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Selling Shame: Feminine Hygiene Advertising and the Boundaries of Permissiveness in 1970s Britain

Daisy Payling

ABSTRACT

This article uses a 1972 television advertising campaign for Femfresh vaginal deodorants and the backlash against it to explore how women grappled with the permissive society in their bathrooms and living rooms. It uses women's magazines and the business archives of Femfresh to trace the popularity of vaginal deodorants in the early 1970s and show how advertising for the product played on women's fears of undesirability and shame about their bodies during a period of changing sexual mores. It details how feminist campaigners Women in Media (WiM) constructed a campaign against vaginal deodorants and how adverts for the product became linked in press coverage to trial television adverts for Lil-lets tampons, before analysing complaints made about both product categories collected by the Independent Broadcasting Authority. The contested terrain of feminine hygiene advertising adds nuance to historical understandings of debates around 'permissiveness', suggesting that, for some women, frank discussions of bodily functions were not inherently 'indecent', but rather had a correct time and place. WiM's campaign and the complaints collected illustrate how women of varying political leanings utilised conceptions of shame to exert limited control over the extent to which feminine bodies were up for public consumption in 1970s Britain.

In 1992, a seventy-year-old housewife in Belfast sat down to answer Mass Observation's Personal Hygiene Directive. Asked to comment on deodorants and whether her habits had changed over the years, she reminisced about a trip to America she had taken thirty years before with her two daughters.

> We used to go round the pharmacists and have a good laugh at the huge lines of shelves filled with these strange things which we had never heard of … foot sprays, vaginal sprays, body sprays and even throat sprays … – we couldn't believe it. Gradually they have crept all over the place but I wonder if they are all good.[1]

Shortly after this woman's trip, vaginal sprays, vaginal deodorants, or intimate deodorants as they were also known, emerged on the market in the UK, hitting shelves in 1963. Brands like Femfresh, Bidex and FDS (Feminine Deodorant Spray) soon developed a range of products, from dry sprays and talcum powders to washes and tissue wipes, of which the latter could be kept in a handbag for a midday freshen up of the vulva. As the market grew and vaginal deodorants were advertised more frequently

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and with greater fanfare in women's magazines and on television in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this housewife was not the only person to wonder whether or not these products were 'all good'.

In the early 1970s, Women in Media (WiM) – an organisation of female journalists loosely aligned with the Women's Liberation Movement – started a campaign against vaginal deodorant advertising in lieu of being able to halt production or ban sales of the sprays altogether. Their campaign drew attention to the unpleasant physical reactions that some women experienced on using these products; stinging, sensitivity rashes and urinary tract infections. They highlighted what they saw as the adverse psychological effects of vaginal deodorants and their advertising, in which a coded language of 'freshness' linked femininity with shame and appealed to women's fear of undesirability and embarrassment around bodily functions like perspiration, menstruation and discharge. Due to their connections to print media, WiM's campaign against vaginal deodorant advertising focused primarily on television advertising, seen as an easier target. Their lobbying attempts and letters to newspapers were swept up in coverage stimulated by the decision of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) – the UK regulatory body for commercial television – to allow the tampon brand Lil-lets to run a three-month advertising trial in the summer of 1972.[2] The advertising of vaginal deodorants and sanitary protection on television became inextricably linked in reporting. WiM's campaign, the wider media discussion sparked by the Lil-lets ad and the adverts themselves provoked women of varying ages and political dispositions to write to the IBA to complain about adverts for both products throughout the summer until the decision was made, in October 1972, to ban advertising for vaginal deodorants and sanitary protection from television as a matter of good taste or decency.

This article uses this incident – the adverts, the campaign and the complaints – to examine the emotional and spatial dimensions of how women attempted to locate themselves and their bodies within a changing, 'permissive' society.[3] It contextualises the growing popularity of vaginal deodorants and details the ensuing backlash that brands like Femfresh received in the early 1970s. Using ads placed in mainstream women's magazines like *Woman*, *Woman's Own*, *She* and *Nova*, the business archives of Femfresh, the archives of WiM and the IBA, it explores how vaginal deodorants were marketed to women in the early 1970s and how women responded to that marketing, with their money and with their complaints.

Complaints could broadly be separated into two types, both based on understandings of shame. WiM's complaints focused on vaginal deodorants and their advertising. They argued that both the product and the ads instilled within women an unnecessary amount of shame around their bodily functions. They claimed that shame around vaginal odour could be both psychologically and physically harmful as it could prevent young women from having the confidence to pursue relationships and might cause women to feel too embarrassed to seek medical attention for malodorous discharge, instead choosing to disguise it, preventing diagnosis of gynaecological issues. Other women, writing on behalf of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association and under their own steam, complained differently. Their complaints were more likely to link vaginal deodorants and sanitary protection and take issue, not with the products themselves, but with the fact that they were advertised on television and, therefore, shown to mixed-gender audiences. These women wrote vividly of the shame and

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embarrassment they felt having their intimate bodily functions projected into their living rooms and discussed openly in front of family and visiting guests. For the most part, these women positioned themselves in relation to changing sexual mores by arguing that they were not prudish, but that the semi-public and mixed gender space of the sitting room was an inappropriate location for content aimed at solely at women.

Shame is a complex feeling. It encompasses aspects of shyness, embarrassment, self-consciousness, modesty, humiliation, mortification, low self-esteem, indignity and degradation. It can be 'isolating or individualising', but is also 'essentially social … occasioned by the regard of another even if the other is internalized'.[4] Queer theorists and scholars of affect theory have posited that shame can be 'productive, even or especially when it feels bad'.[5] In their exploration of affect, Gregg and Seigworth suggest that attending to the 'hard and fast materialities' of everyday life can illustrate moments where 'persistent, repetitious practices of power can simultaneously provide a body … with predicaments and potentials for realising a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm'.[6] Elspeth Probyn applies a similar lens to shame, exploring how understanding and reflecting on experiences of shame can 'compel … a different approach to envisioning social life' and open up spaces for new kinds of political action.[7]

Taken together, the WiM campaign and the subsequent complaints from members of the public offer insights into how shame and embarrassment coloured some women's relationships to their bodies and bodily knowledge in an era of women's liberation, burgeoning permissiveness and taboo-breaking around sexual topics, bringing to the fore the 'affective dimension' of changing social mores.[8] The complaints discussed in this article suggest that, for some women at least, their expressions of shame and embarrassment were conditioned not just by feminine hygiene products or their advertising, but by the making of private matters public. The contested terrain of vaginal deodorant and sanitary protection advertising adds nuance to historical understandings of debates around 'permissiveness' in the 1970s, suggesting that for some women frank discussions of bodily functions were not inherently 'indecent', but rather had a correct time and place. The campaign and the complaints collected illustrate how women of varying political leanings utilised conceptions of shame to exert limited control over the extent to which feminine bodies were up for public consumption in 1970s Britain. Rather than envision a society where women's bodies could exist without shame, WiM and other complainants used their expressions of embarrassment to take feminine hygiene products off their television screens and keep this particular cause of shame out of their living rooms.

