

The Portrayal of PMS on Television Sitcoms

Since television was introduced to the American public in 1939 (Levine, 1998, p.20), the portrayal of women's issues has evolved tremendously. Topics that once could not even be alluded to, such as sex and pregnancy, are now common focuses of dramas, comedies and talk shows. These changes can be attributed to increased education, equal rights, women's liberation, and the constant attempts of writers, directors, and networks to push the limits of what may be seen or heard on television.

Situation comedies or sitcoms are by definition humorous, but over the years many have addressed serious topics in order to educate while entertaining. Sitcoms have shown episodes dealing with formerly taboo or sensitive issues from rape to menopause, sexual harassment, drug and alcohol addiction, depression, suicide, homosexuality, and domestic violence. In the midst of light-hearted laughter, audiences have been educated on the topics of chronic fatigue syndrome, Alzheimer's disease, multiple sclerosis, breast cancer, and impotence. Writers have created scripts that manage to portray the pain and severity of these issues while wrapping them in a delicate coat of sensitive humor. Audiences have cried and laughed and learned.

Changes can be seen on commercials as well as in television programs. In the past, companies placed advertising restraints on their own products in order to not upset viewers. The restrictions were described in a section of *Notes for Guidance on Television Advertising* called *A Question of Taste* (Independent TeleWeb). For example, regarding underwear commercials, the 1964 code stated "The use of a live model to illustrate the movements of a garment is permissible, provided that the wearer is completely blacked out, and showed a black background. Close-ups of foundation garments worn by live models are not, however, to be allowed. In these cases dummies should be used. Any sales features which the advertiser wishes to emphasize should be portrayed diagrammatically." Women's underwear was shown on headless mannequins. The ban on live models was lifted in 1971 but in commercials aired as late as 1978, some women's undergarments were still modeled over a bodysuit or on a model of a torso. Today the female body is not hidden from viewers and live models are the norm.

Perhaps the most significant changes can be seen in commercials for female health-care products which used to be completely banned from television. The guidelines listed in the 1964 code of *A Question of Taste* stated:

Owing to the possibility of causing offence or embarrassment to viewers, products offered particularly in relation to feminine hygiene and feminine disorders are unsuitable for television advertising, and the following points should be noted: (1) The advertising of products intended for the relief of menstrual pain, menopausal symptoms etc., cannot be accepted; (2) Advertising for pads, tampons, etc., cannot be accepted; (3) Care must be

taken to see that advertisements for analgesics, sedatives, health beverages and any other appropriate products cannot be construed either visually or verbally as offering the product for the treatment of feminine disorders; and (4) References to the use of antiseptics and similar products for the purpose of feminine hygiene are not acceptable. (Independent TeleWeb)

The ban on commercials for feminine hygiene products was lifted in 1972 and networks ran the ads primarily during daytime viewing hours. Networks received numerous complaints regarding the ads, mostly from women arguing that the topic was "too personal." Although commercials became permissible, products were advertised in a format that made little or no reference to their usage. For example, a commercial for *Dismiss*, a disposable douche, featured a woman who happily claimed she had found a "feminine and delicate" way to "feel so fresh, feminine and nice" but she didn't elaborate on the secret to her success (Adult 70's TV). In other ads, women huddled over cups of tea, exchanging whispered advice on how to feel clean and reduce itching in some unnamed body area. Today women appear in commercials speaking out about various female health issues ranging from yeast infections and genital herpes to the enhanced sexual pleasure offered by specialty condoms.

Menstrual products are the topic of a wide evolution in ads, and yet, accurate media representations of menstruation are still rare (Kissling, 2002). Commercials for sanitary napkins and tampons premiered in the 1970's but did not show the actual products; only the box appeared on the screen. An ad for *New Freedom* sanitary napkins aired in 1976 played a catchy jingle which asked "Are you a *New Freedom* lady, are you a *New Freedom* girl? it's what you want to be!" but never stated the proposed use of the product (Adult 70's TV). These ads claimed comfort and absorbance (though absorbance of what was never mentioned) and happy women danced, hiked, swam, and rode bikes in white pants, the unstated assumption being that the right product could lead to a wonderful, active social life. It is from these commercials that the classic joke emerged:

A boy is with his mother in the store and asks if he can buy a box of tampons. When the mother inquires why he would want them, he replies, "Because I want to go swimming and hiking and bike riding like the lady in the commercial does."

