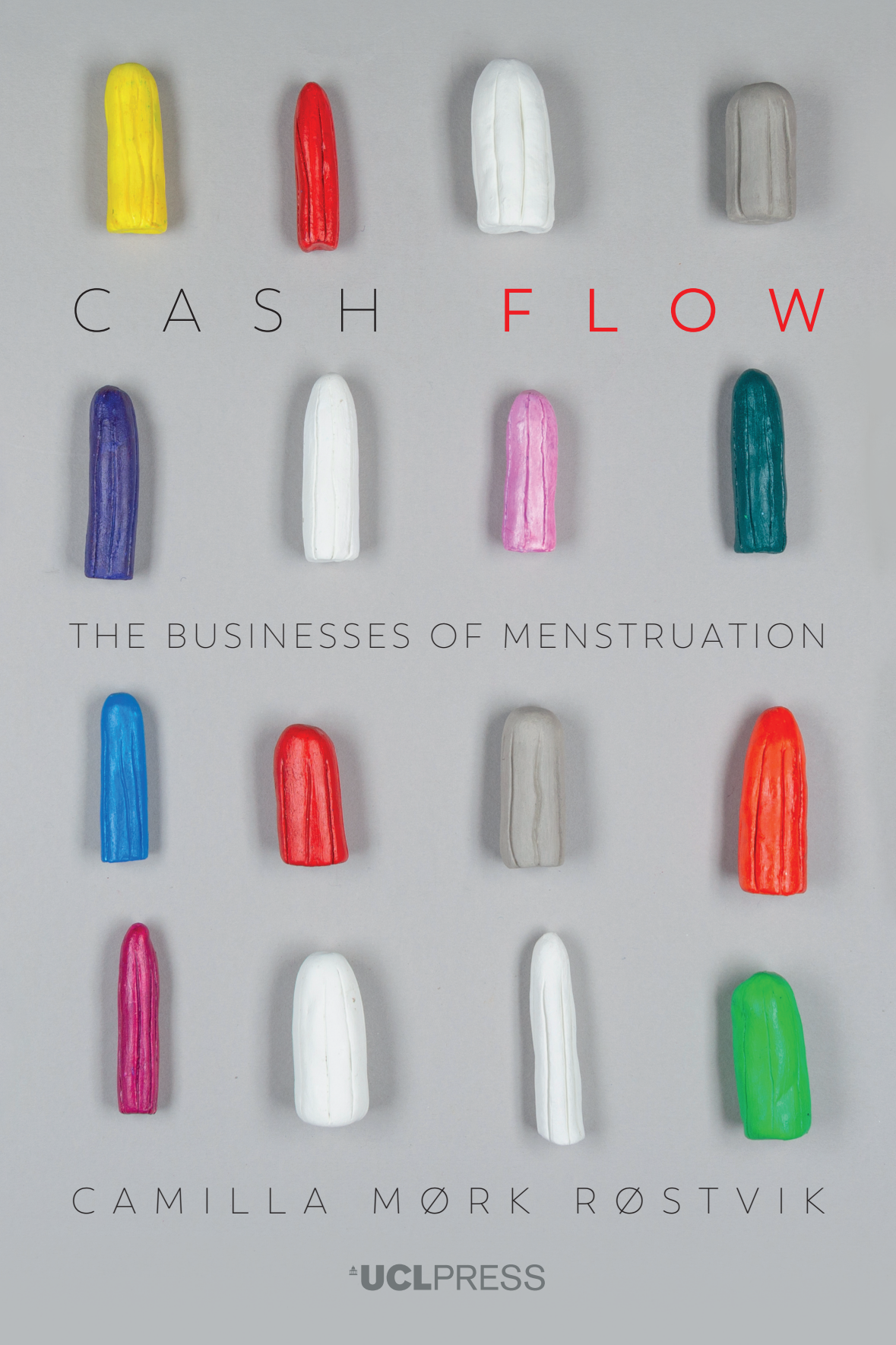
CASH FLOW
THE BUSINESSES OF MENSTRUATION
CAMILLA MØRK RØSTVIK
UCLPRESS

Cash Flow

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The businesses of menstruation

Camilla Mørk Røstvik

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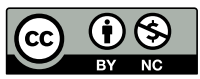

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Introduction
Blood money: the menstrual product industry in late capitalism

> Consumers in the sanitary protection market are particularly vulnerable to a lack of real competition. They have no choice but to buy the products … Although advertising and promotions may result in some benefit to the consumer, their main effects in this type of market are to apportion the static overall market between existing manufacturers and to limit competition by establishing very high levels of expenditure as necessary to effect entry.
>
> House of Commons investigation of the menstrual market, 1978.[1]

Menstrual culture is changing again. Since the new millennium, advertisements have moved from blue to red (liquid). Pink product packaging has been replaced with black. A dozen books about menstruation aimed at the general public have been published.[2] Periods have become plot devices in television series, in an Oscar-winning documentary (*Period. End of Sentence*, 2018), and in two award-winning Bollywood films (*Phullu*, 2017 – see Figure 0.1; *Pad Man*, 2018).

Brands popularised by their disposability are now expanding into reusable options. 'Period poverty' is being challenged with free products throughout the world, via policies in New Zealand, Scotland and Kenya, and through the work of charities everywhere.[3] Free products are available to people in the Norwegian military system, in British prisons, Scottish universities, Canadian schools, and in an increasing number of public buildings around the world.[4] Sanitary bins and their specialist cleaning systems are being introduced to more toilets, including for men and users with disabilities.[5] There are more choices of tampon, cup, and pad companies than ever before, some of which operate a buy-one-donate-one system. Artists are exhibiting and selling work featuring

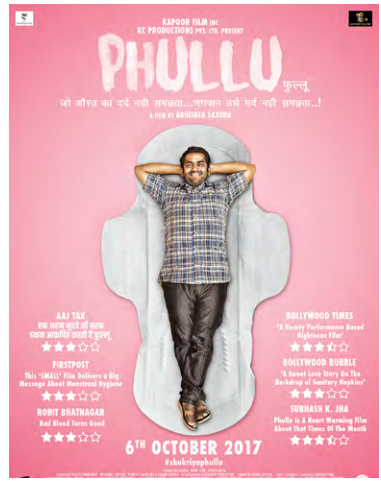

Figure 0.1. Movie poster for *Phullu*, 2017. The film is inspired by the life of Aranachalam Muruganantham, a social activist who created a machine that would produce low-cost menstrual pads. One year later, another film inspired by Muruganantham's life, *Pad Man*, was released, written and directed by R. Balki and produced by Twinkle Khannam SPE Films India, KriArj Entertainment, Cape of Good Films, and Hope Productions.

menstrual themes and blood, and partnering with product companies. You can buy T-shirts featuring menstrual masturbation, slinky underwear designed for 'heavy days', boy shorts designed for 'light days', and menstrual blankets designed for sleep. Traditional product placement has been joined by social media influencers' reviews of menstrual products, together with branded informational and creative videos. You can track your cycle online, creating a valuable dataset which predicts ovulation, menstruation and menopause.

What do all these changes have in common? In addition to the important work of adding to the cumulative destigmatisation of menstrual taboos begun by activists, educators and artists decades ago, they are all part of the booming menstrual economy.[6] The 'feminine hygiene products market' (which officially includes pads, tampons, panty liners and menstrual cups, but not related paraphernalia nor digital technologies) is expected to reach $20.9 billion by 2022, and $27.7 billion by 2025.[7] According to market predictors, change is looming for manufacturers as the Asia-Pacific regional market overtakes North America and Western Europe, owing in part to thawing social taboos as well as government agencies' support for menstrual product distribution.[8] On the horizon, the increase in disposable income of the middle class in large emerging

economies like Brazil and China will mean a growing appetite for quality products, especially well-known international brands that are marketed as 'premium wares'. In developing countries, the increase in demand for tampons and panty liners is just getting started, presenting a 'lucrative opportunity for global players to gain foothold'.[9]

Meanwhile, in North America and Western Europe, consumers are becoming willing to pay more for 'natural' products, which has already resulted in an unprecedented demand for organic and biodegradable options. Increasingly, market research lists 'synthetic, carcinogenic ingredients' (including dioxin rayon, allergy-provoking metal dyes, and highly processed wood pulp) as sources for vaginal discomfort and 'complications' – and as a reason for manufacturers to innovate because 'such health risks may hamper the growth of the feminine hygiene products market'.[10] Or, in other words:

> Increasing female population and rapid urbanization, rising female literacy and awareness of menstrual health and hygiene, rising disposable income of females, and women empowerment are expected to accelerate the growth of the feminine hygiene products market across the globe.[11]

Indeed. This, in turn, presents 'a lucrative opportunity' for manufacturers to invest, innovate and strengthen their market position across the world.[12]

> In short, menstrual culture is changing, and this is good for business.

One hundred years

But this is not the first time that menstrual culture has adjusted. In her book about attitudes towards menstrual education and technology in the early twentieth century, Lara Freidenfelds began with a similar overview of what had changed for menstruators since 1900:

> From cloth 'diapers' boiled on the stove and reused, to Kotex and Tampax. From shock at the sight of first bleeding and an awkward explanation by embarrassed mothers to educational films and pamphlets in fifth-grade classrooms. From warnings to avoid swimming, over-exertion, and 'mental shock' to reassurances that having one's period did not preclude any normal work or play.[13]

In the latter half of the twentieth century, these ideas were still influential, but memories about cloth 'diapers' and 'mental shock' seem distant to those growing up in the 1970s and beyond. By then, the use of pads and tampons had become normalised in large parts of the Global North, and consumers expected to find Kotex, Tampax and more on the shelves of any supermarket. These items helped consumers 'pass' as non-menstruating at all times, and to conform to 'menstrual etiquette' every day.[14] As such, products both helped stigmatise and destigmatise menstruation, both from top-down corporate strategies and bottom-up consumer adaptation and critique.[15] By the 1970s, menstruation entered the mainstream, through jokes and insults, television and songs, cartoons and stand-up comedy, creating for some a feeling of 'a new explicitness in the air'.[16] During the Toxic Shock Syndrome (and, to a lesser degree, the HIV/AIDS) crisis, menstruation was also heavily debated in mainstream media. And by the 2010s, it was yet again noted that 'periods had gone public'.[17] Somewhat like menstruation itself, changes in menstrual culture seem to be both generational and cyclical.

By the early twenty-first century, the menstrual product industry had been operating for around 100 years, resulting in a large-scale rearrangement of the ways in which many people managed menstrual blood. Rooted in the nineteenth century, the commercial and disposable pad was first popularised in the 1920s by North American manufacturers and advertisers, quickly followed by Scandinavian and European entrepreneurs.[18] Although 100 years is not a long time in the context of human menstrual history, it is a substantial length of time for habits to form, and markets to grow.

This book asks what the decades between 1945 and 2020 reveal about the mature industry. To do so, I examine seven companies and brands: Saba, Essity, Tambrands, Procter & Gamble (P&G), Kimberly-Clark, Clue, and Thinx. These case studies reveal an industry in the midst of change yet again, as it grapples with the limitations of its global reach, faces protests against disposable products in a climate-changed world, and witnesses the growth of public debates about menstruation. This book also tracks the way the industry has developed internally, noting how women have begun taking on lead roles in marketing and branding, the importance of menstrual product advertising winning prestigious awards, and the rise of new start-ups. In doing so, I document the changes in technology that underpin marketing efforts, and the labour of those who make the products. Finally, I examine the clash between the industry and its critics, and the role of activists, policy and politics in shaping the market. Recently, for instance, manufacturers in some countries have

signed up to voluntary codes of good practice, and have been subject to more scrutiny from consumers, politicians and the 'nonwovens' industry.[19] By exploring these specific cases, this book provides a deeper scholarly engagement with menstrual economic history, beyond the wide-ranging characterisation of the industry as monolithic, ridiculous, entirely dangerous, or as a saviour of modern womanhood.[20]

As such, the examples are also not representative of everything that has happened in menstrual product development since the mid-century, relying only on case studies where archival or oral documentation was available. This book covers cases from North America, Britain, Norway, Sweden, the Soviet Union and Germany. There is much more to investigate in terms of menstrual product corporations, and future scholars will hopefully gain access to more documentation, especially in the important emerging Asian market where Kingdom Markets and Unicharm are increasing their reach. Furthermore, this book focuses mostly on disposable products and does not include a discussion of the pill (sold as 'menstrual management' for decades) or reproductive technologies, the menstrual cup, or organic products, although literatures about their marketing and development are important contextual materials for this study.[21] Relatedly, it is beyond the scope of this book to include detailed histories of companies such as Lunapads, Mooncup, Natracare or Lunette, all warranting a different historic documentation because their products were developed and remained outside traditional corporate structures and often intertwined with feminist or environmental activist goals. Nevertheless, Chapter 6 provides some comparison of recent self-defining feminist and eco-conscious companies with the more traditional corporations examined in this book, and I have examined the history of Mooncup in particular elsewhere.[22] I have also not engaged much with the machines that drive manufacturing, nor the suppliers of raw materials to the industry – both of which are extremely hard to locate information about, but should nevertheless form the focus for future study as they will document the intersecting histories of cotton farming and pulp manufacturing, and the work of engineers. Nevertheless, the examples selected for this book are important because each company had goals of global reach, and some managed to build a truly international consumer base through effective monopolies and systems of vertical integration – an arrangement in which the supply chain of a company is integrated and owned by that company, and, due to an ensuing vertical monopoly, results in total control of a market. Therefore, this is a study of powerful corporate institutions, and the ways in which their privileged national and Western positions allow them passports to the rest of the world. While studies of

other companies and brands are needed, no history of menstrual corporations can neglect the powerful brands examined in this book.

Many consumers do not know much about the corporate drivers behind the largest menstrual brands in the world. This book argues that it is important menstruators have access to knowledge about these entities in order to make informed decisions about their bodies, health and money.[23] In order to explore this situation, this book answers some questions: What is the history of the companies that have profited from menstruation since the mid-twentieth century? How have notions of Western and/or country-specific exceptionalism and nationalism played a role in normalising a commercial menstrual culture? How has the industry reinvented itself by utilising creativity, close observation of changing generational attitudes towards periods, and appropriation of social justice messages from anti-racist, feminist, environmentalist, anti-poverty and queer communities? As menstruators stopped making their own products, who began making them instead, and what was their work like? And how have larger fiscal movements, from mergers and consolidations to unions and lawsuits, influenced the sector? Finally, the book questions what might have been lost and gained in the transition from homemade to industrially produced items.

While early critique of the industry was actively involved in challenging product manufacturers, there has been a tendency by journalists, activists and scholars to lump all businesses together, thus overlooking detailed historiographical knowledge. I argue that it is not enough to simply gesture at 'the industry', but to solidify and define what is meant when we talk about the menstrual product corporate landscape. Does it matter that scholars confuse brands, corporations and products? Not always. Sometimes the notion of 'the industry' can be helpful in hinting at the power structures at play in this specific realm of personal care capitalism, and I use the term throughout the book. But with more precision, the specific ways in which the industry's power reproduces and appropriates menstrual culture over time becomes clearer. And paying particular attention to national contexts can reveal the ways menstrual discourse and shame are similar *and* different in various regions.

By drilling down into the specifics of 'the industry', it is possible to see how geographic, technological, and marketing boundaries are sometimes drawn firmly between brands, and, at other times, dissolve entirely as businesses that started as distinct become enmeshed in the bland, large-scale industry of menstrual consumption.

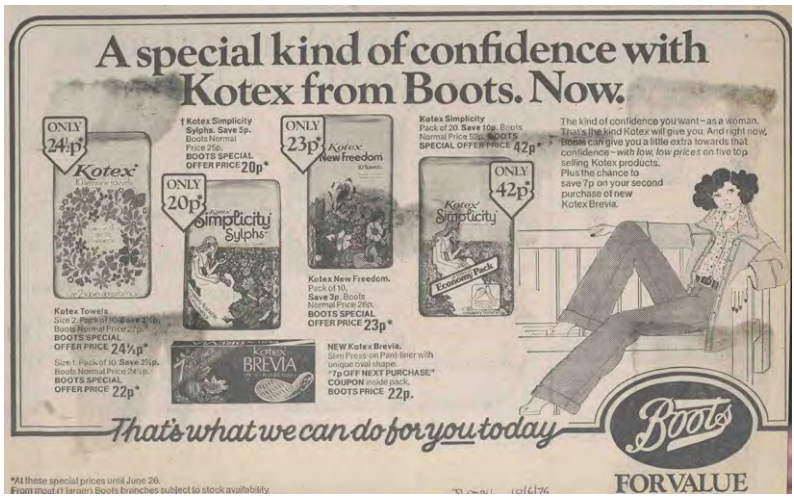

Figure 0.2. Advertisement for Kotex products in the UK by Boots, 10 June 1976. Archive identifier WBA-BT-11-45-1-41-2. Courtesy of Walgreens Boots Alliance Archive.

Blood repurposed as product

The paradox inherent in the profitability of menstruation hinges on the fact that menstrual blood is a free and renewable material, a substance many have believed should be secret, and certainly not part of any public discourse, including the movements of capitalism and branding. In the late twentieth century, blood and semen was repurposed as a product, as corporate and pharmaceutical interest in controlling and profiting from this ballooned, for example through the rise of blood and sperm banks, and products such as condoms and tampons.[24] Scholars have examined the growth of products designed to regulate and manage the menstrual cycle, and attention has been given to the ways in which the menstrual product industry is increasingly making menstruation a 'consumer event'.[25] Put simply, once blood is soaked into pads or tampons it becomes an object that must be disposed of, and replaced with new products. In this way, the menstrual cycle has become tied up with consumer habits and become a commodity in itself. It can be seen as part of 'the productive body' under capitalism, and a state in which everything – also taboo bodily fluids, breastmilk and other bloods – can be branded, commodified and sold (see Figure 0.2).[26] Although keeping menstruation hidden is not new, the monthly purchasing of items has accelerated in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, profiting the same group of multinational

corporations. It is notable, then, that despite the emphasis on taboo-busting from 2015 onwards, menstruation continues to profit many of the same – and some new – stakeholders.

Whether you live in the Global South or Global North, experiencing a monthly menstrual cycle increasingly means using products.[27] Yet most of these products originate in a handful of Western multinational corporations: P&G (Tampax, Always, This is L.), Essity (Bodyform, Libresse, Saba, Nana), Kimberly-Clark (Kotex), Johnson & Johnson (Lister's Towels, lil-lets, Stayfree), as well as store-brand products made in the same factories. In addition, connected industries such as the sanitary bin cleaning system and painkillers marketed directly to women profit from the regular cyclical occurrence of hormonal fluctuations associated with periods, vaginal discharge, or contraceptive-induced bleeding.[28] Manufacturers, advertisers, policy-makers, and many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are eager to point out that products are an efficient, quantifiable solution to period problems, while others are worried about the acceleration and impact of the product-as-solution argument to the detriment of conversations about education, pain and stigma.[29] Because menstruation carries with it a heritage of silence and invisibility, it has become difficult to examine the often messy reality of the issue, and easier to promise salvation through the recognisable iconography of the white hygienic menstrual pad or tampon.[30] Discourse is changing, but products remain a core part of that discourse.

Since the early twentieth century, the menstrual product industry has been fiscally healthy, owing in large part to the constant supply of consumers: people who bleed most or some months from about the age of 11 to 50. Although products, advertising and packaging has changed over the decades, the roots of contemporary menstrual product corporations have remained fixed. The key players – and the key characters in this book – all began as national companies focused on a handful of products, or just one. During the course of the twentieth century, they morphed into multinational corporations. Names such as P&G, Kimberly-Clark, and Essity have become so interwoven with late capitalism that untangling menstruation from them would dismantle a large part of the Western economy. The silence and stigma around menstruation have been profitable for these corporations, but as menstruation finds a place in mainstream discourse, they have remained strong players in the international market, and arguably managed to turn public discourse and scrutiny to their advantage.[31] For instance, while some countries began to experiment with providing free products to citizens in the late 2010s, this ensured that corporations had easy access

to national policy debates and tendering, creating a new government-level customer base where previously none had existed. The 1990s mark a key expansion for menstrual product companies and, with the opening up of Eastern Europe, the Global South, and Asia, benefitted global corporations in the US, UK and Scandinavia. In the West, where the products originate, the same tendency to solve all menstrual problems with products dominates, and the cases of menstrual discourse that sidestep products altogether are rare.[32] While menstrual products thus clearly have a big part to play in the success of twentieth-century corporations, studies of the menstrual product industry have mostly been written from outside the confines of business history.[33]

Gatekeepers

Feminists, activists, health professionals, academics and policy-makers have questioned the ethics of the menstrual product industry for decades. But they receive few answers. Historians and scholars of menstruation have found that communication efforts with the corporate research contacts vanished in thin air.[34] US corporations, which inhabit a distinct legal system, are especially steeped in a secretive culture, which has a knock-on effect regarding available information about brands. Since these brands are also available internationally, the ramifications of transparency (or lack of it) have become global. Furthermore, because the industry has often been the largest and most influential entity to take menstruation seriously for so long, it has gathered decades of research, market studies, product tests and other valuable information behind closed doors.[35] It would benefit consumers, as well as historians, if more information was shared in the future.

In the few historic cases where the corporate doors have temporarily slipped open to outsiders, consumers and historians have glimpsed the potential of the industry's archives and research materials. For example, the infamous crisis points in menstrual history, notably Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS), following the illness and death of consumers after the use of super-absorbent tampons (especially P&G's Rely) in 1980, allowed some public insight into manufacturing and technological development through the legal battles fought in courts.[36] Other episodes of momentary transparency and engagement with the outside world include the panic about blood at the height of the HIV/AIDS global epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s, and the industry's response to critique from environmentalists, to feminist protest against expensive products, to consumer boycotts

throughout the decades, and to transphobia in the 2010s. These episodes, however, do not reflect the mundane everyday operations of the industry, but rather present a sector in moments of crisis. But historians do not want only to know about snapshots of controversy or success; they seek to understand development over time. So menstrual historians have become adept at sidestepping corporate gatekeepers and creating archives of their own consisting of interviews, available literature, court documents, site visits and more. The resulting scholarship, debate and institutional criticism has expanded our understandings of this industry and revealed the many unknown factors within its operations.[37] This study also struggled with corporate gatekeepers, but found that persistence and excessive emailing paid off, resulting in access to new documentation and information about the industry, especially from outside the United States where business strategy has until recently been somewhat less tied up in legal restrictions.

The primary sources behind this book comprise archives, interviews, news articles and marketing materials. I had (selected or full) access to seven archives: the SCA Mölnlycke papers at Vestfold archives in Sandefjord in Norway; Essity's uncatalogued corporate collection of historic advertising and products in Mölndal in Sweden; Berg-Kragerø Museum's digital collection of menstrual technologies from the early twentieth century in Norway; the recently reorganised Kimberly-Clark archives and their Kotex legacy collection (via email exchange due to the Covid-19 pandemic); the Baker Business and Countway Medicine Special Collections at Harvard University; some selected visual material from Procter & Gamble's corporate archive (via email); and the personal collection of past Femtech-employees (through meetings in person and communication over email). I have also relied on corporate histories and publications, material available through company websites, market analysis, and digital, print and televised advertising. As a Norwegian situated in a British institution, I had unique access to both English- and Scandinavian-language archives. When working with archival material, I utilised a feminist archival method in which the voices of women and minorities are prioritised.[38] Bringing these archives together for the first time, the book presents a selection of available materials about menstrual product corporations.

However, relying on available archival information with permission from (some) corporate gatekeepers brings up questions about how much these records should be relied upon. What can be learnt from these archives, and what is not available through such channels? Initially, I approached all the major menstrual product corporations for information

about their archives, typically receiving no or slow answers. Over time, I built relationships with some archivists, while archives from 'dead' companies like Saba were easy to access and use since there were no current owners. As such, this book reflects the information that was available to me at the time, and thus also underlines that the history presented in these chapters is framed by the access given to me by the entities I write about. I have tried to approach the archival evidence critically, mindful of historic corporate erasure and foregrounding the voices of women, minorities, activists and outsiders when they appear. As such, I am writing both with and against the archival material, and I have attempted to supplement the official records with additional information from living persons. In this way, while also steeped in personal narrative and frameworks, interviews help complicate some of the corporate histories by providing individual stories, personal recollection and, at times, opposing views of the menstrual product industry. The challenge for any historian or archivist utilising corporate archives is to work with and against the systems of power that such records uphold. Recent scholarship on the ethics of corporate archives has addressed this tension, while recognising that practices within corporate archive-keeping have not changed substantially, and that the 'litigiousness' of recent decades (specifically in the United States) means that executives avoid keeping detailed, transparent and complex records of decision-making.[39] The result can be a somewhat bland collection of materials that position the corporation in a pleasant light. Throughout this book, I have tried to explore how the official corporate record and counter-voices clash, work together and divert.

To complicate the archival record, I relied on interviews with past and present workers, stakeholders, and family members of past staff. P&G, Kimberly-Clark, Essity, Thinx and Clue employees generously answered my questions and shared information, documents and images when possible. Interviews were conducted over phone, in person, in writing or online, and sources were found through a snowball approach, often with the help of archivists and retired employees.[40] I interviewed the granddaughter of one of the founders of Saba and the daughter of the Saba board's secretary, Essity's Information Specialist, two former managerial employees at Femtech, the Harvard professor who first covered the Femtech case, the advertising agency Leo Burnett's 'Like A Girl' campaign team, and employees from Clue. I utilised a semi-structured approach to these interviews, suggesting themes to the interviewee before our conversation, and letting the conversation develop naturally to ensure interviewees were given time to share their experiences.[41] Regarding interview methodology,

I worked in the tradition of Feminist History (rather than Social Science) in which scholars seek out the experience and thoughts of living subjects to complement and deepen archival, media and cultural sources that have largely denied women, minorities or topics considered taboo any space.[42] In addition, I had several conversations (rather than formal interviews) with employees of multinational menstrual corporations who preferred to remain anonymous. These provided insight into the industry, and underlined the tension inherent in working in a sector which claims to be both sincerely feminist and aggressively capitalist. However, just like archives, interviews provide a specific angle on a topic, and questions of trust, memory and honesty are useful to keep in mind when consuming this information. Interviewees and interviewers have their own agendas and hopes for the interview, and accuracy might suffer due to preconceived notions of each other, the strangeness created by the interview situation itself, power dynamics, misunderstanding, mishearing, stereotypes, leading questions, and expectations.[43] Yet, it is widely recognised that for historians working on histories of corporations and power, interviews are extremely valuable because they provide a new perspective on a familiar story, break down large narratives into personal recollection, and humanise what would otherwise be a cold, clinical company success story.[44]

Together, these sources provide insight into how each company described in the chapters utilised different tactics to produce, sell, market and survive in a changing 'femcare' economy.[45] This book is nevertheless not a typical history of business, since reliable financial data is difficult to find in these primary sources and because my goal has not been to communicate a history of the industry which is focused solely on finances. Rather, I deploy an interdisciplinary approach which includes literary, visual and semiotic analysis of menstrual brands and companies, alongside primary archival and oral sources. In this way, I hope to examine the history of the creativity and social impact of the industry and its products, inspired by and expanding the existing literature in the field.

The historiography of menstrual product companies

Scholars, activists and journalists have critically assessed the role of many of the corporations and brands discussed in this book. Notably, Karen Houppert's 1990s work on the US tampon industry, first published in *The Village Voice* and later as the book *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation*, provided a critical overview of the industry.[46] Houppert utilised methods such as interviews, site visits and a

wide range of sources to make her case against the industry, and also explored contemporary counterculture at the time, such as the brief surge in DIY menstrual sponge production.[47] She also visited a Tampax factory in the US, providing a rare opportunity for close observation of the manufacturing process and the female workers' daily labour.[48] Houppert's site visit influenced the research behind this book, providing evidence that it was possible to access these corporate, secret and complex spaces if one persisted. My own visits to corporate archives and landscapes broaden our knowledge of these locations and the lives of the workers within, while also expanding historical writing about this industry beyond the United States.

In 2006, historian Elizabeth A. Kissling presented an updated analysis of the industry in *Capitalizing on the Curse: The Business of Menstruation*, also focusing on the US (the subtitle of my book pays homage to Kissling's important scholarship).[49] In her work, Kissling explored how the industry had constructed menstruation as a problem to be solved with products, and how menstruation became a 'consumer event'.[50] The book examined case studies of the menstrual economy at the time, including the first Pre-Menstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) drug, the bleeding-reducing contraceptive Seasonale, contemporary advertising, popular culture, dioxins in menstrual products (echoing Houppert and the contemporary feminist health movement's concerns about product safety), and counterculture.[51] Kissling utilised visual and literary analysis, but had little access to corporate archives. Instead, she positioned her analysis in the framework of Simone de Beauvoir's argument that menstruation is an example of the 'Other-ness' of women, providing a reading of the contemporary menstrual market as a sign of patriarchal dominance.[52] Kissling's approach to case studies of menstrual capitalism inspired the structure of this book and my own writing about specific empirical evidence framed in a larger feminist theory of body consumerism. Furthermore, I add evidence and case studies from other countries, cultures and language traditions to underline how prescient Kissling's predictions about a menstrual capitalist future turned out to be.

Two years later, Sharra L. Vostral surveyed the industry from a feminist science and technology studies (STS) perspective in *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology*.[53] Also focusing on the United States, Vostral provided a landmark analysis of the development of products such as pads and tampons, claiming both as technologies in their own right, and linking them to a larger twentieth-century history of personal care capitalism. In the study, she utilised oral history and archival study (including Kimberly-Clark) to great effect, combining this with

media and advertising as source material. Later, Vostral would extend her work to focus on the TSS episode, connecting the technological, biological, cultural and legal aspects of the crisis in *Toxic Shock Syndrome: A Social History*.[54] This laid the groundwork for a critical and historical investigation of menstrual product safety, and is echoed in many of this book's chapters because TSS resurfaces as a key crisis point for all tampon manufacturers active in the 1980s. Vostral's thoughtful and interdisciplinary work underpins this book in many ways, from the inspiration to work across disciplines (as an art historian no less!) to the need for accuracy regarding company names, brands and dates. Again, my study provides transnational evidence about Vostral's subject matter to the broader literature of menstruation, including about how TSS played out beyond North America, and how product development conformed with and diverged from American patents in the twentieth century.

The following year, the aforementioned book by Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period*, made inroads into the corporate influence on menstrual culture in North America.[55] Surveying the ways in which menstruation became reconceptualised during the early twentieth century, Freidenfelds' study detailed how the idea of 'modern' menstrual management was advocated by educators, parents and the booming industry. Tracing the emergence of new ideas about menstruation in the 1920s to 1940s, she explored how new generations embraced franker conversation about periods with parents, detailed educational content from school, and the use of new menstrual technologies. Freidenfelds, whose study drew on archival materials (particularly Kimberly-Clark) and interviews with women who were young in the early century, also showed that the industry was not a rigid entity but a complex set of influential systems in which education, profit and a genuine desire to end menstrual stigma often interlinked. Similarly, Freidenfelds provided crucial evidence about the varied consumer experience of these new products and ideas, based on her conversations with women from different ethnic, socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds in the US. From these conversations, multiple attitudes to disposable pads and tampons emerged, including critique of and dissatisfaction with products, as well as happiness about not having to make and wash cloth 'diapers' anymore. Ultimately, Freidendfelds showed how women and men collaborated with sex educators and menstrual product manufacturers to reframe their thinking about menstruation, suggesting that this was a collective shift which benefitted many menstruators as well as the emerging industry. Her use of interviews to complicate the corporate official record underpins my work, while I also add information about workers within the industry to this oral documentation and, yet again, provide more international details.

Beyond focused studies of product use and the industry, important scholarship about interlinked topics followed. In 2010, Chris Bobel's *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* provided a pioneering study of the historic and contemporary menstrual activist movement, including analysis of the industry and interviews with some representatives from the sector.[56] Bobel's research brought together documentation about the diverse, ever-changing, and countercultural activist side of menstrual culture, detailing how its tactics and goals had helped shape menstrual history. In her 2019 book, *The Managed Body: Developing Girls and Menstrual Health in the Global South*, the focus was turned towards the global 'menstrual hygiene management' (MHM) movement and its ambitious yet problematic aims to provide a 'technology fix' for girls around the world.[57] While not focused on the industry, the study detailed how the industry's products are used for moral, political and charitable aims, and how products are seldom enough to solve all issues related to MHM.

These studies from the 2000s and 2010s are important frameworks for this book, functioning as a historiographical foundation and as direct inspiration for this project. In addition, the recent definition and galvanisation of the field of critical menstruation studies provided extensive interdisciplinary scholarship from the realms of social sciences, humanities, medicine, policy and politics, contemporary activism, the arts, and MHM.[58] Building upon their work, my study extends the critical analysis of menstrual products and the industry beyond the North American context and into the new era of menstrual activism which was popularised after 2015.[59] It also shows how perceptions of Western and Scandinavian exceptionalism, gender equality and progressive politics outside the United States are tied to menstrual capitalism, and how this is often intimately intertwined with racialized perceptions of menstruation 'elsewhere'.

In the years since these books were published, one could make the case that everything and nothing has changed. As Kissling put it then: 'In our postmodern era, a woman's relationship to her menstrual cycle is mediated through consumerism'.[60] This rings true also in the 2020s, but in ways that few could foresee a decade ago, when menstruation was still not 'out of the closet' and certainly not a transnational subject discussed on social media platforms.[61] This book extends the critical study of menstrual consumerism, tracing what has remained similar to the industry's beginnings 100 years ago, and what has changed.

Theorising menstrual capitalism

On International Women's Day in 2018, P&G published a Twitter message stating that the menstrual product industry has been crucial to the empowerment of women, thus presenting the brand as a moral force for good.[62] As this book details, they made the same claim in the 1980s Soviet Union, upon launching of the Tampax brand there, and when first marketing the Always brand to girls. Scholars of menstrual history acknowledge that the emergence of disposable menstrual products helped many people to perform 'menstrual etiquette' in a practical way, but they have also highlighted the ways in which the normalisation of purchasing menstrual products added to the overall taboo.[63] The example of this tweet illuminates the ways in which commercial and sincere interests in breaking down menstrual stigma co-exists within the industry. As such, both economic and feminist theories are relevant to the critical study of this field.

The theoretical framework for many scholars writing about menstruation from the 1960s onwards was often rooted in feminist and Marxist economic critiques, where the idea of profiting from menstruation was compared with other ways in which women were oppressed in systems of white supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism. These scholars argued that productive and reproductive labour are differently valued under capitalism, and that women have been mostly tied to the latter, unwaged type.[64] Reproductive labour includes giving birth and doing the emotional, bodily work of mothering, an expectation rooted in the menstrual cycle and fertility. These documentations of and theoretical approaches to 'social reproduction' have since included exploration of the role of birth control, the beauty industry and dieting as forms of gendered social structures which reproduce over time due to larger inequalities between groups. Writers who engaged with these theoretical approaches included Janice Delaney, Mary Lupton and Emily Tooth, whose 1976 classic *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (and its updated 1988 version) critiqued the patriarchal structures behind menstrual products.[65] The menstrual movement also encapsulated feminist health care providers like the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, whose popular 1970 publication *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was rapidly translated and circulated, and which is referenced by both corporations and activists in this book.[66] Feminist and Civil Rights groups that were founded during the 1970s, and which included consciousness-raising as part of their work, also discussed menstruation, for example the Womanism movement

in North America (which had strong ties to the Black Panthers), Hackney Black Women's Consciousness Raising Group in the UK, the Danish 'red stocking movement', Group 8 in Sweden, and Women's Front and Lesbian Movement in Norway. These health- and rights-focused groups rallied around causes such as access to abortion and bodily autonomy, and included menstrual cycle education and discussion as part of this work.[67]

Later, lawyer Bridget Crawford would define 'menstrual capitalism' to mean the exploitation of menstruators by corporations, advertisers and other for-profit entities.[68] Why, these and other pioneering voices ask, should menstrual products be a commodity at all? Why is toilet paper generally provided by employers and public institutions, but tampons not? And why are these simple products so expensive? These questions foregrounded the later policy discussions of 'Period Poverty' by decades, noting the ways in which those who could not afford menstrual products faced the full force of menstrual stigma if they were seen visibly bleeding. As such, the economic critique of menstrual products goes beyond theory; it has a direct impact on menstruators, who have nothing to gain from visibly bleeding.[69]

The menstrual economy has also developed in line with the emergence of late-capitalist systems after the economic expansion in the West following the Second World War. In his classic text, *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson described how the mid- to late-twentieth-century years were characterized by the collapse of commerce into culture, the rise of multinational corporations and brands, and the dismantling of master narratives of the past.[70] In her critique of these systems, critical theorist Nancy Fraser argued that this had a direct effect on activism and feminism, which was increasingly appropriated by brands and corporations in the late twentieth century.[71] Also in the 1990s, postcolonial theorist Deborah Root argued that there were additional consequences for women of colour, whose activism and creativity were frequently appropriated by the commercial mainstream, in what she defines as a 'cannibal culture'.[72] The menstrual product industry involves many of these tendencies, from the rise of corporate power to the canonisation of iconic brands, the blurring of lines between advertising and 'edutainment', and the constant appropriation of Black women and women of colour's work and activism.

Likewise, theories of sexuality and commodification under late capitalism illuminate the larger economic turn behind 'menstrual capitalism'. In theorist Paul B. Preciado's concept of 'pharmacopornographic capitalism', the wider cultural implications of the pharmaceutical industry's stronghold on reproduction and bodily cycles are investigated, revealing

the ways in which the synthesis of hormones since the 1950s fundamentally changed how gender and sexual identity are formulated, and how the pharmaceutical and pornography industries are in 'the business of controlling desire'.[73] These corporate systems make and change cycles of reproduction, including the management of menstruation through hormonal contraceptives, resulting in less bleeding or no bleeding at all, and postponed childbearing and menopause (all of which can necessitate more menstrual products for spotting, or for longer periods of menstrual cycling). As an example, Preciado points to P&G's development of a type of Viagra for women that was never carried to market due to various concerns about its gendered and societal effects.[74] As such, P&G has been invested in the entire female lifecycle and has, together with its competitors, forged deep connections with pharmaceutical companies, the medical field of research and the parallel manufacturing of artificial hormone development. In these ways, the economic and pharmaco-pornographic lens explored by these scholars widens our perspective to glimpse the interlocking forces of social reproduction, gendered commerce, Big Pharma, sexuality and late capitalism swirling around the menstrual product industry.

