret their bodies in specific ways.

We located our archive of manuals through the History of Medicine Archives at Duke University in North Carolina. We chose manuals that span a century to show how menstruation as a girlhood phenomenon has changed over time. As we coded the content of the manuals, we were attentive to how they present biological facts about menstruation and what they suggest in terms of cultural practices and management of menstruation. We were also attentive to how the manuals instruct girls to behave in relation to their bodies. More specifically, our analysis focuses on the genre conventions of the manuals, how they address their assumed audiences, and how they may have been circulated. An approach grounded in rhetorical ecology acknowledges that analyzing circulation is key to understanding the *intra-actions* that constitute a networked life. In other words, author, audience, and text do not exist as discrete elements but rather as fluid, distributed acts.

Additionally, our understanding of manuals as dynamic, circulating apparatuses is in line with current scholarship in technical communication that examines the cultural uptake of technical manuals.⁵ Additionally, like Erin Frost & Michelle Eble, we understand the specialized information present in these manuals to be persuasive in that they influence public audiences to feel, act, and think in a certain way. The technical rhetorics present in the manuals “encourage public participation in meaning-making” (Frost and Eble 1) precisely because they are implicitly persuasive and specialized. Following the analysis of these manuals’ genres, audiences, and circulation, we discuss the broader implications of a material-discursive analysis through our personal experiences with the manuals.

Genre Conventions of Menstruation Manuals

To analyze the genre conventions of these manuals, we determined if the manuals represent medical, corporate, and/or popular culture texts to compare differences in how boundaries are produced. For the purposes of this article, we define menstruation manuals with a medical focus as those that mostly focus on

⁵ For more on this discussion, see Beverly Saur, Miles Kimball, Marika Siegel, Sarah Hallenbeck, and John Wilson Ramey’s work on the cultural dimension of technical communication.

the biological processes of menstruation without much discussion about the sociocultural implications of menstruation. Conversely, we define menstruation manuals produced by large corporations that sell menstruation products as exhibiting product promotion alongside educational information about menstruation. Finally, we assert that menstruation manuals with popular cultural influences tend to focus more directly on the social and cultural assumptions of menstruation. Despite the categories we ascribe to the manuals in this section, it is important to note that none of the manuals in our archive occupied one clear category of production. The fluid boundaries of these genre conventions demonstrates that these manuals were never designed to serve a singular purpose but rather were written specifically to impact and instruct audiences in multiple ways. All the same, we found that our predefined categories helped us make sense of the information in the manuals, and most importantly, made us understand when and how each manual blurred the boundaries of these genres.

The oldest manuals we analyzed were authored by corporations that produce menstruation products. For example, the 1936 booklet *Facts About Menstruation that Every Woman Should Know* presents as a corporate text but heavily relies on scientific writing and biological facts. The Kotex manual mysteriously states that it is written by an unnamed “imminent medical authority,” demonstrating an appeal to the scientific and medical perceptions of menstruation. Furthermore, alongside both cultural and scientific information about menstruation in the booklet, a reader can find advertisements for specific products. We consider these advertisements as much a part of the manuals as any other information and, therefore, worthy of analysis. For example, the first double-page spread that a reader comes across in the manual features an ad for Quest, “the positive deodorant powder,” next to the first page of the introduction to the manual (Figure I). This product is advertised as a deodorant powder that can be used all over the body, but has a main purpose of being sprinkled directly onto menstrual pads that girls and women wear during menstruation, or directly into underwear if a woman uses tampons. The tagline for this ad states, “Personal daintiness is the first rule of loveliness.” This example directly shows how discursive elements forward the cultural idea that menstruation, and by association female body scent, can and must be meticulously controlled using products like powdered deodorants. In other words, this harmful cultural positioning of menstruation *intra-acts* with Quest, a material product, and co-emerges in the rhetorical process of understanding menstruation and how one should act in relation to this bodily phenomenon. The positioning of this advertisement alongside the information in the manual implicates girls from an early age in the idea that menstruation is shameful and must be hidden. Kotex’s inclusion of the Quest ad is also a hallmark of a corporate manual. These manuals were not just about providing girls with information on how to care for their bodies, it was also about making girls into loyal customers.