In the past decade, commercials began showing the actual sanitary pad and how well it absorbed various liquids (never red) that were poured on them, similar to the liquids absorbed in diaper and paper towel commercials. Tampons also got their day on the screen, usually in their pretty pink applicators unless, also exhibiting their absorbency of the mysterious blue fluid. The first television commercial to use the word "period" aired in 1983 during daytime soap operas (www.mum.org). Again, the networks received numerous letters of complaint, predominately from women. Within the past year, an ad for maxi-pads appeared which uses the word "period" and shows a red ball, representing the punctuation mark, the period, bouncing around the screen and the pad. The most

straightforward commercial yet is the recent tampon commercial where a couple are enjoying a day out on a rowboat and it springs a leak. While the man looks for something to fill the leak, the woman has a brilliant idea - she takes out a tampon, pulls it out of the applicator and with it, plugs the hole in the boat. The viewer not only watches how the tampon opens, expands and absorbs the water, but also witnesses the tampon lodged in the hole with the string emerging. This is, perhaps, the truest commercial for a menstrual product ever aired on American television.

And what has been the evolution of Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS)? PMS is a well-known term in the media. There is a multitude of commercials for products promising relief for bloating, cramping, irritability, and other distressing symptoms. Along with growing awareness of a severe type of PMS, premenstrual dysphoric disorder or PMDD, commercials for prescription drugs have also been on television, discussing the disorder in a well-deserved serious tone. Kissling (2002) examined the representation of menarche, a female's first menstrual period, in film and television, and found numerous television episodes on sitcoms, dramas, and animated shows, with educational and sensitively portrayals. PMS, however, has not been included in the list of issues to be seriously dealt with on sitcoms. Since the first allusion to PMS was made on television in the 1970's, not much has changed.

Premenstrual syndrome is a real medical disorder that involves a range of symptoms, behavioral, emotional, and physical. It is a serious condition for a large percentage of women, affecting their quality of life every month. The dominant model of PMS is a medical one, a genuine illness caused by a physical malfunction in the production of hormones, especially estrogen and progesterone, during the menstrual cycle (Martin, 1988, p. 162). The type and intensity of symptoms vary from woman to woman and from cycle to cycle. In many, the symptoms are significant enough to disturb normal functioning; in others, the symptoms are disabling (Bogin & Fetcher, 1999, p.235). While the most common complaints are mood alteration and psychological effects, there is also a wide range of physical symptoms.

List of Premenstrual Syndrome Symptoms

	System	Symptoms
Psychological	Emotional	Agitation, anger, nervousness, irritability, insomnia, depression, severe fatigue. Mood swings, lack of sex drive, tension
	Behavioral	Difficulty in concentrating, lack of control, lethargy, crying, food cravings, lowered work performance, avoidance of

		social activities, decreased efficiency, forgetfulness
Physical	Fluid Retention	Edema, transient weight gain, scanty urination, breast fullness and pain
	Neurological & vascular	Headache, vertigo, syncope or fainting, abnormal sensations in the extremities, easy bruising, cardiac palpitations, epilepsy, migraine, hot flashes, blurring vision
	Gastrointestinal	Constipation, nausea, vomiting, changes in appetite
	Skin	Acne, inflammation, aggravation of existing skin disorders
	Respiratory	Asthma, allergies, infection
	Eyes	Asthma, allergies, infection
	Other	Pelvic heaviness or pressure, backache, cramps, general aches and pains

On sitcoms, women with PMS only seem to suffer the emotional and behavioral symptoms of the disorder. They are irritable, nasty, short-tempered and difficult to deal with, especially for the men who have the misfortune of being within a fifty-mile radius of them during this time. Physical symptoms seem to be limited to bloating and specific food cravings. This reductive, stereotyped view of PMS allows many scenes of women screaming for chocolate or salt while at the same time crying that their jeans are tight and that they look fat. The symptoms of PMS are portrayed on sitcoms as changes in character and personality rather than in physiological status, which leads to an increase in blaming women for their symptoms by physicians as well as by family members (Martin, 1988, p. 163). PMS is not portrayed as a women's illness, so much as an inconvenience to men. On sitcoms, it is the men who suffer from PMS as they are the inevitable targets of the women's fury. In over three decades of television, the portrayal of PMS as a Jekyll and Hyde personality has not changed. Perhaps the biggest change is that current characters on television actually say "PMS" whereas thirty years ago, it was "understood" by the women's "irrational" behavior.