Femininity, freshness and changing social mores

Developed in the 1960s, vaginal deodorants were a new technological response to a much longer concern; that of feminine hygiene. From regular washing, to douching and liberally using talcum powder, women had a variety of methods for maintaining 'freshness' before the wipes and aerosol sprays created specifically as intimate deodorants. One Mass Observer, born in 1947, remembered wondering about her mother's 'special flannel that hung under the sink, separate from the face flannel', the purpose of which she claimed to only fully understand once she became sexually active.[9] Another recalled buying a douche when she married in 1951, only for her doctor to

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tell her to 'throw the damned thing away … a normal healthy body could look after itself'.[10] In 1964, the *British Medical Journal* warned doctors treating pregnant women for discharge that douching should not to be permitted and instead told them to advise women to bathe and apply powder to stay 'comfortable'.[11] By this time, British pharmacies were selling Femfresh vaginal deodorants which took the form of scent-impregnated 'towelettes' in sealed sachets. Shortly after, a Swiss company called Bidex combined an anti-bacterial agent with an emollient, a scent and a propellant into an aerosol spray.[12] In 1966, American firm Alberto-Culver developed FDS (Feminine Deodorant Spray), a similar product, with Femfresh developing a range of sprays soon after. The vaginal, intimate or feminine deodorant market soon proliferated, offering consumers an array of sprays, talcum powders, towels and tissues to be used on the 'outer vaginal area' in conjunction with regular washing.[13]

These products proved popular. By 1970, 15 *per cent* of women were using vaginal deodorants, rising to over 30 *per cent* in the sixteen to twenty-four age group.[14] By 1973, market research suggested that 39 *per cent* of British women aged thirteen to fifty had used a vaginal deodorant at least once in their lives, and that 21 *per cent* were current users. Femfresh was the brand leader, with 78 *per cent* of those who had ever used a vaginal deodorant opting to use a Femfresh product. With 42 *per cent* of users falling into social class ABC1, Femfresh's primary target market was 'younger, upper class women'.[15] At thirty pence for a sixty gram aerosol spray or twenty sachets, Femfresh products were, in the words of one woman surveyed, 'not exactly cheap'.[16] To put this cost in perspective, a woman working as a hairdresser in 1970 earned roughly £11 a week.[17] In 1971, Boots chemists sold Mum Rollette under-arm deodorant for twenty-six pence and No.7 Wild Pearl Lipstick for thirty-six pence. Sitting between these items, vaginal deodorants priced between thirty pence and forty-five pence could be considered small luxuries.[18]

Nevertheless, a sizable minority of women chose to spend their money on products which were expensive and deemed unnecessary, even harmful, by doctors who witnessed effects including irritation from sensitivity reactions and, occasionally, urinary tract infections.[19] Doctors and magazine journalists blamed their popularity on a 'modern' desire among a younger generation 'not to offend'.[20] Bathing practices had undergone a quiet revolution in 1960s Britain. At the start of the decade, fifteen million Britons lived in homes without baths. Twenty *per cent* of Manchester's residents had no hot water tap at all. By 1971, however, only 12 *per cent* of households lacked an inside toilet, a kitchen sink, a hand wash basin and a bath or shower with hot and cold water supply.[21] Easy access to hot water meant that practices of bathing one or twice a week gave way to patterns of more regular showering.[22] Yet this did not necessarily mean that people felt more clean. Writing about British bathrooms in 1976, architect Alexander Kira noted that that some women reported being unable '"to get as clean" in the shower' as in a bath. Kira speculated that these women were referring to 'genital cleanliness' as the design of showers made it 'virtually impossible for a woman to cleanse herself properly there'.[23] Some women may have felt that washing was not enough. One Mass Observer, who had used Femfresh before being warned off it, recalled a number of incidents in her working life 'years' before when she felt that her own and her colleagues' freshness might have been compromised. She surmised: '*very* nasty smells can waft up from unmentionable places'.[24] As more women

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worked longer hours outside the home throughout the 1970s and 1980s, cultivating professional identities, she was likely not alone in wishing for a 'a healthy spray to combat odd smells down below'.

Elizabeth Shove explains how 'private habits' – like washing – are 'constructed as people steer their own course through culturally and temporally specific landscapes of legitimating discourse'.[25] Britain's new bathrooms changed this landscape, but so did changing social mores around sexual intimacy. Post-war Britain saw a significant shift in sexual culture. The availability of the contraceptive pill to married women on the NHS at the start of the 1960s, followed towards the end of the decade by successive legislative acts governing access to abortion, decriminalising homosexuality and loosening grounds for divorce, contributed to a sense of greater sexual freedoms.[26] Understandings of sex as a source of pleasure rather than shame were reinforced by forms of sexualised consumerism which blurred the genres of pornography and sexual instruction, and were reflected in a wider culture of permissiveness.[27] Women's magazines contributed to this culture, printing adverts which included nude images of women alongside regular features on sex and problem pages which delved into physical and emotional issues related to sexual practices.[28] At the same time, many young women still felt 'ignorant and ill-equipped', left without answers by mothers who found it difficult to discuss 'taboo' topics and an education system which focused on the reproduction of animals up until the mid-1970s.[29] Many young women continued to believe that penetrative sex was only appropriate within marriage or long-term relationships, but, by the 1970s, having boyfriends and being sexually active was also increasingly associated with 'being "cool"'. Hannah Charnock argues that adolescent sexuality became 'more visible' as young people 'sought to "display" their heterosexuality' to benefit from 'the social currency associated with sexual desirability and experience'.[30] Within this shifting cultural landscape, sex could be both aspirational and anxiety-inducing for young women.

