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“In the Wardrobe of Her Royal Daintiness”: A Historical Analysis of Menstrual Product Advertisements From the 1920s to the 2020s

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ABSTRACT

While numerous studies have examined menstrual product advertisements as cultural symbols of stigma, disgust, and shame, longitudinal analyses across many decades rarely appear in the existing literature. In this study, we performed a qualitative longitudinal thematic analysis of 229 advertisements for menstrual products (e.g., tampons, pads, panty liners, and cups) spanning the last 100 years from the 1920s to the 2020s. Patterns of continuity and the changes in the imagery, symbolism, and written texts in the advertisements were examined. Results suggest some consistent patterns across time, particularly around: (1) emphasis on concealment; (2) narratives of shame and disgust; (3) castigating the old-fashioned way of managing periods as bad; and (4) the need for protection from the menstruating body. That said, results also suggested shifting historical patterns that coalesced around: (1) shifting focus on idealized gendered features; (2) the language of menstruation; (3) portrayal of authority over menstruation; and (4) shifting social roles for women. Implications for how narratives of power and empowerment often get coded in neoliberal ways, alongside analysis of menstruation as a cultural story of stripping women of expertise, authority, agency, and language are also included.

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Introduction

Media critic Jean Kilbourne (2000, 2012) has convincingly argued that advertisements are not mere artifacts of culture, but that they actively create and influence attitudes about social identities like gender, race, class, and sexuality. Feminist scholars have identified harmful patterns in how women's bodies in particular have been framed by advertisers, particularly as familiar tropes appear that equate femininity with powerlessness, disgust, shame, hypersexualization, and degradation (Attwood, 2006; Barton, 2021). Advertisements often create a visual economy that reinforces hierarchies between people, conflates empowerment with consumerism, and frames women's bodies as neoliberal objects (Gill, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Luck, 2016). These ideologies portray anyone who “deviates” from common social norms as less desirable, attractive, and important, thus enforcing compliance with social norms as compulsory within a heteropatriarchal capitalist economy (Elias et al., 2017). Menstruation, then, becomes ensnared

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in these systems of dominance, as women's bodies within menstrual product advertisements are situated as "gross" or "disgusting" when menstruating, and as in need of urgent solutions to manage and keep hidden their menstrual cycles.

Looking at menstrual advertisements not just as contemporary phenomena but as connected to the broader histories of misogyny and patriarchal power provides a unique window into how stories of menstruation have changed, or stayed the same, over time. Longitudinal analyses of menstrual products, while occasionally appearing in the existing literature (Erchull et al., 2002; Linton, 2007), remain remarkably scarce. In this study, we focused on an analysis of U.S. advertisements for menstrual products such as tampons, pads, cups, and panty liners in order to track patterns in menstrual product advertisements over the last hundred years (1920s–2020s). While each historical period has framed menstruation in somewhat different ways, messages about bodily compliance and the social necessity of concealing menstruation remain a constant. This study looks both at patterns that have remained stable across time, alongside patterns that have changed and shifted throughout the last hundred years. In doing so, we explored how menstrual imagery has both reflected and created the cultural contexts of menstruation.

The Paradoxes of Menstrual Advertising

The history of menstrual product advertising suggests that women have faced a plethora of images and ideas that have framed menstruation as disgusting, debilitating, and contaminating. The phrase *feminine hygiene*—a relic from 1930s advertisement for birth control—suggests that women's bodies have long been considered inherently dirty and gross. The menstruating body, then, has been pitted against the idea of the clean, hygienic body that keeps menstruation out of sight (Fahs, 2016; Tone, 1996). Menstrual product advertisements have long relied on shame, embarrassment, and humiliation to sell products, particularly by reinforcing the idea that the only proper way to manage menstruation is to reduce any possibility of disclosure, exposure, and the "disaster" of bleeding through clothing (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). Buying certain brands of tampons and pads, for example, apparently allows menstruators to prevent the shameful experiences of leaking, staining, and becoming too smelly; in short, menstrual products help women to avoid the "stain" of menstruation on their femininity (Berg & Coutts, 1994).

Menstrual product advertisements have overwhelmingly depicted women's bodies as unclean and dirty, always vulnerable to embarrassing episodes, and as inherently disgusting (Berg & Coutts, 1994; Kissling, 2006; Liu et al., 2023). An interest in "sanitizing" women's bodies appeared as a common trope of menstrual product advertisements. One content analysis of 240 menstrual product advertisements from *Seventeen* and *Cosmopolitan* over 12 years found that idealized images of women appeared more frequently than sexualized images of women, and that many advertisements left out images of women altogether (Erchull, 2013). Advertisements frequently rely on imagery that avoids actual menstrual blood, instead using blue liquid or cartoon depictions of menstrual fluid or, more commonly, not showing any kind of blood or discharge at all (that is, focusing on the whiteness of the tampons and pads). Nevertheless, the specter of the out-of-control body that can leak and stain at any moment haunts menstrual product advertisements and reinforces stories of shame and secrecy (Luke, 1997; Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). The stories of menstrual

concealment have overshadowed other possible concerns that menstruators have, as advertisements rarely consider the environmental impacts of the products, comfort of using the products, or the safety of inserting tampons made with different kinds of bleaches or treated cotton (Davidson, 2012; Peberdy et al., 2019). Menstrual product advertisements focus instead on heightening the insecurities of the viewer, particularly for adolescent girls who are particularly prone to worry about embarrassing episodes of bleeding through their clothing (Simes & Berg, 2001). The responsibility for avoiding menstrual shame is placed on the individual, who must hide periods as efficiently as possible through the purchase of single-use products (Przybylo & Fahs, 2018).