The social science literature is sorely lacking on the representation of PMS in television and so several of the examples which follow are pulled from my memory and hours of watching television. Other examples are taken from television trivia books and web sites. It is believed the first allusion to PMS on a television sitcom occurred in 1973 during the third season of "All in the Family."

In an episode entitled "The Battle of the Month," Gloria argues with her mother, Edith, for not standing up to her father, Archie:

The writers clearly established that Gloria's irritation stemmed from premenstrual stress—a character motivation that brought more outraged mail than any other episode in the show's history. Writer Michael Ross defended his script when he told interviewer John Brady, "We didn't do the menstrual episode for shock value. We needed Gloria irritated to the point where she would blow up at Edith. In fact, we got the idea from Sally Struthers herself." (Waldron, 1977, p. 208)

"All in the Family" was famous for tackling sensitive and controversial issues such as prejudice, racism, sexism, and the general ignorance of many "average" American families. This show was, in fact, also the first sitcom to deal with the issue of menopause in an episode that aired in 1972. It is noteworthy that while the words *premenstrual syndrome* or *period* were never uttered, it was understood that Gloria's bad mood stemmed from her "monthly battle" as indicated by the episode's title. It is ironic that the episode sparked such outrage and controversy among the viewers in an era during which the women's liberation movement was quite active.

A decade later, in 1983, the sitcom "Taxi" aired its series finale after a successful run of five seasons. The episode, entitled "Simka's Monthlies," presented Simka (the character was described as a "mountain person" from an unnamed Eastern European country) acting very bizarrely, isolating herself from family and friends, screaming for no apparent reason, and surrounding herself with dozens of bags of salty potato chips. In one scene, Simka is screaming that she needs salt and grasps a bag of chips like an angry dog with a bone. Her behavior is inconvenient because she keeps canceling appointments with Immigration and she is at risk of being deported. After her behavior stumps all the men in the cast, Elaine, the show's female cab driver, suggests Simka might be suffering from a condition known as premenstrual syndrome. Elaine knows about this because she has a friend who also gets it. There is no suggestion that Elaine ever gets PMS, which may have threatened her character's image as the sexy, desired cabbie. Simka, on the other hand, was a character marked by quiriness, foreignness, and other strange behavior. Having Simka develop PMS only added to her strangeness without the worry of marring the fantasy of the ideal woman portrayed by Elaine.

"Married with Children" is a sitcom that dared to push the envelope regarding how families are portrayed. Barbs and insults are common and the show became popular as many viewers felt they could better identify with this Chicago family than with the happy TV families on shows like "The Brady Bunch" or "Leave It to Beaver." In 1987, in the pilot episode, the lead character Al tells his friend Steve that PMS means "Pummel Men's Scrotums." The next year, "Married with Children" aired an episode called "The Camping Show," in which the Bundy family go on a camping trip with their friends, Steve and Marcy. While trapped in a cabin by a ferocious bear, the three women, Peg Bundy, Marcy, and Peg's daughter, Kelly, all get PMS. In the episode, the three women sit huddled at a

table, snarling and growling at the men. They want chocolate and they want it now! The men are so afraid of the women that they willingly risk leaving the cabin, choosing to risk the fury of the bear rather than the three menstruating women.

This episode was originally called "A Period Piece" because the writers wanted to demonstrate how women who live with each other for extended periods of time often menstruate at the same time, as well as how animals react to women's menstruation. The FOX censors, who had already pushed the limits with this series and had dealt with the backlash of several controversial episodes, worried that women would be offended by the title (even though the titles of the episodes never appeared at the beginning of the show) and asked writers to rename the script (<http://www.tvtome.com>).

