



Stronger Than Dirt: A Cultural History of Advertising Personal Hygiene in America, 1875-1940

Juliann Sivulka

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Only a century ago the privilege of washing with soap was mainly a special prerogative of the well to do, and a bath was something most people avoided. But by the end of World War I a revolution in standards of personal hygiene had taken place. Soap was not only more widely used but was suddenly viewed as a powerful symbol of purification, civilization, and progress. What caused this radical shift in attitudes?

In this fascinating cultural history, Juliann Sivulka shows that the transformation of soap from luxury product to everyday staple and symbol of success was the result of both the newly emerging advertising industry and large-scale societal changes brought on by the modernization of daily life. The new emphasis on soap translated into more elaborate cleanliness rituals, creating in turn specialized places devoted to care of the body, more complex domestic interiors, and eventually new customers for an emerging consumer society.

Making use of a large body of primary research material, Sivulka's study reveals that cleanliness came to symbolize a morally superior and civilized individual. Keeping clean, according to advertisements, was not only a healthy habit, it also ensured romance, material abundance, and acceptance into the successful white middle class. Advertisements also reflected women's changing roles as agents of cleanliness, as well as creators of mass cultural images that reinforced narrow stereotypes of both men's and women's role in society, which feminists later protested. The African American consumer culture and personal cleanliness rituals emerged in a pattern similar to their white counterparts but were informed by politics of appearance.

This profusely illustrated study is full of insights about the development of the consumer culture that we all take for granted. Sivulka reveals many interesting connections between our attitudes toward cleanliness and conceptions of the body, inhabited space, social class, gender, and race.

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