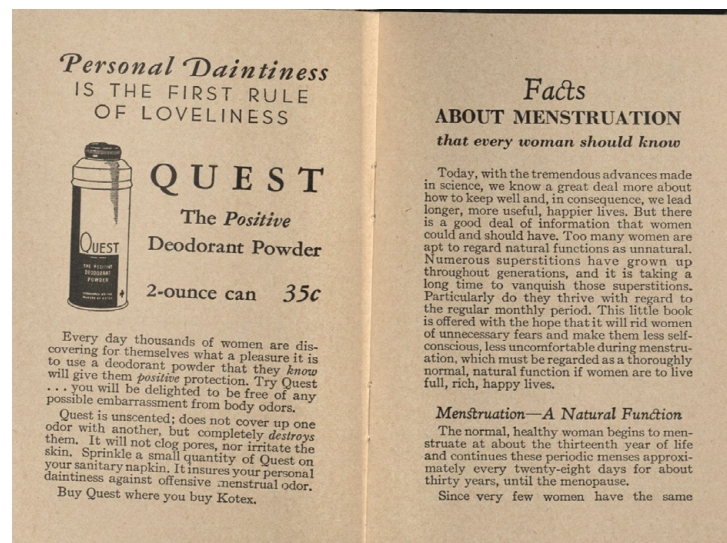


Figure 1: Kotex Quest ad as shown on the first double page spread of the 1936 booklet called *Facts About Menstruation that Every Woman Should Know*.

Similarly, *Accent on You: Your Personal Questions Answered about Menstruation* (1966) from Tampax is a corporate manual. *Accent on You* (hereafter *Accent*) was developed during the tampon boom of the 1960s,⁶ a time when Tampax began to have greater rivalry from companies like Playtex and Johnson & Johnson. In the 1960s and 1970s, fierce competition arose in the feminine hygiene industry. Companies like Playtex, Kimberly-Clark, and Johnson & Johnson debuted their own tampons, adding to a growing market where businesses had to adapt more quickly to reach customers. Innovations like smaller tampons, plastic applicators, and greater absorbency led to tampons becoming a more practical way for women to manage their periods. This led to the first-ever tampon ads on television in 1972, marking a significant shift toward talking more about menstruation and management technologies in public spheres.

Although *Accent* most closely aligns with a corporate style, the visual content appeals to what girls may have found popular in the 1960s. Illustrations of stylish outfits and haircuts present a trendy tone that shows how much the Tampax corporation wanted to target girls. The manual was produced by the education department at the Tampax Corporation and contains a fair amount of medical information despite the focus on selling Tampax pads. For example, a section titled “What Menstruation Is...” details the phases of the menstrual cycle with specific attention to how the cycle works concurrently with a fertility cycle (4) (Figure 2). This detailed medical information exists in contrast to the advice on a subsequent page, where the authors note that Tampax tampons “fit into even the smallest of date-size purses, thus making it easy to stay fresh through an evening of fun” (7) (Figure 3). This is an example of how the hygienic crisis of menstruation co-emerges with material products like the tampon

⁶ Girls and unwed women were unlikely to use tampons. When mass-produced tampons emerged, public concern grew over their intra-vaginal nature and required bodily interaction. Fears escalated with the belief that tampon use could lead to girls’ and women’s self-sexualization (Stone, p. 112, 2021). These anxieties faded as tampon use became more common in the 1970s.