Advertisers of vaginal deodorants played on interlinked anxieties around sex and hygiene, designing ads to appeal to young women's fears and desires, and placing them in magazines they read. Shove notes that the history of cleanliness is 'a history of … successful commercialisation'.[31] Irma Kurtz, writing in *Nova*, certainly blamed the 'Great Salesmen' for the spread of vaginal deodorants. She instructed readers to 'take a stand at the door to our vaginas' on the last page of a magazine that featured ads for the products.[32] Kurtz was not the only journalist to undercut the messaging of advertising. *Woman's Own* health columnist Ruth Martin used her column to criticise vaginal deodorants as early as 1968.[33] Magazines harboured 'diversity, inconsistency, contradiction and tension' within their pages, leaving readers to negotiate conflicting messages themselves; weighing up the authoritative voice of columnists and the impact of repeated advertising.[34] Whether adverts created or responded to social mores, they reflected a notion of normality to audiences of millions. Between 1968 and 1974, adverts for vaginal deodorants proliferated in mainstream women's magazines, popping up like daisies each spring and populating pages all through the summer months. They appeared in weeklies like *Woman* and *Woman's Own*, which spoke to housewives in a comforting and authoritative tone, and in monthlies aimed at the more 'liberated' woman, like the outspoken and 'vulgar' *She* magazine and the 'aspirational' *Nova*, which – written for 'women who didn't read other women's magazines'

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– combined witty snippets with dense 5,000-word essays on social issues.[35] In 1964, over fifty million women read women's weekly magazines and thirty four million read monthly titles.[36] It is estimated that five out of six women saw a magazine every week.[37] In 1969, *Woman*'s editor claimed that around eight million women and two million men read the magazine each week.[38] *She* amassed a regular circulation of more than 300,000 in the 1960s and *Nova* a small but stable readership of 160,000.[39] High numbers of women continued to read magazines throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and product manufacturers monitored readership to ensure the best bang for their advertising buck.[40]

Adverts for vaginal deodorants consistently and explicitly positioned femininity as both problem and solution, and often intertwined notions of femininity, sexuality and shame. As one Femfresh ad put it, if 'the most feminine part' of a woman generated 'odour and discomfort', then only 'the most feminine deodorant' could solve the issue.[41] This kind of coded language was common. In July 1969, Femfresh produced an advert that stoked intimate anxieties. The full page, black and white advert was dominated by a half-page close-up photograph of a smiling, young, white woman wearing a white, high-necked wedding dress and veil. Although 75 *per cent* of women marrying in England between 1971 and 1975 reported that they had had sex before marriage, for many sex continued 'to be related to an eventual marriage', and the wedding night was highly suggestive of the loss of virginity.[42] The text accompanying the image reassured the reader 'you'll feel really fresh. You'll know you're really feminine', creating a link between freshness, virginity and femininity.[43] 'Fresh' spoke to more than a 'subjective feeling of cleanliness'.[44] As Kate Kane explains, 'freshness opposes rottenness'. It implies a temporary 'natural pristine condition'.[45] The manufacturers of vaginal deodorants equated freshness with gentle floral scents. They avoided anything too powerful – which might bring to mind the centuries-old association of perfumed genitalia with sex work – or too suggestive of flavour and, therefore, oral sex.[46] Vaginal deodorants, their scents and their adverts 'repositioned the treated vagina … as newly sexually available, a medicated return to the imagined innocuous scent of … virginal youth'.[47] By linking freshness, femininity and marriage in its adverts, Femfresh hitched its product to societal norms around sex.

Adverts like these played on the notion of the 'nice girl'. The 'nice girl' trope was theorised by feminist scholar Greer Litton Fox in the late 1970s as 'a value construct that idealized femininity as "chaste, gentle, gracious, ingenuous, good, clean, kind, virtuous, noncontroversial, and above suspicion and reproach"'.[48] But, as Charnock explains, the idea of the 'nice girl' pre-dated Fox. She was a 'potent figure' in the personal testimonies of young women in the late 1960s and early 1970s as they negotiated sex in a society where pre-marital sex was becoming more visible but was still frowned upon. The understanding that 'nice girls didn't' provided a framework where sexual activity was an acknowledged option, but waiting until marriage was the most sensible choice. Kane argues that the 'ideology of freshness' used in feminine hygiene adverts defines 'any type of vaginal wetness as a pollution inimical to nice-girl femininity'.[49] In turn, these ads positioned vaginal deodorants as a restorative solution. FDS, a rival brand of vaginal deodorant, produced an advert in 1970 which explicitly suggested to readers that their product was a way of remaining 'nice' whilst engaging in sexual activity.

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In a full-page colour advert in *She*, FDS showed a naked, young, white, heterosexual couple embracing under the caption 'What your best boyfriend won't tell you'.[50] Other versions of the advert were published in *Woman* and *Woman's Own* with the text 'Something every woman should know'.[51] The couple were photographed from the waist up, averting their eyes from the viewer and each other with pensive expressions, suggestive of shame. The text accompanying the image addressed the reader directly: 'maybe you think you haven't the problem. Perhaps you don't. But it's surprising how many girls do'. It suggested that the reader may have a problem she was not aware of and explained how 'common' vaginal odour was. The language of the ad trod the line between the everyday necessity of vaginal deodorants and use on special occasions, mentioning menstruation, hot weather and sexual excitement as potential causes of odour. Throughout the twentieth century, ads for personal hygiene products often played on the notion that individuals were unaware of their own body odour and other people were too polite to tell them.[52] The FDS advert took it a step further than underarm deodorant ads by adding a layer of intimacy: this was not just about perspiration, it was about vaginal discharge encountered by a sexual partner. Sara Ahmed writes of shame that it 'requires a witness'. Moreover, one can only 'be shamed by … somebody whose view "matters"'.[53] The ad played on this sense of shame: 'wouldn't it be nicer, more considerate, to make sure you stay fresh in every way all day?'. Women could avoid this sense of shame and reclaim 'niceness' by using FDS. 'We only mention it to you, because we wouldn't want anyone else to. Especially your husband'.[54] By the end of the advert in *She* and the suggested sale and use of the product, the reader's 'best boyfriend' became her 'husband', removing the fear of shame and undesirability, and legitimising the sexual encounter.