A critical economic and feminist approach remains a helpful tool in examining the industry beyond its own claims of importance, and reminds us of the economic, cultural and health impacts of this specific market. Recent debates about menstrual poverty, homeless menstruators and expensive products have galvanised the economic critique of the industry.[75] This has happened in the West as well as the Global South, counteracting the perceived industry wisdom about Western menstruators as happy consumers and the rest of the world as charitable cases. Marxist feminist critiques have also become a key part of the new critical menstruation studies scholarship, through the ongoing and reflexive debate about the explosion of menstrual discourse in the mainstream media. For instance, Sinu Joseph's economic and postcolonial critique of the short film *Period. End of Sentence* (which won an Academy Award in 2019) questioned the film's perspective of Indian women as uncivilised because they did not have access to disposable pads before the entrance of entrepreneurs like Arunachalam Muruganantham and the mainstreaming of Western brands.[76] Similar critiques appeared regarding the first and second motion pictures about menstruation, *Phullu* (2017) and *Pad Man* (2018), both focusing on the true story of Muruganantham's efforts to provide pads throughout India by the help of his own low-cost pad machine.[77] In the PR for *Phullu*, the actor playing Muruganantham is seen floating on a pad with wings on a pink backdrop, happily smiling as he looks into the horizon of his new micro-economic system of menstrual

management and product manufacturing. The movie's artful depiction of menstrual shame and the potential for solidarity across class and gender boundaries is one of many examples of how artists reacted to the increase in menstrual discourse in the 2010s. In the movie poster for *Pad Man*, actor Akshay Kumar, also depicting Muruganantham, clutches his fist in victory against the backdrop of the sun, on top of a pile of raw cotton and dressed in sparkling white, referencing the iconography of heroic narratives from the past. The latter movie, also a product in itself, did well at the box office (the ninth highest-grossing Bollywood film of the year), and presented menstruation as a worthy and valuable event. For activists who have worked on menstrual themes for years, the Hollywood and Bollywood treatment of menstrual narratives is a double-edged sword: both welcome for its ability to challenge stigma through art, and undermining efforts that are not about products. Following in the footsteps of such critiques, this book utilises a feminist economic critique to assess whether the claims of revolution, women's empowerment, and improvement in menstrual health generally have been gained, or whether established companies, such as P&G and Essity, and new start-ups, such as Muruganantham and Thinx, are also recycling the original capitalist and, often, colonial goals of the industry through technological, educational and branded efforts.

Re-branding menstruation

Today, it is difficult to sell any product, including those created for menstruation, without also providing an overall experience of the product that distinguishes it from competitors via branding. Traditionally, this has been achieved through advertising, education and distribution of free samples. Scholars of menstrual history have identified the tropes and narratives within menstrual product advertising, specifically the focus on purity, hygiene, femininity, modernity and physical activity.[78] At the heart of their analysis is a questioning of the amount of funding spent on marketing versus innovation and product development. This tension was intense in the mid- to late twentieth century, exemplified by a 1978 UK House of Commons commission tasked with investigating potential price fixing (regarding the company Southalls). It is worth taking the time to read this lengthy quote in detail to see how the problem of high advertising costs versus product innovation is not new:

> There is a matter which we feel should be carefully considered not only by Southalls but also by the sanitary protection industry in general. Consumers in the sanitary protection market are particularly vulnerable to a lack of real competition. They have no choice but to buy the products. They purchase mainly for reasons other than price and the prices paid reflect high costs of advertising and promotions. Although advertising and promotions may result in some benefit to the consumer, their main effects in this type of market are to apportion the static overall market between existing manufacturers and to limit competition by establishing very high levels of expenditure as necessary to effect entry. We consider, given these characteristics, that advertising costs and such promotional costs as do not represent direct benefits to the consumer should be reduced and the savings passed to the consumer. While we recognise that such practices are a feature of the trade and that one company on its own could not be expected to affect a major unilateral reduction in such expenditure, we think that all the companies in this industry should restrain their advertising and promotional expenditures to effect a reduction.[79]

This recommendation served as a soft warning to all companies, but was not adhered to because enforcing regulations about advertising was beyond the remit of the commission's role. Advertising costs continued to grow in Britain and elsewhere, with innovation stuttering alongside and product prices increasing.

The 1978 report was also a rather late intervention in the sector, as branding platforms had begun to change earlier in the decade due to the slow thawing of censorship rules. In the 1970s, menstrual product advertising was allowed on television in North America, Europe and Scandinavia for the first time, with mixed results. During July 1972, Britain's Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) conducted a brief experiment for pad and tampon advertising, only to reverse the decision by September that same year. The episode reveals the tension between institutional ideas about good taste and the role of advertisers in breaking taboos. In the 1972 example, the IBA concluded:

> It became clear that the idea of advertising sanitary towels and tampons in the family medium of television is objectionable to a significant proportion of viewers, though fewer appeared to have been offended in practice by the advertisement which actually appeared on the screen.[80]

For advertisers, this decision was extremely frustrating, resulting in a change of direction for marketing towards even more euphemism and secrecy in order to placate the IBA and similar bodies. Meanwhile, in the United States, 1972 marked a permanent change in broadcast rules that allowed menstrual products advertising on television.[81] The re-emergence of menstrual product advertising on television in Britain can be dated to the mid-1980s, when many Western countries allowed the powerful multinational corporation P&G to advertise Always pads (and then only within strict parameters, including a ban on showing red liquid). By the 1990s, advertising could be seen before a movie in some European countries, and in the 2000s advertisers conquered the new media of digital advertising and social media. In 2020, the UK Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice dissolved the last regulations relating to time of broadcast and age of audience, discontinuing rule 32.6.1 about 'sanitary protection' which had previously stated:

> This rule prevents sanitary protection products from being advertised in or adjacent to programmes commissioned for, principally directed at or likely to appeal particularly to children below the age of 10 … The rule was introduced on the basis of public sensitivities about the advertising of sanitary protection products expressed during public research.[82]

While this book does not cover the entire, detailed landscape of advertising censorship (and its intersections with, for example, menstrual porn censorship)[83], knowing a little about the role of censorship boards allows us to appreciate the difficulty faced by women and men tasked with trying to sell or market menstrual products in the mid- to late twentieth century, and the ways in which their arguments about openness coincided with some activist sentiments about destigmatising menstruation more broadly.

The people working in menstrual product advertising have been largely overlooked by scholars.[84] Whereas menstrual product advertisement has traditionally been dominated by women at the creative and lower (rather than at management or leadership) levels, the menstrual product advertising category is now beginning to attract more people, including artists and celebrities. This is due to mainstream attention, advertising-award success, and, as a result, larger budgets for the creative talent involved. Since the 2000s, executives and teams in large advertising agencies have diversified their efforts to capture the attention of a new generation, including through serialized YouTube

videos in collaboration with professional writers, award-winning short films, guerrilla-tactic stunts, new packaging, and celebrity collaborations with stars such as Serena Williams, the Kardashian reality stars, and comedian Amy Schumer. The turn towards more exciting advertising is part of the industry's close observation of menstrual activism and an effort to keep up with what new generations of consumers want from menstrual brands. While menstrual activism has been protesting the industry and advocating for better education and less stigma throughout the twentieth century, this book shows how advertisers across countries have tried to keep pace (and sometimes succeeded) with their energy, rhetoric, and wishes, and those of the wider women's health movement.[85]

Making menstrual products

The manufacturing of menstrual products today bears little resemblance to its beginnings. Throughout this book, makers of products are encountered on factory floors, in boardrooms, and scientific laboratories, and in roles as manual labourers, founders and CEOs, patentholders, and scientists.

Their labour is directly connected to the change in menstrual habits which saw the homemade options of the 1920s disappear in favour of factory-made consumer goods by the mid-century. But this does not mean that human labour disappeared altogether. Female factory workers did

Figure 0.3. Workers exiting Southalls factory at Alum Rock Road, Birmingham, after finishing a shift, 1976. Photographed and courtesy of Nick Hedges.

most of the difficult, highly skilled, monotonous, low-paid shift work involved in making disposable pads and tampons (see Figure 0.3). They faced challenges, including high rates of factory accidents and the never-ending struggle to combine childcare with paid work, but they also built solidarity across the sector and delighted in improving the lives of those who used their products. As such, the workers engaged with feminist ideas and socialist goals, expressed through unions, secretaries and in the media. This labour and working-class history is a largely forgotten part of menstrual product development, which has tended to either downplay skilled work in the sector or to focus instead on the technological development of the product itself. By paying attention to the workers on the factory floor when archival documents render it possible, this book adds a further dimension to both women's labour history and the menstrual product industry, revealing the skill that goes into the making of each tampon and pad.

While the industry may be dominated numerically by women working in factories, there have always been plenty of men involved, too. Most of the products explored in this book were either partially invented or first successfully sold by male managers, owners, CEOs and sales teams. Throughout, this was therefore a distinctly gendered working environment in which women made objects and men managed women. Pay disparity and unequal access to rights and promotions often followed. While this is not a story unique to the menstrual product industry, it is especially extreme in the development of tampons and pads because women, seen as more suitable creators of these hyper-gendered products, were recruited to make these items. Likewise, men were recruited to lead these jobs because of the societal perceptions of men as better leaders, thus sidestepping the parallel societal stigma against menstruation. In other words, male status was not sullied by being connected to menstrual products, as long as they were still leaders, managers or owners. Meanwhile, women were often slotted into a further compromised position during their work, because they were both recruited owing to their gender and seen to be a problem because of their distinctly gendered caring responsibilities. Even more bizarrely, I have not been able to find much evidence of anyone in the industry – female, non-binary, or male – using menstruators' embodied or 'situated' experience to the benefit of the development of the product.[86] For this, managers relied on outsourced market research.

But there are intriguing outliers also in this story. In her research, Arlene Hambrick brought to light the example of African American inventor Mary Beatrice Davidson Kenner, who pioneered a new type of

menstrual belt system in the 1930s.[87] Kenner hoped that her patented product would be more comfortable for women, and two corporations showed a great interest in her work. When meeting for the first time, however, the collaboration was cancelled before it began, with Kenner painfully realising that menstrual product manufacturers were not ready to work with Black women. Kenner subsequently disappeared out of menstrual product history until Hambrick collected her oral history in the 1990s.[88] I share this example to illustrate the problem of researching an industry with strict gatekeepers, and one in which the story of Kenner is likely the tip of the iceberg rather than an extreme exception.

Examples like that of Kenner are rarely documented and heavily mythologised, due to the overwhelming whiteness of the industry's participants as a whole. For instance, as far as it is possible to tell, company owners and managers were predominantly white. It is more difficult to assess whether this is true also of the female factory workforces, as this group was much larger, and documentation is often sparse. While individuals may have come from many backgrounds, the external image of the industry was built on both middle-class status and whiteness as aspirations through marketing. Throughout the century, white women dominated advertising campaigns from all companies, leaving large groups excluded entirely from the visual landscape of menstrual capitalism. For instance, in Scandinavia, there was no reference to or inclusion of the Indigenous Sámi peoples, nor any mention of Native Americans in North America. Corporate histories regarding Indigenous people also have physical roots, tied to the role of companies in the colonisation of native lands and the fronting of specific hygiene and gender paradigms, and thus the erasure of native and Indigenous menstrual culture.[89]

The history of menstrual product manufacturing told in this book examines the role of individual workers, CEOs and marketers. It also ties these individuals to the larger architecture of menstrual culture which was built by the sector as a whole. The workers we encounter in this book were keenly aware of their competition abroad, set goals based on other companies' plans, and raced to develop specific products and campaigns first. While each worker and company was unique, they collectively built a rather homogeneous industry where two products (pads and tampons) dominated, and where only some paradigms (of whiteness, discretion, productivity and hygiene) were fronted above any other.

Case studies

Each chapter is dedicated to one menstrual product company, which either once was or remains powerful in the sector. The book is furthermore organised in three intertwined sections: a) Scandinavia (Saba and Essity); b) P&G (Tambrands and Always); and c) newer examples of branding (Kotex, Clue and Thinx). The chapters cover the full twentieth century, often extending into the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries as well. Chapters overlap and intersect as corporations acquire each other, fail, or re-emerge somewhere else. Businesses that begin in one nation morph into multinational corporations, linking censorship debates, activism and advertising across continents. Such transnational corporate migration is underpinned by the broader frameworks of this book, specifically the ways in which ideas about Western and Scandinavian exceptionalism intersect with menstruation throughout.

I begin with the first historical account of Norwegian menstrual product (and diaper) company Saba, utilising the extensive archives available via Vestfoldarkivet in Norway. Examining the 'Norwegian fairy tale' from its humble beginnings in 1940s rural Scandinavia after the Nazi occupation, I explore the use of the 'Saba bus' to reach customers in remote fjords and mountains, the company's monopoly status, and the acquisition of Saba by multinational corporation SCA (later renamed Essity). The chapter provides new evidence of the national debate about 'menstrual capitalism' in Norway, and a vivid example of the move from national startups to multinational corporations in the mid-twentieth century. Described as a fairy tale business, the story of Saba underlines the specific Norwegian history of menstrual product manufacturing, and reveals the labour and creativity inherent in making tampons and pads in mid-century Scandinavia. Throughout, notions of Norwegian superiority appear in the branding, advertising and business strategies surrounding Saba, underpinned by the ways in which the Norwegian industry often positioned itself against foreign influence and competition from the United States, and foregrounded in specific views about what proper menstrual manners should look like for white Norwegian (but never Sámi) women.

Chapter 2 traces the history of the Swedish Essity corporation and its international marketing of menstrual products through successfully mobilising the concepts of 'Swedish Exceptionalism' and 'Swedish Sin'. Essity began life in the 1800s as the textile company Mölnlycke and was acquired by the Swedish Forestry Company (SCA) in the early twentieth century. The company renewed itself again in 2018, this time as Essity – a

portmanteau describing its products: essential and necessity. Throughout these reinventions, innovative marketing remained key in each phase, from the use of white pin-up style models in the early twentieth century to the invocation of feminist rhetoric in the 1960s, from the denim-like pad packaging of the 1970s to the publication of subscription-based magazine *Klikk Libresse* in the 1990s. Later, Essity won prestigious advertising awards and set the benchmark for influential menstrual marketing in the 2010s, at a time when 'Scandinavian exceptionalism' rendered Sweden aspirational yet again through the 'hygge' and 'Scandi' trends of the decade. Through interviews with staff and archival material from Essity's headquarters in Mölndal in Sweden, the chapter explores how Essity has sold the image of progressive Swedish menstrual consumerism to the world, while challenging foreign competition and menstrual culture.

In the third chapter, the establishment of 'menstrual capitalism' in the West is compared to a unique project in the Soviet Union. During the 1980s, a group of Soviet, British and American manufacturers attempted to establish a Tampax factory in Ukraine: Femtech. The project was an ambitious attempt to create a new market. While tampons had been available on the Soviet black market, Femtech marked the beginning of an official governmental and international interest in the ways in which Soviet women managed bleeding. The endeavour spans the years prior to and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and includes anonymous female factory workers as well as the influence of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the last leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. In its uniqueness, Femtech provides both a comparison to the ways 'menstrual capitalism' functioned also outside the West, and an example of how the menstrual product industry was strong enough to transgress linguistic, cultural and political boundaries as Femtech and Tambrands ultimately teetered but Tampax grew through acquisition by P&G. Femtech's unique history is documented here through interviews with former company managers, their personal archives, and through a 1990s Harvard Business School case study about the project aimed at the next generation of eager businessmen. The example of Femtech is an apt reminder of the agility of menstrual capitalism, and how it pairs exceptionally well with notions of nationalism, in this case Soviet – and subsequently Russian – power.

The fourth chapter investigates P&G's international re-entry into disposable menstrual products, 20 years after it recalled the TSS-related Rely tampon and during the decade when it prepared to acquire Tambrands in 1997. In 1983, P&G launched the technologically

innovative pad brand Always, which was extremely slim and absorbent by contemporary standards. Its success led to a global roll-out and subsequent success for the parent company. By the mid-1980s, official bodies tasked with overseeing mergers and competitions in the UK and the EU raised concerns about the dominance of P&G and Always. In this chapter, I examine the ensuing documentation as the corporation tried to expand globally, as well as early Always advertising and technology, and P&G's complicated relationship to girl consumers around the world. Through the lens of the extraordinarily successful 2014 advertising campaign 'Like A Girl', the chapter outlines the history behind Always's technological and marketing success, examining the role of the American parent company P&G, and its reliance on creativity and artists to engage new generations of critical girl consumers.

Chapter 5 investigates Kimberley-Clark's role as the executive producer of the 2010s YouTube series 'Carmilla'. Based on the nineteenth-century Gothic short story *Carmilla* by Irish writer Sheridan Le Fanu, the narrative mixed a lesbian love story with mystery, humour and vampires.[90] Although Kimberley-Clark funded the project, neither the corporation nor its Kotex pad products are referred to in the plot. The chapter explores how the discreet advertising of 'Carmilla' was both a departure from and continuation of Kotex's historic branding strategies, surveying the product's continuous adaptation to changing white girlhood trends and needs, from its beginnings in an industrial American mill town to the emergence of Kotex as an internationally recognized name. Throughout, I explore how the Kotex brand has always excelled in foregrounding aspirational girlhood goals to sell menstrual products, and how – until recently – such aspirations were tied to a distinct white culture of femininity.

The final chapter focuses on newer menstrual product trends from the 2010s, namely menstrual tracking application Clue and reusable menstrual underwear company Thinx. Both were spearheaded by female leaders, and built early brand recognition through creative and bold marketing strategies verging on controversy. Created to 'disrupt' the traditional menstrual product market, companies like Clue and Thinx positioned themselves as consumer champions and better, more moral alternatives to traditional products and corporations. Set against the backdrop of the historical chapters in this book, I examine Clue and Thinx as part of a continuation of the industry's adaptation to consumer protest and wishes, while also recognising the radical role of the 2010s startups in challenging the traditional market. While other menstrual corporations leaned on nationalism and exceptionalism to sell, newer startups utilised

such strategies differently by claiming to be exceptional because they had female founders, spoke openly about social justice and included diverse models in their advertising campaigns. This chapter interrogates such claims of exceptionalism and explores how Clue and Thinx operate similarly to and differently from their corporate competitors.

In the conclusion, comparisons and contradictions between the case studies are discussed in the context of late capitalism, nationalism and menstrual history. I raise the question of whether or not there is any alternative to 'menstrual capitalism' for menstruators today, and briefly examine the potential role of 'free bleeding' (menstruating visibly without use of any products) in popular culture and media. Furthermore, I argue that menstrual capitalism should be understood as a distinctly gendered, economic and racialised approach to menstruation which, despite corporate claims, has never suited everyone. Finally, I outline the many questions that are raised by this study, suggesting further avenues of historical research for critical menstruation studies scholars.

History repeating?

Yes, debates about menstruation are changing. But, as this book argues, they have changed before, without solving all key questions of menstrual equity. Notably, issues such as pain, endometriosis, Poly-Cystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), TSS, stigma, stained clothing due to inadequate products, and taboos remain prevalent throughout the world. While the industry cannot solve such issues alone, its historic and contemporary insistence on improving menstruators' lives connects it to these concerns. This book is therefore an attempt to historicise the recent past in order to contextualise the claims of revolution and progress made by the industry today. This critique is made in the spirit of 'punching up'. These powerful corporations can certainly handle, and might even welcome, critical attention. The menstrual product industry has long recognised that it cannot broaden its own consumer base without a thawing of taboos, and that the industry alone cannot address all the stigma attached to menstruation. As such, this book also documents the labour and creativity of the sector. These creators are in a stronger place today than ever before, and this book is an attempt to take their work seriously, while also challenging and questioning the wider structure in which that work participates.

There is already a discourse aimed at a popular audience that presents the industry as homogeneous, male-dominated and even dangerous.[91] Such critical readings have benefitted the industry over

time, especially regarding product safety, environmental issues, and consumers' changing attitudes towards euphemism and marketing tropes. In this book, I present historic case studies that shine a light on the complexities of the mature menstrual product sector, focusing on the inherent contradictions, paradoxes and narratives from the industry, and investigating the boundaries between nationalism, activism and profit in the business. People who menstruate also work in the industry, and some of the menstrual equity gains seen today are directly indebted to some of their work. However, as the industry enjoys success, awards and more venture capital investment, critical attention must continue to follow.

At its heart, this book explores the development of the menstrual product economy and the ways in which the brands appropriate and contribute to menstrual education and activism in order to better advertise their products in specific, changing market contexts. I examine how concepts of Western exceptionalism and nationalism are utilized successfully as part of menstrual capitalism and branding, thus positioning menstrual products as symbols of purity, femininity and (often) whiteness. While we will encounter changing and strong inclusive and activist messaging from the industry in this book, ongoing patriarchal hierarchies, gender bias, and poor working conditions evidences a clear continuity between 1945 and 2020 and a disconnect between message and practice that deserves attention.

Notes

1 House of Commons, 'Report on Investigation by the Price Commission under Section 4 or 5 of the Price Commission Act 1977' (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1978), 22.

2 For example, Sine Cecilie Laub and Maja Nyvang, *Gennomblødt: En Bog Om Menstruation* (Copenhagen: Saxo, 2016); Amanda Laird, *Heavy Flow: Breaking the Curse of Menstruation* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2019); Kate Farrell (ed.), *Period: Twelve Voices Tell the Bloody Truth* (New York: Feiwell and Friends, 2018); Nadya Okamoto, *Period Power: A Manifesto for the Menstrual Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Emma Barnett, *Period* (London: HarperCollins, 2019); Radha Paudel, *Dignified Menstruation: The Dignity of Menstruators throughout Their Life Cycle* (Kathmandu: Kathmandu Publication, 2020).

3 In 2018, the Scottish government unveiled a policy scheme to end period poverty, which would later be inscribed in law in 2020. For context on the Global South, see Chris Bobel, *The Managed Body: Developing Girls and Menstrual Health in the Global South* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

4 Following campaigning from military recruits in Norway, the army agreed to provide free menstrual products in 2021. From 2019, female and transgender male prisoners are provided with free products in UK prisons. In 2017, Kenya's president signed the Basic Education Amendment Act, guaranteeing free products in state schools. Since 2017, some Nordic, North American, South African, and South American cities have provided free products through a variety of schemes. Before this, charities and foodbanks were already providing free products, but the late 2010s marks a shift towards universal rather than poverty-focused provision.

5 Susan Stryker and John Sanders, 'Stalled: Gender-Neutral Public Restrooms', *South Atlantic Quarterly* Vol 115, No 4 (2016).

6 For an industry perspective on activism and consumers see Tara Olivo, 'Feminine Hygiene: Room for More', *Non Wovens Industry* (11 December 2020).
7 *Feminine Hygiene Products Market by Nature (Disposable, Reusable), Type (Sanitary Napkins, Panty Liners, Tampons, Menstrual Cups), Region (Asia Pacific, North America, Europe, Middle East and Africa, South America) – Global Forecast to 2025* (Markets and Markets, 2020). The full report is expensive, but a free summary is available online: https://www.marketsandmarkets.com/Market-Reports/feminine-hygiene-product-market-69114569.html (henceforth all online sources have been accessed February 2021).
8 Mugdha Potdar, *Feminine Hygiene Products Market by Type and Distribution Channel – Global Opportunities Analysis and Industry Forecast, 2015–2020* (Allied Market Research, April 2016). The full report is expensive, but a free summary is available online: https://www.alliedmarketresearch.com/feminine-hygiene-market.
9 Potdar, *Feminine Hygiene Products Market by Type and Distribution Channel.*
10 Potdar, *Feminine Hygiene Products Market by Type and Distribution Channel.*
11 *Feminine Hygiene Products Market by Nature.*
12 Potdar, *Feminine Hygiene Products Market by Type and Distribution Channel.*
13 Lara Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 1.
14 Sharra Louise Vostral, *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology* (New York: Lexington Books, 2008), 18; Sophie Laws, *Issues of Blood: The Politics of Menstruation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 42.
15 Louise Klintner, *Normalizing the Natural: A Study of Menstrual Product Destigmatization* (Doctoral thesis, Lund University, 2021).
16 Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), first published 1976.
17 Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, *Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity* (New York: Arcade, 2017).
18 '"The Kotex Age": Consumerism, Technology, and Menstruation', in Vostral, *Under Wraps.*
19 Regulation of menstrual products varies greatly. In the UK, members of the Absorbent Hygiene Product Manufacturers Association (AHPMA, including Kimberly-Clark Europe, P&G, Essity, and Johnson & Johnson) adhere to a *voluntary* Code of Practice for Tampon Manufacturers and Distributors which includes guidance on TSS warnings and correct use. There is a separate code for the EU, via the European Nonwovens Industry Association (EDANA). Pads are not subject to similar codes, but they are subject to the General Product Safety Directive (EEC Directive 2001/95/EC) in the EU. Incontinence products in the UK are classified as medical devices by the Medical Device Directive. In the US, the FDA clears products for sale (it does not 'approve' them), with the menstrual cup being subject to a complete premarket notification submission until 2014. In Scandinavia, products and ingredients are regulated through the EU via EDANA. Menstrual underwear, reusable pads, and newer menstrual products are generally not regulated. AHPMA and EDANA did not respond to my request for an interview.
20 Many people menstruate, others do not. The gendered terms in this book reflect the language and history of the industry, and its consistent exclusion of trans, non-binary, and intersex people until the 2010s.
21 Kelly O'Donnell, '"The Whole Idea Might Seem a Little Strange to You": Selling the Menstrual Cup', *Technology's Stories* Vol 5, No 4 (4 December 2017); Jessica Borge, *Protective Practices: A History of the London Rubber Company and the Condom Business* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020); Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Doris Linder, *Crusader for Sex Education: Elise Ottesen-Jensen (1886–1973) in Scandinavia and on the International Scene* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996); Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).
22 Røstvik, 'Safer, Greener, Cheaper: Mooncup® and the Development of Menstrual Cup Technology', *SHOT Special Issue: The Body and Technology,* forthcoming December 2021.
23 Laura Wershler, '#bodyliteracy: A Hashtag, a Title, a Meme?', Menstruation Matters blog (28 June 2012): http://www.menstruationresearch.org/2012/06/28/bodyliteracy-a-hashtag-a-title-a-meme/.
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Protective Practices: A History of the London Rubber Company and the Condom Business (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).

25 Jonathan Eig, *The Birth of the Pill: How Four Pioneers Reinvented Sex and Launched a Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 2014).

26 Didier Deleule and François Guéry, *The Productive Body*, translated by Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro (London: Zero Books, 2014); Swanson, *Banking on the Body*; Radin, *Life on Ice*; Seán Columb, *Trading Life: Organ Trafficking, Illicit Networks, and Exploitation* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

27 For a discussion of the limitation of the terms 'Global South' and 'Global North' in the context of menstrual history, see Bobel, *The Managed Body*, introduction.

28 Although these are not the same, the industry does not discriminate between types of blood, and has also repositioned itself to cover the lighter blood loss of certain contraceptive cycles, as well as in-between bleeding and other types of vaginal discharge. For a history of the pill and menstrual discourse, see Lara V. Marks, *Sexual Chemistry: A History of the Contraceptive Pill* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010). For an exploration of the rise in popularity of the pill amongst women and doctors, see Holly Griggs-Spall, *Sweetening the Pill: Or How We Got Hooked on Hormonal Birth Control* (Winchester and Washington, DC: Zero Books, 2013).

29 Bobel, *The Managed Body,* 169–208.

30 There is a substantial body of work on whiteness, ethics, and cultural histories of hygiene and waste that links to menstruation, notably Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Owl Books, 2000); Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

31 On current mainstream menstrual discourse in popular culture see Weiss-Wolf, *Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity*.

32 There are many exceptions to this dominating discourse, for example in the work done by activist Chella Quint through the Period Positive platform.

33 Exceptions include Ronald H. Bailey, *Small Wonder: How Tambrands Began, Prospered and Grew* (Tambrands Incorporated, 1987); Willis Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (B) Teaching Note* (Harvard Business School Case No 792-020, 24 March 1993); Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (A) Teaching Note* (Harvard Business School Case No 390-159, 19 March 1993). Business historians have also explored menstrual products as part of larger studies of corporate histories, as in Davis Dyer, Frederick Dalzell and Rowena Olegario, *Rising Tide: Lessons from 165 Years of Brand Building at Procter and Gamble* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2004); Robert Spector, *Shared Values: A History of Kimberly-Clark* (Lyme, CT: Greenwich Publishing Group, 1997).

34 A complete list would be impossibly long, but authors who discuss the problem and consequences of the industry's lack of transparency on scholarship include Vostral, *Under Wraps*; Vostral, *Toxic Shock: A Social History*; Ann Treneman, 'Cashing in on the Curse: Advertising and the Menstrual Taboo', *Spare Rib* (1988); Karen Houppert, 'Pulling the Plug on the Sanitary Protection Industry', *The Village Voice* (1995); Houppert, *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000); Bobel, *The Managed Body*, 88, footnote 7.

35 Identified by Bobel as 'gray literature (which) tend to be less accessible than papers published by traditional presses', *The Managed Body*, 70, footnote 2.

36 See for example the account of the lawsuit against Procter & Gamble by the family of Patricia Kehm in their lawyer Tom Riley's book, *The Price of a Life: One Woman's Death from Toxic Shock* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986).

37 Stephen Berger, 'Toxic Shock Syndrome: Global Status' (Gideon Informatics Inc., 2015).

38 Cheryl Glenn, 'Truth, Lies, and Method: Revisiting Feminist Historiography', *College English* Vol 62, No 3 (2000), 387–9; Mabel Deutrich, 'Women in Archives: Ms. Versus Mr. Archivist', *The American Archivist* Vol 36, No 2 (1973), 171–81; Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, 'Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance', *Archival Science* Vol 2 (2002); Wendy M. Duff, et al., 'Social Justice Impact of Archives: A Preliminary Investigation', *Archival Science* Vol 13, No 4 (2013); Marika Cifor and Michelle Caswell, 'From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives', *Archivaria* Vol 81 (2016); on how feminist organisations and groups have utilised the archive to document their own history see Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014).

39 D. McDowall pointed out the turn towards litigation culture in archives in the 1990s in '"Wonderful Things": History, Business, and Archives Look to the Future', *American Archivist* Vol 56 (1993), 348–56; Richard Cox provides an overview of what happened next in 'Archival Ethics: The Truth of the Matter', *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* Vol 59, No 7 (2008), 1128–33.

40 The research project was examined by the University of St Andrews Ethics Committee, and all formal interviewees were sent a document about the project and their rights before we talked. Interviewees signed consent forms about recording, note-taking, and their right to cancel their participation in the study at any time.

41 DeVault, Gross, 'Feminist Qualitative Interviewing: Experience, Talk and Knowledge', in Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (ed.), *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE 2012), 176.

42 In history, this is largely done through the oral history format. Oral history offers participants or witnesses to historical events an opportunity to address the historical record, to clarify, discuss and provide their own experience to the study of history. While I have not utilised formal oral history here (for instance, I have not promised to preserve recordings as this would potentially turn some participants off from talking), I comply with the 'six Rs of Oral History': Preparatory *research* about the interviewee; establishing good *rapport* pre-interview; maintaining *restraint* in the interview and asking open-ended questions; planning a *retreat* and closing of the conversation before the interviewee becomes fatigued (one hour); *reviewing* the recordings and notes soon after the interview; and *respecting* the interviewee as an individual who is sharing valuable experience and information. See Smithsonian Oral History Program, 'How to Do Oral History', *The Smithsonian* (2020): https://siarchives.si.edu/history/how-do-oral-history.

43 William Lang and Laurie Mercier, 'Getting It Down Right: Oral History's Reliability in Local History Research', *The Oral History Review* Vol 12 (1984), 81.

44 Lang and Mercier, 'Getting It Down Right'; Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein, *Handbook of Interview Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2001).

45 The terms 'femcare', 'feminine hygiene' and 'sanitary products' are industry terms for menstrual products. In this book, these terms are used critically and with quotation marks, whereas 'menstrual product industry' is the descriptive term.

46 Houppert, 'Pulling the Plug on the Sanitary Protection Industry'; Houppert, *The Curse.*

47 For more on counterculture and menstruation see Breanne Fahs, *Out for Blood: Essays on Menstruation and Resistance* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2016).

48 Delaney, Lupton and Toth received medical data from Tassaway, Kimberly-Clark, Tampax, and the Campana Corporation for *The Curse*. They write about visiting the Personal Products Company manufacturing plant in New Jersey, but their description is short and rather uncritical (this is not my assessment, but those of the authors themselves who, in the 1988 edition of *The Curse,* reflected on their initial visit in the light of TSS); see 141–2; afterword, 143.

49 Elizabeth Arveda Kissling, *Capitalizing on the Curse: The Business of Menstruation* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006).

50 Houppert, 'Pulling the Plug on the Sanitary Protection Industry', 1; 5.

51 Regarding contraceptive advertising during these years, see also Laura Mamo and Jennifer Fosket, 'Scripting the Body: Pharmaceuticals and the (Re)Making of Menstruation', *Signs* Vol 34, No 4 (2009).

52 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (First published in French in 1949, translated to English in 1953).

53 Vostral, *Under Wraps.*

54 Vostral, *Toxic Shock.*

55 Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period.*

56 Bobel, 'A Brief Profile of the FemCare Industry', in *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 107–8.

57 Bobel, *The Managed Body*, 1–42.

58 Chris Bobel, Inga Winkler, Breanne Fahs, Katie Hasson, Elizabeth Arveda Kissling, Tomi-Ann Roberts (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

59 Abigail Jones, 'The Fight to End Period Shaming is Going Mainstream', *Newsweek* (20 April 2016). Notably, this was the cover story.

60 Kissling, *Capitalizing on the Curse*, 5.

61 Inga Winkler and Virginia Roaf, 'Bringing the Dirty Bloody Linen out of the Closet – Menstrual Hygiene as a Priority for Achieving Gender Equality', *Cardazo Journal of Law and Gender* Vol 1 (2014–15); Juliana Buritica Alzate, 'The Menstrual Closet: Analysis of the Representation of Menstruation in Japanese and Columbian Advertisements for Feminine Hygiene Products', *ICU Comparative Culture* No 45 (2013), 29–59.

62 Procter & Gamble (@ProcterGamble), 'Is it a coincidence that the development of menstrual products coincides with advances in women's livelihoods? We think not. Find out why on #WomensDay: spr.ly/6015EnSWZvia @UN_Women #IWD #WeSeeEqual', tweet, 8 March 2019, 8am.

63 Anne Kveim Lie, 'Kvinnen Som Biologi: Menstruasjon i Norsk Medisin i Annen Halvdel av 1800-Tallet' ('Woman as Biology: Menstruation in Norwegian Medicine in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century') *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift* Vol 25, No 3–4 (2009).

64 Peggy Morton, 'A Woman's Work is Never Done: The Production, Maintenance and Reproduction of Labour Power', in Edith Altbach (ed.), *From Feminism to Liberation*, Cambridge, MA: Schenkman (1971), 211–27.; Margaret Benston, 'The Political Economy of Women's Liberation', *Monthly Review* Vol 21, No 4 (1969); Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union', *Capital & Class* Vol 3, No 2 (1979).

65 Delaney, Lupton, Toth, 'Rags to Riches: The Menstrual Products Industry', in *The Curse*, 137–50.

66 Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Cambridge, MA: New England Free Press, 1970).

67 Jennifer Nelson, 'Historicizing Body Knowledge: Women's Liberation, Self-Help, and Menstrual Representation in the 1970s', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* Vol 40, No 1 (2019), 39–61.

68 Bridget Crawford, 'Against Menstrual Capitalism', Feminist Law Professors blog (25 June 2018).

69 Vostral, *Toxic Shock*, 47.

70 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

71 Nancy Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', *New Left Review* Vol 56 (2009).

72 Deborah Root, *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996).

73 Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: Feminist Press, 2008).

74 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 221–3.

75 Currently, there are many charities working with homeless people to provide free products, including The Homeless Period, Free Periods, Bloody Good Project, and PERIOD.

76 Sinu Joseph, 'And the Oscar Goes to "Period. End of Sentence" for Misrepresenting Indian Women', *indiafacts.org* (27 February 2019): http://indiafacts.org/and-the-oscar-goes-to-period-end-of-sentence-misrepresenting-indian-women/.

77 For a critique of the numbers behind Muruganantham's mission, see Bobel, *The Managed Body*, 245, footnote 2.

78 Annemarie Jutel, 'Cursed or Carefree? Menstrual Product Advertising and the Sportswoman', in David Andrews and Steven Jackson (eds), *Sports, Culture and Advertising: Identities, Commodities and the Politics of Representation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); David Linton, 'Men in Menstrual Product Advertising 1920–1949', *Women & Health* Vol 46, No 1 (2007); Roseann M. Mandziuk,"Ending Women's Greatest Hygienic Mistake": Modernity and the Mortification of Menstruation in Kotex Advertising, 1921–1926', *Women's Studies Quarterly* Vol 38, No 3–4 (2010); Susan Sandretto and Shire Agnew, 'A Case for Critical Literacy Analysis of the Advertising Texts of Menstruation: Responding to Missed Opportunities', *Gender and Education* Vol 28, No 4 (2016); Cayo Gamber, "Changing the Conversation" about Menstruation from "Very Personally Your" to #ItsNotMyPeriod: A Discursive Analysis of Menstrual Products and Advertisements', in Kaite Berkeley, *Menstruation Now: What Does Blood Perform* (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2019), 81–107.

79 House of Commons, 'Report on Investigation by the Price Commission', 22.

80 'Lilia-White Protest at TV Policy Change', *Chemist & Druggist* (4 November 1972), 665.

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87 Arlene Hambrick, 'Biographies of Black Female Scientists and Inventors: An Interdisciplinary Middle School Curriculum Guide: "What Shall I Tell My Children Who Are Black?"' (University of Massachusetts Amherst, Doctoral thesis, 1993), 140.