U.S. advertisements have been particularly prone to depicting menstruation as contaminating and embarrassing, though similar tactics have appeared throughout the world. For example, India's leading brand of single-use pads is tellingly called *Whisper* (Bobel, 2019), while advertisements in Slovenia and Yugoslavia perpetuate beliefs that menstruation is inherently shameful (Sitar, 2018). Another study found that women in Italy, especially those with less menstrual knowledge, were vulnerable to internalizing messages of self-objectification when exposed to advertisements that framed menstruation as taboo (Spadaro et al., 2018). In Arab countries, menstrual advertisements referred to menstruation in euphemistic terms, rarely spoke of menstrual blood, and highlighted "hygiene" as the primary feature of menstrual products (Chabih & Elmasry, 2022). Throughout the world, ideologies of "protection" dominate the menstrual product advertisement landscape (Jutel, 2004), though some marketing researchers have speculated that future decades might see an intensification of sexualization of women's bodies associated with menstrual products (Weiner, 2004). Many themes in menstrual product advertisements seem to have incredible staying power: gendered stigma, hyper-femininity, and perpetuation of mythologies about menstruation (Mucedola & Smith, 2023).

Looking at more recent menstrual product advertising trends, researchers have rightly noted that the menstruating body in advertisements is full of absurd paradoxes and contradictions around what menstruators should feel (celebratory, joyful, relaxed, anxious) and do (stay silent, be deferent to authority figures, go shopping, ride horses in white pants) (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). Alongside stories of disgust, women in some advertisements were portrayed as sporty, active, joyful, and apparently liberated by effective menstrual products (Fingerson, 2012). This has created a conundrum where menstruators must grapple with a variety of contradictory messages: menstruation is normal but should be kept secret and silent; menstruation is essential to 'being a woman' but it also taints one's femininity; menstruation must be managed and overcome through menstrual products that offer 'empowered' femininity; and that freedom is achieved through the correct product choice even though narratives of embarrassment lurk everywhere (Raftos et al., 1998; Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). The pairing of consumption as an avenue to liberation alongside relentless shame of living in a female body haunts the narratives of menstrual product advertisements.

The consistency of these messages has been notable, as one study of menstrual product booklets from 1932 to 1997 found that narratives of promoting secrecy and concealment did not change for the entire 50+ year span (Erchull et al., 2002). Further, a shift toward appropriation of feminist narratives to sell women on their products as liberatory and empowering has also become ever-more-intense over the last hundred years.

In the 1960s, menstrual product advertisements capitalized on the momentum of the civil rights and women's movements by branding products like "Newfreedom" and "Stayfree" (Vostral, 2008), while in the 1970s and 1980s advertisements touted that menstrual products had "freed the body" (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). This appropriation of feminist discourses by product advertisers speaks to broader trends toward commodity fetishism and "femvertising" (Goldman et al., 1991; Gill, 2008; Heath & Potter, 2005), thus giving the veneer of progress while masking the perpetuation of larger social inequalities (Zeisler, 2016).

Research Questions

In this study we asked several questions:

First, how do menstrual advertisements use language to construct normative ideas about women's bodies and how to manage menstruation across time?

Second, how do these advertisements both reflect and create particular ideologies about gender and embodiment?

Materials and Methods

The Sample

In this study, we performed a qualitative thematic analysis on 229 advertisements for menstrual products (e.g., tampons, pads, panty liners, and cups) spanning the last 100 years from the 1920s to the 2020s. Advertisements were located primarily through Google searches for menstrual product advertisements, alongside searches for historical advertisements as listed on the popular auction site eBay and scans of older magazines. Advertisements were then sorted into decades (e.g., 1920s, 1930s, etc.). Search terms included "advertisement" and "ad" along with "menstruation," "period," "tampons," "pads," "panty liners," and "menstrual cups." Anything not related to menstruation was eliminated. Brands included a wide range of companies, including Tampax, Always, Poise, Kotex, Playtex, Rely, Pursettes, Modess, Gauzets, and others. We looked for advertisements that targeted diverse age and identity backgrounds for U.S. readers (e.g., *Harper's Bazaar*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, *Teen Vogue*, etc.). Television commercials and advertisements that had moving images, as well as advertisements for related beauty, health, and wellness products (e.g., douche products, heating pads, etc.), were excluded from the analysis.

We grouped the decades into 20 year blocks in order to analyze the advertisements, resulting in 51 advertisements from the 1920s and 1930s, 42 advertisements from the 1940s and 1950s, 53 advertisements from the 1960s and 1970s, 39 advertisements from the 1980s and 1990s, and 44 advertisements from the 2000s and beyond.