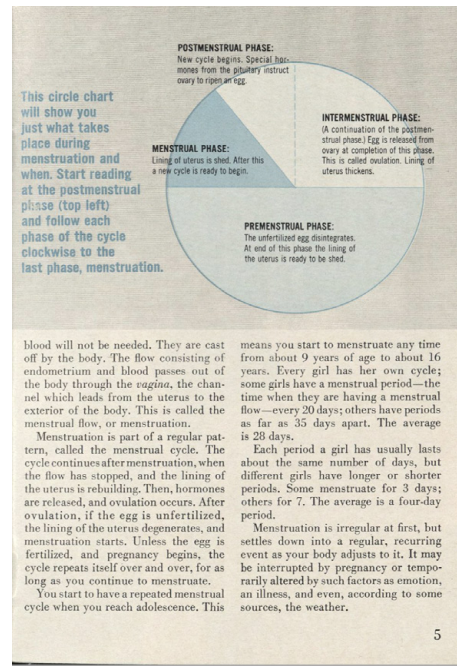


Figure 2: Tampax (1966) *Accent on You* includes a description of the phases of the menstrual cycle.



Figure 3: Tampax (1966) *Accent on You* discusses the impact of menstruation on school and dating.

We found that the manuals that were developed in the mid-twentieth century fit even less neatly into a single genre. *The Perils of Puberty* (hereafter *Perils*) was especially nuanced as it was published and distributed by Planned Parenthood, a non-profit organization. This text embodies a popular culture feeling with textual elements that make clear attempts to come off as approachable, hip, and exciting. For example, Sheri Tepper⁷, the manual's author, included several instances of what feels like tangential knowledge that assert a clear desire to talk about provocative issues. For example, Tepper advises:

7 Tepper served as Executive Director of the Rocky Mountain chapter of Planned Parenthood from 1962 to 1986 and was also a prolific science fiction writer who identified as one of the first ecofeminists. Publishing over forty works of speculative fiction, including *Grass* and *The Gate to Women's Country*, her stories often blur the line between critique and endorsement of controversial ideas. We highlight Tepper because *Perils* similarly plays with controversial ideas in ways we found both compelling and unsettling.

One of the best muscle relaxants available is alcohol, and one ounce of liquor (ONE OUNCE) in juice or soda will almost always stop really painful cramps... Now right away some people are going to say that there are so many teenage alcoholics around that no one should say that alcohol is good for anything. Well, you see all those beer and wine ads on TV and in magazines and papers. None of those ads tell you that alcohol is good for anything, but they all try to make you believe that drinking is adult, smart, or attractive. It isn't adult, because secure people don't need to drink; it isn't smart, because no other drug causes as much trouble as alcohol; and it isn't attractive, because nothing is messier or sloppier than being drunk. It is, however, good for menstrual cramps (ONE OUNCE) and for old people who have circulatory trouble. Maybe if you know what it is good for, you'll be able to figure out what it isn't good for. (4)

This example also shows how *Perils* achieves a trendy feeling with a conversational tone alongside comic book-style artwork and thick, bubbly header fonts (Figure 4). *Perils* considers a broad range of puberty experiences in addition to menstruation. For example, the pamphlet includes two pages dedicated to the “Perils of Your Family,” mentioning that “family obviously belongs to another generation... Half the time they may be pushing you to grow up, and the other half they may be trying to keep you a baby” (8). While earlier manuals also discussed dating, *Perils* was the only one in our archive to talk about sexual activity and desire explicitly. Tepper explains, “People used to believe, or pretend to believe, that women do not have sexual urges. If society pretends something long enough, people begin to believe it. However, we know that women have just as strong a sex drive as men do, though it may not be quite as easy to put that drive in motion with some women” (14). This more expansive view of the impact of menstruation on girls’ lives exhibits both the tone and mission of Planned Parenthood, but with an increased acknowledgment that girlhood is emotionally and physically complex.



Figure 4: Planned Parenthood's *The Perils of Puberty* pages discussing the impact of menstruation on friends and the perils that come with sex. The headline reads, “the perils of sex.”