Even manufactured needs, 'once established, acquired a life and a legitimacy of their own'.[55] Vaginal deodorant advertisers sought to make deodorant use part of women's everyday lives, not only during menstruation or in preparation for sexual activity. In the early 1970s, some brands began to move from adverts that provoked shame and anxiety around sexual encounters to those which imagined vaginal odour as an everyday embarrassment that needed an everyday solution. By 1971, deodorant brand Bidex had a campaign focused around the concept of 'Who uses Bidex?'; 'Girls like us' and 'Busy mums like us'.[56] Ads from this campaign showed women of different ages going about their daily lives; working, shopping, seeing friends and boyfriends, raising children and relaxing with their husbands. These ads described odour as an 'everyday risk'; a normal bodily function, but a source of embarrassment to be guarded against with the help of Bidex's expert 'Swiss gynaecologists'.[57] The shift within ad campaigns of odour from a situational problem to a normal part of everyday life did not represent a healthier or kinder attitude to women's bodies. Rather than positioning odour as an occasional issue it suggested to women that their bodies had the potential to cause embarrassment and shame at any time of the day, month or year. Through these ads deodorant brands aimed to increase profits by convincing women to use products daily rather than as an occasional luxury.

Femfresh in particular targeted this kind of campaign at adolescent girls aged thirteen to eighteen, hoping to instil a life-long habit in them. We can see this explicitly in an advert from 1972 in which a very young, white woman is depicted sitting with legs apart, staring straight at the camera, smiling. Split down the middle from head

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to toe, she is dressed half in school uniform and half completely naked. One of her breasts is fully on display. The camera's gaze looks up her skirt, the unclothed half of her genitals hidden by shadow. Text highlighted the role Femfresh should play in the transition from girlhood to womanhood; 'even when you've left your gymslip behind … you don't outgrow … the need for intimate freshness'.[58] The text explained that 'the more woman you are, the more you need Femfresh', explicitly linking the deodorant with a womanhood which was both feminine and desirable, and in need of careful management lest it be offensive to others. Young women were encouraged to form 'the Femfresh habit – you'll never grow out of it'. Femfresh's approach in this campaign presented odour as an expected part of womanhood. Whilst still relying on the shame inherent in such products and played on by earlier ads, it normalised vaginal odour as a problem shared by all women and solved individually by buying and using Femfresh.

Femfresh sought to place this ad in teenage magazines like *Honey*, *Petticoat* and *19*, and tracked mentions of their products in *Jackie,* but attempts to reach teenage consumers went beyond magazine advertising.[59] The 'fresh school of thought' magazine advert was part of a planned £100,000 marketing campaign that included a lecture kit for schoolchildren and a television ad that foregrounded adolescent knowledge and experience. Femfresh lecture kits included a booklet for teachers ('On being a woman'), twenty booklets aimed at pupils ('A fresh look at confidence'), and twenty sachets of Femfresh for pupils to sample. Mail outs were sent to 6,430 British schools encouraging teachers to buy the £1 kits to teach pupils 'to be confident about personal hygiene the unembarrassing way with Femfresh'.[60] The accompanying television ad, planned for the summer of 1972, was produced along similar lines. Built around the concept 'You ought to tell your mother the facts of life', the ad showed a teenage girl, Jill, explaining to her mother why she should use two deodorants, an underarm one and an intimate one.[61] In a format increasingly used by sanitary protection advertisers speaking to the teenage market, the ad reversed the traditional knowledge exchange between mother and daughter.[62] It depicted vaginal deodorants as a modern product for young women and their mothers alike: 'You want to try them both, Mum. They'll make you feel great'. In having Jill confidently explain to her mother what the product was for – 'Oh, Mummy, you should know by now. Femfresh is particularly for the most sensitive part of you, the vaginal area' – Femfresh aimed to sweep aside any sense of taboo.[63] Yet despite presenting a more confident young woman than many magazine ads, the Femfresh television ad provoked acute embarrassment in some viewers.

Kicking up a stink: WiM's campaign against vaginal deodorant advertising

Femfresh's 'You ought to tell your mother the facts of life' advert was trialled on London television in the summer of 1972. Although summer was the peak season for vaginal deodorants – to the extent that the public relations team managing the Femfresh account wished each other a 'steamy' August and September – the ad launched in a hostile climate.[64] Reports that the US Food and Drug Administration was investigating the use of hexachlorophene, a similar anti-bacterial agent to the chlorhexidine used in Femfresh deodorants, proliferated. At the same time, WiM launched a campaign against the advertising of vaginal deodorants on the grounds that they were physically and psychologically harmful.[65] WiM was made up of female journalists and women

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working in publishing and public relations who were concerned with their position as women who worked in media, but also with the portrayal of women more generally in the media. A broad-church organisation, which nevertheless had strong connections with the Women's Liberation Movement, WiM spent much of the 1970s and 1980s campaigning for better representation for women in media and to overturn unflattering and stereotypical portrayals of women in advertising especially. The campaign against vaginal deodorant advertising was an early offshoot of this much longer campaign. It attracted a diverse clutch of women including Mary Stott, out-going editor of the *Guardian* women's page; Mariella Novotny, a key player in the 1961 Profumo Affair; and actress-turned-journalist Jackie Forster (née Mackenzie) and her partner Barbara Todd, who, together, edited the lesbian newsletter *Sappho*.

WiM's Vaginal Deodorants Working Group first set their sights on television advertising as they acknowledged that tackling advertising in print media – where many more of them worked – was 'likely to be much more of a problem'.[66] They collected information from doctors and medical journals about vaginal deodorants, and from *Which* and *Ad Weekly* about the effect of advertising on sales and on women's perceptions of themselves. *Which* had reported in May 1972 that 'of the women who could pin down a particular reason for first worrying about vaginal smell … one in eight said – without prompting – that it was advertisements which had first made them worry'.[67] With the information they collected, WiM built a case against vaginal deodorants and their advertising, and began a lobbying campaign.

