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COME 324
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February 19, 2020

And That's On What? Period

Introduction

Young adults are attempting to take control over their bodies and health and with new media, they are having an easier time doing so (Ali, 2019). Health apps offer a wide variety of functions to offer to their users. More specifically, period-tracking apps, a subgroup of these health apps, are allowing women to monitor their menstrual cycles along with their symptoms, keep track of their fertility windows, and have access to analyses of their body statistics/cycles and health charts (temperature, moods, and weight,) (Levy & Romo-Avilés, 2019). One of these period-tracking apps, Natural Cycles, was created in Stockholm, Sweden by a married couple, Elina and Raoul Berglund. The app tracks fertility by using basal body temperatures. Users can choose to also tracks things such as menstrual symptoms or unprotected sex. According to the Natural Cycles website, the more information you decide to put in, the better the accuracy. The Berglunds' goal in creating the app was to allow for a more natural contraceptive method ("About Natural Cycles" n.d.). In 2019, Natural Cycles was the first app to become a FDA approved method of contraception. If used perfectly, the method is 98% effective; meaning users have to correctly track menstrual cycles, stay abstinent or use condoms during their fertile window(Ali, 2019). In this essay, I will analyze Natural Cycles using Marshall McLuhan's tetrad of media effects.

Theory

Marshall McLuhan, an educated, communication theorist studied the effects of media. In his book, *Understanding Media*, he claimed “...the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (McLuhan, 1964 p.1). This suggests that media and technology shape the way that we think, and according to McLuhan, any thing that is an extension of ourselves is a medium. McLuhan developed the *Laws of Media*, in which he examined forms of media through using a tetrad. Each medium would follow this tetrad, it enhances, retrieves, flips and makes obsolete something else (McLuhan & McLuhan, year). Referred to as the four laws, each answers something about the medium. The first law, enhancement, answers what the medium intensifies or makes possible. The second law answers what is being retrieved by the medium. The third law, flip or reversal, when pushed to limits, what will the medium do? This answers the question is there a potential for a reverse from the original intention. The fourth law answers what is being pushed out, or being made obsolete (McLuhan & McLuhan, year). There are both figure and ground laws. Figure laws are the ones that are noticed, specifically the retrieval and the enhancement. Ground laws are the ones that are less obvious, and are what the media makes obsolete or flips into (Glantz, 2019).

Analysis: Enhance

Natural Cycles has the ability to enhance women’s knowledge about their own health. In a study about women using period-trackers, researchers found that the main reason that these apps were used were to monitor menstrual cycle regularities (Levy & Romo-Avilés, 2019).

Along with this, women are better able to predict when their time of the month is coming rather than being surprised. It allows users to be better prepared. The study also found that period-tracking apps can also help facilitate conversations between patients and medical professionals (Levy & Romo-Avilés, 2019). Personally, I have been in situations when I have gone to the doctor and have been asked “when was your last cycle” or how “regular” are your menstrual cycles, and in that moment I can never remember so often I have no choice but to give a rough estimate. As a user of the app, one could simply pull out their phones and have their charts available to better help with accuracy during doctor visits.

Retrieve

Natural Cycles can retrieve women’s empowerment in allowing them to feel more connected to their body. When a patient visits the doctor, they may feel limited in their options or feel as though they are alone. As mentioned earlier, the owners of the app created it when they wanted to abandon normal contraceptives and aim for a more natural one. Not only is Natural Cycles a period-tracker, but it can also be used as a fertility-tracker. This is not only useful to women who are avoiding pregnancy, but it can be even helpful for ones that are looking to get pregnant. By mobilizing and creating an app, it gives access to more women to take control of their bodies and health. Menstruation has been taboo in our society, to the point where commercials would only air using blue liquid, not red (Reynolds, 2018). This creates menstruation to be a hush-hush topic, whereas women hide our sanitary products in public or only speak of it with healthcare professionals, these apps allow for women to openly talk about it (some apps offer talk boards) and feel empowered by having a say in their bodies.

Flip

Users of health apps are giving away personal information to these apps in exchange for monitoring progress, statistics, and/or knowledge about their bodies. But is this information protected? Apps do not have to follow HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) regulations that every health care place is obligated to, but should they (Rosato, 2020)? An article written by Kaitlyn Tiffany caught my attention with an interesting subtitle; “The golden age of menstrual surveillance is great for men, marketers, and medical companies” (Tiffany, 2018). Research was done by Privacy International out of the U.K., in interest of if these period-tracking apps were sharing users information with Facebook or other third-party services. What they want to do with this information, missed periods or pregnancy, are to manipulate your mood. As mentioned in the article, if you are one of these, you may begin to see ads for strollers or other baby items on your Facebook feed (Arnold, 2019). There’s no real way to know who is getting the information that users put into these apps since they have small policies. These app companies could have partnerships with tech companies, or digital marketers. With issues such as discrimination, specifically pregnancy discrimination, if this information were to get into the hands of an employer, it could potentially affect the user (Arnold, 2019).

Obsolete

Natural Cycles was the first ever FDA approved app to become a form of contraception (Ali, 2019). I was shocked reading this, because I could not believe that something that is not even physically protecting you against pregnancy, could actually be considered a contraceptive. A survey done by *Cosmopolitan*, found that 70% of young women within the last three years, had stopped or were going to stop taking their birth control pills (Ali 2019). Could Natural

Cycles and other period-trackers make birth control obsolete? I do not think that it ever will totally replace normal contraceptives, because not every woman has a regular cycle they can easily track or maybe some do not even want to put in that much work. Dr. Helen Dunnington, an assistant professor at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Texas Children's Hospital Pavilion for Women warns users who might not be okay with getting pregnant, that on top of the app they should also be using condoms or another form of contraception (Ali, 2019). Although the app has the potential to be 93% effective as a contraceptive, Alan Copperman, gynecology and reproductive scientist at Mount Sinai in New York, says that fertility-tracking methods are ineffective 20-25% of the time (Birch, 2019). So although, apps like Natural Cycles make the timing method (A.K.A. period-tracking method) easier, you are still taking a chance that your body is in alignment with what your charts are telling you.

Evaluation

If used correctly and if the information put in is monitored correctly, period-tracking apps can be great. They have the potential, I believe like a lot of other media, that if used incorrectly it can turn out to harm their users. By enhancing women's knowledge about their bodies through use of monitoring symptoms, sex life, and mood swings, it is a convenient, affordable tool that can reach broader audiences. In an age where people are attempting to take control of their bodies, it can be seen as a form of empowerment. The uses of these apps are not only limited to tracking menstruation cycles, but are also being used as contraception. This medium is significant to women because before this, we have not seen a technology that has given women this power. Although one could track their period on their own or get contraceptive advice from

a medical professional, it is all now at their fingertips and they do not have to track anything besides symptoms and their period. The results are quick and reliable.

Conclusion

Period-tracker apps allow women to monitor their menstrual cycles, as well as report symptoms and moods, and have access to their personal statistics and charts. Natural Cycles, one of many period-trackers, offers a variety of functions to its users. Being an FDA-approved form of contraception, the app allows women to more naturally control their bodies, shying away from old forms of contraception and medicine. When used correctly, the app can be 98% effective although it has its limitations. Using Marshall McLuhan's tetrad of the Laws of Media, this essay examined Natural Cycles and similar apps and the way it enhances, retrieves, flips or makes obsolete communication

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