Like *Perils*, the American Girl Corporation's *The Care and Keeping of You* (hereafter *Care and Keeping*) blends a popular culture aesthetic with medical manual conventions and similarly focuses on several aspects of puberty for girls.⁸ Like the Kotex and Tampax manuals, *Care and Keeping* is a corporate manual, but not in the same way as its foremothers. The American Girl Corporation is not a health product brand but instead built its empire on a series of books, dolls, and doll accessories that show American history through the experiences of girls. Readers will also not find advertisements for American Girl products throughout *Care and Keeping*. Furthermore, *Care and Keeping* exhibits a diverse array of bodies and racial identities, a departure from previous manuals that mostly focused on thin, white female bodies.

Despite the detailed medical information presented in the manual, it is authored by copywriter, Valerie Lee Schaefer, who worked for *American Girl Magazine* in the 1990s. While we assume that the author consulted many medical texts to write this manual, the ways that certain medical texts influenced *Care and Keeping* remains elusive as there are no references to such texts throughout the manual. Despite the fact that the manual was not written by a medical professional and that the connection to existing medical literature is not made clear, the manual presents accurate, trustworthy information that aligns with general public health knowledge about puberty and menstruation. For example, in the "Basic Facts" subsection of the portion of the manual that covers periods, the opening passage reads:

So, what is a period anyway? It's short for *menstrual period*—the period of time each month when fluid containing blood flows out of the *uterus* through the *vagina*. The amount is small, only 4 to 6 tablespoons. This flow usually lasts two to eight days. Some girls have a menstrual period every 25 days. Other girls have them up to forty days apart. All are normal. (70)

This information follows medical scientific observations about menstrual cycles, showing that *Care and Keeping* exhibits a unique blend of presenting factual biological information in an approachable and exciting way. This information also departs from earlier manuals in that it tries to normalize a wide variety of ways that any one girl might experience menstruation.

This blended approach shows a trend within these manuals—as time has progressed, the manuals appear to take on much more subject matter, tend to occupy multiple genre categories, and evolve how they approach information about menstruation, demonstrating their role as apparatuses. For example, in a departure from the 1936 Kotex manual, *Care and Keeping* discusses menstrual deodorizers not as an advertisement but as part of the main text. Further, the manual does this without reinforcing menstrual stigma:

Most pads and tampons are available in both deodorant and nondeodorant versions. Deodorant products have perfumes and other chemicals to fight odor caused by fluids and moisture trapped in a pad or tampon. But they can also irritate skin and cause allergic reactions. You're better off

8 While many reprints, volumes, and spin-offs followed the first edition of *Care and Keeping*, our analysis centers on the original 1998 manual. This edition is genre-defining and personally significant to us, as it was the edition we both encountered as girls approaching puberty. The book is divided into sections on "body basics," hygiene, eating disorders, puberty, and emotions. Our focus is on the "Period" section within "Body Changes," which most directly illustrates how menstruation knowledge is conveyed to girls.

using unscented products and keeping yourself fresh by changing pads and tampons regularly.
(73)

This passage shows how much menstrual information evolved between 1936 and 1998 when *Care and Keeping* was published and how new, more expansive genres emerged alongside these texts. The author directly points out how deodorizers are probably best not used, and rather than relying on them to mask bodily scents, a better practice is to routinely change pads or tampons. This positioning of information teaches girls how to care for themselves and to practice good hygiene in a way that deemphasizes menstrual shame and stigma; further, it instructs girls on how to choose menstruation technologies that can have a direct material impact on the body.