Galvanised by the Femfresh advert and an erroneous understanding that the IBA had newly authorised vaginal deodorant advertising on television (which had, in fact, been allowed since 1969), WiM wrote to Brian Young, Director General of the IBA, calling for its Advertising Advisory Committee to overturn the authorisation. In the letter, WiM cited medical opinion to argue that vaginal deodorants were unnecessary and dangerous, as not only had they caused irritation in some women, but they could mask odours resulting from conditions requiring medical attention. WiM also claimed that the advertising itself could be harmful. They wrote that the adverts were 'designed … to make some women ashamed that their sexual organs might be offensive to others'. This shame could 'prevent the success of their social and emotional experience'. They questioned why the IBA would allow 'the advertising of such a socially useless and medically harmful product' while maintaining a ban on the 'advertising of contraceptives', highlighting the hypocrisy of censorship around sexual topics. Young replied, reassuring the 'Ladies' of WiM that the advert was 'very discreet and makes no explicit reference to the use of the product'.[68]

Realising that Young had misread their critique and perhaps misread them, WiM pushed back, reiterating their concern that vaginal deodorant advertising could be psychologically damaging to young women: 'We are not concerned that the television advertising is "low key" or … inoffensive. We *are* concerned about the harmful medical aspects and particularly the psychological effect … advertising is bound to have on young girls'. WiM's emphasis on the 'psychological effect' echoed Simone de Beauvoir's articulation of the painful burden of shame experienced by girls during puberty in *The Second Sex* (1949), a text which had a profound influence on feminist understandings of embodiment and shame.[69] Young, realising his mistake, replied again, acknowledging their concerns about 'possible medical and psychological effects'. He

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reassured them that the decision to air the Femfresh ad was a 'continuing process', but could not resist the urge to reprimand WiM for its perceived hypocrisy: 'I assume you have made equally strong representations [to] … magazines and newspapers'.[70] Young's colleague Archie Graham, Head of Advertising Control, expressed a similar sentiment. He wrote that he would be more impressed with WiM if members picketed 'their own employers about their share of this advertising'.[71]

With the knowledge that Femfresh's ad was still under review, WiM wrote a press release highlighting the physical and psychological effects of deodorants and their advertising. The working group promised to encourage 'professional medical friends or colleagues' to write to the IBA to put forward their case.[72] Members wrote to Baroness Edith Summerskill, doctor and politician, and to Gabrielle Pike, the ex-Chairman of the National Federation of Women's Institutes who sat on the IBA's Advertising Advisory Committee, receiving favourable replies from both. In the meantime, journalist Mary McCurrie wrote a blistering open letter to Lord Aylestone, the Chairman of the IBA, which was published in *The Times*. The letter contended that vaginal deodorant adverts should be banned as they broke the Independent Television Code of Advertising Standards and Practice that 'forbids appeals to fear'. Following the WiM line, McCurrie particularly highlighted the effects on young women: 'Young girls, at whom many of these advertisements are beamed, are particularly vulnerable to such worries'.[73]

The campaign succeeded in getting press attention. McCurrie's letter was picked up as a story by the *Guardian* and other media outlets. At the same time, newspapers were reporting on a new development in television advertising: that for the first time ITV would be showing adverts for tampons, specifically Lil-lets. The Lil-lets ad showed a young white woman talking about sanitary protection as she climbed into her car.[74] The ad was only to be shown in the 'sophisticated' London area served by Thames Television and only for a trial period of three months to test whether audiences were receptive before decisions were made whether to extend the ad to less 'swinging' audiences nationally.[75] The coverage of both vaginal deodorant television adverts (erroneously described as new), and tampon television adverts (actually new) in mainstream newspapers reached a national audience, causing offense even among those who had not seen the ads. Although different products with different uses, both vaginal deodorants and tampons were concerned with 'feminine hygiene', still a taboo topic in mixed company in the early 1970s. Adverts brought open discussion of intimate concerns into people's sitting rooms and were met with shock and embarrassment. Television 'made porous' the boundaries between public and private, and for some audiences the advertising of intimate products was a step too far.[76] Throughout the summer of 1972 the IBA received a near-constant trickle of complaints and petitions calling for vaginal deodorant and tampon adverts to be banned from television.

'I'd be so embarrassed I'd want to die': emotive complaints against television ads

It is notoriously difficult to find evidence of audience responses to culture: especially ordinary people's responses to ephemeral cultural products like adverts. As Christine Grandy notes, snippets of available evidence are often 'sparse, piecemeal, and … could be refuted by equal amounts of evidence supporting a contradictory interpretation'.[77]

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WiM's campaign and the materials associated with it are one slim archival folder of evidence pointing to how some women felt about vaginal deodorants and their advertising. Complaints written to and kept by the IBA regarding feminine hygiene adverts are another. Complainants often articulated similar grievances to WiM but with some significant differences, including the common conflation of vaginal deodorants and tampons under the category of 'unmentionables'.[78] John Clarke writes that complaints can represent the tip of an iceberg of wider feeling. Complaints are rare missives from a 'hinterland' of 'anxieties, doubts and frustrations'; the public articulation of private grievances shared by many people.[79] While that might be the case, we must also heed Grandy's warning that complaints like these, sparse and piecemeal, are not necessarily representative of wider public feeling.[80] Nevertheless, as Chelsea Saxby notes, letters from individual viewers are 'representative of a means to claim the authority to speak, specific to a particular historical moment'. Writers 'positioned the private, individual experience of watching TV and the feelings viewing evoked as a legitimate basis from which to … intervene in the meaning of cultural discourses'.[81] The way these women (and all but three of the complaints were from women) framed their complaints in terms of where they were and how they felt when they saw the adverts tells us something about the lived experiences, emotional landscapes and physical spaces within which women negotiated new frontiers of permissiveness and liberation in 1970s Britain. Taken together, the WiM campaign and the subsequent complaints offer insights into the ways in which shame and embarrassment coloured some women's relationships to their bodies and bodily knowledge in an era of taboo-breaking around sexual topics in the media, and how women were able to utilise these feelings to influence media portrayals of women's bodies to a limited extent. How the IBA responded to such complaints suggests that the boundaries of the permissive society were more effectively policed by feelings and subjective formulations of 'taste' than by campaigns for better representation of women in the media led by the women's liberation movement.