Procedure

A feminist phenomenological form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Persson et al., 2019) was performed on the advertisements. This method allowed for an intricate description of the data while also maintaining the complexity and historical context of the

advertisements. This type of analysis also maintained the qualitative complexity of the advertisements while grouping them into patterns, and it allowed for a longitudinal thematic analysis to be performed in order to compare and contrast patterns across each decade of the last 100 years. Themes were noted both for patterns of consistency, that is, themes that remained constant over the 100 year period, and for patterns of changes over time that occurred in the advertisements. Further, both the imagery and written texts in these advertisements were also examined. For example, if an advertisement showed a woman riding on a bicycle while wearing a white shirt and white shorts along with the slogan, “Be free to be you,” both of those details were included in the thematic analysis. These data were analyzed for patterned representations of menstruation and menstruating bodies, and were formed into themes that were reworked and refined.

This thematic analysis was also informed by feminist poststructuralist theories of language (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gavey, 1997), where “language is viewed not as merely ‘reflecting’ social practices, but rather as constitutive and a social relation in itself” (Farvid & Braun, 2006, p. 299); thus, language produces meanings but also reflects meanings from the social practices it describes. This type of analysis argues that language and discourse shape the social world and construct a sense of available choices for women (e.g., concealing menstrual periods, deferring authority to doctors over their bodily choices). The data in this study were examined for the assumptions made about women and menstruation, and how these assumptions might shape readers’ subjectivities about their own menstrual product choices. Themes were derived from reviewing each of the images from each decade, determining the prominent thematic content from each grouping, and refining those into the most prominent themes for each time period. After it became clear that two separate groupings were emerging (e.g., what has stayed the same, what has changed over time), we focused our thematic analysis on each of these separate sections. We familiarized ourselves with the advertisements and coded the material in an open and inductive way. After generating the initial codes (e.g., women’s bodies as smelly and disgusting; menstrual euphemisms), we collapsed the most common codes into distinct themes for each of the two sections. This involved examining codes and associating data and clustering these into meaningful patterns. We then reviewed and defined the themes to ensure both coherence and distinction between themes, and we created names for each theme.

Results

We have divided our thematic analysis into two parts. First, we analyzed the *consistent* patterns across time for menstrual product advertisements for the past 100 years. Second, we analyzed the *shifting* historical patterns across time.

Consistency Across 1920s–2020s: What Has Stayed the Same

In this first area, we identified five themes for how menstrual product advertisements stayed consistent across time: (1) emphasis on concealment; (2) narratives of shame and disgust; (3) castigating the old-fashioned way of managing periods as bad; (4) the need for protection from the menstruating body; and (5) discussions of women’s bodies as smelly and repulsive.

Emphasis on Concealment

Theme 1: Emphasis on Concealment.

Date	Company	Advertisement text	Framing
1921	Kotex	"To Guard Against Emergencies"	Boasted that their product was meant "To Guard Against Emergencies"
1927	Kotex	"ABSOLUTE SECURITY, plus freedom forever from the embarrassing problem of disposal."	Emphasized concealment as the avoidance of embarrassment
1950	Modess	"It's Modess ... in the wonderful new-shape box! So skillfully shaped not to look like a napkin box, that the sharpest eye couldn't guess what's inside the wrapping. And to make sure you'll always get it neatly wrapped ... Modess now wraps the boxes before they even reach your store. No delay or embarrassment for you. Of the leading brands, only Modess brings you these two keep-a-secret extras."	Bragged that the box was undetectable as a menstrual product container, thus allowing women to avoid inevitable shame if their menstrual status was revealed
1952	Kotex	"Not a shadow of a revealing outline because only Kotex of all leading napkins gives you ends that are flat and pressed."	Celebrated that no one can see evidence of the wearer using their pads
1961	Tampax	"You feel this cool, this clean, this fresh with Tampax. You by a lovely pool—sun-dappled, blue-shadowed. You crisp and efficient at the office—unhampered, unconcerned. Tampax guards your secret so well."	Celebrated freshness and cleanliness while also enforcing the importance of hiding menstruation altogether
1971	Tampax	"Best of all, Tampax tampons won't remind you or your friends that you're having your period. They're worn internally so they can't show or cause odor ... it's one way to make being a woman a little lovelier—a whole lot easier."	Targeted younger girls and flaunted the ability to conceal menstruation
1971	Pursettes	"Gotta get this tampon out of sight. Was I embarrassed when that tampon spilled out!" "Switch to Pursettes tampons. They fit into this neat compact because they have no bulky applicators. And you'll like the pre-lubricated tips ... Pursettes can save you all sorts of embarrassments."	Featured a cartoon with a school girl dropping her purse and exposing her tampon to other girls at school
2000	Kotex	"Kotex pads now have blissfully quiet wrappers. Less telltale crinkling and crackling. Because there are some things you just don't need to announce to the world. Period."	Highlighted the embarrassing noises of wrappers
2004	Tampax	"A leak can attract unwanted attention."	Depicted a large shark approaching an women ocean diver

Narratives of Shame and Disgust

Theme 2: Narratives of Shame and Disgust.