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89 Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021); for a critical analysis of the appropriation of Indigenous cultures within corporate (pharmaceutical) environments see Shane Greene, 'Indigenous People Incorporated?', *Current Anthropology* Vol 45, No 2 (2004), 211–37.

90 Sheridan le Fanu, *Carmilla*, first published 1872.

91 Especially regarding critique of the industry's role in environmental harm: Liz Armstrong and Adrienne Scott, *Whitewash: Exposing the Health and Environmental Dangers of Women's Sanitary Products and Disposable Diapers: What You Can Do about It* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992); Alison Costello, *The Sanitary Protection Scandal: Sanitary Towels, Tampons, and Babies' Nappies: Environmental and Health Hazards of Production, Use and Disposal* (London: Women's Environmental Network, 1989).

Chapter 1
Saba: a Norwegian fairy tale?

> Be free and glad. Feel on top. Always. You can be safe!
> Saba advertisement, 1945.[1]

Once upon a time, a man drove a bus through the fjords and mountains of Norway in an unprecedented marketing stunt to sell menstrual products. During the 1950s and 1960s, the 'Saba bus' was a frequent sight in rural Norway, evangelising the good news of modern 'menstrual hygiene' (see Figure 1.1). The brand name referred to the biblical figure of the Queen of Sheba ('Dronningen av Saba' in Norwegian), and was represented on uniforms, vehicles and products in the form of an Art Deco-style Egyptian

Figure 1.1. The SABA bus used to advertise products around the country, 1958 or 1959. Unknown photographer. From the SCA Mölnlycke AS archives, series A-1050, at Vestfoldarkivet, Norway.

sphinx's head. The gaps between the regal name and the bus driver, Egypt and rural Norway, the man and his female customer base, was large. Even so, Saba became a fairy-tale business story in the post-war and pre-oil economic landscape of Norway, monopolising the menstrual product market almost completely between the 1940s and 1990s, beginning with the Saba pad and expanding into tampons by the 1970s. In this chapter, I test perceptions of Scandinavian exceptionalism, gender equality and progressive politics in Norway through the case of Saba and its largely female skilled workforce, and tie the company's history to this book's broader arguments about Western exceptionalism and racialised notions of menstruation.

Investigating the history of the Saba company adds new geographic and cultural data to the literature on menstrual product development, while still underscoring how much influence stakeholders in the Global North continue to hold. It uncovers a novel part of Norwegian industrial history, one in which women operated machines and risked their hands and health to make a new market for the emerging 'menstrual consumer', and in stark contrast with the image projected by Norwegians and the external world about the country's gender equality and fairness. As such, the case of Saba tests the assumptions about Scandinavian women's equality and presents a reminder of the fight for equal pay, childcare, influence and respect amongst the labour force.[2] The tensions between the nationalistic Saba brand's claims about Norwegian women and the actual working conditions for women in the company are evident throughout, and echo in later chapters where similar strains between branding and reality appear. Drawing on the remarkably well-organised and extensive Saba archives at Vestfoldarkivet in Sandefjord, Norway, both the official company narrative and stories from staff are available.[3] These Norwegian-language documents include financial information, print and televised advertising, staff newsletters, photograph collections, speech manuscripts, and documentation about the founding and end of the company. Together, they present an official narrative of the company – but one which also includes negative information about working conditions, equal pay, and staff complaints through the staff newsletters and meeting minutes discussing gender and union matters in particular. This is complemented with information from two family members of former Saba workers, the granddaughter of one of the founders, Birgitte Brager Melbye, and the daughter of the head secretary, Wenche Myran.[4] These two family members provide complementing but different views of Saba, although it should be noted that both are talking about Saba staff

in executive or leadership positions, who felt they could speak freely and loudly, and who were proud of what they had built.

The creation of Saba necessitated a group of people unafraid to challenge the strong taboos regarding menstruation in mid-twentieth century Norway. During the last stages of the Second World War, three men, Arne Gravdahl, Olav Breian and Gunnar Nissen Brager, invested in the relatively new concept of disposable menstrual pads made of cellulose (wood pulp) and began a modest production line in a private house. They were soon joined by a workforce consisting mostly of women, and by head secretary Else Singdahlsen, whose enthusiasm for the company and knowledge of English made her an indispensable figure. Although disposable pads had been available to Norwegians with money and access to international markets since the 1900s (via, for example, brands such as Kotex from the US), most women knitted or reused materials, making the potential for a new market extremely promising.[5] Until 1968, the factory and brand Saba remained the sole Norwegian-produced menstrual product and the only choice for consumers, effectively creating a monopoly.

Since no other brands were available, mid- to late-century attitudes to menstruation in Norway were inextricably linked to the name 'Saba' and the mysterious Queen of Sheba first mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. The Queen brought gifts to King Solomon and witnessed his wisdom in an exchange of conversation and riddles. Sheba has been depicted as a Black woman of immense beauty and strength, and has been portrayed as a seductive and powerful figure in television, literature and movies.[6] In both the religious texts and recent representations, there are few links to Norway beyond the 1887 novel *Dronningen av Saba* by the Nobel Prize-winning Nazi sympathiser Knut Hamsun, which detailed the protagonist's 'frustration where the exoticism of the Orient is deemed unattainable', and where he is bored by contrast with the industrialised and provincial life of Scandinavia.[7] Likewise, the choice of name for the company reveals the significant Christian culture of mid-century Norway, and the specific mixture of religious reverence and morality at play, as well as an interest in the 'exotic' or 'oriental' as a contrast to the dull 'civilization' of Scandinavian life.[8] The idea that Saba's products were 'fit for a queen' was implied in the branding strategy, while the elegance, femininity and grace offered by a female royal lent symbolic power.

The company's choice of name signalled both its own reliance on Christian values and a small act of defiance against conventional pietistic Norwegian morality.[9] By choosing a name of a powerful and interesting

Figure 1.2. Saba menstrual pad packaging, alongside a paper bag used to discreetly hold Saba products in shops. The pad and belt also pictured. This belonged to Gerd Andrine Germunrød (née Holt), born 1926, died 2006. She grew up in Vestfold in Norway. The Saba materials were found at her cabin in 2018. Photograph by Geir Ove Andreassen. Identifier KMR.03735 from Kvinnemuseet.

figure from within accepted discourse, the founders cleverly balanced a message of empowerment with religious and political correctness.

Although the branding was carefully designed to celebrate Norwegian womanhood (see Figure 1.2), this commendable goal was sometimes at odds with the reality for female staff at Saba. At the company's 50-year celebrations in 1995, the Queen of Sheba's name and likeness were still being celebrated as a core reason for Saba's success, then as a symbol of 'women's empowerment' and as the 'visual framework' of the business as a whole.[10] Fifty years after the founding of the company, the visual language of Saba continued to revolve around a stylised golden logo of a woman's head, similar to the Great Sphinx of Giza, a limestone statue of a reclining mythical figure from the ancient Egyptian kingdoms. This floating head without a body adorned each package of pads produced by Saba, suggesting that women were at the centre of the product. The business itself was dominated by female staff, but few official female leaders. In the overview of staff who had been given a gold watch after 25 years of service, only three were women – despite the dominance of women on the factory floor.[11] Mostly, there were kings at Saba. To look for the actual Queen or

women of Saba is a difficult task, and one that takes us to the factory floor, the machines, and the union, rather than the boardroom.

A *Norwegian* product

From the start, every Saba worker was told to be united in one goal: to make buyers and consumers aware that their disposable menstrual products existed and were the best option for managing blood. The task was momentous.[12] To reverse the unbroken historic habit of making and reusing cloth to manage menstrual blood had never been tried on such a large scale in Norway before, and the effort challenged Saba to consider economic, gendered, classed and generational stigmas. The Saba buses were one of many early efforts to impact consumer habits – or, more precisely, to make consumers out of menstruating women and girls for the first time. Male drivers visited rural locations to sell products directly to women and shops, creating an almost instant success that drove production up year by year. To keep increasing manufacturing speeds in the factory, Saba relied on an area of Norway where cheap labour and space were readily available.

The area of Tønsberg where Saba was first established was (and remains) a centre of entrepreneurship within the social-democratic welfare system that was established in Norway at the end of the personal union with Sweden in 1905. Key areas of enterprise included the whaling industry, and the subsequent development of new materials, foods and technologies throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[13] Founded in the 1940s, Saba began in the tough post-war era when unemployment characterised Norway, and where sexist attitudes to women barred their entrance to many types of work.[14] Culturally, the town and region was dominated by pietistic religious dogma and working-class culture and pride. Attending church, gender-segregated family roles, and Norwegian nationalism in the aftermath of the split with Sweden and, later, the Nazi occupation, were parts of everyday life. As such, Saba fitted perfectly into the regional and time-specific contexts of Tønsberg by creating a 'Norwegian product' that referenced the Bible.

Saba's origin story was an interesting case of someone crossing the gender boundary in an attempt to understand menstruation. On the way to church one Sunday in 1940, future co-founder Gunnar Nissen Brager, observing handmade pads drying on a clothing line in the sun, asked his wife what they were used for.[15] Shocked by the realisation that Norwegian women used such basic amenities, he was inspired to create what he saw as

a better way of managing menstruation. Brager had expertise in cloth making of another kind, having run the women's clothing store Brager Konfeksjonsfabrikk in the Oslo area previously. According to granddaughter Birgitte Brager Melbye, 'he had sympathy with his wife and his daughters', and sought to help them and other women.[16] He started producing pads consisting of cotton wrapped in gauze in 1940, but had extensive problems with acquiring raw materials. The Second World War and occupation of Norway subsequently paused the project.

Saba resurfaced soon after emancipation, entering a different political and industrial landscape. In terms of the political situation, historians have begun to write the critical histories of Norwegian resistance to and compliance with the Nazi regime during the occupation, and the consequences of this on industrial and family life.[17] The writing of women's war experience partially focused on the 'German sluts' (sic., the translation of 'Tyskertøser') who established relationships, married, and/or had children with the occupiers. These women were hounded in the years after the war, and mandated to leave Norway by the government (in 2018, Prime Minister Erna Solberg issued an official apology). In addition, historians also wrote about patriotic heroines who fought against the occupiers, and about suffering, cold, starvation, and displacement facing Norwegian women, antisemitism facing Norwegian Jews, and the ethnic cleansing of the Sámi peoples by Norwegians and occupiers. The economic effects of this troubled era led many women to look for paid work outside the home.

During the occupation, many Norwegian women entered the traditionally male-dominated workforce of factories. The popular Crown Princess Märtha had encouraged women to work, and 75,000 women signed up to do volunteer and paid work through the organisation Women's Working Help, advertised through national newspapers. Many of these women attended courses for driving, first aid, and factory skills. Some, known as 'Lottene', joined the Norwegian Women's Volunteer Force, a well-organised network that transported illegal weapons, covered farming work for men who carried out sabotage missions against the Germans, and assisted refugees over the border to neutral Sweden.[18] Women also entered industrial factory work (drawing on a much longer Norwegian tradition of women packaging fish products in factories). Tønsberg alone was home to a large textile industry that had flourished in the nineteenth century, and fizzled out by 1870, leaving many women searching for new employment opportunities.[19] In the early to mid-twentieth century, the town's factories welcomed many of them, employing hundreds of women at the chocolate factory and in what remained of the textile industry.

Saba's first factory was built within an old harpoon smithy left over from the whale-industry era. As employers, Saba promised independence, earnings and even empowerment to women seeking work in the mid-1940s. With a product aimed at girls and women, it was assumed that women would make up most of the factory labour force – and they did. While this was presented as an opportunity for 'housewives in the area' looking for extra income in the stark years of post-war Norwegian recession, it was also a way of attracting a cheap workforce.[20] During this decade, a government committee began looking into the issue of equal pay, including in manual factory work. Gendered pay grades, however, were not officially removed until 1961, following the lobbying of the Norwegian Workers Society and the National Union. By 1979, the Equality Law stated that women and men should be paid the same for the same work. In sum, women shift-workers entering Saba's factories in the mid-1940s were good value for money.

In contrast, the founders, management and non-shift work positions (including bus drivers and machinists) were dominated by men. These roles were better paid and more secure. While this imbalance between women and men was not unique to Saba at the time, the specific gendered branding and nature of its products meant that tensions arose between what the company stated about women and how female employees felt. Saba advertising slogans such as 'Be free and glad, feel on top – always' suggested a monolithic view of women and menstruation, in which negative emotion was deemed unladylike. While the male bus driver certainly broke barriers by being attached to the Saba brand, there was a financial and perhaps even societal award involved. Male Saba workers, whether they were founders or bus drivers, could claim to 'help' women and to 'educate' Norwegian society. Meanwhile, these free-thinking ideals were tested on the factory floor where women's reproductive and working lives often collided. While the brand promised that Saba was 'fit for a queen', many factory workers felt less than regal in their roles.

The spirit of Saba

The tension between ideological goals and reality was often apparent in the life and work of the founding figures. While Brager came up with the initial idea and oversaw the company finances, Arne Gravdahl was a businessman known to quote the Bible. Due to the financial instability of the 1940s, he had little education (in comparison to Brager, who was also fluent in English and German), and had tried and failed to seek

employment in the United States alongside numerous Norwegians. He picked up skills and knowledge in a series of jobs, and his religious enthusiasm and humble beginnings were often mentioned in media coverage. Gravdahl was proud of Saba's anti-elitist and Christian roots, arguing that they had created working conditions that were egalitarian.[21] The founders were involved in the day-to-day operation of the Tønsberg plant for decades, and they celebrated their long-term success with the workers by providing rentable holiday cottages, excursions in summer, and a famous annual Christmas feast where lobster and live music were among the many luxuries.[22] The parties were a part of what the managers saw as the spirit of Saba, made possible by the sudden financial success of the product.

Apart from the occasional celebrations, for most Saba workers labour consisted of an intense shift-work routine. The number of employees increased slowly for a while, with 30 workers hired in the 1950s, 90 in the 1960s, over 400 by the late 1970s, and peaking at 800 in the late 1980s.[23] From the start, the majority of the factory floor workers were women.[24] They were employed to oversee specific parts of a large industrial factory system, such as attaching cellulose spools to machines, cutting pads, applying hot glue to the pad, or packaging. Machinists ran the overall systems, walking between stations. A structure of breaks was implemented to ensure workers could stretch their bodies, eat, drink coffee, or smoke, working in day and night shifts as required. Beyond the factory, office workers and management made plans for expansion, an advertising team made campaigns aimed at newspapers, a sales team travelled the country selling directly to consumers via the 'Saba bus' and to salespeople in shops, and product developers ordered in the raw materials from abroad.

We can gain more information about working life from the well-documented company meetings between staff representatives and management, as well as from the internal magazine *Saba Informasjonen*.[25] Both sets of materials bear witness to the gendered context they were written within. The company meetings were kept by the director's secretary and right hand, Else Singdahlsen, who was often the only woman in meetings, whereas the magazine was written by several male contributors. These two very different documents reveal the inconsistencies in both management discussions and staff experiences. Not surprisingly, management were keen to stress improvements, while the staff magazine detailed unsolved issues. At other times, management were keen to point out Saba's exemplary position as a fair employer, whereas the magazine described female workers as little more than

accessories. Women's appearance and their concerns about appearance was commented on in the magazine – 'They are really so cute in their new uniforms', details the editorial voice, while also reminding readers that women 'love to talk about calories' and dieting.[26] In these ways, women were often discussed as 'them', not 'us', both in company meeting minutes and in the internal magazine.

Factory workers also had more serious concerns on their minds. In the 1960s, they noted the low lighting levels and high noise volume in the factory building, which led to headaches and vision problems.[27] They struggled throughout the seasons, working in 'tropical temperatures in summer and freezing cold in winter'.[28] Saba's uniforms were uncomfortable in intense heat and cold, but complaints were often dismissed based on an assumption that the women were commenting on the aesthetics of the clothing. Throughout the year, skin irritation, coughing and respiratory issues were caused by touching and inhaling the raw materials, in particular the fluffy cellulose floating in the air inside and outside the building. The subsequent dusty interior and exterior of the factory in the 1960s was dubbed 'Saba snow'.[29] The problem disappeared by the mid-1970s when a new ventilator was purchased, and the heating was also improved substantially around the same time. Throughout these decades and uncomfortable working conditions, staff were encouraged to act in a 'loyal manner' during the freezing winter months, to remain 'sporty' about the health consequences, and to be 'in good cheer' in general.[30] Overall, women complied – they were clearly proud of their work, the products, and the ways in which Saba was subtly changing the lives of women in Norway more generally. Long shifts were punctuated with coffee breaks and conversation, laughter and debate, and many women became friends as well as colleagues, creating a sense of solidarity in difficult conditions.

Improving women's lives

While ventilation and safety processes steadily increased, the gender dynamics at Saba remained conservative, despite – or perhaps due to – its consumer base. In the 1970s, staff asked if the workforce could make educational visits alongside management to other (non-menstrual product-related) factories, arguing that it was valuable for them to see how other workforces solved problems regarding machines and specific technical issues. The query was not answered. When pay was delayed before Easter of 1971, the tension between staff and management increased further.[31]

Complicating matters even more, during the ensuing communication between staff representatives and management, a senior male manager gave an interview to a regional newspaper about the successes of Saba. He was cited saying that women over 40 years of age were not an entirely reliable workforce, due to their family commitments. This angered the workers, who consisted in large numbers of such persons.[32] The manager, arguing that his quote was taken out of context, caused further hurt when he tried to explain that 'mature ladies' could indeed be good workers. What makes these comments so interesting (rather than unique) is the link between Saba's products and its workforce. While managers were happy to advertise their product's unique ability to improve women's working life, they did not consistently connect this to the lived experience of their own workers.

The issue of childcare for workers shows the gap between working women's lives and Saba's promises. During the 1970s, the company's working mothers pressed to have a specific representative raise the question of childcare in managerial meetings.[33] With a large female workforce of reproductive (and, indeed, menstruating) age, many workers either were or became mothers during their employment years at Saba (yes, many of the male managers had children too – but this was not discussed). In each quarterly meeting between staff and management from 1971 to 1973, the representative for the workers, Singdahlsen, tirelessly brought up the issue. Amongst other requests, such as a kinder tone from management ('even a smile'), better uniforms, and more heating in the factory during the winter months, childcare remained a constant pressure point for the workforce at Saba.[34]

Singdahlsen's questions to management were never fully explored, and were instead simply noted (by her, in a dual role as note keeper) in meeting minutes as 'an issue put on ice for the time being'.[35] Warning that the management's ongoing recruitment of 'housewives' in the area would be stopped in its tracks without consideration of family life, Singdahlsen was proven correct as the turnover of female workers increased year by year as they found the juggling of work and childcare challenging.[36] For Saba, this was not a problem, as they continued to recruit new groups of younger women. In 1974, the management put a final stop to the conversation by explaining that the market for workers had changed and that there was no longer a need to debate childcare as there were always new women to recruit. The reaction to the dismissal of concerns and of current staff's needs was not recorded.[37] In this way, staff were ultimately asked to choose between family commitments and the corporate 'Saba family'.

The case of childcare at Saba is revealing. The company's core technologies – pads, tampons and diapers – were built around women's

or children's bodies, and was invested in consumer research that showed how women's lives did not align themselves with emerging capitalism. Disposable pads, after all, were sold as an accessory to modern working women – women like those working at Saba who did not have time to make or wash a homemade pad. But the menstrual cycle is not just about blood. Nowhere is this clearer than when Singdahlsen asked if staff could use the lunchroom when they felt 'indisposed'.[38] This word could be code for menstruation, menopause, or fatigue, and was frequently used as such in polite Norwegian parlance of the time (it may also mean sick or tired, in itself noteworthy in a work context). In response, the management ended the meeting, citing lack of time. Singdahlsen never mentioned it again. If the word 'indisposed' was indeed code for menstrual cycle problems, Saba, having created a mechanism to control *one* menstrual sign, did not seem to acknowledge that the menstrual cycle could also include symptoms beyond bleeding. Fatigue, whether caused by menstruation or exhaustion, had serious consequences.

The constant reporting of accidents and calls for action from staff show a workforce who was becoming increasingly aware of the dangers inherent in their manual work. A selection of reported accidents from the 1980s gives us some insight into the issues: an infected eye, a finger crushed while cleaning a machine, a fall resulting in a cracked kneecap, a mutilated hand, the loss of several fingertips, second-degree burns following splashback of hot glue, the loss of a finger, a cut across the shin, and second-degree burns of both hands after an attempt to save equipment that fell into hot glue.[39] The accidents reveal to what degree making menstrual products was *skilled* labour, requiring time, concentration and knowledge. Of this trio, time was missing for those taking on extra shifts while juggling housework and childcare. Since Saba was not part of a traditional union for some years, the workers organised themselves around the issue of work safety. The management argued that not joining the union meant that Saba could pay employees larger bonuses (which they did), but this could hardly make up for the loss of a finger.[40]

The management's main concern was entangled with employees' problems, as they focused on the high level of absence due to accidents and complicated home lives during the 1980s. In 1987, nearly one-quarter of all female employees were off sick at some stage during the year.[41] Management noted that their workers were generally 'tired and fatigued'.[42] From a management perspective, new workers were the 'typical' culprits behind accidents, which led to frequent need for rest and absence in order to heal from physical damages.[43] Because of the steep learning curve for new workers, management argued that most accidents were 'self-inflicted'

by newcomers, and that fewer accidents would occur once they gained experience.[44] While some training and support were offered (Saba had a doctor and nurse in the factory), the high absence rate continued.

Training was also offered in moments of crisis when menstruation became part of mainstream media discourse. Both the TSS and HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s ushered in more training and communication to factory staff. In the case of the latter, a full session about the dangers of blood was organised for all workers in 1988.[45] It is unclear if the training was designed to explain the potential links between menstruation, menstrual products, and HIV/AIDS, or if management was concerned about the presence of blood in the factory due to the frequent accident rate. At any rate, the session documents the company's interest in damage control when pressure came from external forces which could threaten its business, understanding its own role in shaping public conversations around menstruation and blood. For many of the women working at Saba, occasional training was not enough, and they began advocating for better rights.

Second wavers

The Saba archives reveal a growing awareness of rights amongst workers. This was influenced both by the interior experience of being a Saba worker, and from the exterior societal changes and discourses that began challenging menstrual taboos and women's roles in the Norwegian workforce in general. Beginning in the mid-1970s and escalating in the 1980s, Saba workers began asking if they could receive training for 'traditional male work', such as running the machines or driving trucks or the Saba buses.[46] Seeking a way to progress in their careers, women sought these roles because they were more interesting, sometimes better paid, and more independent than the work offered on the factory line. The question of training and pay became a frequent issue raised in meetings, and, although no solution was offered, the asking of the question itself, initially by Singdahlsen on behalf of the workers, signalled a small revolution.

Beyond Saba, Norwegian women were changing. Second Wave Feminism hit Scandinavia in the early 1970s and revolved around protest, consciousness raising, and legal rights issues, in particular equal pay, rights to political representation, childcare, and protests against sexual harassment and rape. The Norwegian Association for Women's Rights meeting in August 1970 galvanised people across the country, with an influx of urban and rural groups joining from the already active labour

movement.[47] By 1972, the movement split into the *Bread and Roses* and the *Women's National Front*, the latter a radical version of the mainstream movement. Sámi women established the organisation *Sáráhkká* at the same time, named after the Sámi goddess of reproduction and birth, and fought for an end to 'Norwegianization' – the system whereby Sámi children were sent away from their families to become 'more Norwegian'.[48] In each movement, reproductive rights were core issues, and the resulting discourse soon made an impression on the public. Teen girls growing up in the 1970s were especially prone to these messages, explored through magazines and outspoken female celebrities.[49] The debate about the abortion pill in 1978 galvanised issues further.[50] Media covered these developments closely, both dismissingly and supportively, and often linked to current affairs such as childcare, the 1971 law making marital rape illegal, and the 1977 laws for parental leave. Representation increased more slowly, with 9 per cent female MPs in 1969, and 24 per cent in 1977, and the first female Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland taking office in 1981.

Building on the longstanding work of Norske Kvinners Sanitetsforening for the improvement of women's lives and health (established in 1896), some Norwegian feminists developed an interest in menstrual taboos, and began questioning the price and quality of products as well as the patriarchal attitudes towards the menstrual cycle as a challenge to productivity. In the mid-1970s, Norwegian educational guidelines were changed to specify that boys should be given as much information about menstruation as girls, drawing on feminist approaches to pedagogy that argued for equal access to reproductive information.[51] In 1977, the *Women's National Front* hosted several events to train women in traditionally male-dominated skills and jobs, introducing the sessions with a sketch laying out the typical male employers' argument against hiring women – including menstruation and caring responsibilities.[52] By then, disposable Saba pads and tampons had become the norm in Norway, suggesting that the questioning of these standard signs of femininity, hygiene and modernity was a radical move in line with the emergence of a critical menstruation movement internationally. In Scandinavia, the 1970s also produced the first critical debates about menstrual stigma, and the first works of art that directly referenced menstrual products and blood.[53] Norwegian feminists acquired and read work by feminists in other languages, or translated them to Norwegian. They also contributed to the growing network of feminism in Scandinavia and the Nordic countries, establishing regular meetings, publications and newsletters.

Soon, Norwegian feminists and their deconstructions of the menstrual taboos collided with Saba. The debate was covered in a 1975 *Consumer Report* article, a Norwegian consumer rights magazine widely available on newsstands. In the article, 'Pads and tampons: Expensive, but necessary' (illustrated exclusively with Saba-branded products), the issue was presented as one of 'comfort versus value'.[54] The menstrual product industry was, according to the reporter, a financially 'safe business' due to the consistent supply of young women. But the question of 'need' was analysed as well, and the article discussed whether women would be willing to return to their 'grandmothers' self-made knitted pads' (arguing that, in the end, they would not). During the course of their lifetime, women would spend thousands of Norwegian Kroners on these products, according to *Consumer Report*'s calculations. For many women in difficult financial situations, this was simply too much. The article asked readers: Was this fair?

Media also questioned why Saba was suddenly diversifying into scented products, vaginal sprays and vaginal wipes in the 1970s and 1980s. In response, a Norwegian gynaecologist argued that 'these products are a symptom of the smell-hysteria which is beginning to make itself known. There is something speculatively deceptive about this production'.[55] This expert opinion from the traditional medical establishment echoed the feminist medical and gynaecology debates happening across the world through books like *Our Bodies, Ourselves,* translated into Norwegian as *Kvinne, kjenn din Kropp* (Woman, Know your Body) in the 1970s. Within medicine, concerns about douches and chemicals near the vagina were being met with warnings against new products designed to mask menstrual smells, but production of such items did not cease. In response, an article written by the *Women's Front* group from the Northern Norwegian city Tromsø, called for the Consumer and Administration Department to examine menstrual product prices in Norway. This letter also called for insight into how much money was being spent on advertising, as consumers began noting the increase of print and other menstrual product marketing in Norway.

Saba was given space in the *Consumer Report* article to respond to this long list of criticisms. A company representative argued that the prices could have been much higher, and that expensive products sold best anyway – suggesting that women chose the products and the price. But with an 80 per cent hold on the market, the question of choice remained abstract. Behind the scenes, management became concerned by the external critique of their pricing models, devoting a lengthy discussion to the issue.[56] Women, they noted, were raising concerns about the menstrual

product industry and they wanted to know how prices were set, what was in the products, and exactly who profited. One director suggested holding a press conference to explain the high quality of Saba's products and the 'wonders of modern menstrual hygiene management'.[57] Another director pointed to inflation as a reason for the constant rise in price, remarking that most people did not understand the subtleties of pricing models. In the end, the press conference was not organised, but Saba management took a more active role in the public debate about menstrual taboos.

While Saba changed their marketing to connect with younger menstruators, internal meetings still reflected conservative values (see Figure 1.3). In a speech from the annual sales team meeting at a hotel in 1987, the difference between men and women was clearly defined by the managing director, who spoke directly to the female wives and partners of the male-dominated sales team:

> It's just fantastic that so many wives and partners want to be here with us. I take it as a sign that you enjoy being here at the sales conference with us, but you should know that we also have a strong egotistic motivation for inviting you. You give the meeting an extra dimension. And I'm not thinking first and foremost about the fact that when you are with us, we are not sitting up all night in each other's rooms – so that we are tired and drowsy in the morning. When you are with us, we have other things to do, and then we are

Figure 1.3. Two of the founders (from left) Arne Gravdahl and Gunnar Brager at a SABA Christmas party, undated. Unknown photographer. From the SCA Mölnlycke AS papers, series A-1050, at Vestfoldarkivet, Norway.

> energised and happy at the morning meeting. No no, it's other things I'm thinking of, like the atmosphere, the soul and spirit you bring to these meetings.[58]

This and similar speeches were steeped in heterosocial assumptions, referring to women as 'things to do', and with a rather unprofessional allusion to sexual activity. In this and similar speeches, women are distinctly not discussed as the majority of the Saba workforce, but rather as atmospheric good luck tokens for the sales team.

While internal messages focused on essentialised views of men and women, external marketing was changing to explicitly engage more with public debates about women's rights. During the 1980s, Saba sponsored the Norwegian women's national football team at a time when sponsorship was difficult to obtain for women's sports. The championship became colloquially known as the 'Saba series', providing calculated advertising through word-of-mouth and traditional advertising, and crucial financial revenue and structural support to the team. This shows a radically different approach to branding of menstrual products than in other countries with large menstrual product corporate presences. In the 1970s, Tampax (Tambrands Inc.) had offered support to the US women's tennis championships, but was dismissed as too stereotypical, to the advantage of cigarette brand Virginia Slims (also branded directly to women). The 'Saba series' reveals a distinct Norwegian willingness to bring the menstrual subtext into the mainstream. By giving a name and financial support to the series, and by being accepted as a sponsor by the team, menstrual products became shorthand for something aspirational: strength and national sports heroes. Although not directly stated, it was of course also implied that the players used the products. While Saba was the only product available to Norwegian women at the time, this was a clever way of re-introducing the same product with a twist of novelty. Marketing tactics had hitherto targeted many groups of women (workers, teens, mothers, dancers), but not footballers. It brilliantly linked Saba to a concrete feminist debate about equal pay and access in professional sports, while showing off its product's unique capacity to function under any circumstance.

'YANKEE GO HOME'

Saba's marketing and consumer base remained exclusively Norwegian for decades, only later expanding into Scandinavia. This led to a long-standing relationship between brand and consumer, and a detailed

understanding of the market by Saba. This monopoly situation came to an end in the mid-1980s, when foreign brands entered the Norwegian market. Many Norwegian women had begun to travel for work and leisure, bought different menstrual products abroad, and had seen other brands via international marketing campaigns. Soon, their demands for product diversity led to international, especially North American, brands entering the Scandinavian market.

The first sign of the threat against Saba from the US was paradoxically linked to the negative publicity surrounding P&G in the aftermath of the TSS crisis. The scandal caused confusion and fear internationally, especially in countries were the use of tampons was high – as in Norway. While the research findings of this new condition were still being analysed, Saba's board discussed the issue following initial Norwegian radio and press coverage.[59] In early 1981, 19 cases were found in Sweden and the first case reported in Norway (the brand was not disclosed, but at the time only three brands of tampons were allowed for sale in the country: Tampax, Saba's brand o.b. – a franchised system now owned by Johnson & Johnson – and a non-branded version sold in a supermarket).[60] The rise in awareness about P&G resulted in short-term negative publicity, but a long-term consumer understanding that menstrual products were developing and expanding elsewhere. In a classic case of 'there's no such thing as bad PR', P&G increased consumer awareness in Scandinavia during the crisis. For Saba, the momentary dip in tampon sales meant a surge in pad purchasing, and one of the last times the company could enjoy a near-total control of the market.[61]

In the early 1990s, the Norwegian menstrual market began to diversify. This led to the first price competition for pads and tampons, galvanised by P&G's self-adhesive pad brand Always (explored in Chapter 4), introduced to Scandinavia at a lower price than existing options and accompanied by expensive marketing. Saba's first reaction was nationalistic and based on an assumption that consumers would never choose foreign products over Norwegian goods.[62] The company presented their competitive strategy during the annual sales team meeting in 1993: 'YANKEE GO HOME!!'[63] The message was one of warlike agitation, comparing the fight between Saba and P&G to the one between David and Goliath:

> The competition which we will meet will be the toughest we have ever experienced. But the competition that *they* will get from us, will be so tough that they have never experienced anything like it anywhere in the world. The fight will happen first and foremost in the shops. That's why it's so good to know that we have one of the

> country's best sales systems, and that they have honour to defend our bastions. We have now heard via some PR rumours that P&G are coming now. A lot indicates they are coming soon. Treat your customers every day as if they are coming tomorrow.[64]

The aggressive language of the early 1990s reveals a shift in branding strategies. Marketing, advertising and production were ramped up, but Saba – in its traditional form – could not be saved. Despite the TSS issue, P&G had intrigued consumers looking for better technological solutions. Next to P&G's magazine advertising, Saba's marketing looked provincial, and next to the Always pad's superior absorption and slimness, Saba products were bulky.[65] As consumers had once rejected their grandmothers' homemade pads, they now rejected Saba.

Sweden, then the world

In the 1990s, the Saba brand and business was sold to the Swedish company Mölnlycke, ending menstrual product manufacturing in Norway and beginning the pan-Scandinavian chapter of menstrual capitalism. The two companies had a longstanding business partnership, but while Mölnlycke expanded, Saba struggled.[66] The growth of Mölnlycke will be the subject of our next chapter, but where does this leave the Saba fairy tale?

In 2015, the old Saba factories in Tønsberg were destroyed in a fire (no people were harmed). At the time of the dramatic episode, 3,000 locals nearby were encouraged to stay indoors and close their windows due to the dangerous fumes, in a strange echo of the 'Saba snow' neighbours endured decades prior.[67] By 2015, the buildings were mostly used for storage space by smaller companies and private citizens, and the fire therefore dismantled the last physical remains of Saba. It is a reminder of the working conditions for many Saba staff, most of them women who felt both proud and ambivalent about their labour. Their complaints, it should be stressed, were rarely about the embarrassment of making menstrual products, and more about access to equal pay, rest and training. Saba's own flirtation with Norwegian exceptionalism and nationalism sometimes strained against the working conditions of its staff, presenting a glossy ideal were none existed. As such, projections of and assumptions about Norwegian exceptionalism left women workers in an odd position of appearing ungrateful or unpatriotic if they complained. Nevertheless, many of them had their voices heard, and the company clearly benefitted from it through improvements in

environmental and working conditions for staff, which in turn created a more productive workforce. This type of tension between pride and resentment is a constant of menstrual product (and other) manufacturing, and one we shall meet again in the next chapters regarding Sweden, the Soviet Union, North America and beyond.

Meanwhile, the brand name had been reinvented by its new Swedish owners. During its decades of global expansion, Mölnlycke (later Svenska Cellulose Aksjebolaget, today Essity) used the Saba brand name for their menstrual products aimed at Latin America and the Mediterranean ('saba' means 'knew' in Spanish, linking menstruation and knowledge), promoting 'the modern way to menstruate' in these regions.[68] As such, the Egyptian royal has made another journey, this time across another ocean and expanding into another set of languages.

In its heyday, Saba managers often presented the company as a fairy tale which succeeded from humble origins to household name through hard work. No doubt, the founders' initial idea of providing a disposable option for menstrual management grew into an empire of unprecedented scale in Scandinavia, single-handedly creating, growing and saturating a new market. In some ways, Saba therefore succeeded in their goal of making Norwegian women 'modern' consumers of 'feminine hygiene' products, aiding them in entering the paid workforce, including factory roles in companies such as Saba and in professional football.

If Saba is to be remembered as a Norwegian business fairy tale, was there a villain and hero of the story? In order to succeed, the company's branding claimed to conquer menstruation itself, overcoming the 'leaky' boundaries of the body and bringing it under control.[69] Yet, for the largely female employees, everyday and structural sexism was more of a problem than menstruation. Today, when menstruation is no longer automatically cast in the role of stigmatised villain while discussions of sexism in Norway continue, the role of products as solution is being questioned as Norwegian consumers turn towards reusable options and increasingly ask questions about the damaging effects of past menstrual product advertising and messaging in Scandinavia.[70]

Despite changes in public opinion, however, the Saba brand is arguably still a fairy tale business story. It survived criticism and competition, and thrived through its acquisition by Mölnlycke. In the next chapter I examine the Swedish company, and document how Saba's long-term competitor, collaborator, and, ultimately, owner, eclipsed even the fairy tale success of Saba to build a much larger, multinational, and influential brand catalogue of menstrual technologies for the world.

Notes

1 Henceforth, all archival and cited materials have been translated from Norwegian or Swedish to English by the author.

2 Assumptions about equality in Scandinavia have a long history, arguably all the way back to Mary Wollstonecraft's writings on the region, *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796); on Scandinavian exceptionalism see John Pratt, 'Scandinavian Exceptionalism in an Era of Penal Excess: Part 1: The Nature and Roots of Scandinavian Exceptionalism', *The British Journal of Criminology* Vol 48, No 2 (2008), 119–37; on recent debates about assumptions surrounding equality and Scandinavia in context of the popularity of 'hygge', see Malene Breunig and Shona Kallestrup, 'Translating *Hygge:* A Danish Design Myth and Its Anglophone Appropriation', *Journal of Design History* (2020), 1–17.

3 The collection (full name: A-1050 SCA-Mölnlycke) covers the years 1940 to 2003, is mostly in Norwegian, and can be accessed through appointment only at Vestfoldarkivet in Sandefjord, Norway.

4 Interviews with Brager and Myran were conducted via Skype, email, and text messages. Both interviewees were briefed on the research and book project, and consented to sharing their information.

5 Kveim Lie, 'Kvinnen som biologi…', 362–78; Camilla Mørk Røstvik, 'Vi hadde ikke menstruasjon, vi hadde "vondt i maven": Norske menstruasjonsopplevelser fra 1900-tallet', *Tidsskrift for Norsk Kjønnsforskning* Vol 4 (2018).