Of the more than fifty complaints with over one hundred signatories archived by the IBA, one-fifth parroted the WiM line wholesale: that vaginal deodorants were unnecessary and harmful products in themselves. Apart from WiM and their twenty-two signatories, eleven women raised the issue with varying degrees of forcefulness. One woman, from Oxfordshire, could have been writing from WiM's press release. She claimed that vaginal deodorants should not be advertised on television or anywhere else as 'medical opinion is unanimous in thinking that they can do no good and may do harm. Apart from the risk of skin irritation … there is a real danger that more serious conditions … may be covered up'. She added that the taboo nature of vaginal discharge – 'not a subject in which women readily compare notes, or even like to mention to a doctor' – made women even more vulnerable to 'advertising which plays on their embarrassment'.[82] Another woman, leveraging her position as a family doctor, wrote that she had seen 'a number of cases of severe allergy, and a larger number with minor symptoms due to the use of these products'.[83] The risks of 'irritations and burnings' and fear of harm 'if misused' were raised by a few others. The wife of a canon echoed WiM's arguments about the psychological effects: 'whipping up … apprehension of personal uncleanness sounds like preying on a lack of self-confidence'.[84]

A further seventeen letters (with seventy-one extra signatories) took issue with adverts for both vaginal deodorants and tampons, and another twenty-two (with twenty

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extra signatories) focused solely on tampon adverts. The multiple signatories on some of these letters demonstrate that women spoke to one another about their embarrassment, becoming 'leaky container[s]' of 'negative affect' – 'speaking out as spilling over' – before coming together as a chorus of complaint.[85] The conflation of vaginal deodorants and tampons was not unusual in the context of complaints about television advertising. During a US advertising trial in February 1970, a market research study of 908 women in Minneapolis, Minnesota and Erie, Pennsylvania, found that 69 *per cent* of women offended by television adverts for sanitary towels also found ads for bath tissue, bras and girdles, and feminine hygiene spray [vaginal deodorants] to be 'in questionable taste'.[86] US advertisers dismissed these women as 'chronic complainers' – as Ahmed notes, 'to be heard to be complaining is not to be heard' – and continued to push ahead with television advertising. But the conflation of products is instructive. For the majority of the women writing to the IBA, the issue was not with vaginal deodorants or tampons as products. It was that these intimate items were being advertised on television, to be seen in mixed company, by children, husbands and potentially in front of guests. This was deeply embarrassing for some women who found their intimate bodily functions suddenly under the spotlight in their own living rooms.

The strength of this sense of shame and embarrassment can be felt in the vivid portrayals put down in pen on paper that highlighted the domestic settings in which these ads were seen as women archived their experiences, 'turning experience into evidence and evidence into argument'.[87] A woman described seeing the tampon ad with her nineteen-year-old son and two of his friends: 'We all felt embarrassed … there was a deathly silence instead of the usual quips which greet these items'.[88] Despite indicating her son's awareness of such products, having them projected into her sitting room was an incursion of privacy this woman could not stand. Reflecting on vaginal deodorants and tampons, she wrote: 'we want the private areas of our bodies and our lives kept that way'. Another woman, from Kent, described how when the tampon ad came on 'in front of the men in the family' she was so embarrassed she 'made an excuse to make some coffee'.[89] A third woman wrote that she found all ads for intimate products 'distasteful' and reported her fourteen-year-old daughter's comment that '"if I was sitting watching television with a boy … I'd be so embarrassed I'd want to die"'.[90]

Others took their embarrassment and projected it into sitting rooms across Britain. A woman in London imagined 'the embarrassment in millions of households. Men will fidget uncomfortably; small children will ask awkward questions in mixed company … ; bigger boys will mock women'.[91] Another, from Hertfordshire, asked staff at the IBA to imagine it themselves: 'please try to visualise the embarrassment caused to young girls with brothers and fathers present, and to mothers with inquisitive teenage sons'.[92] Emotive appeals and claims to articulate the feelings of many unknown others – 'I'm sure I speak for thousands of decent, open minded people' – echoed the language of the 'silent majority' favoured by conservative opposition to 1960s permissiveness.[93] As Saxby notes, complaints utilising emotional experiences constructed 'what Emily Robinson has called a particular kind of conservative "truth claim", rooted in corporeal feelings'. Feelings were 'used to position individual TV opinions as authentic, incontrovertible, apolitical expressions of widely held viewing tastes and sexual mores'.[94] Many complainants used the rhetoric and arguments of Mary Whitehouse and members of her National Viewers' and Listeners' Association

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(NVALA) that, at around 7,000 members in 1968, nevertheless claimed to speak for millions.[95] Complainants wrote of the lack of control they felt they had regarding what was seen on TV, of having inappropriate adverts 'thrust upon' them in the living room and the '"changing spirit of the age" … thrust down our throats' at tea-time.[96] Whitehouse had forwarded a couple of the complaints to the IBA herself, though other writers claimed membership of no group. Their affinity was with the 62 *per cent* of Gallup respondents who, when surveyed in 1969, wanted more influence on how ITV was run.[97] Yet through their expressions of acute embarrassment, complainants claimed authority as 'ordinary' women in which they pitted themselves against out of touch professional advertisers and broadcasters as the authentic guardians of taste and decency.[98]

Generally, membership of the NVALA skewed older, but the IBA received complaints about vaginal deodorant and tampon advertising on television from younger women as well as older housewives. Some of these women pre-empted and rejected accusations that they were prim, prudish or narrow minded; labels used by the likes of BBC Director General Hugh Greene to dismiss Whitehouse and her followers.[99] One self-proclaimed 'happily married, reasonably modern, young woman', wrote to the IBA to protest on behalf of her mother who was 'distressed' by ads. She acknowledged that times were changing, but refused to believe that 'talk of vaginal odour … would be accepted in the sitting room without quite an amount of eyelid batting'.[100] Another letter from 'Twenty Disgusted Young Ladies' was more forceful. The authors claimed 'decency and modesty' and demanded to keep their 'last shreds of … privacy'.[101] They utilised the rhetoric of emotions – 'We blush at the thought of having supper with our brothers and fathers while these … ads are shown' – and echoed the claims of conservatives involved in the 1971 National Festival of Light that their youth gave power to their critiques: 'we are not prudes – being teenagers in a so-called permissive society'.[102] Despite this, these young women were not necessarily conservative. Another available reading is that they felt that women's bodies were increasingly commodified in permissive culture and wanted to claim them back. Rather than a conservative truth claim, their status as 'Disgusted Young Ladies' may have invoked 'Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells', a humorous trope in the language of complaint so well-worn by the 1970s that BBC Radio 4 called its new listener feedback programme *Disgusted, Tunbridge Wells* in 1978.[103]