Date	Company	Advertisement text	Framing
1924	Kotex	"The modern woman lives every day of her life. Fills every day with activity, unmarred by what still remains a serious problem to thousands of women less sophisticated."	Portrayed shame as the standard menstrual experience
1926	Kotex	"A Great Hygienic Handicap that Your Daughter will be Spared. This remarkable NEW way, by	Pitted mothers as shameful and daughters as liberated

(continued)

Theme 2. Continued.

Date	Company	Advertisement text	Framing
		banishing the insecurity and uncertainty of old ways, and by providing an all-important easy-disposal feature, solves women's oldest hygienic problem, exquisitely, thoroughly, amazingly."	
1927	Kotex	"Under the Most Trying Hygienic Handicaps, One Can Now Have Peace-of- Mind, Poise, Immaculacy."	Blatantly called menstruation a debilitating event
1928	Modess	"In order that Modess may be obtained in a crowded store without embarrassment or discussion ... Simply cut it out and hand to the sales person. You will receive one box of Modess. Could anything be easier? Is there a woman anywhere who will not be grateful for this method of silent purchase?"	Included a tiny "coupon" that customers cut out and handed to a sales clerk
1970	Kotex	"Dear Mother Nature, Drop Dead! Go on and say it. Then look at the brighter side. We're here. Kotex napkins with deep, downy Soft Impressions. The softer, more absorbent kind that makes things easier for you. Surer. Make darned sure you and Mother Nature hit it off. From the start!"	Explicitly assumed that women hated their periods and feel shame, disgust, and dread about them
1980	Rely	"Rely. It even absorbs the worry. And Rely fits better than any other tampon, for the best protection against by-pass. (An accident caused by a gap between the tampon and you.)"	Included a description of menstrual mishaps
2004	Tampax	"Fear is the only thing that hurts. Overcome your feature and discover new possibilities."	Depicted two young girls entering a haunted house amusement park ride

Castigating the Old-Fashioned Way of Managing Periods as Bad

Theme 3: Castigating the Old-Fashioned Way of Managing Periods as Bad.

Date	Company	Advertisement text	Framing
1922	Kotex	"Study lamps instead of pine torches. Printed books instead of written parchments. Women welcome instead of barred at schools of higher learning. Habits and customs change. Living conditions improve. Grandmothers and mothers used birdseye and other bulky sanitary pads. Today a new sanitary habit has been made possible by Kotex."	Compared using pads to other social advances like "allowing" women to become educated
1923	company not mentioned	"Inexpensive enough to throw away."	Compared product to garters and sanitary belts
1924	Kotex	"Eight in ten women today, in the better walks of life, have adopted Kotex in preference to dangerous and unsafe makeshift methods."	Compared modern menstrual pads favorably to older methods of menstrual management like DIY pads
1939	Kotex	"Still looking and feeling my best at the time so many girls are irritable."	Pitted the Kotex-wearer against the average woman
1936	Tampax	"WELCOME THIS NEW DAY FOR WOMANHOOD. This summer you can experience a comfort and an assurance of daintiness you have never known before. SANITARY PROTECTION WORN INTERNALLY."	Appearance of the first Tampax advertisement

(continued)

Theme 3. Continued.

Date	Company	Advertisement text	Framing
1953	Tampax	"All of you have seen woman who seem so vital, so alive, that you'd swear they were the older sisters of their own daughters. The chances are these women seem young because they 'think young'—even about such delicate problems as the proper method of monthly sanitary protection. Tampax is the young way, the modern way, the internal way."	Cast Tampax as the modern, young-person's choice
1960	Tampax	"Chic new hat and <i>just like that</i> you acquire a worldlier look. But <i>you</i> know that clothes don't make a woman. What really does it is developing a mature point of view. Deciding to try Tampax, for example, is definitely adult. Unquestionably smart! Worn internally, Tampax is the modern way."	Explicitly linked Tampax products to adult womanhood and modernity
1972	Tassaway	"Because you never have to change more than twice in 24 hours ... <i>Tassaway</i> is a revolutionary new menstrual product."	First appearance of a menstrual cup advertisement; stated that a single-use menstrual cup required less effort and time than other products
1990	Tampax	"There's no bulk so the whole world doesn't know when I have my period. And I don't have to use those gross pads ... I don't have to think about embarrassing accidents either. Best of all, though, with Petal Soft Tampax, I don't feel like I have my period at all."	Portrayed tampons as obviously superior to pads

The Need for Protection from the Menstruating Body

Theme 4: The Need for Protection from the Menstruating Body.

Date	Company	Advertisement text	Framing
1933	Gauzets	"At last you can enjoy complete protection, perfect freedom from an old worry that has haunted women since time began!"	Portrayed leaks and odor as reasons for needing protection
1950	Kotex	"New, too, is the smiling confidence you feel. From the moment you let Kotex dismiss worrisome 'hazards' from your mind."	Celebrated that the wearer could feel confident in their products
1966	Kotex	"they also have moisture-proof side strips, plus an extra safeguard shield to keep you even safer. That's why Kotex napkins can protect you when other napkins would fail."	Recounted the glories of protection from menstrual leaks by using vague phrases
1972	Tampax	"Our only interest is protecting you."	Featured the rhetoric of protection
1980	Tampax	"Even wear white without that uneasy feeling, with Tampax Super Plus tampons."	Showed three images of women wearing white pants, white sleepwear, and a white bathing suit
1990	Tampax	"On being a woman. On feeling secure. Kotex."	Depicted a woman walking with purse at her side
2001	Always	"Different days need different levels of protection ... Three levels of protection in one smart box. So no matter what, you've got the right protection."	Relied heavily on discourses of protection

Discussions of Women's Bodies as Smelly and Repulsive

Theme 5: Discussions of Women's Bodies as Smelly and Repulsive.