6 Miriam Ma'at-Ka-Re Monges, 'The Queen of Sheba and Solomon: Exploring the Shebanization of Knowledge', *Journal of Black Studies* Vol 33, No 2 (2002), 235–46; Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

7 Elisabeth Oxfeldt, 'Orientalism, Decadence and Ekphrasis in Hamsun's *Dronningen av Saba* (Oslo: Edda, 2003), 181; Hamsun's book was first published in 1887, before Norwegian independence. Hamsun had a longstanding political and literary interest in questions of exoticism and race, expressing racist views regarding African Americans and Africans. During the Second World War, he expressed sympathies for Nazi Germany and wrote a eulogy for Hitler. After Norwegian occupation, his books were burned and he was viewed as a traitor by many, but was not convicted because of mental illness. Ever since, a debate about whether or not Hamsun was in fact mentally ill has continued, alongside scholarly and political discussions about his role in the occupation and beyond.

8 For a historic perspective on 'orientalism' in Norway see Oxfeldt, *Nordic Orientalism: Paris and the Cosmopolitan Imagination 1800–1900* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculaneum, 2005). The term 'Orientalism' was coined by Edward Said in his 1978 book of the same name.

9 On religious attitudes and rules about menstruation, see Rahel R. Wasserfall (ed.), *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1999); M. Guterman, P. Mehta and M. Gibbs, 'Menstrual Taboos Among Major Religions', *The Internet Journal of World Health and Societal Politics* Vol 4, No 2 (2007); Aru Bharitiya, 'Menstruation, Religion and Society', *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* Vol 3, No 6 (2013); Kustiani Kustiani and Stephen J. Hunt, 'Menstruation, Sexuality and Spirituality in Buddhism', in Andrew K. T. Yip (ed.) *The Ashgate Research Companion to Contemporary Religion and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 2016).

10 'Documentation of Saba's 50-year anniversary celebration', Series L0002/0001: Historical documents, SCA-Mölnlycke collection, Vestfoldarkivet, Sandefjord, Norway (henceforth all archival material refers to this collection).

11 J. C. Andersen, *A/S SABA, 1945–1985: 40 år i vekst og trivsel* (A/S Saba, 1985).

12 On a similar corporate investment in changing menstrual habits, see Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period*, 120–70.

13 Vilhelm Møller (ed.), *Vestfold: By og Bygd* (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1980), 48.

14 Helge Ryggvik and Marie Smith-Solbakken, *Blod, svette og olje, Norsk Oljehistorie Bind 3* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1997).

15 Interview with Melbye, 2 July 2020. Writing about Sweden, Denise Malmberg points out that such practices were easier to do in rural areas, *Skammens Röda Blomma: Menstruationen och den Menstruerande Kvinnen i Svensk Tradition* (Doctoral thesis, Uppsala Universitet, 1991), 63–5.

16 Interview with Melbye, 2 July 2020.
17 Bjarte Bruland, *Holocaust i Norge: Registrering, Deportasjon, Tilintetgjørelse* (Oslo: Dreyers Forlag, 2017).
18 'Women's Aid to War during the War', the Norwegian Archives (16 March 2017): https://www.arkivverket.no/utforsk-arkivene/andre-verdenskrig/krigen-bryter-ut/kvinners-arbeidshjelp-under-krigen.
19 Married women were not allowed to undertake paid labour until the late 1930s, although contracts were still terminated upon marriage later, as noted in the infamous case of Karin Johanson who sued her employer after she was fired for getting married. She won the case.
20 Øyvind Eitrheim, Jan Tore Klovland and Lars Fredrik Øksendal, *A Monetary History of Norway, 1816–2016* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 385–480.
21 As late as the mid-1990s, company meetings would often include Bible verses, as in the 'Speech at Bolkesjø' (7 August 1992), Series L0002/0005: Historic documents/ speeches from administering directors 1985–94.
22 Interview with Myran, 24 April 2020.
23 Notes about the 'Saba bus' in *Bilen og byen: En bok i anledning Tønsberg automobilklubs 75-årsjubileum i 1999* (Klubben, 1999), 69–70.
24 By 1975, there were 150 men and 64 women on monthly contracts, in contrast to 68 men and 164 women on day contracts. 'Personal data from 1975', *Saba Informasjonen* (1975), Box 0007: Internal Magazines 1965–88, Series H/HA: Consumer Hygiene Products/Consumer Division General.
25 Note, *Saba Informasjonen* (May 1978), 11–12, Box 0007: Internal Magazines 1965–88, Series H/HA: Consumer Hygiene Products/Consumer Division General.
26 Note, *Saba Informasjonen* (May 1978), 11–12.
27 'Protocol from a meeting of the work committee' (3 October 1973), point 7, Series AF/L0001: Work committees 1966–79.
28 *SABA kontakt* (June 1966), Series H/HA: Consumer division general: Internal magazines: *SABA kontakt* 1965–6.
29 *SABA kontakt* (March 1966), Series H/HA: Consumer division general: Internal magazines: *SABA kontakt* 1965–6.
30 'Protocol from a meeting of the work committee' (18 December 1973), point 2: the oil situation/ access to raw materials, Series AF/L0001: Work Committees 1966–79.
31 'Protocol from a meeting of the work committee' (28 April 1971), point 4: various issues, Series AF/L0001: Work Committees 1966–79.
32 'Protocol from a meeting of the work committee' (28 April 1971), point 4: various issues, Series AF/L0001: Work Committees 1966–79.
33 Since the 1930s, women in Norway were, in theory, protected against dismissal when pregnant, and had six weeks maternity leave before and after birth. In the years before this was expanded to 18 weeks (from 1977), the reality of pregnancy for working Norwegian women was often one of uncertainty and secrecy. Elisabeth Lønnå, 'Women's Rights in Norway from 1945 to the 1990s', *Store Norske Leksikon* (25 May 2018): https://snl.no/Kvinners_rettigheter_i_Norge_fra_1945_til_1990-%C3%A5rene.
34 'Protocol from a meeting of the work committee' (2 December 1971), Series AF/L0001: Work Committees 1966–79.
35 'Protocol from a meeting of the work committee' (5 September 1973), Series AF/L0001: Work Committees 1966–79.
36 This was underscored by the Norwegian government grants and projects to support home workers during the post-war decades, sometimes rendering staying at home more financially stable than working outside the home.
37 'Protocol from a meeting of the work committee' (1 February 1974), Series AF/L0001: Work Committees 1966–79.
38 'Protocol from meeting' (23 September 1989), Series AG/L0001: Work Environment Committees 1977–89.
39 'Protocol from meeting' (5 September 1973, 6 November 1986 and 23 September 1989), Series AF/L0001: Work Committees 1966–79 and Series AG/L0001: Work Environment Committees 1977–89.
40 'Protocol from meeting' (23 September 1989), Series AG/L0001: Work Environment Committees 1977–89.

41 'Protocol from meeting' (24 February 1987), point 3: absence, Series AG/L0001: Work Environment Committees 1977–89.
42 'Protocol from meeting (24 February 1987), point 3: absence, Series AG/L0001: Work Environment Committees 1977–89.
43 'Protocol from meeting' (24 February 1987), point 3: absence, Series AG/L0001: Work Environment Committees 1977–89.
44 'Protocol from meeting' (30 April 1987), point 3: accidents, Series AG/L0001: Work Environment Committees 1977–89.
45 'Protocol from additional meeting on HIV contagion' (18 April 1988), Series AG/L0001: Work Environment Committees 1977–89.
46 'Board meeting' (26 June 1974), Series AB/0002: Board meetings 1970–84.
47 Sasha Roseneil, Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund, Ana Cristina Santos and Mariya Stoilova, 'The Norwegian intimate citizenship regime', in *The Tenacity of the Couple-Norm: Intimate Citizenship regimes in a changing Europe* (London: UCL Press, 2020), 76–92.
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49 Røstvik, 'Vi hadde ikke…', 225.
50 Peter Beck, 'Abortpillen: Fremtidens prevensjon?' *Rogalands Avis* (27 April 1978), 7.

51 'Boys should have the same information about menstruation that girls receive' from *Plan for Primary Education* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1974), 194.
52 Marte-Ericsson Ryste, 'Kvinner i grafisk bransje på 1970-tallet: Siri Jensen forteller', *Kvinnehistorie.no* (2003): https://www.kvinnehistorie.no/artikkel/t-3278.
53 Una Mathiesen Gjerde, 'Blodig alvor: Menstruasjonskunst i Skandinavia fra 1970 til 2015', Master's thesis, Københavns Universitet, July 2017.
54 Magdalena Eckersberg, 'Bind og tamponger: Dyrt, men nødvendig for 766000 brukere', *Forbruker-Rapporten* No 8 (1975), 28–30.
55 Eckersberg, 'Bind og tamponger…', 28.
56 'Board meeting' (18 November 1974), point 2, Series AB/0002: Board meetings 1970–84.
57 'Board meeting' (18 November 1974), point 2, Series AB/0002: Board meetings 1970–84.
58 'Speech to the sales team at the conference at Bolkesjø' (6 August 1987), Series L/0002/0005: Historic documents: speeches from administering director 1985–94.
59 'Board meeting' (20 October 1980), point 2: regarding TSS, Series AB/0002: Board meetings 1970–84.
60 Svein Dybing, 'Poisoned by tampons: First case in Norway' and 'Only three approved tampons in Norway', *Arbeiderbladet* (12 February 1981), 8.
61 'Board meeting' (3 June 1981), Series AB/0002: Board meetings 1970–84.
62 'Speech to sales team at Storefjell' (5 August 1993), 2–3, Series L/0002/0005: Historic documents: speeches from administering director 1985–94.
63 'Speech to sales team at Storefjell' (5 August 1993), 2–3, Series L/0002/0005: Historic documents: speeches from administering director 1985–94.
64 'Debate at the sales team conference in Sandefjord' (2–3 January 1992), Series L/0002/0005: Historic documents: speeches from administering director 1985–94.
65 In 1994, the *Consumer Report* magazine raised new questions about the cost and quality of pads, testing available options and finding that even the most popular pads often leaked. Lisbet Harstad, 'Alt for damene?', *Forbrukerrapporten* No 8 (1994), 21–3.
66 'Mölnlycke/SCA goes together', *Saba Informasjonen* Vol 4, No 2 (1975).
67 Marianne Aakermann et al., 'Kraftig brann i Tønsberg', Norwegian Broadcasting Association online (23 July 2015).
68 Eugenia Tarzibachi, 'The Modern Way to Menstruate in Latin America: Consolidation and Fractures in the Twenty-First Century', in Bobel et al. (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, 813.
69 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 102.
70 Lene Elisabeth Eide, 'Endelig snakker vi om mensen', *Dagsavisen* (9 March 2020). Note that Eide is the founder of a Norwegian cup company CleanCup.

Chapter 2
Mölnlycke, SCA, Essity: Swedish menstrual exceptionalism

> … she moves safely on the tennis court, while playing her favourite sports, as when in the water. There is nothing that annoys her and the safety is total, from when she began using the new pad… Mimosept is its name…
>
> Mölnlycke newspaper advertising, 1942.[1]

The corporation was changing its name, again. I visited the circular white building in spring 2018, when the international Svenske Cellulose Aksjebolaget (SCA) headquarters in Mölndal, outside the city of Gothenburg in Sweden, became Essity. Since it is located in the middle of a roundabout, all visitors have to cross the road to get there, moving around the building to reach the door. The tram linking the suburb to the city rumbles underneath, the cycle path running parallel. Covered entirely in windows and with a large foyer, the panopticon structure advertises the corporation's values of transparency and outreach.

Outside, a group of construction workers were changing the logo on the roof (see Figure 2.1). Inside, the new pink company name was already everywhere. This used to be Mölnlycke, a nineteenth-century textile company. Then, it was SCA, a wood pulp and forestry corporation. Today it is Essity – a portmanteau of 'essential' and 'necessity' – and a fitting name for one of the most powerful players in the global hygiene business. From here, Essity develops and markets menstrual brands Saba (acquired from Norway), Nana, Libresse, and Bodyform (acquired from the UK) to the world. As such, this is the epicentre of the Scandinavian menstrual business.

In the corridors, Essity's icons were exhibited behind glass: toilet paper, wet wipes, tampons, pads, and diapers. In the bathrooms, a selection of Essity products were available for use. In the lobby, a new menstrual pad

Figure 2.1. Essity headquarters in Mölndal, Sweden, photographed by author prior to the name change from SCA, 2018.

campaign was on display, revolving around the hashtag #BloodNormal and, unusually, featuring bright red liquid rather than blue. A few months earlier, when the campaign was launched in Scandinavia, Britain, and online, Essity had been celebrated for showing realistic period experiences.

I was greeted by Information Specialist Elinor Magnusson, a (now retired) staff member with a passion for company history and expansive knowledge of the different phases of Essity's growth. Together, we looked through historical material and advertising loosely organised by Magnusson and former staff in cardboard boxes, and visited the production line by the old mill. Magnusson arranged for me to meet with retired Essity Product Developer Monica Kjellberg and Essity Lead Product Developer for Global Product Development in Feminine Care Magdalena Hörle. I interviewed Brand Manager of Essity UK Traci Baxter via email separately.[2] While relying on these corporate sources of information, I try to examine the role of women in the company and consumers' reception of its menstrual products and marketing, thus steering the focus away from the existing company histories dominated by male managers and documentation of the business's other wares. While the history of this company is important to menstrual history, it has seldom been examined as such. Rather, the names Mölnlycke, SCA and Essity are today better known for other products, namely textiles and thread, forestry and wood pulp, and bandages. Examining the role of menstrual products within this

larger business reveals new material about the company, as well as about the broader international menstrual ecosystem.

Essity's history is unique, not just because of its location outside the Anglo-American menstrual industry, but because it has successfully shapeshifted many times. Amongst these changes, menstrual products have been consistently produced from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. Essity's ability to adapt remains a hallmark of survival in the menstrual product landscape. Yet, in a country where IKEA, Volvo and Spotify created the benchmark for grand Swedish innovation, the development of toilet paper, diapers and tampons was a less celebrated affair. Even so, the corporation is as much part of the famed Swedish technology and design boom as any other. For instance, staff often have advanced scientific degrees in product development, material sciences, and ergonomics, solidified by Essity's strong link to Chalmers University of Technology located nearby.[3]

The corporation's ability to succeed over the centuries is linked to the overall economic landscape and support for innovation in Sweden, but also to the mythology of Swedish Sin (the perception of Swedish people, and especially women, as sexually liberal), Swedish Exceptionalism (the moral superiority of Swedish institutions, including corporations, when describing the wider world), and Scandi Cool (the notion that Scandinavia, including Sweden, is an aspirational, fair, and trendy place, recently embodied by the Anglo-American appropriation of the term 'hygge').[4] Essity's understanding of and adaption to these mythologies, as well as its awareness of Sweden's international reputation, has enabled the corporation to thrive, reinventing menstrual branding to coincide with each new century, technological shift, material availability, and consumer group. Investigating its long history and increasing global reach can help us understand how this small textile company morphed into the global powerhouse behind some of the strongest brands in the Western industry.

In this chapter, I survey Essity's longer history, following its menstrual product development and branding through company name changes, advertising successes and failures, and a steady global expansion plan. Having acquired Saba in the late twentieth century, Essity emerged as the only menstrual product developer in Scandinavia until a new generation of alternative companies started to challenge its position. Beginning in the 1970s, anti-consumerist menstrual activism also surfaced in Sweden, resulting in Essity both benefitting from and struggling against consumer and feminist critique regarding product ingredients and toxins, the price of pads and tampons, and the environmental impact of both.[5] Throughout, the concepts of Swedish Sin

and Swedish Exceptionalism loomed in the background, fading in and out of view as Essity brands such as Bodyform in the UK and Libra in Australia were marketed with advertising initially conceptualised in Sweden. By examining Essity's Scandinavian and, subsequently, global reach, we gain insight into how menstrual product corporations succeed and change, as well as how ideas about womanhood, nationalism and exceptionalism have shaped regional and international menstrual history.[6]

Swedish Sin and menstrual culture

Today, Essity is a truly global corporation, but its roots lie deep in Swedish industrial and cultural history. Established in 1849, the Mölnlycke company initially made textiles in the industrial village of Mölndal – the 'valley of mills'.[7] The company began supplying gauze to Swedish hospitals in the early 1900s, while also producing domestic textiles for use in dress making and interior design.[8] Around this time, Sweden started losing its last colonies in America, and in 1905 Norway was released from its prior union relationship. While Saba and similar post-war companies had been contextualised as patriotic national startups for Norwegian women in a newly independent country, Swedish entrepreneurs had a much longer industrial history to draw from in terms of materials, wealth and expertise. While the nation-state haemorrhaged land and people, Swedish companies would, during the course of the twentieth century, take up a new role as representatives of the country abroad.

As had been the case in Norway, the introduction of disposable menstrual products into Sweden constituted a change in habits. In the nineteenth century, undergarments were uncommon, and blood usually seeped into the many layers of skirts utilised for warmth, with the lower part of dress being coarser and darker than the rest.[9] Overflow of blood was wiped away with hands or clothing. Ethnographers have recorded little embarrassment about these facts, noting that blood stains were simply one of many stains on (all) people's clothing. One Swedish ethnographer termed this habit the 'blood road' after the traces made in snow by menstruating women and girls (later, cloth, moss and wool were utilised as well, made possible by the introduction of undergarments).[10] The choice to let blood run free could be due to many factors: a temperature and climate that dried blood quickly; the custom of wearing many layers of dress; frequent pregnancy and fewer menstrual cycles; the inclusion of the topic in ethnographic studies of Sweden when similar documentation elsewhere ignored menstruation; or, perhaps, an open

attitude towards menstruation. Yet, the shift from the 'blood road' to the menstrual pad was, by all accounts, sudden and popular. It should also be noted that this was not the last time visible bleeding occurred in Scandinavia, as will be discussed regarding the rise of free bleeding in this book's conclusion. As such, there is a small, hard to define number of people who have foregone all menstrual products throughout history, and which tie the 'blood road' to our contemporary world as well. For most menstruators, however, this was not an option.

The sporadic reality of visible menstruation and relaxed attitudes to this in nineteenth-century Sweden can best be seen in the mythology of Swedish Sin. The trope of liberal attitudes towards sexuality reached its peak in the late twentieth century, spurred on by international perceptions of Swedish women in particular. In 1960, US president Dwight D. Eisenhower insinuated that Sweden was a country full of sinful behaviour, linking this to welfare policy excesses, whilst 1950s movies such as Ingmar Bergman's *Sommaren Med Monika* (*Summer with Monika*) exported homegrown fantasies about sexual transgression.[11] Many have questioned to what degree these ideas about Sweden were based on facts. In her letters about Sweden from 1969, Susan Sontag describes a nation that both conforms to and departs from the liberated mythology, but noted that excessive alcohol consumption seemed more common than sexual liberation.[12] Sontag examined the rapid industrialisation of the welfare state, too, correctly noting how quickly industry was building Sweden's reputation abroad. In comparison to Norway (with the exception of oil and gas from the late 1970s), Sweden had made its mark on international business many times during the industrial era, and was increasingly part of the global financial market.[13] Its competitors were no longer neighbouring countries, but powerful economies like the United States. Branding Sweden as 'liberated' may not have accurately reflected reality on the ground, but it was useful in the construction of an identity that would attract consumers (including tourists) to the Swedish lifestyle brand. The myth of Swedish Sin and, later, 'Scandi Cool' continued to confirm nationalistic themes of radical progressiveness in the face of 'international backwardness'.[14] Since the dawn of the twentieth century, the trope has taken on parodic proportions, and has been heavily exploited in pornography, advertising, popular culture, the arts, and marketing. But in the mid-1900s, this mythology was relatively new and exciting. The shaping of national Swedish identity during this time and afterwards was linked to scepticism of foreigners, rooted in the country's colonial past and ethno-nationalist politics.[15] Setting Sweden apart from the rest of the world included foregrounding a more open attitude to sexual education and discussion of personal hygiene

through policy initiatives throughout the nineteenth century, at the same time that visible menstrual bleeding was becoming invisible.[16]

While Sweden grew financially, the role of women and workers changed. Women in pre-industrial society could be respected in Sweden, as long as they could work and exhibit a strong, healthy and fertile body.[17] This changed in early Swedish industrial society, when exclusion due to menstruation and other gendered experiences became more frequent.[18] When women entered educational and employment settings, Swedish physicians – like their colleagues elsewhere – discussed whether or not this would drain their fertility.[19] This ushered in a need to hide menstrual blood and symptoms, to ensure productivity (see Figure 2.2). In order to do so, and in a time when clothing no longer involved excess fabric and long skirts, the need for quick solutions to ensure the three pillars of menstrual protection – hygiene, discretion and productivity – were increasingly attractive.[20] At the beginning of the twentieth century, menstruation thus took on a 'charged sexual' and gendered character within Sweden.[21] Menstruation became a hidden affair, and thus something that mysteriously signified womanhood.

Menstrual pads, and later tampons, played an important part in this new paradigm, where 'technical expertise' ensured that women could carry on unaffected by the menstrual cycle.[22] Being unaffected also meant appearing sexually available at all times, thus extending a 'sexual invitation' and complying with the growing Swedish norm of sexual progressiveness and permissiveness in and beyond the mid-century.[23]

Figure 2.2. A handsewn pad from the 1940s, used before the Mölnlycke pads became normal in Sweden. The pad is likely filled with absorbing material, such as cotton or flannel. The absorptive material was disposed after use, while the pad was washed. It was fixed to underwear with safety pins or with a homemade belt. Courtesy of Mölndal Museum via Digitalt Museum (identifier 05007, Berit Gustafsson papers).

From Mimosept to SCA

Mölnlycke developed a new type of menstrual pad in 1939, launching the Mimosept towel and girdle combination one year later, and speeding up production throughout the 1940s.[24] Towels consisted of cotton wrapped in gauze, with two loops designed to hook into a girdle belt worn around the waist. The loops were tied by hand by a mostly female labour force, but little documentation has survived about their experiences. Early models of Mimosept were bulky and often uncomfortable, but could soak up more blood and stay fixed to the body longer than homemade options. While imported menstrual products from the UK and Germany had been available in Sweden since the 1870s, this had been an expensive option for wealthier, internationally mobile Swedes only.[25] The launch of Mimosept thus presented a cheap and patriotic alternative to costly items from abroad at a time of intense international tension. This was possible because Sweden maintained its position of neutrality during the Second World War and 'adapted' accordingly, meaning that some production continued despite problems with raw materials, in contrast to the momentary pause experienced by Saba founders in occupied Norway or the large-scale American use of gauze as bandages noted by Kotex entrepreneurs.[26]

Mimosept launched Mölnlycke into modern commercial marketing by offering consumers aspirational lifestyle dreams as well as a practical product. The first advertisements from the 1940s featured a line drawing of a woman playing sports outside. Dressed in a short white dress, sneakers, and featuring an impossibly miniscule waist, the woman was a cartoon ideal of womanhood. With elegant hand-drawn lines, the artist highlighted her tanned white skin and blond hair, her athleticism and beauty. The copy stated that 'she moves safely on the tennis court, while playing her favourite sports, as when in the water. There is nothing that annoys her and the safety is total, from when she began using the new pad… Mimosept is its name…'[27]

The name was a typical menstrual product portmanteau, combining the sweetly scented cascading yellow flower tree Mimosa (native to Central and South America, and rather rare in Sweden) and the promise of being 'aseptic' to a consumer group interested in avoiding menstrual signs and smells.[28] Later, the Mimosa flower became a core part of magazine campaigns, accompanying models in fashionable outfits, suggesting a delicious smell as well as modern femininity. The branding strategy built a customer base quickly, and by the 1950s Mölnlycke sought

to innovate its menstrual product offerings as the first generation of Mimosept users entered menopause, and a group of new potential customers experienced menarche.

Swedish industrialisation and the pursuit of modernity met in the development of Mölnlycke's new pads. In the 1950s, its menstrual technology team developed a top coat for pads that would ensure a drier surface through a 'drainage layer'. The manufacturing was changed to include machine-made loops at the end of the pad – work that had previously been done by hand. Both changes were in the service of making a drier experience for users, as well as a quicker and more machine-dependent production line. The quest for a completely dry menstrual experience originated in this decade, engineered and developed by companies, in correspondence with market researchers who surveyed consumers. As such, Mölnlycke created a goal for itself: a linear and modern menstrual product development that would lead to a menstrual period that was barely noticeable. The focus on saving time and the feeling of dryness contributed to the overall view that menstruation should be kept hidden and not hold women back from being productive (and attractive) members of Swedish society.

Alongside new materials, Mölnlycke developed advertising to ensure that consumers understood the linear progress the company outlined (see Figure 2.3). Campaigns from the late 1950s and 1960s abandoned the black-and-white newspaper advertising, moving to luxurious colour photography in glossy women's magazines. Whereas the first campaigns had detailed the technological advances, price, and type of product, the new generation of images featured only codes. The semiotics of Mölnlycke's advertising changed to reference, for example, the popular pin-up aesthetic of the decade.[29] White models in pale pink suits and expensive-looking fashionable dresses smiled at the reader, against a backdrop of blooming Mimosa flowers. Information was stripped to the minimum – 'soft, comfortable protection' – while market statistics made an entrance – 'two out of three women use Mimosept'. The tagline 'are *you* the third woman?' suggested that the codename 'Mimosept' was a gateway to femininity, womanhood and secret knowledge. In a similar move to US-based Modess's pad advertising strategies from the 1950s, these companies relied on elegance, fashion, flowers and mystery to sell what had become, by then, a 'basic necessity' to consumers. Little is known about who created these campaigns, but recent scholarship about Swedish advertising firms in the mid-twentieth century stresses that the role of women in creating marketing for gendered products (such as pads) was often overlooked and underpaid, and that

structural inequalities barred many women from leading on more prestigious projects.[30] Nevertheless, the layers of intrigue and glamour lent some much-needed luxury to an item that was becoming increasingly familiar to women of reproductive age in Sweden and beyond.

Figure 2.3. A newspaper advertisement for Mimosept pads from July 1947, from SCA Hygiene Products adverts and history collection on feminine hygiene products. Courtesy of Elinor Magnusson.

Mölnlycke's ability to speak to changing consumer habits and lifestyles made it noticeable in the Swedish economic landscape, and, in 1975, the Swedish Cellulosa Aktiebolaget (SCA) acquired it.[31] By then, SCA was one of the giants of Swedish corporate life, producing paper and wood pulp products from the vast forestry industry. After an infamous bankruptcy episode in the aftermath of the Great Depression in 1932, SCA was controlled by a bank, and had expanded extremely slowly and carefully.[32] The acquisition of Mölnlycke was SCA's first expansion, exemplifying how stable and safe this investment was viewed as at the time. From 1932 to 1948, Mölnlycke subsequently grew from 1,600

employees to 4,600, with turnover increasing from 8.5 million Swedish kroners to 83 million.[33] Two 1940s images from the company history book show rows of women workers dressed in white, while a man in a suit oversees their work in the factory of Kristinehamn, named after the Swedish Queen of the same name.[34] Some of the women are seen adding a girdle loop to the pad by hand, while others operate the automatic knitting machines for production of pads. The women working by hand are hunched over workstations, hair curled and styled, lit by the large windows to their side. The women at the machines are wearing hairnets, and standing next to the large manufacturing system. The images document the business at a time of technological change, in which manual labour was being phased out in favour of more machinery.

In keeping with SCA's expertise, the company swapped the gauze layer which had previously been used to fasten the pads to girdles for a central paper-based layer. The new material could be prepared by SCA machines, thus reducing the need for the largely female factory workers who had previously knotted and added the girdle loops by hand.[35] Like its international competitors, SCA was also developing options that would alleviate the need for troublesome girdle belts altogether. For instance, during the late 1960s, the research and development team experimented with foam and plastic materials that would create a high friction layer without any need for loops or belts. A prototype was launched, but consumers were not impressed because it was expensive and because the friction layer had a tendency to shuffle around in underwear.[36] Despite the failed experiment, SCA's consumers clearly stated that they were interested in adhesive pads without girdles, and, in response, SCA went back to the drawing board with the goal of developing a better option.

The jeans pad

Soon after Kimberly-Clark launched their innovative non-girdle pad 'New Freedom' in the United States, SCA followed with the adhesive Mimosept Mini. The importance of international rivalry in driving innovation is documented in the boxes of materials from competitors stored in the Mölndal corporate archives, ranging from Kotex (sold in Sweden since the 1940s)[37] and British Southalls' pads (available in Sweden since the 1920s),[38] to menstrual sponges and the ill-fated menstrual cup brand Tassette, to Japanese tampons and more.[39] SCA clearly took menstrual product innovation extremely seriously, monitoring their competitors and new inventions. Although SCA's products predominantly reached

Scandinavian consumers in the mid- to late twentieth century, its collection of contemporary materials, ranging from the mainstream to the countercultural, suggests a growing awareness of potential international competition. It also shows SCA's knowledge of criticism towards menstrual products and the industry, as the boxes also include Delaney, Tooth and Lupton's pioneering menstrual history *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* from 1976.[40] Although the authors were writing about North America rather than Scandinavia, SCA's acquisition of the book shows its interest in menstrual discourse at the time, and armed it for the race towards global domination that would follow.

During the late 1970s, SCA became increasingly creative, a trend that had begun with the launch of the new brand Mimosept Anatomic in the early 1970s. It responded to consumer interest in adhesive pads and their increased need to dispose of used products outside the home by explicitly stating that the pad could be flushed due to its construction and materials. Consumers in Sweden (and elsewhere) had been flushing pads for a while, but had not been directly encouraged to do so by SCA before. In this way, SCA responded directly to an increase of women entering paid work and education outside the home. Promising discretion and ease, Anatomic was decidedly marketed as a product for 'modern' women, while the pad's name revealed the focus on comfort. Old-style Mölnlycke pads were square, creating awkward bulges in the tight-fitting clothing of the time, and skin irritation when they were either too large or too small for the consumer's body. Instead, the Anatomic design was oval with a raised area at the centre, built to sit between the labia majora.

In addition to its technological innovation, Anatomic became known for its packaging. The pads were wrapped in a plastic layer made to resemble a jean-trouser pocket, and were known colloquially as the 'jeans pad' during the 1970s. The packaging suggested that the pad could be easily slipped into a jean pocket, thus referencing the fashion popular amongst young people. But the construction of the pad and its creative packaging made it an expensive item to produce. The effectiveness of the central bulge in the pad was dependent on not being squashed during packaging, rendering the process time consuming and more dependent on manual labour. The resulting boxes were also large and awkward for shopkeepers to fit on their shelves. All of this resulted in strong reactions from consumers, who either loved the new design and cool marketing, or hated both. The mixed response from consumers and the expense of manufacturing led to Anatomic's discontinuation in the late 1970s, while lessons learnt from the process were adapted by SCA.[41]

After the experimental Anatomic phase, SCA became bolder, launching new products in quick succession during the early to mid-1980s: Mimosept disposable menstrual underwear, smaller pads for teenagers, an adhesive pad with plastic backing named EVA (after the fig leaf worn by Eve), and the very popular introduction of pads that wrapped around underwear (known as 'wings').[42] When P&G started to experiment with materials to make a very thin pad, SCA was inspired to create its own three-millimetre version despite the high cost and lack of access to materials.[43] The winged, thin result – rebranded Libresse – became a consumer favourite across Scandinavia.

With increased confidence, SCA subsequently launched a tampon range, but were soon swept up in the TSS crisis. Tampon sales dipped briefly during the early 1980s, when 19 related cases were documented in Sweden, momentarily unsettling the corporation's belief in the product.[44] SCA's tampons were of the 'digital' (as in finger) make without applicators, and based on the German o.b. (German for *ohne binde* – without pad) franchise. The tampon was developed into the o.b. Fleur (French for 'flower') brand for SCA, and changed somewhat from the original over the years, including new bright packaging and a twisted absorption core. By the mid-1980s, Swedes preferred tampons, having either forgotten or forgiven the TSS episode.

Recalling her time as a Fleur product developer in the 1980s and 1990s, Monica Kjellberg remembered the challenge of finding a strong material for the tampon string, and the complexity of discussing this with textile experts in Sweden. To work properly, the string had to be unbreakable, dry, and durable, while also being safe to wear. During these conversations at work, Kjellberg often had to step into the role of educator.[45] Frequently, she resorted to showing a wrapped product in order to explain their practical use, giving colleagues in male-dominated industries a crash course in menstrual management.[46] This quadruple role of technical expert, developer, advertisers and taboo buster is one that is likely familiar to many people working in the industry. The tampon-string story illustrates the ways in which SCA employees often challenged stigma and secrecy surrounding menstruation. The Fleur o.b. tampon became a bestseller in Scandinavia, overtaking competing brands and even pads by the 1990s. The downside to this popularity was a quick saturation of the market. Therefore, SCA looked to the next generation of menstruators, seeking to engage with younger people who had not begun to menstruate yet, drawing on a longer history of collaboration between health professionals, educators and corporations in Sweden and beyond.

Educating Scandinavia

Feminist responses to reproductive freedom have a long tradition in Sweden, founded on the Scandinavian debate about sexual morals at the end of the nineteenth century and the establishment of the National League for Sexual Education (later Swedish Association for Sexuality Education; Riksforbundet for Sexuell Upplysning [RFSU]) in 1933 by feminist organiser Elise Ottesen-Jensen.[47] Due to this pioneering work, the 1975 Swedish translation of *Our Bodies Ourselves* (translated into *Våra kroppar, våra liv:* 'our bodies, our lives') even dropped parts of the content about the sexual revolution, as the editors felt Sweden had already achieved some of what the US version focused on.[48] Yet, both RFSU and Swedish publications advocated for more normalisation of the body, including menstruation. During the 1970s and 1980s, Swedish feminists also called for an end to menstrual product taxes and price increases, drawing on the Marxist economic critique sweeping the country.[49] The issue was debated on television during the 1980s, with an employee from Mölnlycke representing the industry in a rare instance of direct corporate involvement in feminist menstrual discourse aimed at the general public.[50]

In response to calls for better sexual (and menstrual) health education, Mölnlycke published books from the 1970s onwards, in collaboration with educators and artists. The watercolour illustrated *Du och Jag* (*You and Me)* from 1977 was authored by a biology teacher, a medical clinician, and a gynaecologist.[51] The visual design was by Lars Melander, an artist who drew on surreal and psychedelic natural imagery to illustrate the menstrual cycle and Mölnlycke's products. Melander's rainbow of colours lovingly outlined branded tampons in billowing clouds, a pad surfing on breaking waves, a liner on a meadow framed by grass, a sunflower with a pad core, a Lady-branded product surrounded by an abstract moon and stars, a sunset scene on a night pad, and Mölnlycke-branded underwear emerging from patterned flowers. On the last page, Melander organised scented wet wipes between a rainbow, grass, and waves, solidifying the psychedelic 1970s aesthetic of the whole project. In a publication from the same decade, *Den Första Mensen (The First Menstruation)*, Melander's illustrations became even more surreal, illustrating the menstrual cycle as a large human head in profile, filled with a cascade of summer suns, a field of bright vegetation, a nude girl picking flowers, and a gigantic butterfly. Projects like these encapsulated the era's visual trends, but they also show how SCA happily embraced counterculture and sexual health education when useful.[52] The lines

between education and commerce were often complex, and Freidenfelds and Malmberg both point out that there were strong overlaps between reformists, medical practitioners, and the industry, all informing each other and reshaping public discussions to focus on hygiene through education and products.[53]

During the 1980s and 1990s, SCA's international branding strategy also changed, leaving behind messages about hygiene and product technology. Advertising aimed at adult television viewers showed women in their thirties running, skydiving, riding horses, and flirting – the assumption being that doing so whilst on your period was both a transgression and a sign of successfully 'passing' as non-menstruating at all times.[54] In the UK, SCA partnered with singer Sandra McKenzie, who belted out a specially written anthem for the Bodyform-branded pad, roaring 'Whoooah Bodyform'. The videos and song became a trope in their own right, featuring on televised comedy show 'Mr Bean' as an aggressive morning alarm.[55] McKenzie's vocals were recognised for their impressive range, and a competition to find the next Bodyform-jingle singer was briefly organised in Britain. Meanwhile, at their Swedish headquarters, SCA also made marketing designed for pre-menstrual and teen consumers who might find the 'Whoooooah Bodyform' less interesting.

In response to a new generation of media-literate consumers, SCA made a concerted effort to bring the menstrual cycle into the realm of popular culture. Abandoning messages of hygiene and health, menstrual branding became linked to celebrities and trends. In the 1990s, SCA established the Libresse Advisory Service which published *Klikk Libresse* – a free girls' club and weekly print magazine. A typical issue would include articles about being a woman, hat fashion, health, and flower arranging advice, and be delivered by post with a few Libresse pads. *Klikk Libresse* was an innovative and holistic advertising strategy at a time when SCA's competitors focused only on print and televised advertising. Creating a corporately funded and edited subscription-based magazine meant that SCA could reach teen girls directly, and that teen girls in turn would inform the brand by writing letters about their concerns to the address posted on the back of the magazine. At its height, the club had 100,000 Nordic members, expanding into a large internet chat room in 1997.[56] The club was a highly effective brand ambassador, blurring the lines between product placement, data collection, advertising and publishing. It could not, however, compete with the maturing internet. By the 2000s, subscription numbers shrank rapidly, necessitating the full

closure of the product by 2003. The *Klikk Libresse* era thus closed, SCA looked to the wider world.

A menstrual revolution?

While SCA grew internationally, their advertising strategy was shaped at home. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were launched in the 2000s, and began offering advertising options by the end of the decade.[57] A series of experimental SCA campaigns were made in order to keep up with competitors, some now available in Sweden for the first time – such as Tampax applicator tampons. Turning to creative partners and with an eye on the feminist debate about menstruation in Sweden, menstrual product advertising pivoted again – this time referencing the institutional critique levelled at SCA itself.