The Circulation and Intended Audience of Menstruation Manuals

Based on our diffractive approach, it is clear that these manuals co-produce material-discursive cultures of girlhood. It is also clear that girlhood meant, and means, something different depending on when a manual was written and circulated. For example, the circulation of each manual was filtered through powerful institutions, families, clinics, and schools. *Accent* was primarily distributed at schools, meaning that only girls within formal schooling systems had access to them. Importantly, segregation in public education was not prohibited until 1954 and integration took many more years to institute. This means that access to these materials was stratified based on socioeconomic class as well as race. Conversely, *Perils* was most likely distributed at Planned Parenthood clinics. With Planned Parenthood's more expansive views on sexual and reproductive health, we can assume that the circulation of *Perils* and its audience was limited to those with similar views on the subject.

Histories of menstruation by Joan Jacob Brumburg, Sharra Vostral, and Lara Friedenfelds show that menstruation manuals have circulated through domestic spheres, schools, and medical settings to engage girls in discourses about their changing bodies. As manuals circulate, there is *intra-action* amongst different menstruating bodies, cultural expectations, and institutional practices, which are all entangled with how we make meaning about menstruation. As we have previously argued, the manuals in our archive are apparatuses that actively participate in the co-production of knowledge and being, particularly concerning menstruation. Importantly, part of this co-production includes how these menstruation manuals appeal to their intended audience and how they are circulated. The intended audiences for the texts varied slightly depending mostly on genre and timeframe, as did the sites of circulation and distribution. Though all of the manuals worked to address girls who were experiencing or about to experience puberty, the exact age categories and additional audiences shifted.

The Kotex manual was designed for girls to read, but also very much for their mothers. The Kotex company commissioned their education department to produce the booklet and distributed it through the mail. The dedication on the inner sleeve of the envelope that the manual was mailed in is to "Mothers The World Over," and is addressed with the urgent call of "Mothers! Don't Wait!" (Figure 5). While this manual mostly

refers to “women” rather than “girls,” we assume that girls would have received a copy from their mothers. Additionally, because this pamphlet is cast as a “mailer,” girls and young women would mostly gain access to it through their mothers mailing off for it. The circulation was, we assume, probably largely dependent on mothers buying Kotex products for themselves and finding an ad in a box to mail off for a pamphlet for their daughters

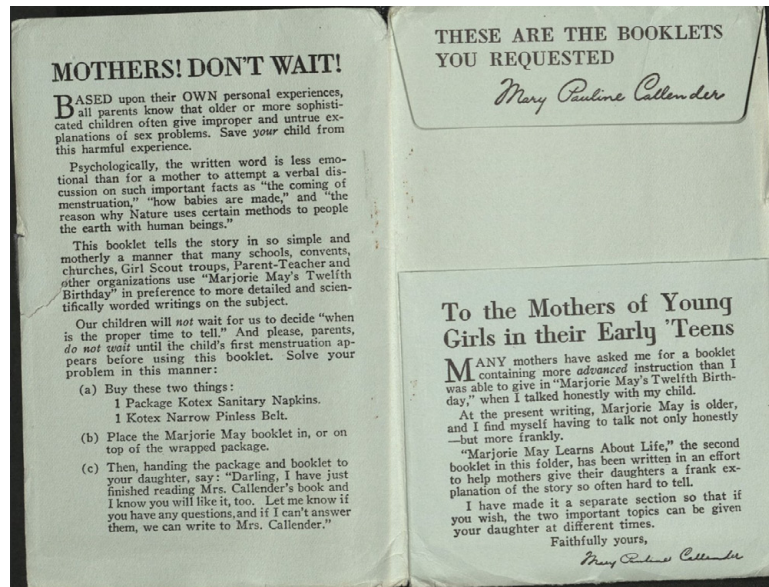


Figure 5: Mailer that Kotex's pamphlet arrived in.