Date	Company	Advertisement text	Framing
1924	Kotex	"Impregnated with a newly-discovered super deodorant, this new accessory offers the last word in self-assurance, poise, and daintiness ... modern science's solution of women's oldest hygienic problem."	Directly talked about vaginas as in need of deodorants
1943	Tampax	"No pins, belts or pads— <i>no external odor</i> can form!"	Talked about other menstrual products as producing odors
1946	Tampax	"Probably the most impressive discovery is the fact that you need not give up your daily shower if you use Tampax. For Tampax is worn internally and cannot interfere with your regular bath in either shower or tub."	Suggested that menstrual blood is so repulsive that women should not attempt to shower during their periods unless wearing a tampon
1975	Tampax	"You're relaxing in a soothing sea of fragrant bubbles. Is there any more luxurious way to feel utterly feminine? Thanks to Tampax tampons, this pleasure can be yours even on problem days."	Reappearance 30 years later of the idea that menstrual blood is so repulsive that women should not attempt to shower during their periods unless wearing a tampon
1985	Lightdays Pantliners	"I like to feel just-showered fresh all day, every day ... It's a good feeling that makes you more confident in yourself, and when you're talking to a client, that comes across."	Suggested that women's bodies lack freshness and cleanliness without menstrual products, and that women needed these products for longer amounts of time during a monthly cycle; the advertisement featured a real estate agent
1998	Playtex	"get the odor protection you want ... actually eliminates odor by absorbing it naturally."	A part of the 1990s plethora of new products designed to block, minimize, or eliminate vaginal odor quite explicitly
2019	Tampax	"100% odor free."	Linkage between menstruation and foul odor

Change Across 1920s–2020s: What Has Shifted Over Time

In the second part of our thematic analysis, we identified four themes for how menstrual product advertisements have changed throughout the last 100 years: (1) shifting focus on idealized gendered features; (2) the language of menstruation; (3) portrayal of authority over menstruation; and (4) shifting social roles for women.

Shifting Focus on Idealized Gendered Features

When examining shifting trends over time, the focus on idealized gendered features shifted quite dramatically from a focus on being dainty and hyper-feminine in the 1920s–1940s, to a focus on being busy and sexually desirable in the 1950s–1970s, to a focus on being confident and empowered in the 1980s–2020s. The earlier decades emphasized a particular kind of daintiness as ideal, with a 1921 Kotex advertisement gleefully celebrating "daintiness" as a key selling point of the product with the bold headline, "In the wardrobe of Her Royal Daintiness." Another Kotex advertisement from the same year declared, "Insure poise in the daintiest frocks." A 1922 Kotex advertisement described idealized femininity as the embrace of pads that give women social status and class: "Wherever nice women gather. Low price sometimes causes people of

means and refinement to hesitate in buying a new article. Kotex is inexpensive, yet women who can afford the best were first to accept Kotex.”

Menstrual advertisements then shifted in the 1950s into imagining women as busy multitaskers concerned with getting things done and asserting their own needs and wants. For example, a 1959 Kotex advertisement imagined women as having many roles and possibilities and being able to do them all with their products: “All at once you’ve joined the millions of busy girls with lives of their own, minds of their own. Some are away at school. Some are brides. Many go to work. But all of them (like you) have big and little decisions to make every day of their lives—decisions that usually revolve about: ‘What’s best for *me*?’” This ethos of a “do-it-all” woman, active and interested in multiple roles, appeared frequently in the 1960s advertisements. For example, a 1965 Tampax advertisement with images of women boating and strolling through a garden declared: “New horizons fills your dreams...trips, excitement, music, merrymaking...and always the beautiful security of cool, clean, fresh protection by Tampax.” Another 1966 Tampax advertisement depicted women surfing, playing guitar, and brushing their hair, along with the tagline: “The modern sanitary protection lets you wear what you wish, do what you want.”

Sexual desirability and confidence also emerged as idealized gendered features beginning in the 1970s. For example, a 1970 Kotex advertisement explicitly situated their products as a way to maintain sexual desirability, with a woman in a tight dress alongside the text, “Be his. Be home. Be hard to forget. But be sure. Sure as Kotex napkins.” This same concept appeared again in a 2011 Tampax advertisement that showed a man in a hotel room on Valentine’s Day with the line, “Mother Nature please, the room is already paid,” as he waits to potentially have sex with a woman. The pairing of confidence with sexual desirability also appeared more frequently, as a 1990 Kotex advertisement situated confidence as the most important feature of womanhood: “Only one pair of jeans has ever fit you so well. And one thin pad lets you feel confident enough to wear them.” Building on this, the 2000s featured advertisements that depicted women as making smart choices by choosing certain products, as the notion of the smart consumer became ubiquitous. A 2009 Tampax advertisement campaign boldly said, “Outsmart Mother Nature.”