Menstrual activism, like elsewhere, reignited across Scandinavia in the 2000s and 2010s, while the menstrual cup also entered the Nordic market as a competitor for the first time.[58] Prior to SCA's rebranding strategy, the foundation of the non-governmental organisation MENSEN (Menstruation) in Sweden saw a new generation debate menstrual product taxation, outdated advertising, taboos, and menstrual health. Artists and public intellectuals played a large role in bringing menstrual debates to the mainstream, building on a longer history of Swedish feminist discourse. Notably, artist Liv Strömquist chose menstruation as her subject for a monologue on public radio in 2013, and published an illustrated novel about menstrual issues one year later. Both were discussed and reviewed in other Swedish media outlets. Fellow Swedish artist Arvida Byström's series of photographs from 2012 made similar headlines by featuring menstrual blood in casual settings (people exercising, socialising, drinking coffee, resting, etc.). Academic and menstrual activist Josefin Persdotter created a public art exhibition with Byström featuring 11 artists from across the world, which was discussed in *Aftonbladet* and on Swedish public television. Strömquist was subsequently asked to create a public art project for the subway system in Stockholm in 2017, while Byström made three short films about menstruation in collaboration with Swedish high street clothing brand MONKI and Finnish menstrual cup brand Lunette. As the debate about menstrual art continued in 2019 with reviews and opinion pieces in national Swedish newspapers, the artists enjoyed some form of institutional and economic support through these exhibitions, collaborations and public art commissions. The negative critique of menstrual art and activism shows that also religiously or politically

conservative groups were aware of these events, and willing to comment. In sum, menstruation was mainstreamed by these creative professionals as well as activists in and beyond Sweden in the 2010s.

As Swedish activists began building the effective national Period Poverty and menstrual equity campaigns, SCA engaged with many activist campaigns while expanding the business. Througout the 1990s and 2000s, SCA acquired all of Saba, several packaging companies, and paper companies from across Europe, including Bodyform in the UK and US tissue brands. In 2007, it bought the European business section of P&G and Chinese tissue company Vinda, changed its name to Essity, updated the Swedish headquarters, and built a new advertising strategy. The corporation had been operating a product-donation programme abroad for decades, but began to look at period inequity much closer to home and donating also within Scandinavia. Social media channels like YouTube meant that restrictions on traditional advertising were in effect lifted, making it possible to reach the young menstruating audience cheaply and quickly with franker messages. Bodyform's (Essity's brand name for UK products) Senior Brand Manager at the time, Traci Baxter, noted the importance of activist debate around the Tampon Tax and Period Poverty in driving change in Essity's overall branding strategy in the 2010s:

> Over the last eighteen months, there has been a noticeable difference in the amount of conversations about periods both on a global and local level. We are in the midst of a menstrual revolution![59]

The debate about menstrual poverty hit Essity 'hard', according to Baxter, who was involved in the immediate corporate response of donating 200,000 packs of menstrual products to various Western charities.[60] For Baxter, the 2010s was both a personal and professional opportunity for change. It interested her as a mother, as someone with decade-long experiences in menstrual advertising at a time when media censorship severely limited her options, and as a worker in a field dominated by women.[61] Similar to the history of women working in the menstrual product advertising sector or on the factory floor in the twentieth century, Baxter and her colleagues had to bridge complicated tensions as feminists and professionals in the business of selling gendered personal care.

In tandem with the postmodern marketing moves seen elsewhere at the time, a self-conscious attitude to the company's past underpinned Essity's new advertising strategy. In the new millennium, many Western corporations were working hard to leave their old selves behind,

embracing, for instance, the rhetoric of body positivity and feminism. Part of moving forward for Baxter and her team meant distancing themselves from previous advertising in the sector:

> Women are desperate to be portrayed in a realistic way in the advertising for menstrual products and they are rejecting the 'weirdly happy women in white, rollerblading'.[62]

Knowingly or unknowingly, Baxter was referring to, amongst others, Essity's own history of advertising. Although the 1990s rollerblading campaigns, featuring the 'Whoooooah Bodyform' jingle, were made by a different generation of advertisers, Baxter and her peers rejected their own brand's history. In Essity's headquarters in Sweden, conversation with younger staff members confirmed this as they ridiculed the blue liquid advertisements of the past. In one interview, a retired staff member reminded her colleague that SCA had also utilised blue liquid in international advertising campaigns, for censorship reasons and to avoid offending viewers (at a time of the HIV/AIDS epidemic), and *not* to ridicule consumers.[63] Regional Scandinavian advertising, however, utilised pink liquid as early as the 1990s, suggesting that Scandinavians (and their censorship laws) had been exceptionally progressive before everyone else.[64] The notion that contemporary menstrual product practices are better than the past are not unique to Essity, but they exist there too.

In a set of postmodern self-referential commercials launched on YouTube in the mid 2010s, SCA embraced irony. The first video focused on fictional Bodyform CEO Caroline Williams.[65] The title and theme was a conceit – the CEO remained in Sweden under the Essity umbrella, and was male. Nevertheless, the actress playing Williams exhibited such precise mannerisms and intensity that she became a viral sensation. In a video paradoxically entitled 'The Truth', Williams responds to a Facebook message from a disgruntled male viewer of menstrual product advertising (it is unclear whether the message and the complainant, named 'Richard', were real). Like most viewers in the 2000s, he was not impressed with images of women rollerblading and the use of blue liquid, finding both annoying. Williams responded passive-aggressively to the comments, revealing 'the truth' about periods as messy, and certainly not blue. At the end, she drinks a glass of blue water, which has been on her desk while she delivered her monologue.

'The Truth' is clever in part because of the performance and script, but likewise due to its appropriation of third-wave feminist anger towards the industry and towards the patriarchal attitude of menstruation as

disgusting. Feminists and health care professionals had long pointed out the limitations of the use of blue liquid.[66] It had become a symbol of outdated advertising and attitudes, and 'The Truth' campaign cleverly linked both, sidestepping SCA's own extensive use of the trope in the 1980s and 1990s. The positive viral momentum that followed gave SCA and the Bodyform brand a much-needed publicity boost. It also seemed to energise the corporation, which subsequently changed its entire branding strategy again.[67] Soon after, their marketing began featuring red liquid, precise anatomical descriptions, activist slogans such as 'Blood Normal', and more humour.

'Blood Normal' and Swedish Exceptionalism

During the decades of international expansion, SCA increasingly invested in the global menstrual landscape, keeping its eyes fixed on nations and cultures that were not yet using disposable menstrual products. The investment by Western corporations in the developing world served financial and charitable goals.[68] In Essity president Magnus Groth's introduction to the 2016–17 report *Joining Forces for Progress: Hygiene Matters*, he outlined the 'hygiene crisis' of menstruation (as well as sanitation and incontinence) around the world. A series of photographs showing Indian, African, Asian, and South American people (mostly women) illustrated the corporate messages about breaking menstrual stigma through product use. The sentiment was echoed in my conversations with Essity staff, who often noted that developing countries were behind the curve on menstrual hygiene, while Sweden (and the Nordic countries) had advanced greatly. Here, the Swedish reputation for liberal sexual education and progressive views serves the corporate message by promising that Sweden will 'clean up' the rest of the world.[69]

Essity utilised its many geographic markets to pitch slightly different advertising campaigns to different countries. Whereas the rollout of the 'Blood Normal' campaign featuring red liquid and frank menstrual iconography was met with positive responses in Scandinavia and Britain in 2017, it was challenged as an advertising standards case in Australia soon after the televised debut for Essity's Libra pad range. Examining the ensuing case reveals how Essity had, by then, adapted to become a global player, and a powerful entity in international menstrual discourse and visual culture, all the while benefitting from the concept of Swedish Exceptionalism.

In 2019, the Australian Advertising Standards Community Panel prepared a 23-page document to examine whether the campaign was

offensive.[70] This was an important and public case for Essity, who had been rolling out the 'Blood Normal' campaign on social and traditional media on a region-by-region basis, testing the waters of acceptability. In the words of one Essity product developer: 'In some geographic locations… WOW! We are just not there yet…'.[71] Presumably, being 'there' meant celebration of the red liquid and frank messages of the advertising campaign, which in turn presumably suggested an automatic relaxed attitude to menstruation as per the societal acceptance towards the campaign already established in Sweden and the UK.

In the Australian case study, complaints centred on what viewers defined as the campaign's vulgarity, especially graphic imagery. These complaints were underpinned by menstrual taboos that perceive any visualisation of menstruation as harmful. However, amongst the majority of what can be categorised as longstanding negative attitudes towards menstruation, some complaints also reveal a far more detailed deconstruction of 'Blood Normal'. One complainant was concerned about menstruation being 'visually shown for profit', and several noted that viewing the advertisement in a less supportive or male-dominated environment would feel embarrassing. A couple pointed out serious aversion to images of any type of blood, and many were worried about the campaign introducing children to menstruation in a confusing way, summarised in one view as 'the company having unnecessarily pre-empted a discussion about puberty and periods'.[72] This comment is perhaps not so much about menstruation as about the role of a (foreign) corporation's place in educating children, and the ways in which Essity's confidence in its own expertise to do so was not always matched by the experience of viewers beyond Sweden. Rather than suggesting that all of these people were not 'there yet' in terms of menstrual literacy, the comments suggest a diverse and critical range of opinions about the visualising and commercialising of periods.

While Essity could lay claim to invoking or re-appropriating Swedish Sin and openness in the campaign, other aspects of Blood Normal's visual landscape seemed less modern. For Australian viewers used to advertising that featured ethnic diversity, the whiteness in the campaign was striking. One complainant argued:

> It's as though only young-ish white girls get periods. It's as though combining black skin with periods is not something the company wants to do because they want to lay the foundation of the ad as that women are pure and showing Black or dark women would go against that basic premise… [73]

In response, the Panel noted that 'a man of African descent was depicted, but that all of the female actors did appear to be Caucasian'. The man was Swedish fashion blogger and designer Julian Hernandez, who enters the campaign as a consumer in a shop, buying pads for a partner, thus representing male and Black consumers. The Australian Code did 'not require racial diversity', so this issue was dismissed. But the example shows us the extent to which some viewers had become sceptical consumers of menstrual product advertising, and were not ready to accept all frankness as automatic progress. The point about whiteness and diversity, for instance, was acknowledged as valid by the Board, and had little to do with whether or not Australian viewers were in fact open about menstruation, and more to do with a critical reading of Swedish Exceptionalism.[74]

Whereas the complaints described a wide array of issues relating to menstrual iconography, Essity presented the debate as one consisting of fighting the menstrual taboo or not, and cited its advertising awards as accolades for trustworthy, respectable and admirable visual creation with a series of heroic goals:

- Leads change in Australia's society surrounding menstruation/ period taboo
- Is on a mission to help Australian women feel better about themselves every day and to tackle period stigma head-on
- Is the brand preference for taking care of everyday periods in everyday life in the Australian market [75]

As in Sweden, Essity's public educational programme and marketing were cited as evidence for good – even moral – corporate behaviour abroad. Furthermore, Essity argued that the original Swedish 'Blood Normal' campaign was based on research into menstrual taboos, and that this served to illustrate the corporation's seriousness about breaking stigma. The Essity 'Period Taboo' research project had surveyed 1,000 men and women in June 2019, and found that three out of four agreed to the statement that there was 'a taboo associated with menstruation'.[76] But this does not mean that they believed in the taboo. Essity had a tendency to collapse all critique of its own role into a generic menstrual taboo, yet it should also be noted that there is not always a conflict between menstrual activism and corporate interests. In the end, all the complaints about the campaign were dismissed, allowing Essity to keep broadcasting 'Blood Normal' in Australia, and to subsequently roll out this and other campaigns in other geographic regions. The entire affair was excellent PR.

Profit *and* progress

In comparison to the global coverage of Essity's marketing during the 2010s, MENSEN and other grassroots campaigns remained firmly within the national Swedish setting. This is an example of late capitalism in which corporations' contradicting aims encompass the entirety of life – global pop culture, education, and even campaigning – while activist ideas are appropriated. A few decades ago it would have been unthinkable to imagine a future in which Essity was a global player in breaking menstrual taboos about visualising blood. Increasingly, Scandinavian (and international) activists see their place in the menstrual landscape unsettled by the entrance of corporate giants who copy their messaging. Exactly what role do activists in Sweden have, when a massive corporation can more successfully use their slogans and ideas to reach far more people and make an impact on global menstrual discourse? Essity is not alone in doing so, as large corporations in the 2010s increasingly utilised their power to foreground messages and actions regarding environmentalism, for example. Yet, the case of menstrual products is somewhat prescient of this in the way corporations have always been able to claim that the making and selling of the items in itself counts as a form of taboo breaking, and therefore progress.

In terms of messaging, there is little difference between Swedish menstrual activists and Essity's campaigning today. Both corporation and activist groups agree on using gender-inclusive language, champion both negative and positive realities of the cycle, increasingly feature art in their projects, and are dominated by white leaders. The only difference is that Essity's goals are those of profit *and* progress.

The history of Mölnlycke/SCA/Essity reveals a corporation that has always been willing and able to be extremely adaptable and has managed to thrive under strong criticism. Stripping away the outer layers of names and branding from the venture, what remains is a history of an incredibly agile business that has saved the underlying project time and time again. From Mölnlycke's adaptation of surplus textiles into pads, to SCA's use of wood pulp and acquisition in a time when international competitors began to threaten its monopoly, to branding that encompassed feminism and countercultural art and messaging, the acquisition of Saba, to Essity's invocation of feminism and global censorship debates about 'Blood Normal', the company and its brands have survived. Without ever trading on their historical roots, Essity has built a unique ability to learn from its past. It changes name and organisational structure frequently (compared to, for example, P&G or Kotex), grows when its youngest consumers

demand change, adapts to feminist and environmental critique, and parodies its own industry to ensure that Essity appears moral, trendy and enlightened – in short, a model of Swedish Exceptionalism.[77] This makes it an incredibly slippery operator for activists to critique. The surface-level changes have been bolstered by Sweden's reputation as radical and open-minded (Swedish Sin) and its place in the world as a moral leader (Swedish Exceptionalism) – both of which have famously helped ventures that have garnered far more public attention, such as IKEA, Spotify and H&M. But marketing is only half of the story, and Essity's technological innovation is equally important. Women like Magnusson and Hörle created technology that has been genuinely popular in Scandinavia, and which has changed a great deal over the years, including the introduction of a black pad, packaging that doubles as a momentary disposal unit, a menstrual cup, and a line of reusable menstrual underwear.[78]

At the end of my visit to Essity (which now encompasses medical supplies, and has separated from the forestry operations work), I passed by a delegation of the corporation's international brand managers on their way to a meeting. They spoke English, wore suits, and eagerly discussed Essity's next steps, including the new strategic initiative for sustainable and digitally advanced health and hygiene ('Essity Ventures', partially focused on 'Femtech'), and the launch of a 'Pain Dictionary' during Endometriosis Awareness Month 2021.[79] I had the feeling that just as I had deluded myself into thinking that I had achieved some sort of grasp on how this corporation operates, it had already begun moving on.

Notes

1 Henceforth, all Mölnlycke, SCA and Essity material has been translated from Swedish to English by the author. The corporate archive is located in Mölndal and may be possible to visit by appointment. It is not catalogued, but organised in themes and cardboard boxes near the old mill. Henceforth, I refer to the collection as the Essity archive.

2 Interviews with Magnusson, Kjellberg and Hörle conducted at Essity headquarters, Mölndal, 24 March 2019. Interview with Baxter conducted over email in 2018. All interviewees read a Participant Information Sheet and signed consent forms. I signed a form stating that I would not share patented information or give away corporate secrets.

3 Interview with Kjellberg and Hörle, 24 March 2018.

4 Note that 'hygge' is Danish and Norwegian, but that the notion of Scandinavia sometimes transcends the various nations' linguistic boundaries, as explored in Malene Breunig and Shona Kallestrup, 'Translating *Hygge:* A Danish Design Myth and Its Anglophone Appropriation', *Journal of Design History* Vol 33, No 3 (2020), 1–17.

5 Louise Klintner, *Normalizing the Natural: A Study of Menstrual Product Destigmatization* (Doctoral thesis, Lund University, 2021).

6 In his 1949 company history about the corporation, Gustaf Munthe noted that examining Mölnlycke was akin to examining the history of progress in Sweden, including the advent of electricity, chemistry's use in the industry, improvement in transport, better productivity, and

the 'social revolution' which led to 'better living conditions and more political influence', *Mölnlycke Väfteri Aktiebolag 100 år* (Göteborg: Mezeta, 1949).

7 Munthe, *Mölnlycke Väfteri Aktiebolag 100 år*, 8.

8 Dan Korn, *Mölnlyckeboken: Ett samhälles historia genom tvåhundra år* (Mölndal: Mölnlycke, 1983).

9 Levi Johansson discussed in Denise Malmberg, *Skammens Röda Blommer? Menstruationen och den Menstruerande Kvinnan i Svensk Tradisjon* (Doctoral thesis, Uppsala University, 1991), 60–1.

10 Johansson analysed by Malmberg, *Skammens Röda Blommer?*, 61.

11 My thanks to Dr Saniya Lee Ghanoui for alerting me to this.

12 Susan Sontag, 'A Letter from Sweden', *Ramparts Magazine*, July 1969, 23–38.

13 Fredrik Andersson, Fredrik Heyman, Perh-Johan Norbäck and Lars Persson, 'Has the Swedish Business Sector Become More Entrepreneurial than the U.S. Business Sector?', Working Paper Series 1147, Research Institute of Industrial Economics, revised 19 November 2018.

14 N. Glover and C. Marklund, 'Arabian Nights in the Midnight Sun: Exploring the Temporal Structure of Sexual Geographies', *Historisk Tidsskrift (S)* No 3 (2009), 487–510.

15 Glover and Marklund, 'Arabian Nights in the Midnight Sun', 490.

16 Glover and Marklund, 'Arabian Nights in the Midnight Sun', 490; Malmberg, *Skammens Röda Blommar?*, 124–35.

17 Malmberg, *Skammens Röda Blommer?*, 203.

18 Malmberg noted her efforts to reach SCA in the 1980s and 1990s, but they did not respond. Email from Malmberg, 9 May 2018.

19 Malmberg, *Skammens Röda Blommer?*, 205.

20 Malmberg, *Skammens Röda Blommer?*, 205–6.

21 Malmberg, *Skammens Röda Blommer?*, 206.

22 Malmberg, *Skammens Röda Blommer?*, 207.

23 Malmberg, *Skammens Röda Blommer?*, 206; 490; Glover and Marklund, 'Arabian Nights in the Midnight Sun', 490; Klintner, *Normalizing the Natural*, introduction.

24 Bengt Johansson, 'Important steps at SCA Mölnlycke for towels and pantyliners' (2008). Uncataloged, Essity archive.

25 Malmberg, 'Trygg och fräsch – trots allt', *Norveg* No 32 (1989), 187.

26 British and German naval blockades, accidental bombings, and a chaotic international market nevertheless impacted Swedish companies and the country's economy, Martin Fritz, et al., *The Adaptable Nation: Essays in Swedish Economy during the Second World War* (Göteborg: University of Göteborg Press, 1982).

27 Mimosept advertising, *Göteborgs Posten,* 1942.

28 For example, Kotex is a combination of 'cotton-like texture', and Tampax a combination of 'tampon package'.

29 Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 232–310.

30 Klara Arnberg and Jonatan Svanlund, 'Mad Women: Gendered Divisions in the Swedish Advertising Industry, 1930–2012', *Business History* Vol 59, No 2 (2017), 268–91.

31 SCA was previously known as Bowater-Scott, with personal care products organised by the sub-company Sancella Limited.

32 SCA was founded by infamous Swedish engineer and financier Ivar Kreuger, known as the 'match king', who had many dubious and legitimate claims to fame. He died in March 1932, and historians remain split as to whether he committed suicide or was murdered.

33 Munthe, *Mölnlycke Väfteri Aktiebolag 100 år,* 22.

34 Munthe, *Mölnlycke Väfteri Aktiebolag 100 år,* Kristinehamn seksjon (no page numbers).

35 Munthe, *Mölnlycke Väfteri Aktiebolag 100 år,* 21. Interview with Kjellberg and Hörle, 24 March 2018.

36 Johansson, 'Important steps at SCA Mölnlycke for towels and pantyliners', 1.

37 Malmberg, 'Trygg och frasch', 188.

38 Malmberg, 'Trygg och frasch', 188.

39 Boxes of competing products from 1950 to 1970. Uncataloged, Essity archive.

40 Delaney, Lupton, Toth, *The Curse.* The archive contains the original 1976 version.

41 Interview with Kjellberg, 24 March 2018.

42 Eje Österdal, 'Tidiga Trosskydd' (3 March 2008). Uncataloged, Essity archive.

43 Interview with Kjellberg and Hörle, 24 March 2018.

44 Interview with Magnusson and Kjellberg, 24 March 2018.

45 In Klintner, *Normalizing the Natural,* 93–114, the author interviews menstrual product developers in the wider context of menstrual entrepreneurship in Sweden, concluding that menstrual stigma

had an effect on their work and their ability to talk about work outside the company environment. Klintner notes that this became much easier to do for employees in Sweden over time, 115.

46 Interview with Kjellberg and Hörle, 24 March 2018.

47 Saniyah Ghanoui, *'I Am Curious (Yellow)* as Sex Education in the United States', in Anna Westerstahl Stenport and Arne Lunde (eds), *Nordic Film Cultures and Cinemas of Elsewhere* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

48 *Våre kroppar, våra liv* (Stockholm: Gidlunds forlag, 1975); Ingrid Mette Gjerde, 'Kjenn din kropp, kjenn din tid: En bokhistorisk analyse av Kvinne kjenn din kropp (1975–2013) i et feministisk perspektiv' (Master's thesis, Universitetet i Oslo, 2019), 12.

49 Gjerde, 'Blodig alvor', 57–8.

50 Interview with Kjellberg and Hörle, 24 March 2018.

51 Anna-Carin Björkerud, Göran Rybo, Lars Hellgren and Lars Melander, *Du och Jag* (Mölndal: Mölnlycke, 1977).

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53 Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period*, 120–70; Malmberg, *Skammens Röda Blomma?*, 137–58.

54 Vostral, *Under Wraps*, 3.

55 Alexander Robertson, 'Rock Singer Who Had a Fling with Prince and Was Famous for Putting the "Whoa!" Roar in 1990s Bodyform TV Advert Reveals She is Now Penniless and Homeless', *The Mail Online,* 23 January 2018. McKenzie did not respond to my request for interview.

56 'Direct mail/Klikk Libresse', Hba/0002: Generelt, 1958–2002, Hb: Feminine Products, 1954–2003, SCA Mölnlycke collection, Vestfoldarchives at Vestfold museum, Sandefjord, Norway.

57 The platforms existed earlier, but mostly as social networks and usually without featuring any corporate advertising.

58 Josefin Persdotter, *Countering the Menstrual Mainstream: A Study of the European Menstrual Countermovement* (Master's thesis, Göteborgs University, 2013); Klintner, *Normalizing the Natural*, 17.

59 Interview with Baxter, 15 December 2017.

60 Interview with Baxter, 15 December 2017.

61 Interview with Baxter, 15 December 2017.

62 Interview with Baxter, 15 December 2017.

63 Interview with Kjellberg and Hörle, 24 March 2018.

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65 Bodyform UK, 'Bodyform Responds: The Truth', *YouTube* (16 October 2012): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bpy75q2DDow.

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67 Mark Sweney, 'Bodyform owner SCA Hygiene calls £100m ad review', *Campaign Live*, 25 September 2003.

68 Bobel, *The Managed Body,* Introduction.

69 On 'cleaning up' the 'spectacle of the "third world girl" and the politics of rescue', see Bobel, *The Managed Body,* 169–208.

70 Ad Standards Community Panel, 'Case Report. Case number 0262-19: Asaleo Care: Libra', Ad Standards website: https://adstandards.com.au/sites/default/files/reports/0262-19.pdf, 1–23.

71 Interview with Kjellberg and Hörle, 24 March 2018.

72 Ad Standards Community Panel, 'Case Report', 4.

73 Ad Standards Community Panel, 'Case Report', complaint, 4; response, 19–20.

74 For more on changing Australian ideas about menstrual management, see Lara Owen, *Innovations in Menstrual Organisation: Redistributing Boundaries, Capitals, and Labour* (Doctoral thesis, Monash Business School, 2020).

75 Ad Standards Community Panel, 'Case Report', 8.

76 Ad Standards Community Panel, 'Case Report', 8.

77 SCA has faced environmental critique due to its aggressive forestry operations in Sweden; see *How Europe's Tissue Giant is Wiping Away the Boreal* (Amsterdam: Greenpeace International, 2017).

78 Interview with Kjellberg and Hörle, 24 March 2018.

79 Maija Palmer, 'Looking to Break More Taboos: Why Essity Ventures Bets on Femtech', *Sifted.eu* (13 October 2020); *The Libresse Pain Report* (Essity, PDF, 2021): https://www.bodyform.co.uk/our-world/pain-stories/.

Chapter 3
Tambrands Incorporated: Femtech and the development of Soviet Tampax

> Why do modern women in 118 countries use Tampax tampons?
>
> Tampax campaign, 1971.

In the late twentieth century, no menstrual product brand had a bigger global reach than the applicator tampon Tampax, produced by Tambrands Incorporated in the US since 1936. A 1970s advertising campaign celebrated the fact by noting that people in 118 countries used the product. Featuring women from around the world, the campaign explained how Tampax was the perfect accessory for skiing in Scandinavia, deep-sea diving in Japan, hiking in the Alps, bicycling in the Netherlands, playing tennis in Nigeria, and horseback-riding in Spain. Yet a few major geographic regions were missing, including the large and potentially rewarding region of the Soviet Union. Therefore, in the late 1970s, the company began an ambitious endeavour to create and conquer the Soviet market through a rare American, British and Soviet joint venture that would test, collide and combine notions of Western and Soviet exceptionalism.

Spanning the 1980s and 1990s, the history of Tambrands' Soviet project intersects with large historical arcs. Political figures such as British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev played their part in ensuring the success of the business, while hundreds of women workers pioneered the manufacturing and marketing of menstrual products in the USSR. The project was run from the Ukrainian city of Boryspil from 1989 and was dismantled in the mid-1990s. It was given the name 'Femtech', a word that may be more familiar with readers from the 2010s, when it was re-coined by technology entrepreneur Ida Tin (founder of menstrual tracking app Clue, which we will meet in Chapter 6) to mean 'technology aimed at women'.[1] Similar to the 2010s use of the term, the Soviet project pioneered technology for women's

bodies at a time when the role of gender and reproduction in the Soviet Union was hotly debated in local and international media and politics.

Feminist economist Heidi I. Hartmann argued that the question of women's rights tends to take a backseat in ideological or economic conversations about the world, whether communist or capitalist or somewhere in between.[2] The case of Tampax was intimately and literally connected to the reproductive lives of women, their work, and rights. A society, Hartmann writes, 'could undergo transition from capitalism to socialism, for example, and remain patriarchal'.[3] The tenet of this prophecy came to pass in the story of Femtech, where both Soviet and Western values coexisted, while workers and consumers were caught between private, economic and political tensions. Similar to the Norwegian and Scandinavian exceptionalism foregrounding Saba and Essity's work, UK- and US-based Tambrands' interest in global expansion was fronted by a Western attitude to menstruators in the Soviet Union (and elsewhere) whereby Tampax would bring their menstrual habits in line with Western women. Likewise, the Soviet Union's thawing relations with the West meant that ideas about womanhood were increasingly aligning regarding paid employment and productivity, fertility and femininity – all of which were concepts and roles that played out in the case of Femtech.

The business history aspects of the venture were so unusual that it drew attention from scholars studying the changing nature of the Soviet economy at the time. While Femtech was still operational, Harvard professors of Sociology and Business Paul R. Lawrence and Willis Emmons made a case study for their (mostly male) students based on Femtech.[4] For this chapter, I explored the resulting archival material at the Baker Library at Harvard Business School, and interviewed Emmons about his time compiling the documents.[5] I also spoke to two of the people (both retired) directly involved in developing the project: Vice-president of Tambrands USA, Constantin Ohanian, and General Manager of Femtech, Yury Saakov, the former via email and in a busy café in London.[6] These sources are important not only for the story of Femtech, but for shedding light on the taciturn history of Tambrands and Tampax in the years before both were acquired by P&G.[7] Yet, they also leave large gaps that future scholarship will hopefully fill regarding the role of anonymous female workers, who have proven difficult to talk to. As such, the source material for this chapter relies heavily on dominant narratives of success regarding Femtech, and are therefore discussed and contextualised with the help of contemporary literature, journalism, and analysis in addition to interviews.

A new frontier

The Tampax product consisted of an absorbent cotton, polyester and rayon cylinder inserted into the vagina by a cardboard or plastic applicator.[8] It had been created by the medical doctor Earle Haas, who patented it in the 1930s. Colorado business entrepreneur and German immigrant Gertrude Tenderich purchased the patent soon after, starting a modest and slow production line, founding the company Tambrands Incorporated, and launching the brand to market in 1936. A factory in New Brunswick, Canada, on the unceded territories of the Míkmaq and Maliseet First Nations, opened at the turn of the decade, resulting in a quicker production pace and more workers. As was the case at Saba, Mölnlycke and elsewhere, Tampax factory lines were staffed mostly by women, as the work was seen to be more suitable for people who understood the social and practical aspects of menstruation and the product.[9]

In the Tenderich years, Tampax advertising had to inform users of how to wear the product, since it was a genuinely novel idea to many potential consumers. The first boxes included text stating 'to be worn internally' and reassurance that the product had been accepted for advertising by the American Medical Association. During the 1940s, the need for constant menstrual protection as more women entered shift and paid work in North America saw a rise in Tampax's popularity. The company, seeking to reach even more people, created its first formal educational programme in 1941, resulting in a group of 'Tampax Ladies' who travelled to colleges, universities, workplaces and other settings where women could be reached.[10] Tambrands' earliest print advertisements flirted with first-wave feminist ideas of enfranchisement and featured a model in a red bikini – swimming being one of the strongest selling points for the product.

After the war, Tambrands started its first phased expansion abroad while battling growing competition at home. US companies such as Kimberly-Clark, International Latex Corporation, and Johnson & Johnson's tampons were debuted in rapid succession, each with accompanying magazine advertising, samples and price deals. When the US television advertising board began allowing tampon marketing in 1972, Tambrands explored new forms of branding, often partnering with professional sportswomen to show how effective Tampax could be when swimming, running or playing tennis.[11] In 1985, Tampax televised advertising was the first to include the word 'period', as part of the company's insistence that menstruation was a natural function and nothing to hide, in addition to the brand's ongoing efforts to attract younger consumers through bold and creative campaigns.[12]

As a result of their work, Tambrands became a Fortune 500 company in the late twentieth century, an employer of nearly 5,000 people, with offices in 21 US locations.[13] Tambrands embarked on an ambitious programme of geographic diversification throughout the decade. It grew its already remarkable global reach by nine countries and a plant in China during this time, while maintaining 60 per cent of the US tampon market.[14] Years of growth were momentarily jeopardised when multinational corporation P&G entered the market with the super-absorbent tampon Rely in the late-1970s, only to be stopped in its tracks by the TSS crisis. A dip in the overall sales of tampons following the crisis made the entire sector nervous, but Tambrands and Tampax emerged relatively intact.[15]

Tambrands' interest in the Soviet market began during the 1980s, following on from the challenging post-TSS years. In 1980, the company tried to control the situation by starting a campaign to educate consumers about TSS symptoms. Already established in the UK, much of Europe, parts of South America, and sections of Africa, Tambrands' largest growth potential was outside its domestic market. Areas where tampons had not previously been available had the added benefit of having skipped the TSS episode altogether.[16]

By the time Tambrands began considering the USSR market, the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, had just taken office. Meanwhile, Soviet women had continued to utilise reusable and homemade menstrual products, or acquired Western products on the black market.[17] Thus, introducing the Tampax formula into the Soviet Union in many ways mirrored the beginning of the brand's conquest of the United States earlier in the century. Tambrands researched Soviet consumer patterns by sending representatives and samples to a Moscow health care exhibition in the mid-1980s. Vice-president of Tambrands US, Constantin Ohanian, recalled his first trip East: 'It was an absolute riot. We had to stop! We were mobbed for Tampax!'[18] The conclusion was clear: The Soviet Union was the new frontier for disposable menstrual products at a time when Western consumers were increasingly nervous and literate about tampons due to TSS and the growing feminist, medical and environmental critique of the industry. In setting its sights on the Soviet Union, Tambrands would be able to thrive without the weight of TSS history. It could, instead, market itself as a truly modern personal product.

Legitimising tampons

In the mid-1980s, Tambrands established a Soviet taskforce, given the portmanteau name Femtech, from 'feminine' or 'female', and 'technology'. The group consisted of Tambrands US staff like Ohanian, British Tampax manufacturers, and people with experience of Soviet economic structures, such as Saakov.[19] Tasked with figuring out a potential location for a factory and understanding how an international collaboration with Soviet workers could be done, the Femtech project group decided on the industrial area of the city of Boryspil, 20 kilometres from Kyiv.[20] The availability of jobs through Femtech made the proposal interesting to local politicians, as was the promise that the company would be the only one to manufacture and distribute tampons in the entire Soviet Union. Even better, Femtech promised to rely on raw cotton from Uzbekistan and cotton bleacheries in Cherkassy and Leningrad, boosting satellite industries.[21] According to Tambrands, the future widespread use of tampons in the USSR would help save Soviet cotton, as the homemade menstrual cloth options utilised much more of the material than one Tampax tampon.[22] The only parts of the product that could not be sourced from the Soviet region were the string needed for removal and the carboard surrounding the tampon. The waterproof and durable string could not be made locally, while the local cardboard options were too soft for insertion into the body. The issue of the string mirrored the trouble encountered with the same technology in Sweden, underlining the transnational challenge of securing enough of the material. As a practical solution, Femtech proposed to bring in its British subsidiary as a partial supplier of string and cardboard.[23]

With local political backing and plans in place to scope out space for a factory, a deal was made. In mid-June 1988, president of Tambrands Edwin Shutt flew to Kyiv for the signing of a joint venture agreement between Tambrands' wholly owned British subsidiary (Tambrands Limited) and the Central Pharmacy Department (GAPU) of the Ukrainian Ministry of Health.[24] GAPU's inclusion was necessary to facilitate the connection between state and business mandated by Soviet regulations at the time, and provided a useful if complicated compromise. Shutt had recently joined Tambrands after years at P&G, and had in part been given the role due to his expertise in international ventures.[25] In signing the agreement, he established one of the first joint international ventures in the Soviet Union at a critical time for the brand.[26] Once upon a time, Tampax had the reputation of being the 'Microsoft of tampons', but

market shares were sliding in the US and Shutt's expansion plan was part of the survival mission.[27] Aware of its place in history as the USSR changed, the US and UK partners were adamant about succeeding, funnelling large amounts of funding into the project and negotiating the complexities of Soviet business bureaucracy.[28] Later, the company would claim that it would have been 'difficult to see how the necessary capital, modern technology and know-how would be obtained other than through substantial foreign investment' as evidence for why more US companies should work with Soviet partners.[29]

A Tampax champion

Early discussions about tampon branding in the Soviet Union acknowledged that advertising would have to be approached in a different way as compared to the rest of the world. Rather than building a print or televised campaign, Femtech mainly focused on celebrity support. While in its infancy, the project group looked for a woman celebrity to champion 'menstrual hygiene' to Soviet consumers. The team first considered asking a Soviet female astronaut (likely Valentina Tereshkova, whose 1963 mission captured international attention), since space travel was a popular obsession at the time, and because partnering with physically impressive and famous women had worked well in Tampax campaigns elsewhere. When the astronaut proved uninterested, the team discussed alternatives, including British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.[30]

Thatcher was initially floated as a joke, but the project group quickly realised that she might be important in other ways than as a celebrity spokesperson. Since the idea of a joint business venture between the US, Britain and the Soviet Union aligned with the Conservative Government's interest in the USSR at the time, could they get Thatcher's support for the project? As the first woman Prime Minister of Britain, might she take an interest in the business side of menstruation when few other politicians did? Furthermore, could Femtech in turn offer Thatcher something in terms of British jobs?

Tambrands had been an employer in Britain and Ireland for decades – the former a subsidiary, the latter managed by the US.[31] In late 1957, Tambrands opened a factory in Havant, southern England, while the large Tipperary plant in Ireland opened two years later.[32] The experienced teams from both plants became close allies to the Soviet team by providing training, advice and manufacturing lessons. The English plant also had connections in politics, and reached out to Thatcher's office on behalf of

Femtech. Part of the business pitch focused on how Soviet women had hitherto mostly used homemade, washable and reusable cloth, and that they were an 'untapped' market for introducing manufactured, disposable and single-use pads and tampons.[33] The Femtech project group agreed that it was unlikely to happen, making Thatcher's positive reply a surprise.[34]

Ohanian, who was part of the initial pitching process, recalls receiving an enthusiastic reply from the Prime Minister's office. The details about what Soviet women had (not) been using to control menstrual blood had worked:

> Margaret Thatcher played a decisive role. More business meant more jobs for the UK plant. She asked about Soviet women: What do they use? Really? Is it real? It was incredible how her office followed up. They came down like a tonne of bricks on Ukraine when action was needed. Without her support, we wouldn't have got there.[35]

Thatcher's views on Soviet women were of course informed by wider political events. Gorbachev had made an official visit to the UK in late 1984, speaking to Thatcher at length. This was followed by Thatcher's first visit to the USSR in spring 1987 (see Figure 3.1). At the time, it was

Figure 3.1. Left to right: Yuri Saakov (GM Tambrands-Ukraine); Constantin Ohanian (Vice-President Tambrands Inc. USA); Margaret Thatcher (shaking Ohanian's hand); the UK Ambassador to Moscow, USSR. From Saakov's personal collection. Photographer unknown.

remarked that the inclusion of Gorbachev's wife Raisa at various events was 'considered unusual by Soviet standards' and hinted at the 'unusual cordiality of the visit', and perhaps also the awkwardness of hosting a woman leader.[36] Saakov dates the galvanising period of Femtech to the time following Thatcher's visit to Moscow and other cities, when he believes she must have asked Raisa about menstrual products, and that Raisa would have been able to explain the extensive use of homemade or reusable options.[37] Thatcher's shock at learning about a society where Tampax and other disposable products were not available underlines the typical Western norm that had been established regarding menstrual management by this time. For women like Raisa and Thatcher, it was unthinkable to live without such products, and hearing about people who did conjured up mysterious stories about 'uncivilised' hygienic practices.