Similarly, while Tampax's Accent emphasizes the journey of womanhood, we argue that this booklet is aimed at girls as well. That is immediately evident on the opening page where the booklet states, “Judging from questions we’ve received from girls just like you, we know that many of your doubts and wonders revolve around the subject of menstruation” (3). In addition to mailing off for manuals, they were also likely accessed through ladies’ home journals, by word of mouth, or even passed out in schools and physicians’ offices. For example, in 1941, Tampax began to send educators known as the “Tampax Ladies” to schools and universities, as well as trade shows and conventions, to distribute education pamphlets (“The History of Tampax”). The way these manuals were distributed to audiences and how that distribution has changed over time is another direct example that shows how menstruation manuals are material-discursive apparatuses. These manuals used to come in the mail or get physically passed out to girls. Now girls can simply search for information about menstruation on the internet or download an app like Girlology, a point we discuss more in our conclusion. This shows how the circulation and distribution of knowledge has a materiality. In other words, the content of the manuals co-emerges not just over time but also in relation to how it is physically presented to its audience.

Because Planned Parenthood's *Perils* adopts an adult tone through jokes and plain language about sexual health, we argue that this manual is probably meant for adolescent girls—girls who were likely to be entering high school. As an example, it is clear that Tepper is attempting to challenge prescribed, hyper-feminine norms, like when she demands, “Just because you are menstruating or growing breasts DOES NOT MEAN that you are now a delicate creature. You’re not. You’re going to live longer than most of those strong boys,

and you're going to have more endurance" (5). Still, there are moments throughout when the language can't seem to balance its needs and reifies harmful patriarchal discourses about girls' bodies and their sexuality. For example, "There's another reason for not shoving your breasts into everyone's eyes. There are a certain number of sickies out there who will take it as an invitation to give you a lot more attention than you bargained for. Don't 'offer' yourself unless you're ready for some nasty attention" (5). This excerpt reflects the type of second-wave feminist sentiments that younger generations of feminists have worked hard to move beyond by encouraging sex education that challenges the idea that girls and women who dress a certain way are "asking for it." Further, we were unable to find information about how Planned Parenthood pamphlets were distributed more broadly, but we assume that they were given out at their clinics. This means that girls' access to these manuals was probably filtered through their parents or their ability to access a Planned Parenthood clinic.

Care and Keeping feels more oriented toward younger girls, though the American Girl Corporation has since written a book for older girls. The author mentions that she intended to target pre-adolescent girls between ages 7 and 11. The manual positions itself as a "self-health" text for children, specifically girls. This neologism is a play on the term "self-help" but with a specific emphasis on personal health and well-being. Much like the 1966 Tampax manual, *Care and Keeping* was developed in response to letters that girls wrote to the American Girl Doll organization to be featured in American Girl Magazine. After thousands of letters were sent in, the founder of American Girl, Pleasant Rowland, and the magazine's editor at the time, Barbara Stretchberry, knew there was a need for a longer book to address the issues girls were writing about⁹. These letters are featured throughout the book in between each of the major sections. What's more, speaking from personal experience, we both received a copy of *Care and Keeping* when we were in this age range. The original circulatory strategies of the manual are not clear, but they were effective; *The Care and Keeping of You* is a remarkably popular and successful book. Since its first print, the manual has sold over six million copies and is widely considered the #1 growing up guide for girls (American Girl).

The analysis of circulations is limited by what is documented within the archives and in broader histories of these manuals. We cannot fully account for the information and circulation of these materials that may have happened on the margins. For example, Hannah knows that a single copy of *Care and Keeping* made its way through the entire fifth grade in her school, stored in a bathroom stall until a teacher turned it into the administration. Rather than offer a complete picture of these texts' circulation and distribution to their audiences, we contend that this demonstrates the role of institutions in the rhetorical ecology of menstruation manuals. The texts were authored and distributed by institutions and frequently filtered through multiple complex environments before girls could access them. As such, reliance on institutional systems was not only enforced within the text but also in the creation and circulation of the manuals. This kind of circulation is a major departure from how knowledges were once circulated before the institutionalization of menstruation. Before this, girls counted on knowledges about their menstrual cycle and management technologies to be passed down to them by previous generations. Brumberg argues that in many "traditional communities"

⁹ See Tanya Basu and Morgan Sung on the history of the book's production and its importance to tween health.

in early US history, sexually maturing girls learned about menstruation within a single-sex environment or through what was called “women’s culture.” Brumberg further explains that learning about being a woman “...was a kind of ‘integrated, core curriculum’ that happened organically as part of day-to-day life” (106). In the absence of books and pamphlets about female biology, girls before the nineteenth century often learned about menstruation and menstrual management technologies by word-of-mouth from older women in their families.