The Language of Menstruation

As a second example of what changed throughout time, the language of menstruation also underwent dramatic shifts in how menstruation was discussed or referred to in advertisements. The 1920s to 1950s focused on highly euphemistic language, with menstruation discussed only in the most indirect ways. For example, a 1938 B-ettes advertisement says, “Such a little price for priceless freedom... Modern sanitary protection.” A 1941 Kotex advertisement avoided discussing menstruation directly and instead referencing only the “time of the month”: “Just your luck, you moan. You’ve looked forward to this jamboree for weeks, but the day that suits everybody else doesn’t suit you one bit! For it’s the wrong time of the month for you. If only you could smile and laugh and be gay.” Similarly, a 1950 Kotex advertisement relied on euphemistic language to describe periods: “New gayety lightens your step, your spirits, on days when your calendar calls the tune—and you answer with the comfort of the new Kotex.”

In the 1960s, when tampons were being widely advertised, the language of menstruation still avoided direct references to genitals, blood, or even the placement of tampons themselves. A 1969 Tampax advertisement touted the apparent freedom women might feel though still referred to inserting tampons as “worn internally”: “The way you feel is free. Today and every day, you feel free, confident, unhampered.” Similarly, the word *menstruation* did not appear at all in menstrual advertisements until 1971 when a Tampax advertisement included the line, “And maybe, like her, you’ve just started menstruating. It’s kind of a drag. Right?” Still, advertisements overwhelmingly relied on not using direct menstrual language. Instead, a 1972 Tampax advertisement said, “You would never give up a day like this just because it’s ‘that’ day ... To keep the good times good.”

Direct references to menstrual blood and women’s genitals took even longer to appear. The first mention of both *menstrual fluid* and anything referring to a vagina occurred in a 1979 Tampax advertisement: “Water is not the same as menstrual fluid, nor is the inside of a glass the same as the lining of the vaginal canal or its contours.” Periods took even longer to be directly mentioned. A 1990 Tampax advertisement also started talking about periods as something to endure: “Tampax Tampons. The better way to deal with your period.”

Portrayal of Authority Over Menstruation

Another major shift over time involved who was given authority over the technology and narratives of menstruation. In the 1920s–1940s, doctors and nurses were ascribed authority over what women should use for menstrual products, followed by a longer period where husbands were considered the ultimate authority over what their wives should use. A 1921 Kotex advertisement touted, “Nurses in France started the Kotex idea.” Similarly, a 1937 Tampax advertisement declared, “Gynecologists recommend it as hygienic, civilized and sure ... Chafing, bulkiness, binding become merely a memory of what soon seems a dark era.” Another 1939 Tampax advertisement attributed the product to doctors and drew on medical language to sell the products: “Tampax is the invention of a Doctor—and is worn internally ... Tampax is an adaptation of the hospital tampon, and is made from highly absorbent, sterilized, surgical cotton wool compressed and stitched in such a way that no disintegration can occur.” Yet another 1939 Tampax advertisement boldly stated, “MEDICAL APPROVAL. Tampax is accepted for advertising by the Medical Journal of Australia, The British Medical Journal and the Journal of the American Medical Association. A DOCTOR invented Tampax.”

This language of doctors and nurses giving approval of different menstrual products shifted to focusing on what husbands preferred or liked. A 1969 advertisement for Femicin, a product that helped relieve menstrual pain, situated husbands as the real “victims” of menstrual pain. A photo of a man is accompanied by the text: “I suffered from menstrual cramps. I feel sorry for any woman who suffers from menstrual pain. But I also feel sorry for her husband. Cramps, headaches and body aches used to make my wife so depressed, so irritable that I suffered through those bad days each month, too ... Thanks for Femicin, she now acts like the woman I married—every day of the month.” A 1970s Kotex advertisement also suggested that husbands’ feelings about menstrual products were paramount: “Be his. Be home. Be hard to forget. But be sure.”

Starting in the 1990s, emphasis on who designed or approved of the product mattered less than the technical features of the products, giving authority in more vague terms to the menstrual product companies themselves. A 1996 Tampax advertisement boasted, “Now better than ever, with a super-smooth applicator so they’re incredibly comfortable to use. And the wrapper is stronger and more durable.” Similarly, a 2004 Always advertisement claimed, “Our unique LeakGuard Core pulls fluid deep into the middle of the pad and is designed to help neutralize odors. So you can dance the night away.”

Shifting Social Roles for Women

Finally, another major shift happened around social roles for women, as advertisements showed women shifting from conservatively dressed housewives to wartime workers to bathing suit beauties to nightgown-clad sex objects to corporate work wear and sports clothing. A 1921 Kotex advertisement depicted four women at a picnic wearing hats, full-length dresses, and full makeup along with the line, “To guard against emergencies.” An abrupt shift in the 1940s then found women in menstrual advertisements wearing wartime work clothing. For example, a 1944 Kotex advertisement declared, “We know how much our plant—our country—depends on us, when every minute counts! But how can we keep going when we feel like this?” Also in 1944, a Kotex advertisement first depicted women playing sports and dribbling a basketball with the phrase, “She’s going places! And what’s to keep you from going places—basketball games or wherever? Surely not ‘difficult’ days!”