As the first British female Prime Minister, Thatcher had shown little political interest in what was termed 'women's issues' at the time.[38] Although people involved in Femtech assumed that Thatcher's attentiveness towards menstrual products was tied to her gender, her support more clearly aligned with the Conservative Party policies of promoting private companies, as well as supporting the Gorbachev-era politics of perestroika.[39] In terms of menstruation, her shock also underlines a colonial approach in which Western management systems of the body are naturalised as normal, whereas any contrasting practices are described as uncivilised and unhygienic. As such, her thinking was influenced by the world that Tampax and its competitors had created in which all menstruators should also be consumers.[40]

Soviet periods

Exactly what were the Soviet menstrual habits that disturbed Thatcher and Femtech? Many women used raw cotton or cloth to soak up blood, discarding or washing the materials after use.[41] For people with some disposable cash or access to underground networks, the black market sometimes offered brands such as Tampax. Since products were not officially available, the lack of advertising was another difference to the way people interacted with menstrual themes in the Soviet Union. Yet, the underground economy circulated women's magazines from the West, thus familiarising readers somewhat with glossy Tampax and other campaigns.[42] Knowledge about the cycle came from parents, friends, or in educational settings, but was also available in the stern language of medical textbooks for those with access.[43] There was stigma against bleeding through clothes,

creating a menstrual taboo that echoed similar attitudes in the West. In response, euphemisms and jokes stood in for franker discussion, even including Communist symbols, as in the saying 'I have Red Days on the Calendar'.[44] As such, women built solidarity by sharing information and helping each other, running into many of the same taboos and mythologies as those faced by women outside the Soviet Union.[45]

Yet, despite similarities, Soviet women's early entry into the labour force meant that some aspects of menstruation related to productivity became a public and economic issue somewhat earlier than elsewhere. In the 1920s, Soviet employers experimented with menstrual leave, but this led to an insistence that women were less reliable than male employees, and subsequently a low uptake.[46] The experiment ended, having mostly resulted in the myth of unproductive femininity and the need for women to refrain from disclosing menstrual details lest they lose their jobs.[47] In sum, despite the differences of management options and cultural symbols, Soviet and Western women faced some aspects of the same underlying menstrual stigma.

By the 1980s, the Soviet economy relied on working women, who in turn grappled with the gendered hierarchy of labour. In the late Soviet era, the problem of gendered differences in the workforce was reinforced by medical institutions, who warned that if women worked too hard their fertility could be damaged.[48] In his 1987 book, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country*, Gorbachev wrote about the role of women and work, seemingly regretting that their 'emancipation and equality' under Soviet rule had made childbearing and childrearing more difficult:

> … over the years of our difficult and heroic history, we failed to pay attention to women's specific rights and needs arising from their role as mother and home-maker, and their indispensable educational function as regards children … This is a paradoxical result of our sincere and politically justified desire to make women equal with men in everything. Now, in the course of perestroika, we have begun to overcome this shortcoming. That is why we are now holding heated debates in the press, in public organisations, at work and at home, about the question of what we should do to make it possible for women to return to their purely womanly mission.[49]

Gorbachev argued that the employment of women in hazardous jobs was due to the legacy of war and the loss of male workers, and would begin to be reversed because the 'health of the family' would take a larger role in the next stage of Soviet life. According to Gorbachev, Soviet women in the

1990s needed to 'reclaim their space as feminine home-makers'.[50] Yet, Femtech relied on women's labour outside of the home from the beginning, and women made up the vast number of factory workers while men took on managerial and engineering roles, echoing the structures of Saba, SCA, and in Tambrands factories elsewhere.[51] For women who both menstruated and made menstrual products, these contradictions and tensions were always present.

Making Tampax

In the late twentieth century, tampon manufacturing was still heavily reliant on human, and largely female, workers globally. In Houppert's investigative journalism and site visits to Tambrands factories in the 1990s, she detailed the conditions for American workers.[52] Soviet workers would come to know different systems, but the machines, shifts and technology described by Houppert were similar. She wrote about the employees in the US plants as 'resigned women', working under paranoid rules.[53] Houppert noted the gender discrepancy between women and men at Tambrands, detailing the numbers of male executives and female factory workers.[54] She linked this to the brand's promise that Tampax was a 'brave new world' for women, pointing out the paradox of promising equality when women factory workers were managed entirely by men, and had no way of working their way up to a managerial position.[55] When Tambrands had the chance to start again in the Soviet Union, how did the roles and rights of workers unfold?

During the first phase of recruitment in Borispyl, it became clear that acquiring labour would not be a problem, growing to 200 staff within the end of the first year.[56] The local area was economically challenged, and many people were interested in paid work.[57] In addition, Femtech offered some unique benefits as compared to other Borispyl plants. Most notably, Femtech jobs paid better. The factory had reliable electricity and its own shop selling some sought-after items, making it both warm, well lit, and a place to buy Tampax and other Western goods at discount prices.[58] Workers also had the opportunity to learn new skills via a training programme and through engagement with visiting foreigners. For women workers, Femtech also felt safe because there were strict firing policies, and a zero-tolerance attitude to stealing, alcohol use, or sexual harassment.[59] In the years of the widespread depression and turmoil following the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident, these benefits became very attractive to local women, who in turn earned a reputation as excellent workers (see Figure 3.2).[60]

Figure 3.2. Woman working on assembly line at Tampax factory Femtech at Boryspyl, Ukraine in 1993. Photo by Robert Wallis/Corbis via Getty Images.

However, in joining a system of production operated with Western partners, workers also gave up some benefits. While the pay was higher than elsewhere, expectations of work hours were also more intense.[61] Femtech factory workers were concerned about the lack of a trade union, a workers' collective council, and not having the right to vote for general directors.[62] Soviet workers were, in *best-case* scenarios, accustomed to unions supplying holiday cabins, childcare facilities, and summer camps for children.[63] For workers who were parents, the lack of these rights could not be balanced by a larger salary because there were few childcare facilities in the area. This clashed with Gorbachev's view of 'womanliness' at the time, illustrating the double-bind that women in particular may have experienced if they were workers and mothers. Although this tension also existed before perestroika policies came into effect, the contradictions were heightened in the tension between equality versus hierarchy at Femtech. Thus, the new capitalist arrangement favoured workers who did not have children or caring responsibilities, or those who were able to ask family for help. Nevertheless, workers remained loyal to Femtech, and the production grew week by week. With a goal of launching the first batch of products in 1989, Femtech managers planned pricing and advertising.

The only game in town

Deciding on a price for tampons in a region where none had officially been available before was both a challenge and an opportunity. In the US and Europe, the typical price in the late 1980s for one tampon was $0.10 (a box of 10 for $1). Black market tampons available in the Soviet Union fluctuated greatly in price, but were generally more expensive. Deciding to model itself on the West, Femtech began selling boxes of 10 tampons for $1 per box, first launched on International Women's Day (a public holiday) on 8 March 1989.[64] As in the US, Tampax became a word-of-mouth sensation from the start.[65] Tampons regularly sold out within hours in GAPU pharmacies.[66] Whereas this would have been a crisis in the West, Femtech's place as the only manufacturer meant that it could weather even the weeks when the plant was simply not producing enough: 'We had so much money – roubles out of our ears. The products were selling like crazy'.[67] Soon, Femtech operated an effective monopoly, rendering 'Tampax as Totems'.[68] To be the only game in town was in many ways a complicated luxury for the Tambrands teams from the West. They had been used to extensive and aggressive advertising, competition for retail shelf space, and combatting paranoid business practices from their rivals. As the sole provider of tampons in the USSR, Femtech's control over the market was total, but currency and exchange rates remained a problem.[69]

While pricing could be mimicked from Western models, no such mechanism was available for advertising in the Soviet Union. With no framework that would allow for Western styles of menstrual product marketing, Femtech used free samples and word-of-mouth from the start. Many potential consumers were unfamiliar with the concept of a tampon, necessitating the need for information about how to use and dispose of them. Therefore, education combined with product placement became another core part of marketing, and 15 per cent of revenue was channelled into menstrual health education programmes involving audio-visual products and lectures. To this end, Femtech developed Russian-language materials with the help of two full-time Soviet health care professionals.[70] Examples of their work appeared in the popular health magazine *Zdorov'e* (Health) in 1990, in a two-page illustrated article that at first glance appears to be editorial content but is in fact a Tampax advertisement. In the article, staged as a question-and-answer column about tampons, a woman asks if Tampax – which she has been hearing so much about – is safe to use. The medical experts reassure her that it is perfectly safe, and explain the many virtues of the brand. The illustration clearly shows the

reproductive system and the menstrual cycle, including a vagina with an inserted Tampax tampon (see Figure 3.3).

This type of paid content ensured that Femtech reached potential consumers who might be curious about the product and who had no one else to ask. As in the West, materials like these would also state that menstruation should not hold girls and women back from living normal lives, and that tampons could help facilitate productive education, work and sports. Tampax was also frequently contrasted with pads, which were described as 'diapers', and not fit for modern women. The inclusion of realistic and blood-soaked imagery predated similar Western advertising by decades, illustrating how shaky American and Scandinavian claims of pioneering modernity and civility in fact were.

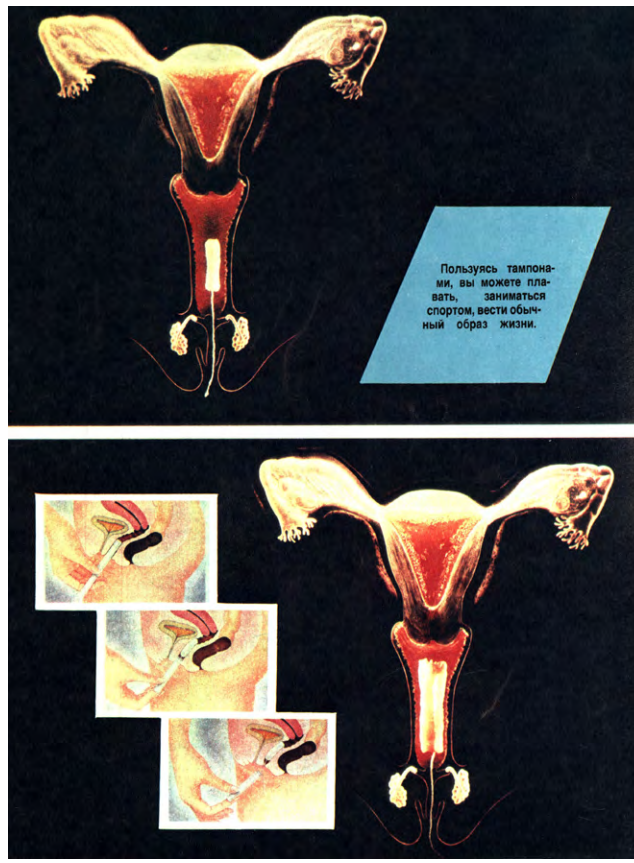

Figure 3.3. Illustration of menstruation. Promotional material about Femtech, appearing as a reply to a reader who has discovered Tampax, from *Zdorov'e* (Health), a major Russian health magazine from 1990.

Liberated from the cost of advertising and the curse of competitors, Femtech also did not have to engage with all the social taboos that had plagued the early Western industry.[71] Ever since Tambrands had been established, the US company had fought moral concerns regarding the use of tampons being linked to masturbation and/or loss of virginity.[72] Freidenfelds writes about tampons as a 'case study in controversy', especially because some doctors in the early twentieth century feared that the product would result in sexual behaviour.[73] Yet by the 1960s, tampons were increasingly normalised, and by the late century they had become 'a key technology in modern menstrual management'.[74] In the Soviet Union, the Tambrands team claimed that they found less resistance in the mid-century.[75] This is most likely a simplification resulting from Tambrands' focus on urban Soviet women and products, rather than other markers of menstrual taboos which stretched across the large and diverse region.[76] Overall, neither American nor Soviet culture celebrated visual menstrual bleeding, and the opportunity to sell a product that would assist with hiding blood therefore had a role to play in both societies. When the branding and educational programmes were rolled out by Femtech, the team claimed that there was no need to spend time explaining that virginity and morals would be intact when using the product. Instead, their focus was on femininity, modernity and hygiene. This sales tactic put the burden of self-improvement firmly back on women: if not even the state or religious institutions protested the new device, only an unsophisticated girl would stand against it. With no competition, little moral backlash, and minimal advertising costs, Femtech was by all accounts (including its own) a business in the right place at the right time.

From Femtech to P&G

Femtech was a remarkable project in the history of Soviet economic relations to the international market, but in terms of menstrual product history it reveals a familiar narrative. The creation of a market where none previously existed, the introduction of discreet and culturally appropriate advertising, and the ensuing profits mirror those seen in previous chapters. Furthermore, the tension felt by the workers is not unique to Soviet women, whose experience of balancing childcare with shift work was similar to that of their colleagues in North America, Britain, Ireland and Scandinavia. While Femtech had to comply with some Soviet rules and traditions, it largely overcame its geographic and cultural location, eclipsed by the international corporate and political

networks that made it possible, and, ultimately, succeeding in making the Tampax brand even stronger.

For Tambrands, the project was a success that proved how Tampax could conquer the world, and even help shape it. Onanin explains how it felt from a corporate point of view:

> In terms of history, I felt the changes. I was privileged to do so. To work in Soviet and Eastern Europe and China then. I could feel and see what was happening. I was fortunate. It was all happening right in front of my eyes.[77]

But by the early 1990s, the chaotic end of Soviet business life left Femtech in limbo. Over in the US, Tambrands itself was already in talks with large American corporations about a possible acquisition. The move was due in part to the debt and financial problems that had followed Tambrands' ambitious expansions since the 1950s, and which had already seen UK Tambrands factories slimmed down and, ultimately, close.

In April 1997, P&G therefore bought Tambrands for $1.85 billion ($50 per share).[78] At the time, it was P&G's largest acquisition, and signalled its intense interest in trying to develop menstrual product again, following the TSS years. In the next chapter, I will trace the launch and growth of P&G pad brand Always in the mid-1980s, a move that was shaped by TSS, and one which showed the corporation that they could succeed again in the sector if the brand was truly trusted. Always' position as the leading brand in the US menstrual product market (at 36.6 per cent in the US in 1997, and one of every four pads sold worldwide) led regulators to scrutinise the Tampax deal very closely before approval in order to avoid the creation of a de-facto monopoly.[79] Acquiring Tampax would automatically give P&G the leading tampon brand as well, solidifying its position in the sector and potentially harming competition. Since Tambrands had already begun expanding internationally, P&G would also benefit from access to new and emerging markets, factories around the world, and a large workforce.

Having ended the independent Tambrands company after 50 years of international operation, P&G's entrance left Femtech unsure of its future, and the connection to Tampax was severed soon after the Femtech factory closed. Likewise, the Tampax factory in Tipperary closed in 1996 and the Havant plant (see Figure 3.4) stopped production in 2003, leading to, respectively, 220 and 400 lost jobs.[80]

In Ukraine, by the early 2000s, the company Vatfarm LLC took over some of the production, launching digital-style tampons for the Ukrainian

Figure 3.4. Photograph of Tampax factory in Havant.

market. It is unclear what happened to the workers' wages and conditions after P&G took over, as management changed and it has proven difficult to contact workers from this time. Meanwhile, in Tipperary, a whole system of working- and middle-class prosperity folded in the wake of the closure as former Tampax employees could no longer obtain loans or pay mortgages.[81] Meanwhile, P&G launched Always and Naturella pads across the former Soviet region, and effectively re-introduced Tampax. During the next decades, economic and demographic trends limited growth of branded products as consumers switched from high-priced brands like Tampax to budget options.[82] Yet, P&G remains the leading menstrual product corporation in Russia and the larger former Soviet region, and Tampax is still a popular choice for consumers with disposable income. Through the changeover from Tambrands to P&G, the Tampax brand itself was thus effectively saved.

Rather than being made across the world in places such as Ukraine, Ireland, China and England, today's Tampax are mostly manufactured in Auburn, Maine, USA, where it is sold to North and South America, and exported to Asia, Europe and the former Soviet region. In Auburn, P&G is the largest private employer with nearly 400 factory workers. As in the UK and Ukraine, Auburn factory workers are mostly women, who initially struggled against a strict gender hierarchy between male managers and female shift workers. During the Tambrands years, paid shift workers earned $1.85 per hour (25 cents above minimum wage), and the women were outfitted with white uniforms to underline cleanliness.[83] When P&G

acquired the factory, the pace increased to production of 9 million tampons per day, and women began taking on more responsibility, including for machine maintenance and management. The first female mechanics joined in the late 1990s to oversee the changes in Tampax construction from original cardboard to hard plastic applicators and smaller pocket-sized shapes (branded as 'Tampax Pearl').[84] Ever since, Tampax has re-established itself as the top tampon brand across the world.

Menstrual economy at Harvard

The next chapter in Femtech's history was academic. In the 1990s, Harvard Business School students encountered Femtech as one of their case studies. The business was an exciting contemporary example due to its pioneering status as a rare Soviet joint venture, and students were keen to engage with the case.[85] After considering the rise of Femtech and its unsettled status in the 1990s, students were asked: 'What general lessons can one draw from Tambrands' Soviet joint venture experience thus far? What questions or concerns do you hold with respect to the future of Femtech?'[86] The students were approaching these questions as future business experts, not as scholars of menstrual culture. At the time, Harvard Business School was dominated by male professors and students, making the discussion of menstruation in the classroom a novelty, and the ensuing conversations opportunities for learning about the specific products as well as the social, cultural and economic aspects.[87] In addition, Harvard had ties to the company through its alumni networks, for instance through Tambrands chairman and chief executive (1981–7) Russell Sprague's decision to sponsor Professor Edward Kass's research into TSS with £5 million in the early 1980s, and a £1 million endowment from Tambrands for a professorial chair named after Kass at Harvard in 1986.[88] As such, discussions of Tampax were right at home at Harvard.

Fundamentally, the success narrative of Femtech was exactly the kind of inspirational and complex case that would engage the next generation of businessmen. In a way, these young male students were not so different from the men who had pursued Femtech, or who would acquire the Tampax brand through P&G. Whereas the menstrual taboo is strong in many corners of the world, Femtech and its place as an inspirational tale at Harvard Business School tells us something about the lack of embarrassment if menstruation is discussed only as a commercial venture. By discussing prices, ventures, growth and acquisition, menstruation became a story of profit, rather than bodily reality or

embodied experience. Ironically, this new generation of businessmen left Harvard Business School with more knowledge about the Tampax brand than most loyal consumers.

It is no accident that Harvard chose this case study as a training ground for the next generation of economists trying to understand the implications of the post-Soviet–US relationship. Femtech showed how 'Doing business in the Soviet Union in the early 1990s requires flexibility, creativity, and patience', and that 'Ultimately, if you love the idea of adapting to rapid change and are comfortable with uncertainty, you might well consider business opportunities in the USSR'.[89] The narrative as presented at Harvard showed how the menstrual product industry remained mobile against all odds. As the company history correctly states, Tampax managed the Great Depression, the TSS crisis, and would come to manage others.[90] Communist, capitalist, or somewhere in between, the norm that menstrual blood should be hidden remained nearly universal in the late twentieth century. Anyone with a product designed to stop bloodshed in disposable doses was primed to make a profit.

After Tambrands

In the years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, menstrual culture by way of art, popular discourse and activism in the former Soviet Union changed enormously. Younger people in the former Soviet region are part of a popular international trend as they return, in small but unprecedented numbers, to reusable options such as cloth pads and menstrual cups, and advocate for the environmental benefits of this through groups such as Zero Waste Alliance Ukraine.

What then of the people who made Tampax? The women who worked at Femtech left no traces in the archives, and were not interviewed for the Harvard case study. No one I spoke to seemed to remember any names. Onanin had doubts about their prospects:

> I didn't observe many changes for women. I doubt there is big change now. Women were basically in servitude.[91]

This view is not echoed by the growing Soviet feminist movement of the 1980s, nor does it square entirely with histories of women's role in the USSR. Books about menstruation and health had been translated and circulated in the Soviet Union during the second half of the 1980s, introducing readers to critical analysis of menstrual habits and culture

elsewhere.[92] A currency of pride ran through the 'DIY' menstrual 'innovator' community of the Soviet era, where overcoming menstrual taboos through homemade solutions instilled a sense of self-sufficiency, while providing a contrast with the excessive 'luxuries and vulgarities' of the West for those who supported communist values.[93] Although life could be challenging for menstruators in the Soviet Union, as elsewhere, they utilised and understood their agency, and it is difficult to prove that tampons factored into liberation on a grand scale.

For the women workers, their experiences mirrored those of Tampax workers in Britain, Ireland, North America and Scandinavia. Their collective labour gave women across the world one of the most iconic brands of the twentieth century.[94] Although it was Tambrands, and subsequently P&G, that profited from their work, these anonymous women are no footnote in the history of menstruation. They were both consumers and creators, critical users and practical workers, and their labour is as much part of the brand as the Tambrands or P&G logo.

In the 1970s, Tampax advertising had asked 'Why do modern women in 118 countries use Tampax tampons?' Experiments like Femtech are part of the answer, showing Tambrands' (and, later, P&G's) willingness to collaborate, invest, and break the silence around menstruation across the world. While Femtech is unique in the ways this chapter has outlined, it also exemplifies other experiments undertaken by Tambrands and P&G during the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As the advertisement correctly states, ambitious and culture-clashing projects also began in geographic locations including China, Scandinavia, Japan, Continental Europe, and Nigeria during the late twentieth century. This shows how menstrual product corporations adapted to cultural contexts and markets for profit, and how the Western exceptionalism fronted by Tambrands and P&G was utilised successfully across the world. Information about each endeavour is needed to be able to piece together answers to the question about how Tampax came to dominate the menstrual product sector so completely in so many regions. Nevertheless, Femtech is instructive in the ways it overcame menstrual stigma in the service of building a business, looping in Prime Ministers, labourers, changing nations, political enemies, and universities in the process.

Notes

1 'Ida Tin: The Rise of Femtech', *YouTube* video, 1:35 min. "Clue", 1 March 2017.
2 Heidi I. Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union', *Capital & Class* Vol 3, No 2 (1979). There is an extensive literature on Soviet Marxism and feminism, with one important text being Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860–1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).
3 Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage', 13.
4 Case method teaching at Harvard Business School immerses students in realistic and contemporary scenarios, combining several types of documentation (interview, video, exhibition, fact sheet, financial data) as a basis for discussion in class.
5 Willis Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (B) Teaching Note*, Harvard Business School Case No 792-020 (24 March 1993), 1–17, box 42, folder 9 and box 44, folder 11 (with handwritten notes) in the George C. Lodge Papers; Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (A) Teaching Note*, Harvard Business School Case No 390-159 (19 March 1993), 1–12, box 27, folder 4 in the Paul R. Lawrence papers. All papers consulted at the Baker Library Special Collections at Harvard Business School, Boston. The collections are available through appointment made in advance.
6 Interviews with Emmons, Constantin Ohanian, and Yury Saakov were conducted in person or via phone in 2019 and 2020. All interviewees were given a project description and signed consent forms.
7 The P&G corporate archives form the material for Ronald H. Bailey, *Small Wonder: How Tambrands Began, Prospered and Grew* (Tambrands Inc., 1987). P&G shared some images and information with me, but specified that historic material could not be shared as this was still of relevance to competitiors and P&G.
8 'What are TAMPAX Tampons Made Of?', Tampax UK website (2021): https://tampax.co.uk/en-gb/tampax-articles/women-s-health/what-are-tampax-tampons-made-of.
9 Bailey, *Small Wonder,* Introduction.
10 'The History of Tampax', Tampax P&G website (2021): https://tampax.com/en-us/about/our-story/history-of-tampax/.
11 Delaney, Lupton, Toth, *The Curse*, 134. The authors note that some corporations (Tassaway and Scott) fought for an ease to restrictions, whereas others (like Kimberly-Clark) were against it.
12 Delaney, Lupton and Toth include details about the 'period' campaign from a Tampax-affiliated advertiser who explained that Tampax asked the networks to 'prove' that the word would not offend, *The Curse*, 137.
13 Bailey, *Small Wonders*, 4.
14 Bailey, *Small Wonders*, 47–8.
15 During the TSS crisis, total tampon unit sales in the US declined by about 11 per cent, whereas Tampax sales increased by 4 per cent. This might have been due to the consumer fear of the TSS-related brand Rely, or to Tampax dominance generally; see Bailey, *Small Wonders,* 46. However, according to Research & Forecasts Incorporated, *The Tampax Report: Summary of Survey Results on a Study of Attitudes Towards Menstruation* (New York: Research & Forecasts Inc., 1981) many people believed TSS had also made consumers more willing to talk about menstruation, benefitting the industry in the long term overall.
16 Pavel Vasilyev, *Red DIY: Soviet Menstrual Innovations and the Moral Supremacy of Socialism* (unpublished manuscript, shared with author in 2020), 10. My thanks to Vasilyev for sharing his manuscripts.
17 Vasilyev, *Red DIY*, 10.
18 Interview with Onanin, 8 May 2019.
19 Saakov had previously worked in the Ministry of Foreign Trade in the USSR, and as deputy chairman of Techsnabexport (trade company connected to the Rosatom State Nuclear Energy Corporation, later Tenex) and Medexport (responsible for Soviet cooperation in the Health Ministry of the USSR at the time). Email from Saakov, 31 July 2019.
20 Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (B)*, 1.
21 Interview with Saakov, 28 October 2019.
22 Teresa Simons Robinson, 'Tampon Maker Encourages More Investment in USSR', *UPI* (26 September 1991), 2.

23 Interview with Saakov, 28 October 2019.
24 Tambrand's factory in China was also a joint venture with Pharmaceutical Factory No. 6 of the Liaoning Province, Bailey, *Small Wonders,* 48.
25 Bailey, *Small Wonders,* 44.
26 Jane Perlez, 'A Mean Political Hangover for Seagram in Ukraine', *New York Times* (27 January 1994).
27 Jennifer Reingold, 'Time Can't Wait for Tambrands', *Bloomberg* (10 February 1997).
28 Robert Cullen, 'One Firm's Agonizing Journey through the Red Tape of Russia', *Business Month* (March 1989), 24–6; Judann Dagnoli, 'Tambrands Plans Overseas Growth', *Advertising Age* (13 March 1989), 24; Amy Dunkin, 'They're More Single-Minded at Tambrands', *Business Week* (28 August 1989), 28.
29 Robinson, 'Tampon Maker Encourages More Investment in USSR', 3.
30 Interview with Onanin, 8 May 2019. On female astronauts, see Varsha Jain and Virginia Wotring's work on the medical history and treatment options, including some historical and sociological observations, 'Medically Induced Amenorrhea in Female Astronauts', *npj Microgravity* Vol 2 (2016).
31 'Tambrands Limited and Subsidiary Companies Director's report and financial statements 31 December 1989', filed with Companies House 14 November 1990.
32 Images and text about the Factory at Leigh Park, Havant for Tampax Ltd Portsmouth Office, December 1957 (record number: amshh/AMS6649/4/9/2), East Sussex and Brighton and Hove Record Office via the National Archives; Ralph Cousins, *A Brief History of Havant* (Havant Borough History Booklets, August 2016).
33 Vasilyev, *Red DIY*, 6.
34 Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (A)*, 4.
35 Interview with Onanin, 8 May 2019.
36 Tyler Marshall, 'Crowds Warm Up on Her Last Day: Thatcher Welcomed on Soviet Georgia Visit', *Los Angeles Times* (2 April 1987).
37 Vasilyev, *Red DIY*, 6.
38 Interview with Onanin, 8 May 2019.
39 Archie Brown, *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
40 The Margaret Thatcher archives, recently opened to researchers and extensively organised and available online, shows no direct link between Thatcher and Femtech, but provided information about the Prime Minister's relationship to Soviet politicians, perestroika, and US business, as well as her government's interest in promoting British manufacturing. On Thatcher's relationship to 'women's issues', see Laura Beers, 'Thatcher and the Women's Vote', in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
41 The argument that Tampax would save USSR cotton supplies was especially effective in convincing local politicians, and was also brought up by Thatcher: 'The Tambrands executive said he sold the Soviets on the idea – with former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's help – by illustrating how it would save the country valuable cotton…' From Robinson, 'Tampon Maker Encourages More Investment in USSR'; Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (B)*, 4.
42 Natalya Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era* (London: Routledge, 2013); Serguei A. Oushakine, 'Against the Cult of Things: On Soviet Productivism, Storage Economy, and Commodities with No Destination', *The Russian Review* Vol 73, No 2 (2014), 198–236; Timo Vihavainen and Elena Bogdanova (eds), *Communism and Consumerism: The Soviet Alternative to the Affluent Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Anna Krylova and Elena Osokina (eds), special issue 'People and Things Under Socialism', *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* Vol 43, No 2 (2016), 147–261; Julia Chan, 'The Brave New Worlds of Birth Control: Women's Travel in Soviet Russia and Naomi Mitchison's *We Have Been Warned*', *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol 42, No 2 (2019), 38–56.
43 Vasilyev, *Red Days on the Calendar: The Politics of Menstruation in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* (unpublished manuscript, shared with author in 2020).
44 Vasilyev, *Red Days*, 5.
45 See for example Frances L. Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex: Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007); Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press,

2009); Susan Grant, *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society* (London: Routledge, 2014); Chris Burton, 'Minzdrav, Soviet Doctors, and the Policing of Reproduction in the Late Stalinist Years', *Russian History* Vol 27, No 2 (2000), 197–221.

46 Melanie Ilic, 'Soviet Women Workers and Menstruation: A Research Note on Labour Protection in the 1920s and 1930s', *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol 46, No 8 (1994), 1409–15.

47 Sally King, 'Menstrual Leave: A Much Needed Benefit or a Threat to Gender Equality in the Workplace?', *Occupational Health at Work* Vol 13, No 5 (2017), 35–6; Ilic, 'Soviet Women Workers and Menstruation', 1410.

48 Vasilyev, *Red DIY*, 5.

49 Mikhail Gorbachev, 'Chapter 2: Women and the Family', in *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country* (San Franscisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

50 Gorbachev, *Perestroika,* Chapter 2.

51 Interview with Saakov, 28 October 2019.

52 Houppert, 'Pulling the Plug'; for an analysis of Tampax in the twenty-first century see Sophie Elmhirst, 'Tampon Wars: The Battle to Overthrow the Tampax Empire', *The Guardian* (11 February 2020).

53 Houppert, 'Pulling the Plug', 10. In contrast, Delaney, Lupton and Toth paint a much more optimistic picture of employment conditions at the Personal Products Company, *The Curse,* 142 (although they later question their views in the 1988 edition).

54 Houppert, 'Pulling the Plug', 10.

55 Houppert, 'Pulling the Plug', 10.

56 Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (B)*, 3.

57 Interview with Saakov, 28 October 2019.

58 Interview with Saakov, 28 October 2019.

59 Interview with Onanin, 8 May 2019.

60 Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (B)*, 3–4.

61 Interview with Onanin, 8 May 2019; Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (B)*, 4.

62 Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (B)*, 4.

63 Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (B)*, 4.

64 Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (B)*, 5–6.

65 Tim Carrington, 'International: Ukraine's Women Love These Two Firms', *Wall Street Journal* (6 February 1992), A10.

66 Interview with Saakov, 28 October 2019.

67 Interview with Onanin, 8 May 2019.

68 Vasilyev, *Red DIY*, 10.

69 Comparative profitability was hard to measure due to the complexities of the exchange rates and the uncertainty of rate translation during this time according to Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (B)*, 6; Interview with Saakov, 28 October 2019.

70 Interview with Saakov, 28 October 2019; Interview with Onanin, 8 May 2019.

71 'There were no taboos' according to Onanin, 8 May 2019.

72 Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period,* 170–93.

73 Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period,* 170–1.

74 Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period*, 172; 192. Freidenfelds documents how normalisation of tampons happened in white consumer groups first.

75 Interview with Onanin, 8 May 2019; Interview with Saakov, 28 October 2019.

76 For instance, menstrual restrictions and separation occurred amongst the Siberian Khanty throughout the twentieth century, but this was a region not discussed by the Tambrands team, Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, 'Rituals of Gender Identity: Markers of Siberian Khanty Ethnicity, Status, and Belief', *American Anthropologist* Vol 83 (1981), 850–67.

77 Interview with Onanin, 8 May 2019.

78 Steven Lipin and Raju Narisetti, 'P&G to Buy Tambrands in a $1.85 Billion Deal', *The Wall Street Journal* (9 April 1997).

79 Monopolies and Mergers Commission: 'Tambrands Ltd. A Report on the Granting of Discounts by Tambrands Ltd on Condition That the Whole or Part of the Tambrands Range of Tampons is Stocked', Cm 3168 (London: HSMO, February 1996).

80 Dick Hogan, 'Town Has Yet to Come to Terms with Closure of Factory', *The Irish Times* (20 September 1996); Ralph Cousins, 'A Brief History of Leigh Park and the Hamlet of Leigh', *Leigh*

Park Community Centre (October 2008): https://leighpark.weebly.com/brief-history-of-leigh-park.html.

81 Hogan, 'Town Has Yet to Come to Terms'.

82 'Sanitary Protection in Russia', *EuroMonitor International* (June 2020): https://www.euromonitor.com/sanitary-protection-in-russia/report.

83 Amy Paradysz, 'The Tampon Champions', *Maine Women Magazine* (26 March 2019). My thanks to Paradysz for sharing her thoughts on this article over email.

84 Bobel interviews a P&G employee about Tampax Pearl and its role as a 'cosmetic-appealing product' and the need to 'dress it up' when increasing the price by 30 per cent, *New Blood*, 108.

85 Interview with Emmons, 28 August 2019.

86 Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (B)*, 14.

87 Interview with Emmons, 28 August 2019. It should be noted that Emmons was also interested in other stigmatised areas of business at the time, and wrote an influential case study on Burroughs Wellcome and the AIDS treatment AZT in March 1993. Later, he would write about breast implants, pollution, pharmaceutical industry regulation, and other topics relating to power hierarchies in corporate environments.

88 'Russell Sprague, 79, Tambrands Chief', *New York Times* (22 April 1995), section 1, 30; *Harvard University History of Named Chairs: Sketches of Donors and Donations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 174; Bailey, *Small Wonder*, 46.

89 Emmons, *Tambrands Inc.: The Femtech Soviet Joint Venture (B)*, 12.

90 Bailey, *Small Wonders*, 12. Onanin commented that he felt strongly about inserting TSS warnings in all Tampax boxes, but that the Ukrainian health officials felt less strongly about this. The inserts were nevertheless included in all international Tampax products after the TSS crisis. Interview with Onanin, 8 May 2019.

91 Interview with Onanin, 8 May 2019.

92 Vasilyev, *Red DIY*, 6.

93 Vasilyev, *Red DIY*, 9.

94 Tampax and Earle Haas were mentioned in *The Sunday Times Magazine – 1000 Makers of the Twentieth Century* (21 September 1969).

Chapter 4
Procter & Gamble: Always Like A Girl

> Find that morning freshness all day, every day.
>
> Trust Always. It's a clean, dry feeling
>
> When did doing things 'like a girl' become an insult?
> Let's make #LikeAGirl mean amazing things.
>
> Always slogans from the 1990s, 2000, and 2014.

A girl is asked to run on the spot. She does. A woman is asked to do the same. She performs a half-hearted jog. A message flashes across the screen: 'girls lose confidence around puberty when doing things "like a girl" becomes embarrassing'.[1] This social experiment and commentary would not be out of place in a sociology journal, or as a presentation at a gender studies conference. In fact, both disciplines are heavily invoked in this advertising campaign from 2014. The 'Like A Girl' (LAG) campaign for P&G's pad brand Always, created by advertising agency Leo Burnett in 2014, was the first menstrual product advertisement to win an Emmy, and was applauded by celebrities from Gloria Steinem to Bill Clinton. Unusually, the campaign did not mention menstruation or products, despite Always' long history of technological innovation. LAG's enormous media impact ensured that other menstrual product brands abandoned old messages about technology, femininity and discretion, opting instead for activist rhetoric.[2] Although menstrual product advertising has always had a subtextual relationship to feminisms, P&G made the connection text in 2014.

This chapter focuses on the impact made by Always in the menstrual product advertising and technology sector since the brand's launch in 1983. I begin with a close reading of the LAG campaign, and connect this to Always' long-term relationship to specific girlhood culture. Next, I examine P&G's introduction of an innovative slim model of pads in 1980s

North America, and trace how Always subsequently challenged competitors and changed the ways pads were marketed and monopolised in the European Union and Britain in the 1990s. The sources for this chapter have been assembled from interviews with creative professionals who oversaw big Always campaigns. This includes artist William Chyr, Always brand manager Charlotte LeFlufy, senior brand manager of Tampax (formerly Always) Charles Steinmyller, and brand manager Ioanna Kournioti. By talking to the people who helped shape Always' success, their work's role in the changing value of the brand within the P&G ecosystem becomes clearer.[3] By examining the reception and critique of their work, we can begin to question and document Always' effect on menstrual culture around the world, and to critically examine the dominant narratives of success written and disseminated by P&G.

Always remains a popular brand across most continents.[4] Examining its history reveals what made it successful, as well as the tactics used by P&G to realise its global ambitions for the brand at a time of competition and changes in perceptions of menarche and girlhood. While the name Always suggests a consistency and long-term presence, the brand history reminds us of its relatively short and quick journey from innovative newcomer to global leader. Always' history and LAG's legacy, however, are not uncomplicated corporate success stories. Through analysis of the #MyAlwaysExperience activist campaign for ingredient transparency in Kenya, and P&G's response to this through the #GenerationOfChange project, we see how activist networks and corporate messaging continue to collide and evolve, and how consumers outside the US also challenge the Western menstrual product hegemony.

Performing like a girl

Viewed from the 2020s, LAG appears as a typical 'femvertising campaign', outfitted with inspirational and empowering messages and an emotional score. Yet, LAG should not be compared to later campaigns but seen in part as a reference point for a new beginning. At the time, journalists, cultural commentators, (some) feminists, politicians, celebrities, and people surveyed in Leo Burnett's market research all agreed that the ad was revolutionary.[5]

The video begins with a young white woman named Erin. She wears high heels, and is the first person to respond to the director's prompt about what it means to 'run like a girl'.[6] Throughout, Erin seems slightly shy, and when words failed, she demonstrates her ideas by performing a

half-hearted jog on the spot. Restricted by her outfit and heels, Erin is not realistically able to run naturally. Her run is clearly a performance, showing us what Erin understands to be society's (negative) perception of girlhood.