If the IBA was not going to ban adverts for vaginal deodorants, the 'Disgusted Young Ladies' cheekily proposed levelling the playing field: 'why not balance it with some male intimate products … we dare you'. Their dare echoed a joke made by counter-cultural magazine *Oz* two years earlier. In its 'Female Energy' issue from July 1970, *Oz* featured a fake advert for a male genital deodorant picturing a full-frontal nude image of a man with the copy 'What a man's best girl won't tell him', clearly aping the FDS advert of April 1970.[104] *Oz*'s joke suggests that it was inherently humorous to imagine men as the objects of this kind of marketing, but for the young women writing 'I suppose you think a man never smells – but rest assured, if he smells, he smells', their complaint and dare drew attention to the injustice of unequal beauty standards and the feelings of humiliation which came from of having their bodies scrutinized in a public medium. 'Permissive' popular culture could be a 'rich ground for the propagation of shame'.[105] Their complaints reflected those of the women writing to *The Sun* women's editor Joyce Hopkirk when she introduced a male

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pin-up series, who celebrated the arrival of 'beefcake for [them]' but also complained about 'men ogling glamour girl pictures' in the office.[106] Complaints from younger women illustrate that intimate ads on television provoked a prickle of embarrassment, offense and discomfort that crossed generations and political persuasions.

For many who complained, the embarrassment of these ads was entirely due to their broadcasting of intimate concerns into a communal space via television. Michael Warner explains how, when it comes to shame, recontextualisation is key: 'something that plays invisibly in one context feels shameful when exposed to a more encompassing or powerful view'.[107] Many women who wrote explained how they expected to see adverts for products like vaginal deodorants and tampons in the women's magazines they read, but that television was not the medium for this kind of product. As one woman articulated, television 'advertising is unnecessary as these particular products are so widely advertised in women's magazines … and that is the best place for them'. Another reiterated that women's magazines were 'a more suitable place to provide information for anyone seeking it', and a third had 'no objection to seeing advertisements in print' as she could choose which to read and which to skip over.[108] Two more women described ads in magazines as 'sufficient'.[109] It has long been acknowledged that women's magazines were spaces for women, young and old, to find out information about their bodies, relationships and household products at the same time as being entertained.[110] Readers were occasionally offended by what they read; the letters pages of *She* and *Nova* magazines in the early 1970s contain lively discussions of the levels of nudity and sexual topics presented between the covers.[111] By making the distinction between television and magazine advertising the women who complained to the IBA strayed further from WiM's critique. To them the products were not inherently offensive, but the advertising of them on television was.

Letters articulated where such women drew the line and how they demarcated spaces in which intimate topics could be discussed. One woman, eager not to be dismissed as easily offended, explained how she was not 'a prude' and 'neither is the girl in the chemist's shop' with whom she had spoken about the adverts. Despite selling sanitary products and vaginal deodorants 'all day long', the shop assistant 'said that on seeing the [television] advert for the latter, her eyes "popped out of her head" and she was acutely embarrassed'.[112] By introducing the chemists – which could also be a space of codes and secrecy, 'STs' (sanitary towels) and brown paper bags – as a third space in which vaginal deodorants and tampons could be discussed, this complainant emphasised just how unnecessary and inappropriate she felt it was to advertise on television. Despite Young and Graham's initial irritation that WiM was targeting television advertising before magazine advertising, it seemed that for the women watching and reading, television was the greater problem. For many the sense of shame invoked by the product itself and played on by print advertisements was only truly realised when it was brought forth and enacted in front of an audience by television adverts broadcasting it into communal spaces; when it was witnessed by those who mattered (in actuality and in complainants' imaginations).

A matter of taste

On 6 October 1972, the Advertising Advisory Committee of the IBA sat down to watch all the ads featured in complaints; ads for vaginal deodorant brands Femfresh, Bidex

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and Perfemma, and the Lil-lets ads. No one on the Committee was personally offended by the Lil-lets ads, but the letters they had received meant they could 'not justify an immediate decision to open television to the general advertising of sanitary towels and tampons'. Regarding ads for vaginal deodorants, the Committee was split. It was 'generally' thought that the Femfresh ads were 'made tastefully', but the 'women members of the Committee' – two of the seven members including Pike – raised concerns about the safety of the products. They cited 'unfavourable press and medical comment' and argued that 'there was a real possibility that girls and women could be induced to worry about totally natural secretions'.[113] Graham assured the Committee that their medical advisor had not 'come across any cases of serious irritation caused by these products' in his Birmingham practice. It was eventually agreed that the ads 'could be questionable on grounds of taste' rather than safety. The Committee recommended that ads for genital deodorants should not be accepted 'at this time', but with 'total medical clearance' this could be reconsidered. On 31 October 1972, an IBA press release announced that it would no longer accept ads for sanitary protection or vaginal deodorants because 'no advertisement should offend against good taste or decency'.[114]