Twelve years later, in 2000 - the 21st century! -, the Emmy-award winning show "Everybody Loves Raymond" aired an episode in their fourth season called "Bad Moon Rising." In this episode, Debra is on a rampage, yelling and screaming at Raymond. He discusses Debra's behavior with his male friends and they suggest he get her some medication to ease "her" distress. They also suggest he tape-record her so she can hear what she sounds like when she gets into these premenstrual moods. When Raymond gives Debra the medicine, she reads on the box that the pills will help her bloating, cramping, and irritability, and she becomes angry. She demands, "What about bitchiness, Ray? There's nothing in here for bitchiness." Cowering, Raymond replies, "I think you need a prescription for that." Debra shows Ray's mother the "magic pills" that will suddenly make "Ray's clothes jump into the hamper" and "Frank's toenails fly into the garbage can" and Raymond ends up getting slapped in the face by his mother for his insensitivity.

In an unusual twist from most PMS episodes, Ray, the husband, acknowledges the PMS, even if it is only the emotional symptoms, while Debra is in full denial that she goes through any changes at all. When Ray plays the tape for her where she is screaming at him for not emptying the lint tray in the dryer, Debra bursts into tears and accuses Ray of not being supportive during her "lady's days." She asks Ray if he has ever considered giving her a hug and he replies, "This is not huggable." Later when he does try to comfort Debra with a hug, she responds by pushing him into the bookcase. At the end of the episode, Debra agrees to take the pills but Ray is too eager to give them to her and she has another mood swing, leaving Ray alone on the couch. Patricia Heaton won an Emmy for her performance in this episode.

In 2002, "My Wife and Kids," a sitcom that features an African-American family, aired an episode entitled "The Road Trip." Jay, the mother, organizes a trip to Paul Revere's house so the family can learn about American history. Michael, the father, is not excited about the trip because both his wife and his daughter have PMS. He warns his son about "that time of the month" and describes how men

suffer during this time. The trip is filled with problems, including Jay's complaints about her weight, the daughter's whining, and multiple stops for the rest room. By the time the family gets to Paul Revere's house, it's closed.

The sitcom episodes described above have several things in common. First, they are funny. There is no denying that the scripts are well-written and the acting is hilarious. Second, they all portray women with PMS as only suffering from the emotional symptoms. The women are angry, cranky, and irritable. Characters don't complain about pain or cramps or any of the physical symptoms suffered by so many women. By not focusing on the physical aspects of PMS, both the cause and the symptoms, the illness is more likely to be attributed to the dispositions of women than to their physiology. Not only does this take the focus off the medical etiology but it discourages seeking medical treatments.

Third, in these episodes, the focus is on the men's sufferings rather than the on the women who have the illness. Societal roles place maintaining family harmony on the women. Their moods must not inconvenience others. Women end up receiving blame rather than empathy or support for their medical illness. This is in contrast to men, whose problems are usually attributed to outside circumstances and other people (Martin, 1988). This creates a double-bind for women. During their periods they are blamed for the behavioral and emotional symptoms induced by hormonal changes. On the other hand, women's bad moods are often blamed on PMS, regardless of whether or not they are menstruating. Thus, negative expressions of anger or sadness are not validated. Troubled women get blamed for their PMS and PMS gets blamed for women's troubles.

Finally, social learning theory states that people construct their beliefs and attitudes according to the scripts with which they are provided. The more people identify with a character, the more likely they are to imitate that character (Levine, 1995, p. 30). Thus, when television sitcoms misrepresent PMS, people develop inaccurate ideologies about the reality of women and the illness.

The portrayal of PMS on television sitcoms sparks several questions: why is there not more advocacy for serious and sensitive coverage of women's issues on television? With so many female writers, actors, and directors, why aren't they treating this issue with more sensitivity? Why haven't sitcoms evolved at the same rate as dramas, animated shows, or commercials, as discussed in Kissling's (2002) study? Most importantly, how does the portrayal of PMS as something that makes women "behave badly" impact on public perception of the illness? Further research needs to be done in this area. Television sitcoms need to catch up to their counterparts in drama and commercials and address the issue that PMS is no laughing matter.

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