Women’s social roles abruptly expanded in the late 1950s, as women were depicted as athletic, sexual, and engaging in energetic pursuits. The first menstrual advertisement showing a woman in a bathing suit appeared in 1958, as Tampax declared, “Don’t miss a single day of fun! Feel the delightful, flying freedom. Lift your face to the sun. Revel in the sheer joy of living. Water-ski, swim, dive, and splash in lovely summer waters. Nothing holds you back—certainly not time-of-the-month. You know the freedom of Tampax!” A 1966 Tampax advertisement showed a woman in a sexy nightgown and on a surfboard with the phrase, “Cares are oceans away.” A 1967 Tampax ad depicts, for the first time, women in short white shorts and white bikini bottoms as markers of freedom from menstrual burdens: “Run. Whirl. Roar. Have fun. Be as active as you want... And swim any time of the month.” A similar 1968 Tampax advertisement included women in white fencing outfits and women in white ball gowns with the slogan: “They never hold you back.”

In the late 1960s, coinciding with the start of the women’s movement, women in menstrual advertisements appear as having expanded social roles, particularly related to juggling careers and parenthood and expanding their social circles to include multiracial groups. A 1969 Tampax advertisement featured women both as professionals actively seeking careers and as mothers caring for their children on the beach, along with the tagline: “She’s an antiques collector and an architect... She’s entirely too busy to be restricted for even a moment let alone five days a month. Tampax tampons leave her free to browse or do the millions of mother things that fill her life.” A 1971 Playtex advertisement laid out the particular categories women could occupy: secretaries, housewives, nurses, models, college girls, stewardesses, and the lady next door; this was

accompanied by the text, "That's why so many women just like you are switching to it." Building on this, the first woman of color did not appear in menstrual advertisements until a 1972 Tampax advertisement portrayed an African-American ballerina having her posture corrected by a white teacher along with the line, "To save your active day: Tampax tampons. Bend. Stretch. Twist. Leap." Similarly, a 1987 Tampax advertisement showed a woman at her 10-year high school reunion holding a football while being lifted up by a man, and later posing for photos with a coed, multi-racial group of friends.

The late 1990s saw the start of menstruating women being depicted as athletic and ambitious. A 1998 Always advertisement featured a sweaty woman holding a basketball and depicted as a serious athlete with the lines, "10 seconds on the clock. 2 points behind. You've got the ball. And your period... Take a jump shot. Make a fast break for a layup. Or just dunk it. With Ultra, your period doesn't have to be an obstacle." A 2006 Tampax advertisement featured a woman losing her bikini top in a pool along with the line, "Embarrassment happens. Leaks shouldn't." Finally, a 2009 Tampax advertisement featured the first image of sports and aggression associated with period products, with Serena Williams winning a tennis match along with the line, "Serena delivers the smackdown. A champion like Serena Williams doesn't let Mother Nature's Monthly Gift interrupt her game." This shift in imagery revealed the changing social roles that women were ascribed and the different images and roles associated with marketing menstrual products.

Discussion

Looking at these results in a more longitudinal sense, these images suggested uncanny consistency in certain aspects of how menstrual advertisements depicted women's menstruating bodies: smelly, repulsive, shameful, disgusting, and needing to be concealed. Menstrual advertisements also repeatedly framed menstruating bodies as needing new technologies in order to properly manage menstrual blood, and as something women needed protection *from* (Malefyt & McCabe, 2016; Simes & Berg, 2001). These themes raise questions about the degree to which advertisements reinforced and promoted patriarchal ideas about women's bodies, particularly as so many of the themes remained constant over the last hundred years. Advertisers are still incessantly communicating to women that menstruation is shameful and disgusting, in need of management, and that it threatens their reputations and abilities to function in the world (as mothers, wives, athletes, workers, and friends, in particular). Menstrual messaging remained relatively constant, even in the face of changing gender roles through time. The staying power of menstrual stigma and the complicity of corporations and marketing campaigns to reinforce and repeatedly emphasize and capitalize on that stigma, serves as a stark reminder of how deeply misogyny and patriarchy guide the cultural story of menstruation. This fusion of capitalism, sexism, and body shaming, something many feminist scholars have addressed in a variety of areas of critical body studies (Elias et al., 2017; Rodrigues & Przybylo, 2018), has taken different forms, but remained consistent in its messaging throughout time.