The joint ruling met with a small but mixed response. One woman wrote of her 'relief and delight' that she would be able to move on from her nine-year-old son's innocent questioning about whether he needed an intimate deodorant when he played football. But another wrote to convey her disappointment with the decision to ban sanitary protection ads, saying 'I believe that treating them as something that cannot be recommended openly and without embarrassment is actually to the disadvantage of girls and women'.[115] Although the ads for tampons and vaginal deodorants had been conflated by many of the complainants and by the Committee's ruling, they were after all very different products with very different purposes. Nevertheless, WiM took the ban of vaginal deodorant advertising as an unmitigated success without recognising how banning sanitary protection ads might contribute to the framing of menstruation as 'unmentionable' and therefore shameful. Not unreasonably, perhaps, the possibility that 'the public circulation of specific scripts about shame' might make it 'easier for individuals to catch shame' seemed not to occur to WiM.[116] When an irate Denis Wilkinson, the marketing director of Lilia White (manufacturers of Lil-lets), blamed WiM for their role in stirring up complaints around feminine hygiene adverts, WiM rebuked him; 'Women in Media would like to make it quite clear that they do not care … where Mr Wilkinson places his tampon campaign … If Mr Wilkinson is unable to distinguish between the two products … manufacturers … should appoint a woman to advise them on their marketing strategy'. WiM preferred to highlight their victory and reiterate claims that vaginal deodorants were 'potentially harmful and socially useless' – a view that remained unsupported by the ad ban. They also took aim at print media: 'we hope eventually the editors of women's magazines will take the IBA decision as a guide line'.[117]

Terry Churchward of Crookes Anestan, the manufacturer of Femfresh, described the IBA's ruling as 'bullshit'.[118] It came at a particularly bad time for Femfresh. In September 1972 the FDA had banned products containing more than 1 *per cent* hexachlorophene after infant deaths in France were connected to a baby powder containing the anti-bacterial agent. Although Femfresh were not affected directly – they used chlorhexidine rather than hexachlorophene – other vaginal deodorants were, and staff at Femfresh worried that anxieties around the product category would have an adverse

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effect on sales. The inability to advertise on television was an added blow. This was compounded in June 1973 when the *Financial Times* reported that the FDA were to issue health warnings on all vaginal deodorants due to irritation. Churchward passed the cutting onto a colleague in development and sales, writing: 'If this hits the popular press we could be in real trouble'.[119] By September 1973, Femfresh reported that sales for 1972–1973 were down by one-third from 1971–1972 levels, blaming 'a spate of adverse publicity'.[120] Market research ordered by the company found that lapsed users were concerned about safety. 'Bad publicity' from the previous year had 'left a lasting impression' with women saying they had stopped using it after they heard it caused cancer, after reading negative articles, and after talking to their doctors about infections they had developed. Others felt that with regular washing, vaginal deodorants were not necessary, with survey participants suggesting that they were a 'farce' and bathing 'every morning' was sufficient.[121] Yet market research suggested that even women who were 'quite voluble on the subject of the dangers of using intimate deodorants' had not 'completely shut their minds to them'. Femfresh perceived these women as awaiting 'convincing reassurance' the products were safe, and were confident that they could win them back, turning their attention to groups 'vulnerable' to marketing, such as pregnant women. By 1974, Femfresh lamented the IBA's 'rock hard veto' on television and radio advertising, and found they had started to face restrictions to magazine advertising as well. Marketing documents reported a growing 'antipathy' among magazine editors for their product, affecting rate and positioning negotiations. It became increasingly difficult for Femfresh to place ads in the coveted first quarter of magazines, and their sales took a further knock; down 15 *per cent* on the year before.[122] The campaign against vaginal deodorants had a lasting effect.

Conclusion

This was not the end of Femfresh. They diversified into bath foams and rebuilt the brand. One can still buy Femfresh vaginal deodorants today, including in spray form. The Femfresh website includes information about the pH levels of 'intimate skin', interviews with Doctor Frankie – Femfresh Health Expert, and quizzes to test how much the reader knows about vulvas versus vaginas. It is shadowed by an Instagram account where stylised consumer feminist slogans like 'the future is female' sit next to photographs of bath bombs, halved oranges and women doing yoga.[123] Yet despite careful branding around 'self-care' and taboo-busting, the very concept of a vaginal deodorant still speaks of shame.

This article has used an early 1970s ad campaign and the backlash against it to explore how women grappled with the permissive society in their bathrooms and living rooms. It traced the popularity of vaginal deodorants in the early 1970s and explored how adverts played on women's fears of undesirability and shame about their bodies during a period of changing sexual mores, in turn highlighting how consumption as a practice could offer women ways to manage sexual norms and expectations.[124] Ads used coded language around 'freshness' to connect vaginal deodorants to notions of 'nice girl femininity', encouraging daily use among a market of young women. Feminist campaigners WiM worried about the effects such adverts would have on young girls' bodies and self-esteem and targeted television adverts which were explicitly aimed at the teenage market. WiM's campaign against vaginal deodorant adverts

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became linked in press coverage of trial adverts for Lil-lets tampons, and the IBA soon received complaints about both or either advert from women across the political spectrum.

Whilst the letters which focused solely on vaginal deodorants complained about the harmful physical and psychological effects the product might have on young women, the complaints about tampon ads and those which conflated vaginal deodorants and tampons had a different focus. They were much more likely to find fault, not in the products themselves, but in that fact that they were advertised on television where they would be seen by mixed gender audiences including women, children, husbands and visiting guests. These complaints took issue with the making public of women's intimate concerns and wrote vividly of the shame and embarrassment they experienced seeing ads in front of loved ones, or imagined others might feel in similar situations. Many of these complaints compared these television ads unfavourably to ads in magazines, which they deemed an important space for women to learn about their bodies. These women's overt expressions of shame and embarrassment were conditioned not by the material itself but by the form it took and the space in which they experienced it. Through their complaints, these women attempted to draw the boundaries of the permissive society, claiming that they were not prudes but there was an appropriate time and place for discussions about intimate bodily functions and the living room at tea time was not it.

The IBA heard these complaints and ruled that television ads for vaginal deodorants and tampons were 'against good taste or decency'. Whilst initially celebrated as a win, feminist campaigners soon came to realise the limitations of 'taste'. By 1978, feminist campaigners fighting sexist or exploitative portrayals of women in adverts were writing in *Spare Rib* that advertising regulators were 'obsessed with antiquated notions of "taste and decency" which are totally defined by what they conceive majority views to be, based of course on their own'.[125] But limited as they were, emotive complaints made on the grounds of shame, embarrassment and offense were one way that women exerted a mite of control over the extent to which feminine bodies were up for public consumption in a changing society.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

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2. The IBA's responsibilities included setting guidelines on advertising content, quantity and timings, and monitoring the quality of programme content on commercial television and radio broadcasts.

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