The Material-Discursive Implication of Menstruation Manuals

Menstruation manuals can be truly profound sources of meaning-making for those who read them. This profundity is due in part to how readers embody the knowledges these manuals present. In her examination of breast pumps (an apparatus), Jordynn Jack argues that “the ways that we live in and through our bodies are inextricable from the technologies we use” (209). In other words, embodiment is dispersed through technologies (Melonçon 68). In this case, we argue that embodiment is dispersed through menstruation manuals. We also draw on Abby Knoblach who argues that embodied knowledge “begins with [a] bodily response...a trigger for meaning making that is rooted so completely in the body” (54). In this regard, menstruation itself is embodied knowledge because it is a bodily act imbued with physical, emotional, and material experiences. Taken together, in our treatment of menstruation manuals as apparatuses, we have argued throughout this article that the information in these manuals (and how that information is presented to readers) participate in the experiential knowledges that are generated through the bodily act of menstruation.

During our data collection process, we realized that it would be difficult to show how these texts participate in the meaning-making process of menstruation without at least some direct experiences to point to as examples. Maureen Johnson, et. al. understand this kind of approach in their argument that bodies are sources of rhetorical power—sites of meaning-making—that can and should be considered when conducting feminist research projects. As feminist researchers who have both had menstrual cycles since girlhood, we feel it is important to include our experiences with the *Care and Keeping* manual in our analysis. Put differently, we use our own experiences to show how our relationships with menstruation, and more largely, puberty, were materialized through reading *Care and Keeping* as girls.

Hannah received *Care and Keeping* as her first puberty manual. Hannah and her mom would read through the book together, and when she had her first menstrual cycle that year, Hannah felt much less scared than some of her peers about the many new sensations. Particularly, the images of growing breast tissue stuck in her mind for years as she was teased for being an “early bloomer.” *Care and Keeping* served as a reminder that the things happening in her body were supposed to be happening.

Melissa clearly remembers getting *Care and Keeping* one Christmas when she was on the brink of puberty. She read the book constantly and remembers feeling a sense of authority over her body because she could guess at the things that would eventually happen to it. One morning in fifth grade, Melissa put on her favorite

navy blue knee-high socks to wear to school with a plaid skirt (like the girls in the 1994 film *Clueless*). As she pulled on her socks, she felt a ripple of tiny shocks up her shins only to discover that the socks were pulling at the long leg hairs that had developed seemingly overnight. But because she had religiously read *Care and Keeping* she felt prepared for this moment, and rather than being scared and disgusted with her own body she was excited by the sign that she was growing up. Later, that same year, Melissa experienced her first period. With her mother out of town when it happened, she took solace in *Care and Keeping* because it contained such a wealth of information about how to navigate a menstrual cycle.

While not representative of all girlhood experiences with menstruation and puberty, our examples show the onto-epistemological relationship¹⁰ we each had with *Care and Keeping*. We were able to navigate the material realities of menstruation and puberty through the information presented to us in the manual. Further, while both of our experiences show that even though the manual was no stand-in for the connections we sought with our mothers, the manual was there to inform us in times when our mothers were unable to give us their versions of menstrual knowledge.