Reflecting on the second part of the analysis, where we analyzed how messages and imagery have shifted over the last hundred years, we found it compelling that menstrual advertisements were so closely tied to the broader culture of changes in gender, specifically around women's changing social roles. The sudden appearance of wartime attire and themes of patriotism during World War II, for example, and the rapid shifts around portraying women as both mothers and workers starting in the late 1960s suggested an intertwining of menstrual imagery and sociopolitical shifts for women. The dramatic shifts in women's social roles during WWII, as women entered the workforce out of necessity, followed by their "return" to domesticity during the 1950s baby boom (Brock et al., 2015), was reflected in menstrual advertisements quite clearly. Similarly, the explosion of the women's movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the accompanying emphasis on women's sexual, financial, and personal freedom (Donnelly et al., 2016), was both co-opted and partly represented in menstrual advertisements of this period. The emphasis on women's sporty bodies (Jutel, 2004), the invention of the tampon (Reame et al., 2020), and the focus on women's changing social options (Campbell et al., 2021) reflected clear historical shifts in women's social and political power. The shifts in idealized gendered features, particularly as women became career-oriented, then freer in terms of clothing choices and public displays of leisure, and then as powerful athletes and/or athletic figures, suggested that menstrual advertising is adept at responding to the norms of the day (particularly if they stand to monetize new forms of "empowerment"). Our study affirms the shift from menstruation as overtly threatening to more invisible over time (Campbell et al., 2021). Changing social roles for women (e.g., feminist movement, sexual revolution, the invention of the birth control pill, access to more financial independence, no-fault divorce becoming legal, and so on) interfaced closely with changes in menstrual advertisements, again reflecting how women's social statuses have shifted throughout each decade of the last hundred years.

The shifting authority over menstruation also showed how different messages of women needing to comply with, or defer to, authority figures has shifted from more explicit depictions of doctors as authority to more subtle depictions of husbands as authority to even more subtle notions of corporations themselves as authority figures over women's bodies. None of these are promising or ideal, and none of these actually place power in the hands of women and menstruators. Women went from deferring to their doctors to pleasing their husbands to eventually just surrendering to vague technological claims of different menstrual product companies. The perceived lack of need for companies to qualify their claims ("doctors say...!") and instead just invent words that sound both fancy and vaguely medical is another disturbing shift in the world of menstrual advertising. Menstrual product companies can now invent whatever language they want to assert authority, to claim technological advances, or to recruit a loyal customer base. This maps onto previous research showing the ways that the medical world assumes authority over menstruation and portrays women as needing to defer to medical authorities to understand their own bodies (Barnack-Tavlaris, 2015; Oinas, 1998).

As another observation, the changing language of menstruation offers a somewhat hopeful sign of progress. While menstruation has long been discussed in highly euphemistic terms ("that time of the month"), there have been changes over the last hundred years that have included more accurate and specific language such as

menstruation, periods, and vagina. There are still quite a few words and phrases that continue to be left out, including other references to genitals (e.g., no mention of labia), specific instructions about how to use menstrual products (e.g., advertisements still never mention tampon insertion or how to use a menstrual cup), and explicit references to menstrual blood (e.g., no advertisements mention blood or bloodiness at all). There also seems to be a lag for print advertisements to address any of these omissions, as some video advertisements have begun to include red menstrual blood, more explicit imagery of tampon strings, and more cheeky humor about the history of menstrual advertisements relying on blue liquid (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). In this way, advertisements are following patterns seen in language practices of adolescent girls: maintaining norms of menstrual concealment while also simultaneously violating taboos against communicating about menstruation (Gottlieb et al., 2020).

Limitations and Future Directions

Certain limitations impacted this study and are worth noting. Our selection of images and advertisements was far from comprehensive, and much of what we found was limited to magazine print advertisements from each period. We chose not to look at social media or video commercial advertisements, which might have yielded different kinds of observations about imagery and narrative to menstrual product advertisements (e.g., how much women speak, their body language, etc.). Looking at advertisements prior to 1920 could also be fruitful in future studies, as a few menstrual product advertisements appeared slightly earlier than the 1920s in some magazines (e.g., menstrual girdles from the 1910s). We were surprised that the 1960s and 1970s had such regressive gender role depictions in menstrual product advertisements despite the tremendous social upheavals of this time period; further inquiry about whether changes in advertisements lag behind social and political changes in the culture at large could be another compelling future study. A quantitative coding analysis of these data could also yield more precise and systematic counts of the presence/absence of different features in the advertisements (e.g., racial diversity, white pads versus liquid on pads, etc.). Further, analysis that separates tampons, pads, panty liners, and cups could prove useful, particularly as cups have emerged more recently and often have connotations of environmental-consciousness and more gender neutrality compared to other products.

Ultimately, this study once again showed how advertisements operate as a set of cultural artifacts, depicting the values of each decade, cultural frameworks of femininity and women's bodies, and, notably, reactions to the increasing amount of power (particularly spending-power) women gained over the last century. Keeping a close eye on the neoliberal frameworks for menstrual product advertisements is crucial in order to avoid the pitfalls of assuming that these advertisements are getting more "inclusive" and promoting actual empowerment for women. Further still, the relentless paradoxes of menstruation—joyful and shameful, powerful and embarrassing, easygoing and weighed down, energetic and lethargic—shine through when looking at these advertisements in a more longitudinal sense. In this way, this study tracks a critical history of menstruation while also serving as a warning for the future; advertisers continue to "sell" menstruators on the necessity of concealment and the supposedly empowering qualities of

effectively hiding their periods, all while retaining the intractable story of menstruation as shameful. Once again, this study highlights how menstruation brings together stories of (hetero)patriarchy, capitalism, and neoliberalism. Until more consumers refuse the stories these advertisements are selling, we can expect more—and perhaps an ever-intensified version—of the same.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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