The camera cuts and another adult woman appears. She clutches her head and says 'oh, my hair', illustrating the gendered performance of running 'like a girl', smiling at the joke. A Black woman and a white man perform in the same way, suggesting that race and gender are no boundaries for the belittling of girlhood. In this part of the video, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* haunts the participants as they construct and repeat stylised acts over time, critiquing and presenting what they assume to be society's ontological view of gender, while also clearly performing binary and essentialised gendered tropes.[7] Like the viewers, the adult participants in LAG are both irreverent to these stereotypes and self-referential in their later deconstruction of what they admit to be a performed action. They are presenting and resisting gendered tropes at the same time, whereas the children in LAG respond earnestly. The skilful editing of the video is a case in point, with the choice of beginning with Erin's limp trot setting the stage for all performances to follow.

In comparison, the eight girls in LAG react differently to Greenfield's prompt. Unlike Erin, they seem unaware of the societal perception of doing things 'like a girl'. Whereas Erin is faced with a dilemma – to be herself or to illustrate the sexist trope – the girls have no such choice. Dakota, a 10-year-old, simply runs naturally. Wearing sneakers and unaware of the bite of the question, the children charge around stage. One girl, however, seems to have begun the journey into self-doubt as she pointedly comments that it sounds like Greenfield is trying to 'humiliate someone' by implying the connection between weakness and girlhood. When Greenfield asks a very young child in a pink puffy dress about running, she responds loudly that 'running like a girl means running as fast as you can!' The music swells as the audience and the adults (and single boy) in the video begin to understand how their performance might harm girls in the feature.

Back to Erin and the adults, attitudes and performances have changed. Girls are made to feel weak, which is bad, the director suggests to Erin. She seems to repent her performance, while the (unnamed) Black woman states that 'I do things like a girl. I am a girl!' When, wonders the voiceover, did doing things 'like a girl' become an insult? The solution is provided next: 'A girl's confidence plummets during puberty. Always wants to change that'. As the music intensifies again, the Always logo flashes across the screen and the hashtag is shared: 'Let's make #LikeAGirl mean amazing things'. In the final clip, Erin is back on stage with a smile

on her face asking: 'Why can't "run like a girl" also mean win the race?' Not once is menstruation, menstrual products or parent corporation P&G named. Despite – and perhaps even because of – this, LAG is an incredibly moving and smartly constructed piece of marketing.

Spanning 3 minutes and 18 seconds, the video was published on Always' YouTube channel shortly after its launch at the 2014 Superbowl. It was titled 'Always #LikeAGirl', and had a strong tie-in to a related hashtag campaign on Twitter. The use of the Superbowl half-time show, YouTube, and a hashtag were markers of popular culture in the US at the time, when corporations could operate in new media forms relatively free from regulation. The gigantic launch platform of the Superbowl ensured instant notoriety, while engagement with the YouTube and Twitter platforms allowed international viewers to share their immediate (largely positive) responses. Many wrote that they had been moved by the campaign, feeling conflicted about their own use of the term 'like a girl' and praising Always. Early commentary largely refrained from mention of pads, menstruation, P&G, or the Always brand's overall purpose, instead focusing on the campaign's feminist message.[8] At the heart of LAG's success was its severing of ties to anything pertaining to its product or owner.

The LAG director was seasoned filmmaker Lauren Greenfield, who utilised postmodern editing techniques to reveal the behind-the-scenes making of the campaign. Throughout, LAG made no pretence at reality, featuring Greenfield asking questions, while video clippers snapped across the screen, and unnamed staff did their work in the background of a soundstage. In this way, the video collapsed the boundary between reality and fiction. Theorists of postmodern advertising note that consumers in the early twenty-first century were no longer simply manipulated by advertising, but responded to them on a 'mediated, "knowing" level'.[9] Because of this, some viewers reacted better to campaigns that were irreverent and self-referential. LAG excelled at both strategies, showing irreverence towards a general idea of patriarchy, while referencing the making of the campaign itself as a tool for change – all the while avoiding mention of the actual product and the corporation behind its funding and purpose.

Always there

Established in 1837 by English candlemaker William Procter and Irish soapmaker James Gamble, P&G initially focused on personal health care, quickly expanding into food, beverages, and home, baby, and 'feminine'

care products by the early twentieth century. Early on, P&G had gained a reputation for pioneering branding techniques with great success, with images of the American housewife becoming a symbol for its cleaning brands, for example.[10] Adept at utilising advertising to sell unexciting products (diapers, soap, deodorant), P&G moved to the menstrual product market. In 1983, the corporation introduced Always Maxi to the US market after studying the existing market's weaknesses, specifically the bulkiness and wet top layer that consumers disliked.

In terms of innovation, the Always brand featured pads that were impressively slim by the standard of the decade. Between 3 to 5 millimetres, it spurred competitors like SCA into action in the mid-1980s, as we discovered in Chapter 2. At the time, most other pads – also in the US – were much thicker, and therefore difficult to completely obscure under tight clothing. The first print campaigns visually compared Always with competing brands, using the blue saline liquid used to test products in P&G's laboratories to show consumers its impressive ability to absorb moisture (see Figure 4.1). Always print advertising focused on hygiene and comfort, with slogans such as 'Find that morning freshness all day, every day'.[11] Whereas blue liquid was not realistic as a stand-in for blood, it managed to sidestep media censorship against showing red liquid and to demonstrate absorbency to potential consumers. On the other hand, since 'blue goo' was the favoured test substance for pads during the 1980s, one could say that the inclusion of blue liquid was a realistic

Figure 4.1. Early advertisement for Always in print, 1983. P&G Heritage & Archives Center.

representation of the research environment at the time.[12] Overall, early Always campaigns promised 'a cleaner, drier kind of protection than you ever expected from any maxi', and relied heavily on technological details and images of the products to convince consumers to change brands. Another early campaign featured an adult woman in white trousers, and copy that read 'feel so clean, so dry, you'll almost forget you're wearing it – even on heavy flow days'. The precise inclusion of the term 'heavy flow' let consumers know that Always could compete with super-absorbent tampons and was a reliable choice for people who bled profusely. Always' advertising focused on the feeling of wearing a pad, and promised that this was not the wet and clammy experience of earlier technologies: 'Trust Always. It's a clean, dry feeling'. Key to this message was the detailing of Always 'Dri-Weave surface technology'. The patented innovation consisted of a polyethylene (i.e. plastic) layer (also known as a nonwoven top sheet) that allowed fluid to penetrate and become trapped in the pad.[13]

Menstrual technologies had changed a great deal since P&G first tried to enter the market. By 1984, it had been four years since the corporation had scrambled out of the Rely tampon and Toxic Shock Syndrome crises, and over 10 years would pass before it dared dabble in tampons again – through the acquisition of Tambrands and Tampax in 1997. Always therefore functioned as P&G's re-introduction into the menstrual market, necessitating a need to avoid all the mistakes of Rely. This time, all aspects of the launch and branding had to project a message of safety and trustworthiness. The name 'Always' set the right tone: the pad would be reliable, a constant partner in the war on menstrual stains, to be found everywhere, and purchased by everyone. Unlike Rely, it would never disappoint or disappear.

Any lingering concerns about menstrual product safety were soothed with medical institutional affiliation, secured through P&G's collaborators in the US National Association of School Nurses and the Society for Adolescent Medicine. Educational material was produced to underline P&G's responsible corporate approach, removing any doubts left over from the TSS years, while also presenting an effective method of direct-to-consumer product placement. In the 1987 P&G booklet *Periods and Puberty: A Practical Guide for Girls*, the physiological scale of breast and pubic hair development was included – which Harry Finley at the Museum of Menstruation notes as a rather detailed and technical description of puberty for the time and format.[14] With a strong focus on medical information, the booklets were comprehensive, including information about boys and non-menstrual-related puberty education. Product information and placement appeared on page 10, stating that

'Always® Slender for Teens' was 'A Maxi that wasn't designed for your mother', making it clear that P&G was presenting a modern educational and technological message for a new generation of girls. In the mid-1990s, new booklets such as *Always in Style: Your Personal Guide to Choosing Feminine Protection Products* and *Always Changing: Puberty and Menstruation Information for Girls* presented a somewhat different focus for a new wave of girls experiencing menarche.[15] While some information was recycled from the 1980s, the amount of text decreased while visuals increased. In the text, more references to technology appeared, especially regarding 'Dri Weave'. In the images, the white girls of the 1980s were joined by a diverse group of children, suggesting that Always' pads were for everyone, regardless of age or ethnicity.

During the late 1980s and 1990s, Always solidified its links to girls through these leaflets, but also through direct engagement in schools. P&G's puberty-education output has changed over the years and across regions, but has been a consistent part of Always' brand building. Booklets and product samples could be ordered by teachers, or taught by Always representatives, depending on individual countries' attitudes to corporate presence in the classroom (banned in France, welcomed in the UK). This project became increasingly international, including the pan-African 'Always keeping girls in school' programme, and collaboration with Save the Children, UN Women, and UNICEF to provide free products in over 50 developing countries, war zones and refugee camps.[16] During the years before menstrual activism hit the headlines, this was stigmatised and complicated work, and Always' reach into developing countries and schools across the world ensured that millions of products reached people without access to alternatives. While critics have since astutely pointed out the colonial attitudes at the heart of this project to 'clean up' girls and make them productive entities of society, Always was nevertheless often the only entity speaking openly about menstruation in the 1980s. For example, Always' Africa brand manager Irene Mwathi-Miheso and educator Lesego Lekgetho both forged strong links with local communities, based on their own knowledge of regional cultures and languages.[17] Likewise, through the Western school programmes, girls (and, later, boys) were introduced to Always products alongside puberty, sexuality and mental health at a time when public funding of such programmes was often unreliable. The Always team knew that they were 'a company, not a philanthropic organisation', and they blended educational and promotional strategies to increase brand awareness accordingly.[18]

Educational outreach is part of what made Always a strong brand, instantly recognisable to the girls first introduced to the product as

children, and going far beyond the marketing tactics of most personal care brands to change attitudes in the 1980s. The same approach was taken by the P&G Tampax team when attempting not only to sell through marketing, but to change deep-rooted stigma against the use of internal menstrual products linked to ideas about virginity or femininity through a strategy of social impact. In doing so, P&G's menstrual product teams insist that they are not just following trends, but listening to consumers' needs – including the needs of consumers who are not (yet) confident about menstruation.[19] Fundamentally, menstrual education was not just part of P&G's corporate responsibility strategy, but a good business plan that helped dissolve stigma against menstrual products.

Saturating the market

For P&G, Always became the pioneering global product that Rely had failed to become. Business historian Davis Dyer terms Always the corporation's first 'truly global brand', noting its presence in North America, Europe, Africa and Asia.[20] Dyer's history of P&G accounts for social and cultural factors, while staying focused on the marketing and economic impact of the growing corporation. His account of Always, while important, grapples only briefly with the deep stigma and complexities of selling menstrual products to the world during the early decades of the brand's existence. By the late 1980s, the corporation had gained experience in launching products into various cultural and linguistic areas, as exemplified by the Femtech experiment in the last chapter. Examining the ways in which Always entered the European Union and British markets shows how P&G paid careful attention to detail when approaching new regions.

During P&G's global expansion period in the mid-1990s, company mergers were frequent. In 1994, the corporation notified the European Union Merger Regulation Commission of its intent to merge with Bavarian company VP-Schickedanz, makers of the Camelia pad brand. The move would give P&G two-thirds of the value of the German menstrual market and 50 per cent in Spain.[21] This was a clear example of P&G's intent to make the Always brand global. At the time, the EU commission 'raised serious doubts as to its compatibility with the common market', and concluded that P&G posed a 'significant threat to competition in the German and Spanish markets for sanitary towels'.[22] In order to overcome this, P&G suggested divesting Camelia to diversify the market. The EU

Commission's response illuminates the economic attitude to menstrual product development and branding at the time:

> In respect to towels and tampons, while both are a means of menstrual protection, they meet different needs (whether real or perceived) based upon consumer preferences arising out of the difference between internal and external methods of protection. The needs and preferences displayed by consumers arise out of the objective characteristics of the product (discretion, practicality, comfort) and also out of complex cultural, psychological and physical influences and motivations. Once a woman has found a system which works for her, she tends to be loyal to the method or mix of methods, and even the brand, concerned. Consumer behaviour is thus significantly influenced by factors other than price and there is only a very low cross-price elasticity between the two products, strongly pointing to separate product markets.[23]

If the market was in fact split between tampon and pad users, the EU Commission noted that the two sectors were not operating entirely transparently. They found that there were 'sizable price differences' between factory and net prices in different EU member states, with the same suppliers circulating different brand names in several countries, and a wide variation in national distribution and purchasing patterns. They also noted that there had been a 'history of failed attempts at market entry' into the EU before P&G, due to the combination of brand loyalty and the need for 'high levels of advertising both for on-going brand support and for the launch of a new brand'.[24] For the European market, the worst-case scenario would be 'higher prices to the consumer, a loss of consumer choice and the loss of competition on innovation between P&G and Schickedanz'.[25] Yet, P&G's offer to divest the Camelia brand appeased the Commission, which calculated that it would lead to P&G entering the German market with an acceptable 40 per cent share of the market. While P&G was eager to promote corporate responsibility through its ambitious educational programmes, its parallel role in monopolising the menstrual market can be seen at odds with a moral attitude to menstruators when considering – as the EU did – the ability of companies to truly compete freely, and thus bringing down prices and improving products.

Commenting on the decision, EU Competition Commissioner, Socialist politician, and one of the most 'powerful men in Europe'[26], Karel Van Miert, noted that the merger was:

> … a good thing for competition and a good thing for the consumer. If there are too few firms on a market, this can only be bad for prices, bad for consumer choice and bad because it reduced the incentive for firms to innovate.[27]

The P&G and VP-Schickedanz merger had the desired effect on the European market, which under Miert was described as 'the most powerful market regulator in the world'.[28] Camelia and other European brand names were absorbed into the P&G system, rebranded Always (or another of P&G's synonyms for its pad range), re-packaged, and technologically tweaked to match the US product. Throughout, P&G could rely on an increased number of factories and providers of raw materials across Europe, providing hundreds of jobs and producing millions of pads, opening European headquarters in Geneva, and global offices in Dubai, Singapore, China, India, and Panama soon after.[29]

Two years after, P&G's increasingly powerful role as a manufacturer and advertiser of pads caught the eye of market regulators in Britain. In a report on the granting of discounts for menstrual products in the UK, written by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (hereafter 'the Commission') in 1996, Always was described as a brand that shifted technological and marketing strategies in the overall market.[30] The Commission's goal was to examine whether the menstrual market was healthy at the time, and, similar to Karel Van Miert's statement on the European situation, it cited the entrance of Always onto the market as a good indicator of competition.[31] The report noted that the Always launch had been accompanied by unmatched levels of advertising, funded by P&G's large budget, eclipsing British competitors and subsequently changing the amount spent on advertising in the British market (see Figure 4.2). The increase in overall advertising from all brands, it was noted, was 'largely due to the expenditure by P&G as part of its launch of its Always brand', but also due to a relaxation of censorship on advertising.[32] It was a shock for the quiet and relatively stable UK menstrual product market, which had hitherto mostly competed internally via access to shelf space in shops and through discount offers.[33] Now it was struggling to keep up with American competition. From 1991 to 1994 the sector doubled its expenditure on advertising, from £9 million to £19 million.[34] Although it welcomed the healthy competition, the ripple effect of P&G's use of advertising raised concerns for the Commission, who warned against increasing advertising budgets further.

To fund some of the extensive amount of advertising in the UK, Always was introduced at twice the price of a box of Tampax tampons,

Figure 4.2. 1991 Ultra-Thin Always pad print ad. P&G Heritage & Archives Center.

with further increases to follow. The Commission noted that this was justified because:

> As a result of product innovation, these ultra-slim towels (3mm to 5mm thick) are more convenient both to carry and to use, addressing a number of disadvantages which traditional towels had been seen as having compared with tampons.[35]

Always' popularity ensured that P&G could reduce prices thereafter, whereas tampons remained at an inflated rate. These developments led to a minor crisis in British tampon sales, with a reduction from 43.5 per cent of the market in 1991 to 36.9 per cent in 1994.[36]

Product innovation in the UK and US did not mean that the Always brand changed internationally. In the mid-1990s, some consumer groups had the option of buying the slim, super-absorptive pads mentioned by the Commission as genuinely innovative, whereas other regions had access only to older technology. This led to confusion, as consumers encountered different products under the same brand name in different geographic regions when travelling. It also led to dissatisfaction with the old style of pads. In 1996, an article published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* found a correlation between Always pads in Canada and severe

vaginal irritation.[37] The Canadian pads were brought into line with US and UK Always soon after, whereas the older style pads persisted in other P&G regions, especially outside North America and the European region. This episode underlines the increased reliance on advertising to attract consumers, whereas product development moved at a more uneven pace.

P&G's macro-level moves in the EU and Britain happened on the international and financial scene, far removed from most consumers' experiences of purchasing pads. When tampon sales stabilised again at the end of the decade, P&G focused on groups that were more likely to adopt a pad habit: very young girls.[38] Having established itself across the world by the mid-1990s, P&G allowed the Always team more freedom to shape campaigns according to each geographic region's girlhood culture while maintaining a distinctly American and Western attitude to menstruation by fronting menstrual discretion, femininity and a constant focus on products.

A creative boom

For advertisers working on the Always account in the 1990s, the excitement of mergers and acquisitions experienced by P&G did not translate into rousing marketing. Always had relied on saccharine messages such as 'have a nice period', while continuing to focus on the blue liquid demonstration which consumers and intersectional feminist health care practitioners increasingly found outdated.[39] In 2000, a shifting P&G leadership ushered in a new enthusiasm for branding within the corporation, spearheaded by chief executive officer Alan George Lafley. Under his leadership, P&G experienced a growth in sales, cash flow, and annual core earnings per share. The corporation gained a reputation for being consumer driven and externally focused, with an increased interest in innovation and risk-taking, including funneling more funding into advertising for its Always and Tampax products. When Kimberly-Clark re-launched its Kotex pad brand by altering the packaging to a glowing neon and black combination in 2010, a jolt of electricity sent the whole sector back to the literal drawing board. Consumers responded positively to the change away from pink and pastels, suggesting that a menstrual brand which championed ideals of gender equality through branding might do well in future. It was a time of excitement and potential, when advertisers began to reshape the boundaries and norms of menstrual product marketing yet again.

Artist, videogame designer, and former Leo Burnett advertiser William Chyr recalls that 'Always had its butt kicked by the black neon Kotex box'.[40] He remembered the increasing view of traditional advertising in the sector: 'Women said it was stupid'.[41] During the recession years of the late 2000s, designers such as Chyr, often with art school educations and artistic ambition, entered the advertising sector to make a creative impact. It was not easy. On his first day, Chyr was told that the global Always account was tough 'because you couldn't say what the product does'.[42] Because of this, the 'femcare' advertising sector tended to attract people who were not particularly passionate about menstrual products, but saw their time working on Always or Tampax as a way to boost their portfolio. Mirroring the experience of Saba and Mölnlycke manufacturing staff in Scandinavia, advertising these brands was not a job to be proud of, and not something easily talked about outside the office.

During the 2000s, Kotex's packaging stunt gave those who ended up in the menstrual product sector an opportunity to be creative because it proved that original visual strategies could work. Inspired, Chyr began experimenting with a different type of campaign, one that would be simple like the favoured Absolut Vodka style of the time, yet frank in its depiction of menstrual themes. Rather than having access to large-scale market research like his senior colleagues, he reached out to his friends, most of whom were African-American and ethnic minority women in their late twenties and thirties.[43] They told him that they preferred pads, but that they were unimpressed with previous P&G advertising, which they found childish.

In response, Chyr designed the 'Red Dot' campaign: a hand-drawn illustration of a minimalist white pad resembling a maze, with one single red dot in the centre. The small crimson centre depicted menstrual blood in a stylised yet unmistakable way. While he thought the idea was good, Chyr had made it as a typical 'fake ad' to boost his slim advertising portfolio, one of many creative experiments that was unlikely to reach the boardrooms of Leo Burnett, let alone P&G. Yet, it did. Chyr recalls his surprise because P&G had a reputation of being 'a conservative campaigner', musing that in the period after the Kotex black box stunt, creative ideas were perhaps slightly more welcome.[44] The campaign was redrawn and published in 2011, making an immediate impact as the first of its kind to feature anything resembling realistic menstrual blood in North America.[45]

Chyr's 'Red Dot' campaign put Always on the map with Kotex's black box stunt, but it had not yet eclipsed the latter's bold move. Meanwhile, Unilever's soap brand Dove had catapulted into popular consciousness with the 'Real Beauty' campaign featuring 'real women' (rather than

models) in 2006. Like Chyr, the advertiser (Ogilvy & Mather) had listened to its diverse customer base and centred women's experiences of their bodies at the heart of a moving, long, and research-based video that never mentioned the actual product. The accumulated effect of Kotex's black boxes, the 'Red Dot' campaign, and Dove's success led to more risk-taking within Leo Burnett and P&G.[46]

The social scientific method

In the 2010s, Leo Burnett partnered with market specialists Research Now (later Dynata) to learn as much as they could about their research objective: girls. Research Now, founded in 1999, pioneered the new science of tracking and collecting data about online behaviour. In addition to observing girls' digital lives, Leo Burnett also relied on published social science research. One paper written by a team of behavioural psychologists in the late 1990s, entitled 'Global Self-Esteem across the Life Span', was cited and used for the development of LAG.[47] The research was already somewhat dated, chronicling the life and confidence of people in the 1990s, but nevertheless gave important insight into an emerging generation of consumers.

The study was part of the developing field of self-esteem studies, which the article's authors argued had focused too much on adolescence, and not enough on life span.[48] The research project had therefore uniquely included the oldest age groups in the study, from 9 to 90 years of age, collecting digital data from 326,641 individuals. The findings echoed previous studies of narrower age groups, finding high self-confidence in children, a sharp drop in adolescents, a steady rise through adulthood, and a decline in the over-80s back down to adolescent levels.[49] Both genders adhered to this general development, although adolescent girls' confidence dropped double the amount of boys (the same was seen in the over-80s).[50] These general findings, argued the authors, needed to be viewed in light of ethnicity because they found that ethnic minorities' self-esteem began declining before old age, and that this was true for both genders.[51]

Research Now and Leo Burnett summarised their view of the study and findings from market research to P&G:

> Our research shows that girls' confidence drops at puberty, significantly more than boys', and rarely is it regained. If it does come back, it doesn't happen until much later in life. As a brand that champions girls' and women's confidence, we knew we had to do

> something about this. Girls feel like they can do anything. And then they hit puberty and they find themselves questioning everything. They are trying to figure out what's going on with their bodies, what's going on with their lives and they start asking if it's even good to be a girl.[52]

These conclusions related to the original study, but also left some important details out. The authors had insisted on the importance of looking at confidence throughout the lifespan, and especially in old age. And, it negated the significance of racialised and minority ethnic experiences on loss of confidence. Furthermore, the data was collected in the 1990s, therefore not reflecting girlhood confidence status in the mid-2010s. By smoothing out some of these details, the LAG campaign was based on a reading of the research that focused on a homogeneous analysis of girlhood, whereas the study itself was concerned with highlighting diversity in terms of age and ethnicity. If it was the case, for instance, that ethnic minority and Black girls lost confidence while white girls gained self-worth throughout the teen years, would the LAG campaign be accurate? Always' use of some of the ideas in the research paper underlines the brand's commitment to an idealised and homogeneous girlhood ideal.

Building brand confidence

Based on the insights from Research Now and Leo Burnett, LAG was rolled out first in the US and online, and subsequently around the world. Always brand manager Charlotte LeFlufy, who worked on the British launch, instantly understood how unique its virality was.[53] For LeFlufy, it was 'the first time a "femcare" brand had ever done something so deep and emotional'.[54] It made her proud of her job.

Officially, Always' mission has been to help empower girls and women. LeFlufy recalled that this aspect 'hadn't changed, but the new news about girls losing confidence had and what are we doing about it?'[55] Her team understood that 'getting your period is very scary and you don't want to have leaks, and so that's how our products fit'.[56] The previous educational strategy carried out in schools by the Always team was losing favour and LAG attempted to put a 'bigger lens' on the problem of confidence more generally: 'How do we a) identify the societal issues, and b) rally society with us to make a change?'[57] This big lens and focus on society was gargantuan. LeFlufy recalled that the 'insight was so broad and it is something we needed to change globally', with the campaign

quickly reaching 'into 40 countries, like India, China, Africa'.[58] Indeed, tackling an issue such as self-esteem was clearly a task beyond the brief of making and selling pads, and therefore required the expertise of creative professionals.

P&G approached director Lauren Greenfield due to her background as an established photographer and film maker, and her authorship of *Girl Culture*.[59] This photographic essay, seeking to capture what it is like to be a girl in a consumerist and celebrity-obsessed country, opens with an introduction by cultural historian Joan Brumberg, whose pioneering work remains a cornerstone of girlhood studies.[60] Greenfield's credentials as an expert on visualising and understanding girl culture was strong, but both her (and Brumberg's) work, like the data behind LAG, was undertaken in the 1990s. As such, the study and cultural knowledge behind the work was based on girlhood experiences from the previous decade. Perhaps due to this, the generation of adults in charge of shaping LAG – many of whom were girls in the 1990s – connected strongly to its core message.

CEO at Leo Burnett Canada, Judy John, recalled the moment when the idea of centring the campaign on the LAG concept was first suggested:

> As we started talking about it, there was so much energy in the room, we just knew it was true. There were a lot of people who had used the phrase, even women. There were so many different stories that people told. It really hit a nerve. And then we started looking at movies and there were a bunch of different times in films when they said the phrase, 'You throw like a girl', 'You hit like a girl', or 'You cry like a girl'. Then we started seeing it in the media as well.[61]

This experience of creative discussion about language (especially Anglo-American rhetoric) is described here almost like a radical feminist consciousness-raising session in which collective discourse leads to revolutionary awareness. The revelation that the term 'like a girl' was seen as negative spurred the group of women into action, and, as the 'energy in the room' changed, Greenfield and the advertisers crossed the boundary from marketing into activism.

Meanwhile, the focus on technology was abandoned. Prior to the 2010s, LAG was a unique pitch due to its lack of engagement with the pad itself. In fact, there was not even a new product to advertise. As discussed, earlier menstrual product advertising (and product advertising in general) tended to feature the actual product, or to include a detailed description of its technological and competitive advantages. While not first to include feminist slogans in its branding, Always' LAG campaign was an early

example of the broader cultural shift towards 'femvertising' in the mid-2010s.[62] At the time, P&G may have wondered about the absence of its Always pad in the original pitch. According to the advertising team, they excluded technological details because they wanted an 'emotional' brand message, rather than a 'rational' product focus, noting that the product 'wasn't going to make sense' in the storyline.[63]

In order to build brand confidence, P&G and Leo Burnett therefore left behind their history of technology-centred marketing. For the LAG campaign, the product itself did not 'make sense' because the message was about the brand's emotional and cultural cachet beyond menstruation. If anything, menstruation and menstrual products would have confused its focus, as both are well established links to the loss of girls' confidence around puberty.[64] In their astute critique of the campaign, Breanne Fahs and Ela Przybylo argue that LAG's concealment of menstrual themes contributes to the overall societal pressure for menstruators to conform to 'menstrual invisibility'.[65] If so, the campaign's popularity hints at a consumer group and viewership eager to embrace this idea.

Winning the race

Within days of launching, LAG was the second-most-watched video on YouTube in the world, gaining P&G scores of new subscribers who shared largely positive feedback in the comment section (see Figure 4.3). Bill Clinton and Gloria Steinem shared the video on Twitter, elevating the hashtag #LikeAGirl into celebrity. Steinem's acceptance was noteworthy,

Figure 4.3. Still from Always 'Like A Girl' campaign, 2014.

as her well-known 1978 essay 'If Men Could Menstruate' had been part of the radical feminist movement's response to menstrual corporations, and her tweet therefore suggested that parts of the critical menstrual movement had accepted the core message of LAG.[66] The UN and Save the Children applauded the campaign for its impact on gender equality. It won six Clio advertising awards, and the 2015 Emmy for Best TV Commercial. By 2021, the original YouTube video had been watched 69 million times.

'It was above our wildest dreams', remembers LeFlufy, but 'it wasn't like we weren't doing anything before'.[67] In comparison to the hands-on work of teaching children and teens about their bodies via school programmes, the campaign made it clear that a more conceptual and bold approach provided better branding for P&G – this was what people wanted. For people working on the Always account (mostly women), it made them feel 'elevated, it became bigger and more purposeful'.[68] The LAG campaign also made the team respected amongst their competitors in advertising agencies. The sector started taking notice of Always, which had previously lagged behind Kotex and Tampax regarding brand awareness – a key metric in a market with few competitors. 'It's great to be recognised, but people want to work on the campaign to bring about social change, not to win awards', noted LeFlufy.[69] Reflecting on the project, she considered it 'feminist' work:

> For many years Always has had 'confidence' at its core, but expressed this only in functional terms ('won't let you down'). While this trust remained important, it became insufficient to maintain relevance among younger women, increasingly drawn to brands that also engaged them emotionally. We needed to extend the meaning of 'confidence' into emotional territory. Our exploration led to the discovery that puberty is a time of confidence crisis in girls and that gender stereotyping through language plays a big role. This is exemplified by the use of the phrase 'like a girl' as an insult, implying that simply being female means whatever a young woman does is not good enough. So, we created a campaign that challenged the use of this poisonous and damaging expression, redefining it in a new, inspiring way, and using social media and PR to spread the message.[70]

According to LeFlufy, LAG finally gave the 'femcare' sector a seat at the table regarding menstrual policy and health. The market research commissioned by Always made this possible because it provided data showing how the campaign changed attitudes. According to P&G, 19 per

cent of girls had positive associations with the phrase 'like a girl' before seeing the video, rising to 76 per cent after watching the video.[71] The realisation that branding could do good spurred the team to want to do more. Soon, they launched a successful campaign for more diverse smartphone emojis, advocating for the inclusion of female firefighters and girls running (previously gendered as male). This type of corporate activism exemplifies one of the core themes of late capitalism in which 'immortal corporations' and brands take on global work far beyond the selling of products, reaching into activism, cultural representation, and even the law and policy.[72]

Fundamentally, LAG was good for the people working in menstrual product advertising in the 2010s, and good for P&G. Similar to the titular girl of the campaign, the team's awareness of their own complex position as women was highlighted during their work on LAG. It is no surprise that advertising insiders speak about the campaign with love and pride, and that their competitors equally wish to discuss it. LAG raised the game for a whole sector, teaching it that working on a product for girls and women was not shameful, but exciting and, ultimately, profitable. LAG created a higher-than-average brand awareness and preference for Always in the menstrual pad market, and P&G reported an astounding 50 per cent increase in purchase intent amongst their target demographic of girls.[73]

For P&G, this was a chance to celebrate their history while moving forward. In the LAG video, Erin and the other adults have learned their lesson from the brand. The screen proclaims:

> So tell us... what do YOU do #LikeAGirl? For the past thirty years, Always has been empowering girls globally, bringing puberty education to millions of adolescent girls.[74]

Here, the brand's history is invoked as part of a tradition, suggesting that viewers engage with the hashtag and become part of Always' social justice campaign. Despite Erin's attempt at straddling the boundary between perception and reality, she has been corrected and educated by Always during the course of the video. It is the brand which will change the harmful conversations that were carried out by 'uneducated' women like Erin for decades. Yet, five years later, in a research report about menstrual stigma commissioned by Always, the brand acknowledged that 'even today, periods can be a scary, confusing, and sometimes profoundly disabling experience'.[75] The brand clearly sees its own historic role as a bystander to the creation of menstrual stigma, and as an outlier in the dominant forces that create period shame. However, in the same report,

it is noted that the media contributes to the negative portrayal of periods in society – alluding to, but never outright stating, Always' own historic role in public perceptions of menstruation.[76]

International girls

In the years since LAG launched, the campaign has been both critiqued and celebrated for its invocation of some aspects of feminisms. A few notable examples reveal how the insights discussed in the campaign have had both impactful and unexpected effects on consumers and the Always brand, and how LAG's ambitious goals sometimes wobbled under the pressure of corporate management and market globalisation. While P&G had been an international presence for decades, the US accounted for nearly 80 per cent of its menstrual market, resulting in the need for international Always brand managers to do their work through an American consumer lens.[77] This sometimes clashed with the work of international branding, or with P&G-affiliated workers elsewhere.

In the 2010s, P&G's Women's Network founder, Dalia Feldheim, started talking publicly about the bullying and sexism she had faced in corporate environments, titling her TED lecture 'Dare to Lead Like A Girl'.[78] Feldheim had been involved in the LAG campaign and had celebrated it as 'more than an ad – an icon for women's empowerment'.[79] Yet, at the same time as Feldheim enjoyed great success, she was struggling with bullying. She detailed how men spoke over women in meetings, how emotion was seen as unprofessional, and the many ways in which women had to work increasingly hard to be seen as both smart and attractive. This paradoxical reality is typical for many women working in menstrual product industries or marketing. While the 2010s marked a time when celebration of their work became more normal, this did not mean that their historic place at the bottom of the advertising food chain was reversed overnight. Feldheim used LAG to share her own experience of sexism, utilising a campaign aimed at girls to share a message about adult women.[80]

The use of the term 'girl' to describe herself might seem strange in the context of Feldheim, but it also signals solidarity with younger people. By writing and making the campaign, Feldheim and others involved in its creation for the first time saw themselves represented in the advertising they made. As the mere existence of the 'P&G Women's Network' attests, women in the industry are far from immune to patriarchy, and may have felt some degree of claustrophobia while working on gendered accounts like Always and Tampax. The only way out of this trap would be to alter

the value attributed to menstrual product accounts through the currency of awards, sales, media coverage and online virality.

In Fahs and Przybylo's aforementioned feminist analysis of LAG, Always excelled at developing a strategy 'that involves distancing itself and absolving itself of responsibility for menstrual shaming, sexism and body negativity that it has capitalised on since its introduction by P&G in 1983.'[81] At worst, they argue, the entire video was 'a pseudo-feminist lesson' that evaded all responsibility for P&G's own role in perpetuating sexist stereotypes. The authors write that the brand benefitted 'directly from menstrual activism and feminist involvement in shifting ideas around bodies and menstruation…'.[82] This, and other critiques of the campaign, however, seldom engage with the makers of the advertisement, or its consumer base, flattening corporate and creative intentions into a monolithic villain.[83] Nevertheless, consumers have also become more alert to the problems of the menstrual product industry, and Always has been especially troubled by this awakening.

Soon after Feldheim's talk, an unrelated response to LAG and the Always brand in Kenya also asked questions about the integrity of the parent company behind the bold campaigns. Since 1992, Always had increased its Kenyan consumer base year on year, constituting 65 per cent of all menstrual product sales in the country by the 2010s.[84] During these decades, Kenyan consumers detailed their negative experiences with the brand, ranging from rashes, itchiness, feelings of heat and burning, and unpleasant smells, and when social media platforms made information sharing easier, they rallied under the #MyAlwaysExperience hashtag. Started by political campaigner Scheaffer Okore, consumers explained that they had used Always since its Kenyan launch in the 1990s, and simply assumed their experiences were normal. Taboos and misunderstanding about menstruation – for instance the myth that menstrual blood smells bad or that menstruation should be painful – contributed to the slow realisation that the products were to blame.[85] Okore and others only began realising that their experiences might in fact be symptoms of faulty products after visiting the US or the UK, where the Always product looked and felt very different. Utilising Twitter, Kenyan activists and consumers demanded answers in the public fora of social media. This was a group of girls and women who did not accept LAG's claims about all girls lacking confidence, instead taking on a multinational corporation together.

Media attention followed. In a detailed investigation and comparison of international pad brands conducted by *Quartz Africa*, Ciku Kimeria proved that Always products available in Africa generally used a different polyethylene film than found in its American or European counterparts.

This material was more similar to the plastic top layer technology available in the US and Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, which in turn had been the subject of the aforementioned Canadian clinical research project from 1996. In other words, by the late 2010s, it was hard for P&G to deny that the African markets were being sold old technology that consumers in the West had warned against over 15 years earlier, while Western Always users were provided higher-quality pads. The episode is a clear example of Western exceptionalism and corporate colonialism driving branding strategies without considering the agency or intelligence of consumers.

At its height, the #MyAlwaysExperience campaign mirrored the same virality of the #LikeAGirl hashtag, motivating consumers around the world, and retweeted by celebrities. In response, P&G called for a meeting with the activists, promising that more menstrual products would soon be available across the continent. Activists countered that this would mean an effective hierarchy of products, with comfortable options available only to those who could afford them, creating the 'Period Poverty' problem seen elsewhere in the world – and explicitly documented through P&G's own African pad donation programme. In response, P&G produced a video and hashtag of its own titled #GenerationOfChange. In the video, the brand's Kenyan office stated: 'You spoke, we listened, we improved', vaguely promising technological change against a visual backdrop of Kenyan women and scientific laboratories.[86] While not an apology, P&G promised to 'better ourselves' and 'get on your level', referencing their own research findings about how to create a society where periods are less stigmatised by 'further elevat[ing] the voices of young people who are already driving change'.[87] The response is a testament to the effective campaigning from Okore and some Kenyan consumers. Similar to North American and British users of Always pads in the 1990s, they successfully managed to change the product by transgressing against the menstrual taboo of silence, demanding technological innovation rather than advertising, and insisting on corporate responsibility. However, without documentation of technological change or insight into P&G's profits in Kenya, it is hard to conclude much about the corporation's accountability and whether it will stop relying on Western exceptionalism to sell products in the Global South.

What kind of girl?