Additionally, in a recent class taught by Hannah, the students were discussing their first experiences with sexual education, and every young woman identified *Care and Keeping* as a central text for developing an understanding of their own body. Hannah brought a copy to the next class session, and the students stayed after to carefully look through each page and share stories about how it affected them. Many of the students noted that their schools did not have any formal puberty or sexual health education—*Care and Keeping* was all they had. Given the current state of reproductive rights and the removal of funding for sexual health education in public schools, trustworthy, inclusive puberty and menstruation manuals are more important than ever.

The Future of Girlhood and Menstruation Manuals

As we argue throughout this article, meanings of girlhood emerge alongside complex material-discursive ecologies, and that has only become more apparent in our current landscape of reproductive health. Contemporary menstruation now involves even more educational sources and diffracted agents—tracking apps, social media influencers intent on instructing others on how to “fix your period,” and new menstrual management technologies in the booming Femtech¹¹ field, to name a few. The *intra-activity* present in the lived experiences of menstruators does not exist in isolation and is not fixed. As a result, we ask future scholars to consider how the meanings of girlhood and menstruation have changed within an increasingly digital and technological environment. For example, in our initial analysis, we looked at a fifth manual—the *Girlology, Inc.* app. Truth be told, we were both overwhelmed by the sheer number of resources presented for girls and their mothers within the app. Because of the amount of information in the app, we decided to shift it out of

10 The term onto-epistemological is a Baradian neologism that refers to the inseparability of ontology (ways of being) and epistemology (ways of knowing). We use this term to show how menstruation manuals act as apparatuses that actively participate in the ongoing co-production of both knowledge and being.

11 The Femtech industry is a multi-million dollar industry that has seen major growth since the term was coined by Ida Tin, the Danish entrepreneur who founded Clue, a popular fertility and menstrual tracking app. We note the origin of Femtech because of its specific tie to menstruation.

our main analysis and instead consider how it offers us a picture of what girlhood looks like in our current moment. On the *Girlology* website, it states, “Girlhood doesn’t come with a guide, so we built one for you” (Girlology). This statement shows how finding information about menstruation now requires very little effort. The Girlology app is available on personal devices like smartphones and tablets, and has a web platform. Once the app is set up, it is easy for girls to access it without supervision or direction from parents. Accessing health information is neither solely reliant on family and community channels of learning nor on traditional institutions. Instead, it is even further diffracted through the use of digital technologies.

Young menstruators are balancing breadth and depth of information, unlike anything we have seen before. For instance, the *Girlology* app contains hundreds of videos addressing countless facets of menstruation, from a range of menstrual management technologies to a series discussing menstrual illnesses and how to talk with a physician. We argue that as technologies and circulation strategies shift, it is important to continually consider the broad implications within these manuals and their potential to continue reifying strict personal responsibility practices, reliance on institutional systems, and entrenched gender essentialism. We also argue that an overabundance of information is not necessarily better for girls. Instead, what matters is ensuring that information about menstruation is accurate, accessible, and free of outdated cultural influence that positions menstruation as shameful.

We close our article with a call for more scholarship that not only takes a material-discursive perspective of menstruation more broadly but also for more scholarship that features girlhood experiences related to menstruation. More specifically, scholarship in rhetorical theory and technical communication about girlhood is virtually non-existent. In these fields, we are accustomed to posing research questions about the implications of technical documentation related to automotive repair (Kimball), workplace communication (Randazzo), and medical surgeries (Frost and Eble) to name a few; however, we have not yet explored similar research questions about menstruation-related documentation for people of all genders. Some closely aligned scholarship provides a small yet strong foundation to build from. For example, Marika Seigel’s work with pregnancy manuals, a *Peitho* special issue about *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (DeCaglio and De Hertogh), and our own dissertations (Stone; Taylor) are important scholarly additions to the subject; but there is a dearth in rhetorical work about menstruation broadly and from the perspective of girls and young women specifically. Hence, it is our hope that this article, and more largely the special issue in which it appears, provides a valuable contribution to the rhetorical perspectives of menstruation and girlhood studies.

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