What does it mean to be 'like a girl' in the Always extended universe? The non-specific girl in P&G's campaign is a global, multi-ethnic subject who is both confident, and at risk for loss of confidence. In the US, she receives

feminist messages and products based on intricate research and years of development. In Kenya, she is not considered ready for progressive politics or new technology. This type of Western exceptionalism invokes both traditional and corporate colonial attitudes, as well as exporting very specific ideas about Western menstruation to a world which may not need or welcome it. #MyAlwaysExperience attests to the agency of menstruators, and their dislike of patronising messages. Even so, P&G does not think it is realistic that all girls are ready to stop being quiet about menstrual shame, and will only challenge stigma when the cultural context has already begun to thaw due to the grassroots work of activists.[88] This paternalistic attitude is rooted in both colonialism and patriarchy, excused by the wish to 'help' menstruators live good lives. It fuels the Western 'corporate saviour complex' that is much broader than the menstrual product sector, and which insists on bettering African lives in particular.[89] #MyAlwaysExperience is a reminder for P&G (and other corporations) that not all menstruators want to be consumers, and certainly not 'helped' or patronised by brands.

Yet, P&G is skilled at traversing the line between scandal and celebrity. Creative advertising was one of the factors that made it one of the world's largest multinational corporations, from the housewife trope to the invocation of feminist rhetoric in the 2010s. Following the success of LAG, the corporation pivoted towards embracing more social justice messages, for instance through the 'Black is Beautiful' and 'The Talk' campaigns aimed at African American consumers, both of which directly referenced police brutality and racism. In terms of challenging gendered tropes, the re-conceptualisation of the Gillette razor campaign for men from 'the best a man can get' to 'the best a man can be' in the 2010s resulted in similar debates about the role of corporations in challenging sexism. These campaigns arguably could not have happened without the work of activists. Nor could they have happened without the success of LAG in 2014, and the ways in which the campaign challenged perceived wisdom in the realm of personal care advertising and branding. Furthermore, LAG lifted a generation of women advertisers out from obscurity through the elevation of the 'femcare' sector from embarrassing bore to exciting creative opportunity – a move that has seen creativity in menstrual product advertising thrive ever since.

Despite its originality, LAG also functions in a historic continuum. It is linked to ambitious artistic experiments such as the 'Red Dot' campaign, the technological focus of the blue liquid demonstration, and the brand's entry into new markets. Each step of the way Always solidified the perception that public discussion about pads signals a sincere corporate interest in improving the lives of girl consumers, from providing education

through schools to enlightening a larger audience on social media. Consumers, however, have kept pace with these claims, and continue to hold the corporation responsible when it fails to live up to its own standards. As long as Always exists, it will be locked into a relationship with new generations of critical, curious and ever-changing young people. As long as it insists that Always is a necessary part of the girlhood menstrual experience, girls in turn will insist that their critique of the brand is also inherent in the relationship between consumer and brand. In P&G's recent Always research report into menstrual stigma, it is noted that: 'Whilst much work remains to be done, Always believes that by 2030 … we can create a world where we end period stigma – and everyone has access to the menstrual education and period products they need to manage their periods safely and with dignity'.[90] Will Always manage the balancing act of ending period stigma – which is in part tied to the culture of menstrual products – and increasing sales? And will the girls of 2030 see these two goals as complementary or contradictory? To be 'like a girl' is, after all and according to Always, to be a strong and critical thinker.

Notes

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Chapter 5
Kimberly-Clark: Kotex marketing from groovy girls to Carmilla

> Simplify the laundresse problem. Kotex.
>
> Not a shadow of doubt with Kotex.
>
> Kotex protects more groovy girls than anyone else.
>
> Kimberly-Clark advertisements from 1920s, 1950s, and 1970s.

In 1872, the personal care corporation Kimberly-Clark was established in the US. That same year, Irish writer Sheridan Le Fanu published one of the early works of bloody Gothic vampire fiction; the serialised novel *Carmilla*.[1] Le Fanu made both heroine and vampire female, and imbued the story with lesbian erotic desire. One hundred and forty-two years later, Kimberly-Clark centred their new Kotex pad campaign on the story, updating it for the twenty-first century and utilising the relatively new social media platform YouTube to reach millions across the world. Early adopters of YouTube were often young and looking for representation of their identities when more traditional entertainment and media platforms had failed.[2] The 'Carmilla' YouTube series was one of the first corporately sponsored – rather than DIY community created – serialised narrative stories to become a sensation within queer communities. The story of its creation, reception and legacy reveals the complicated nexus between corporation, creative advertising and the consumer, while the longer history of Kimberly-Clark's quest to engage with changing girlhood culture reminds us that, despite the 'Carmilla' series' radical content, the ways in which the corporation uses countercultural narratives is not new. In this chapter, I bring together the stories of Carmilla and Kimberly-Clark, both originating in the nineteenth century (1872 to be precise), and still

important to girls in the twenty-first. Menstrual product companies and vampire narratives share an overt interest in the culture of blood, and through embracing the story of *Carmilla*, Kimberly-Clark positioned itself as part of a creative and countercultural history of periods, embracing the Gothic aspects of blood and cannibalising on the underpinning activism inherent in both queer and menstrual history.[3] In comparison to P&G and Essity, Kimberly-Clark has also gradually expanded globally since its beginnings, but its current position is likewise underpinned by its starting point in a specific historic and geographic context. While, for example, the Irish story of *Carmilla* and international brand ambassadors are increasingly utilised by Kotex, these are linked to the larger ecosystem of aspirational girlhood fronted by the brand and parent corporation over time, and anchored in a specific American attitude to menstruation. As explored in this chapter, this means a focus on white femininity, English-language descriptions of menstruation, and the brand's interest and need to connect the menstrual cycle to consumer culture.

In Le Fanu's story, the vampire Carmilla argues that 'Girls are caterpillars while they are in the world, to be finally butterflies when the summer comes; but in the meantime they are grubs and larvae'.[4] To see a girl as a caterpillar suggests that girlhood is a period of potential and mystery, but also a slightly degrading time in which a person is at a larval stage of development and not fully human. In the 2013 novel *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, from fellow Irish author Eimear McBride, the title alludes to the same problem – the unknown landscape of the girl body and its changes, including uncontrollable menstrual bleeding and violent desire.[5] The assumption about girlhood in *Carmilla* suggests that this unfinished state renders girls vulnerable to dangerous seduction, and that they have little agency of their own. McBride, reversing Le Fanu's text, breaks this assertion apart in a scene were a girl bites her male lover, drawing blood. Where Le Fanu assumes girls need to be protected, McBride hints that others may sometimes need to be protected from girls. Kimberly-Clark's 'Carmilla' series expertly straddles the tensions between these approaches to girlhood, inserting agency, desire and textual queerness in a story that was written against the backdrop of Christian morality.

Through its history, the Kotex brand has had to manage the balancing act of educating girls versus reflecting girls' own interests and agency. 'Carmilla' marks a stage where the brand acknowledged that girls no longer need to be led as much as before – a relatively new tone for a brand whose history suggested that girls are 'caterpillars' in larval sub-human development stages who need moral guidance, (corporate-sponsored) education, and strong messages about bodily surveillance and control in

order to become beautiful, feminine and acceptable 'butterfly' women. In this chapter, I examine the role of girls and women in the development of the Cellucotton material and the Kotex brand in order to understand how, in the 2010s, a multinational corporation like Kimberly-Clark took a financially active but creatively passive role in the development of a marketing strategy based on queer vampire lovers. Material from the Kimberly-Clark Corporation Legacy Archive illuminates the twentieth-century history, documenting the ups and downs of Kotex and its relationship to undeveloped, unpolished 'caterpillar' girls.[6] These sources, however, present a view of the company approved by Kimberly-Clark, and are therefore analysed in the light of Critical Menstruation Studies with an eye to documenting menstrual history, stigma, and the role of brands like Kotex in both normalising menstrual capitalism and fronting a specific Western (and, in this case, US) view and culture of menstrual habits.

Cellucotton and 'queens' row'

Kimberly-Clark was well established by the time it began experimenting with the cotton-like texture that would become the Kotex product. Founded in the late eighteenth century by four young men on the land of the Ho-Chunk people, in what would later be known as the village of Neenah in Wisconsin, Kimberly-Clark traded in pulp and timber, and operated several mills along the Fox River.[7] Company mythology was intrinsically tied to the figure of the girl, because a child looking for wrapping paper was the first to buy materials directly from the new business. According to the company biography, her crumpled paper money was framed in successive CEOs' offices for decades to come, literally solidifying and framing the relationship between girlhood, Kimberly-Clark, and consumerism.[8] Before and after the corporation's arrival, the Ho-Chunk people organised menstruation-related coming-of-age celebrations, with both Indigenous and settler girls utilising home-made menstrual management strategies.[9] Kimberly-Clark's early paper and household products were part of the rewriting of American history from one of Indigenous history to the grand narrative of modernity, progress and industrialisation. To do so, the company also employed many women, seated at individual workstations sorting rags and cloth to be repurposed for paper production in a labour system known as 'queens' row'.[10] This manual and mill-based mode of operation was, however, soon outdated. In 1907, the new chief executive Frank J. Sensenbrenner

ushered in an era of research, building the first company laboratory, and hiring scientist Ernst Mahler to run it.

In the ill-fated summer of 1914, Mahler toured Germany, Austria and Scandinavia – swinging by Mölnlycke in Mölndal, which we explored in Chapter 2 – to examine competing wood pulp and paper mill systems. The trip was cut short by the First World War, but not before he had witnessed ways of repurposing wood pulp into a soft fabric-like texture. After returning to the US, Mahler created a new type of paper product consisting of creped cellulose wadding that served as a cheap substitute for cotton. Kimberly-Clark trademarked it as Cellucotton. Soon after, Cellucotton was used as surgical dressings by the army and the Red Cross in the war. In peacetime, no one at Kimberly-Clark knew what to do with the enormous amounts of Cellucotton crowding its storage spaces. Buying back the surplus from the army and the Red Cross, Kimberly-Clark staff had to 'figure out what to do with it'.[11]

According to company lore, Red Cross nurses somehow managed to share with Kimberly-Clark the ways in which they had used Cellucotton during their menstrual period. This proved difficult, because menstrual taboos can sometimes harm or hinder menstrual capitalism. Mahler and his team noted that competitor Johnson & Johnson had tried to produce a disposable pad in the 1890s, but that stigma and embarrassment surrounding menstruation stopped the otherwise successful endeavour in its tracks.[12] Perhaps it was time to try again? After all, the concept had already been tested and favoured by a new generation of possible consumers via the young working nurses. Relying on these women's embodied knowledge and detailed experience of Cellucotton, Kimberly-Clark approved research into menstrual protection based on their evidence.

After two years of testing at Mercy Hospital in Chicago, Mahler and his team created a Cellucotton pad in 1920.[13] It consisted of 40 plies of absorbent creped cellulose wadding shaped in a rectangle and hand wrapped in gauze, sold in packs of 12 for 60 cents.[14] Bulky, expensive (as compared to free options utilised earlier), and almost impossible to advertise, the prototype needed tweaking before it was accepted as a potential consumer product. Similar to the cases at Saba, Mölnlycke, and Femtech, female employees known as 'The Cellucotton Girls' made the product because the company assumed that men would not take this job, creating a manufacturing line dominated by women in white smocks, who worked shifts.[15] Meanwhile, Kimberly-Clark set up the wholly-owned subsidiary Cellucotton Products Company in order to distance themselves from their potentially embarrassing product ('The Cellucotton Girls' had no such luxury).[16] Mahler became its first nervous president, ensuring

scientific oversight. If the pad succeeded, Kimberly-Clark would take back ownership, and if it failed, they could pretend that it was someone else's idea.[17] This example of the potential harms done to Kimberly-Clark's reputation resonated in the early efforts to advertise the product.

Missionary men

Kimberly-Clark's early marketing efforts for the Kotex pad needed to be informative yet modest. Many ideas were tried. Focusing on the innovation of disposable products that would not need to be washed, one early text stated: 'Simplify the laundresse problem'.[18] Reassuring female nurses appeared in print campaigns next, with the company offering a discreet self-service model of purchasing Kotex, and the traveling sales team (which was entirely male) steadily building knowledge about how to 'tastefully explain the purpose of a product that was the target of taboos that bordered on the mystical'.[19] In the process, the Kotex team found that many young girls experiencing menarche thought they were haemorrhaging, and that the modesty of parents and educational systems caused traumatic confusion. The company history describes these men as 'pioneers – missionary men in the strictest sense of the word'.[20] As such, Kimberly-Clark, whether intended or not, was cast in the role of educator as well as business.

While gaining information about shy and confused consumers, the sales team was also in charge of getting Kotex products into storefronts. In order to do so, they had to become adept at understanding women's concerns about purchasing menstrual products, while explaining its importance (and financial potential) to grocers. As in other countries, this large group of middlemen explained menstruation and its practical implications to a generation of shopkeepers in the US, succeeding in convincing many that the associated taboo would not be broken because of Kotex's sleek and discreet packaging, brand name and advertising strategy.[21] Notes written by Kotex president Sensenbrenner in the mid-century show how the company balanced its market research and observation of youth culture strategically.[22] Information given to the sales team shifted between descriptions of how consumers might feel most comfortable about picking up the taboo product in-store, with a description of per capita usage of products per year by menstruating women.[23] Bonus offers, free gifts, promotions, coupons and national campaigns followed, many benefitting salesmen and grocers, in addition to consumers.

It soon became clear that 1920s modesty regarding menstruation was hurting Kimberly-Clark financially. Publications refused to print Kotex ads, shops pushed the boxes into dark corners, and consumers would therefore have to write directly to the company to purchase more. Soon, the recession threatened the project, but president Sensenbrenner argued for one final push before folding. In 1923, he hired advertising agency Lord & Thomas, handled by Albert Lasker, later known as the 'father of modern advertising'.[24] Lasker understood how to balance direct messages with discretion and intrigue, mixing 'the realms of freedom and prohibition'.[25] He infused Kotex branding with aspirational lifestyle messages of white middle- and upper-class feminine glamour, rendering the text smaller and the images larger. Painted by professional artists, these early print campaigns looked like artworks and the models wore high-fashion outfits (made possible by the product; 'Not a shadow of doubt with Kotex'). Soon, leading women's magazines welcomed Kotex advertising and Kimberly-Clark was no longer squeamish about officially associating itself with the brand.[26] By 1927, Kotex had established itself as a popular product, available in 57 countries, and facing nearly 300 eager rivals to the disposable pad market.[27] As such, Kotex was part of establishing US dominance over the menstrual market in the early to mid-century. In this way, the brand helped normalise the distinct US attitude to menstruation also abroad, creating a broader Western cultural landscape in which the menstrual cycle was tied to consumption and branding.[28] Fundamentally, Kotex proved that menstruation could be profitable if it could engage deeply with girls' and women's knowledge through consumers, workers and advertising.

Competing for young ladies

Kotex's early- to mid-century engagement with young consumers, however, was not universal. Its pioneering advertising focused on white, able-bodied and slim girls.[29] The first Kimberly-Clark health booklets aimed at schools featured white girls and women, as was standard practice by white-owned US companies at the time, despite being designed to connect with and convince as many girls as possible to use Kotex.[30] When fashion model Lee Miller became the first real person to star in a Kotex campaign in the early 1920s, Kotex effectively outlined what the brand defined as the beauty standard of the time. Miller's flapper iconography, white skin, short hair and slim body became girlhood goals for many, but unobtainable for most. The 1946 Disney collaboration *The*

Story of Menstruation, seen by millions across the world, likewise centred on a white, middle-class cartoon girl. These aspirational, but limited, representations restricted the potential for solidarity across racial lines regarding menstruating women and girls, presenting menstruation as a hygiene paradigm fronted by whiteness. Exceptions to this rule proved how Kimberly-Clark (and other companies in the sectors) were likely missing out on consumers by excluding groups. For example, a 1941 promotional experiment was aimed at the Jewish market in New York, featuring advertising in Jewish newspapers and on a radio programme in Yiddish, both of which were successful and proved Kimberly-Clark's assumptions about Jewish women wrong:

> It is interesting to note that this did not prove offensive or in bad taste to the Jewish public, inasmuch as the facts of menstruation are contained in the Jewish code of Laws which serves as a textbook for boys and girls of the Orthodox Jewish faith.[31]

In other words, Kimberly-Clark was pleasantly surprised to see a 'solidarity dividend' pay off.[32] Much later, in November 1962, Kotex marketing was also extensively broadened to include African American magazine *Ebony*.[33] As Adriana Ayers has documented, these campaigns 'co-opted Black women into the pre-existing gendered discourse', duplicating campaign ideas featuring white women, and foregrounding lighter-skinned women and middle-class status.[34]

Competitors Modess's and Tampax's advertising had also begun featuring models of colour in magazines aimed at African American families.[35] Modess's unique advertising campaigns included Black models in ballgowns. Tampax, relying on informative question-and-answer style campaigns about tampon use, featured smaller text-dominant campaigns in black and white. In contrast, Kotex's use of glossy full-page spreads in *Ebony* was both eye-catching and unusual.[36] (No menstrual product advertisements running in magazines aimed at white women or even at a diverse ethnic audience included models or cartoons of colour.)[37] The company's 'institutional habit of whiteness' relied on a broader societal acceptance of visual segregation and exclusion in twentieth-century US markets, in which marketers of gendered products such as pads and tampons claimed to welcome all women consumers equally, while foregrounding white femininity above all others.[38]

In order to be competitive, menstrual product developers also had to respond to the embodied knowledge and technological expertise of menstruators. To do so, Kimberly-Clark invested in market research

designed to capture a broad picture of the average consumer. As a result, complaints about uncomfortable chaffing and absurd sizing were often acknowledged in early Kotex advertising, suggesting that both former Kotex and competing products were inferior (see Figure 5.1). From the 1920s to the 1960s, Kotex menstrual products consisted of belts worn around the hips and fabric strapped between the legs. During this time, the company constantly reworked both products, experimenting with different types of clasps to hold the belt and fabric in place – including a 'non-cutting' elastic, and offering pink belts when coloured material was in surplus.[39] In order to attract teenagers, gifts and innovative sales techniques were trialled, such as a nightgown in 1955, and a bracelet and sewing kit in 1957.[40] These gifts give insight into the corporation's assumptions about who their customers were, suggesting a link between femininity and domestic labour.

Despite early success, Kimberly-Clark trailed behind competitor Modess in the mid-century. Modess was awarded Outstanding Package of the Year at the 22nd Annual Variety Store Packaging Award, and the Grand Gold Award at the Package Award Clinic, suggesting that the menstrual taboo could be overcome with the right window dressing, and that also advertisers would recognise the exciting and creative potential of trying to sell a secret like periods.[41] Furthermore, in September 1957, the Modess tampon was introduced to the US market, and use of belted pads began reclining. Two years later, the Modess brand led the sector for the first time.[42]

Figure 5.1. Kotex display plate, c. 1920s, metal. Framed. Provided by Kimberly-Clark.

Kimberly-Clark, despite several attempts at entering the tampon market (first during the 1930s, then with the brand Fibs in the 1940s, and Kotams during the 1960s and 1970s), remained focused on production of pads, thus haemorrhaging consumers as younger girls swapped Kotex for Modess and Tampax tampons.[43] While discretion was key in consumer relationships, it would not ensure victory regarding brand recognition and growth.

While Modess and Tampax offered a genuinely new idea in the form of the internally worn tampon, Kotex continued to front the 'feminine appeal' of pads, introducing a flexible plastic carrying case and new types of belted products.[44] A new pad case was introduced in 1961, 'designed to appeal to the women who want a prettier, more feminine belt'.[45] This option, which was also more expensive, had been tested on a consumer group, but in the outside world it failed to entice women. Instead, Kotex developed 'A Young Lady belt' for use in the *Mother's Introductory Kit of Kotex* booklet and bundle, which had been circulating as an educational tool and product placement for years.[46] This belt was made to differentiate girls slightly from their mothers – it was aqua picot and smaller in size. Later, a 'Miss Deb' belt was added, featuring a pink picot edge and pink packaging designed for the 'adolescent and the very young lady'.[47] This underscores the corporate understanding of gender and age boundaries, and the need for products aimed at girls to appear different from those designed for maternal figures. The focus in campaigns on colours and style over changes to underlying technology or absorption likewise suggests that marketing and packaging were becoming increasingly important to sell in the category.

During this time consumer research notes describe teen girls' discontent with the product's tendency to leak and its poor durability.[48] In response, laundry instructions were included with 1963 belt packaging and the booklet *Just between Us* about the menstrual cycle was made available for purchase.[49] In the late 1960s, a Kotex line of pads that did not rely on belts or clasps was tested, in parallel with the development of Johnson & Johnson's adhesive pads, launched in 1971. The lag meant that Kotex products had to be streamlined and savings made. For instance, the length of Kotex belts was reduced between one and four inches, saving money.[50] This meant a reduction of size for consumers, and one can only wonder how confusing it would have been. These examples suggest that by the early 1960s, the company was losing its grip on what young consumers wanted, while competitors had captured a generation of girls seeking to try tampons. This was one of many ways in which the American teenage girl had begun to differentiate herself from older

women, and showed the successful integration of tampons in 'a liberation toolbox' as commercial icon of women's empowerment.[51]

No more 'old wives' tales'

Kotex's once-pioneering products were no longer avant-garde menstrual protection in the 1960s. Similarly, Kotex advertisement was somehow both stuck in the past and seeking to reinvent itself. The aforementioned 1946 Disney film *The Story of Menstruation*, produced for Kimberly-Clark, was still circulating in educational settings as late as the late 1960s. A 1968 pamphlet designed to raise awareness of the free film to educators and schools in Britain reveals how the focus on 'the young lady' from the 1940s had now been substituted by a focus on youth culture.[52] The language of the pamphlet is clear and informative in comparison to the symbolic language of the Disney film. It promised that girls would gain a 'thorough, wholesome' understanding of menstruation, and that the film was 'built around the reasoning that accurate knowledge helps to create a normal and healthy attitude towards menstruation'.[53] The film would 'impart an attitude of respect for the dignity of menstruation as an essential part of the entire life process'.[54] *The Story of Menstruation*'s use of cartoons and a specially written musical score would ease viewers into this radical message by using the 'beauty and colour typical of Disney cartoons… handled to allay fear of embarrassment; half real, half diagrammatic rendering of physiological organs; intriguing large-head, small body animation of characters'.[55] While this was written to be aspirational and intriguing, it was also alienating. The Disney protagonist was still hyper-feminine, white, with an unrealistic hourglass figure, large eyes, tiny feet, and a strained, elegant walk. From Kimberly-Clark's perspective, she was an ideal young person who rejected 'old wives' tales', but for consumers who struggled with menstrual cramps or stigma connected to menstruation, the gap between Disney fairy tale and reality could be large.[56]

The struggles of the early to mid-century provided Kimberly-Clark valuable lessons about its consumers. It had begun by viewing those consumers as grown women in the 1920s, young ladies in the 1940s, teenagers in the 1960s, and, ultimately, child girls. The repurposed Disney cartoon and educational materials aimed at schools were reaching international markets and girls before menarche in a missionary fashion. While its loyal consumers entered menopause, Kotex targeted the next wave of pre-menarche children. This skewed the branding strategy away from the elegantly dressed women of the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s,

and reintroduced the same products in smaller sizes and through more youth-oriented channels like schools.[57] During this time, pre-menarche became the ideal moment of interaction with consumers for Kotex. In order to connect with children, Kimberly-Clark had to become experts on the constantly changing girl children of the world. Experiments like *The Story of Menstruation* and the re-imagining of its proto-feminist message in the 1960s taught Kimberly-Clark that the only consistent thing about girls was that they constantly changed on an individual and generational level.

The promise of emancipation from earlier advertising through use of menstrual products made pads and tampons likely candidates for appropriating a new wave of feminist culture and discourse. Kotex's launch of the non-belted adhesive pad New Freedom in 1970 coincided with the growth of the Women's Movement in the US. Kimberly-Clark funnelled funding into campaigns that promised revolution: 'welcome to the beltless, pinless, fussless generation'. A 1969 advertisement in *American Druggist* featured a girl in a red gym suit and sunglasses, with text seeking to convince salesmen that liberal women were excellent targets for sales, and a slogan that mimicked teenage slang: 'Kotex protects more groovy girls than anyone else'.[58]

Like her predecessors Lee Miller and the Disney girl, the 1960s and 1970s Kotex models reflected the dominant culture. She was still white and slim, but adorned now with long flowing hair and hippy attire, swimsuits, and boyfriends. Sometimes she was funny, as in the campaign 'Dear Mother Nature: Drop Dead!' This girl, who could be seen on the pages of *Seventeen* magazine, offered a humorous view of menstruation as difficult. While the image was novel for a menstrual product campaign, the text revealed that Kotex's understanding of menstruation and girlhood was fundamentally rooted in rigid gendered binaries. The text suggested that the girl should 'be appreciative' because 'at least, your voice is not changing'. The centring of this girl's experience in the photograph contrasts with the sidestep into the world of boys in the text. This was exactly the type of patronising messaging that feminists were beginning to campaign against in their early critiques of patriarchal attitudes towards women's bodies and their reproductive systems, and which climaxed in the TSS crisis.[59]

An international demographic

The TSS episode made real what feminists who had been sceptical about menstrual capitalism feared, and, like all major players in the market,

unsettled Kimberly-Clark momentarily. Before the TSS story began gaining news coverage, Kimberly-Clark had filed patents for super-absorbent tampons and were part of the race to develop a new type of internal menstrual product alongside P&G and other corporations. During the early 1980s, Kimberly-Clark funded research into TSS, faced several related lawsuits, and was involved in advocating for moderate introduction of standards for tampon ingredients.[60] It turned out to be a temporary wobble, as Kimberly-Clark and all its competitors reinvented themselves over the next decades. For the Kotex pad brand, the momentary dip in tampon sales was ultimately good news, as consumers flocked to the perceived safety of external menstrual products. In this way, the insular economy of pads and tampons continued to operate as a pseudo-monopoly where few products and brands were available.

Kimberly-Clark used the late twentieth century to expand internationally, which included selling menstrual products in Israel, South Africa (during apartheid), Sri Lanka (Kotex had also been available in Ceylon during British colonisation), Kenya, South American countries, Canada, Britain, Sweden (as early as 1938, but never overtaking the Swedish Mimosept brand) and many other countries and regions.[61] In each setting, the Kotex teams acquired knowledge about menstrual taboos, culture and local activism. In each setting, they tweaked advertising to ensure compliance with national media censorship and to attract specific viewers. By the new millennium, the 'groovy girls' that Kotex was trying to attract included a truly international demographic. Appealing to such a large group of people was challenging, especially when an increase in menstrual activism in the 1990s and early 2000s saw menstrual product brands become punchlines yet again. Parodies by comedians made fun of campaigns featuring women playing sports and riding horses, whilst the entrance of more sexual education in schools rendered Kotex pamphlets less urgent. Like its competitors, Kimberly-Clark faced the ridicule for some time before responding. In the 2010s, it tentatively began purchasing YouTube advertising space, testing the waters amongst young internet users, and the relatively censorship-free environment of early social media.

In the years before 'Carmilla' was launched, Kotex authored a range of experimental English-language campaigns. In a 2010 Kotex television feature, a mother and daughter discussed menstruation while jokingly referring to the coded language still structuring advertising in the sector – since the word 'vagina' could not be used, the mother uses the rhyming 'angina' to respond to her daughter's questions. In the same year, Kimberly-Clark returned to its focus on packaging by launching a line of black Kotex

boxes. Hailed as 'more fashionable' for the young menstruator, the brand was noted to have 'identified a feminine care products language' for a new generation.[62] When interviewing menstrual product advertisers, the black Kotex boxes are routinely described as the starting gun in the race to create truly innovative menstrual product branding (we may recall that Modess did much of the same for the sector in the late 1920s). For a while, Kotex competed with itself, embracing body positive, queer, and sex positive messages in rapid succession. When yoga instructor Jessamyn Stanley was signed to be the face of the brand in the 2010s, the transformation was complete. Stanley became known on YouTube as a yoga influencer and as an activist for the body positive community. Stanley is African American and full-figured, connecting Kotex with the Black and plus-sized communities who love her. As the Black Lives Matter movement exploded into American consciousness again, the use of African American front figures has been seen as both a sincere and cynical branding exercise for corporations who completely ignored the era of Civil Rights protests.[63] Stanley's success as a frontwoman taught Kotex that minorities might speak to a larger group than previously assumed. While the 'groovy girl' of Kotex history had been decidedly white, slim and mute, Stanley's contrasting body and involvement in creating brand content (videos, yoga lessons, blog posts, images, etc.) clearly outlined a new horizon for aspiration that would soon also include fictional lesbian vampires.

A new It girl

In the early years of YouTube, scripted mini-series became cult hits in many groups that previously had been termed countercultural. Series and content about queerness was a case in point, first made by and for the community but proving to be popular outside the demographic, cultural and even linguistic barriers that traditional media creators might assume would halter engagement.[64] Likewise, *Carmilla* broke boundaries for queer content and assumptions about who would read it in 1872.

The plot of *Carmilla* ties together medical expertise and scientific rationale with superstition and folklore. The narrative is presented as a doctor's casebook, chronicling an unorthodox example of occult medical trouble. A doctor details how teen girl Laura lives in a castle in a forest with her father, as in a fairy tale. As a child, Laura envisions a beautiful woman in her bedroom, and a staggering feeling of being bitten in the chest despite lack of physical evidence the following morning. Years later, a carriage accident outside the castle brings Laura together with a

mysterious girl named Carmilla, her mother, and an unnamed Black woman wearing a turban.[65] The Black woman remains a mysterious and undefined presence in the narrative, an example of how Le Fanu perhaps found it easy to write her in and out of the story without much thought – which in turn mirrors the complete erasure of this character from the Kotex-sponsored series, as we shall see.[66] While the adult women exit the main story, Carmilla stays to recover from the accident, and Carmilla and Laura recognise each other from their dreams.

The moody, seductive and beautiful Carmilla increasingly interests Laura, and the two develop a close friendship that soon becomes romantic. The girls touch, kiss, declare their love for each other, and share a bed. Meanwhile, Laura has a series of disturbing dreams, one of which shows Carmilla at the end of her bed with a nightgown soaked in blood. Laura becomes ill after the dream, and finds a small spot below her collar where she recalls the dream-creature bit her. This time, the mark is also there in the morning.

While ill, Laura and her father learn of a story that mirrors their own, as they hear that a series of girls have recently died from similar symptoms. Consulting with a doctor, the group seek out the mysterious Mircalla Karnstein's grave with strong suspicions that this historical figure is not really dead and that Carmilla may indeed be her. Carmilla appears, they attack, she disappears. Carmilla's body is found soon after, drenched in blood. A stake through the heart and decapitation ends Mircalla/Carmilla's existence. Laura travels with her father to recover, but while her body gains health, her mind and heart are with Carmilla.

This doomed story of taboo attraction can be read in the moralistic light it was likely intended, or as a remarkably early portrait of love between women who cannot be together. The scenes in which the two women kiss and declare their interest are perhaps supposed to frighten readers, but in their detailed and clear language these descriptions read as passionate and real:

> She kissed me silently.
>
> 'I am sure, Carmilla, you have been in love; that there is, at this moment, an affair of the heart going on'.
>
> 'I have been in love with no one', she whispered, 'unless it should be with you'.[67]

It remains unclear whether Le Fanu's focus on lesbian passion was intended only to shock or disturb, or whether the author was also representing some lived experience. Brought up in a stern Calvinist

household in Ireland, Le Fanu's childhood was steeped in notions about right and wrong. Written in the year before his death, the novel was first published as a serial in the journal *The Dark Blue* in 1871–2. The serialised format was popular at the time, tantalising and hooking readers over time, just as the serialised YouTube videos effectively accumulated viewers over time.

The popularity of *Carmilla* suggests that readers were attracted to the taboos of the vampiric female figure. The brutality of vampire conquest centres on blood, and often invokes menstrual themes alongside monstrosity, horror and queer sex.[68] In *Carmilla*, where the protagonist and antagonist are both alternately soaked in blood and dreaming about it, menstruation appears as the healthy symbol of blood in contrast to Carmilla's deranged use of it. The suggestion that women might be attracted to each other, and especially each other's blood, is another transgression. Menstrual sex remains a rare presence in mainstream heteronormative literature and popular culture, while queer communities have produced memes, codes and slang to celebrate it.[69] In turn, Le Fanu gestured at something he might not have understood, but that became an obvious reference for any reader who connected the pieces.

The many ways in which *Carmilla* transgressed in the 1870s are referenced in the YouTube series. Sex is a frequent topic of discussion, alongside bodies and attraction. Rather than adopting Le Fanu's dramatic sincerity, however, the 2010s series appropriates the humour of queer online communities in order to make the subtext of the novel clearer. Paradoxically, Le Fanu inserts more sexual behaviour in his story than director of the series Jordan Hall. In the YouTube version, passionate kisses and longing looks suggest sexual acts, whereas *Carmilla* finds the reader exploring scenes in bed (although later YouTube series and the film includes more sexualised content). The visual medium of YouTube is chaste in comparison to the imaginative ideas dreamed up by Le Fanu, yet both represent passionate relationships that mirror their era, restricted by publishing censorship in the 1870s and social media regulations in the 2010s. During Le Fanu's lifetime, lesbians were perhaps as mythical as vampires, whispered about but – with some exceptions – not fully considered real by heteronormative society.[70] During the 2010s, lesbian and bisexual subcultures gained more mainstream attention, but still floundered somewhere in the shadow behind debates about other queer communities.[71] Focusing a corporately sponsored series on lesbians was therefore genuinely unusual, underpinned by Kimberly-Clark's belief in the project's ability to raise brand awareness amongst women in particular.

Executive producer

The 'Carmilla' series was launched on Canadian teen girl magazine Vervegirl's YouTube channel (renamed Kinda TV in 2016) in August 2014. Humorous, ironic and sincere by turns, the series was a success, receiving awards from the Canadian Screen Awards, AfterEllen Visibility Awards, and the Banff World Media Festival. Generating millions of views per episode on YouTube, it became a viral phenomenon. The setting was moved from Gothic castle to fictional university campus, and structured around first-year student Laura's single-frame video journals. As in the novel, missing girls are the first sign of supernatural events. Taking over Laura's missing roommate's bed, Carmilla is introduced as an unusual but attractive Goth, and increasingly warms to Laura. The two start a relationship in season one, and a cast of queer characters help them track down the culprit behind the missing girls. Again, Kotex advertising foregrounded and celebrated some girlhood identities while rendering others invisible. Notably, most of the lead speaking roles were given to white actors. As such, the show transgresses myths about blood, vampires, menstruation and queerness, but rarely crossed racial barriers regarding romantic relationships in the first season.[72] This was especially striking because the writers had recontextualised much of the original novel, including inventing new characters. Since the original novel describes an intriguing, if brief, glimpse of a Black female character, it is important to note that this was not expanded when other small plot details were given substantial weight and attention.[73]

Throughout the whirlwind success of the series, executive producers Kimberly-Clark remained discreet about their role. Menstruation was not a part of the plot, with only sparse product placement appearing in the videos. Nevertheless, occasional tie-in content revealed the extent of corporate involvement, but fans watching casually could easily miss the link altogether. The video 'Do vampires get their periods?' featured stronger Kotex (if not Kimberly-Clark) presence than most 'Carmilla' content, including the description:

> Laura and Carmilla talk about the history of feminine hygiene and answer the question that's on everyone's mind: Do vampires get their periods? Brought to you by U by Kotex®.[74]

The video describes the history of 'feminine hygiene', and Carmilla provides commentary about having had over 4,000 periods during her

long life, being 'about as pleasant as you think'. While Carmilla is responding to fictional monster-lore, the character of Laura directly references the real First World War origins of Cellucotton, mentioning Kotex by name, and testing the product with pink soda. Both agree that the new black Kotex boxes are nicely suited to Carmilla's Gothic style, praising the real packaging, and holding up a box. Viewer numbers were much lower than for the narrative videos, suggesting that fans – nicknamed 'Creampuffs' – chose to reject outright product placement for story content. The creative project had definitely worked, and by 2017 'Creampuffs' were actively fundraising for the development of a 'Carmilla' movie, which was funded and produced within years.

In their support of the project, Kotex had managed to speak to a new generation of 'groovy girls'. These were internet-literate and brand-sceptical millennials who rejected the tropes of traditional advertising, many involved in social justice causes.[75] The queerness of 'Carmilla' spoke to a generation of children who grew up with outspoken lesbian, bisexual, trans and non-binary role models, and who saw themselves reflected in more popular culture. This generation has also been noted for their anxiety about capitalism, especially towards multinational corporations.[76] Many of them, especially in Canada where the series was made, tried menstrual cups and joined menstrual equity movements.[77]

By removing the Kotex brand almost entirely from the series, giving over control to an external creative producer, and publishing the series in a free format favoured by young people, Kimberly-Clark faced a paradoxical problem: since 'Carmilla' was a success in part due to the lack of traditional branding strategies, how would viewers know to buy Kotex? By removing themselves from the campaign, Kimberly-Clark hoped to win the admiration of some viewers who respected the sincerity of the move. But was this enough to build brand loyalty, or were these happy viewers simply actively disassociating Kimberly-Clark from the series?

Girl as brand

Over the years, the 'groovy' girl featured in Kotex advertising changed, but the focus on capturing the white girlhood culture of the moment never wavered. Examining the relationship between Kotex and white girlhood culture reveals the foundational architecture behind the brand. Whether featuring Lee Miller's flapper fashion, Disney's idyllic cartoons, or queer vampire lesbians, Kotex campaigns took their inspiration from the exciting and ever-changing worlds of girlhood, appropriating each

generation's countercultural expertise, visual creativity and desires. Yet, like P&G, it historically foregrounded white girlhood over all others. The company's 'institutional habit of whiteness' has been reversed in the late 2010s, but its history shows how Kotex's view of proper Western menstrual culture was distinctly white for most of the corporation's existence. This specific view of menstruation has had consequences for what is perceived as 'normal' and acceptable menstrual technology, branding, and even culture today. Like Saba, Mölnlycke, Essity, and P&G, these multinational corporations contribute to nation-specific notions of exceptionalism, while also collectively adding to a depiction of Western menstrual normativity grounded in commercialism, branding, whiteness and secrecy.

Kotex was established in the days when menstruation and menstrual products were unspeakable topics amongst white Americans. While consumers in the 2010s were not rejecting affiliation with the Kotex brand because of embarrassment or social stigma in the same way their grandparents did 100 years ago, the example of 'Carmilla' shows an ongoing unwillingness to engage directly with the brand. This is not simply because menstruators are passive consumers. Girls, as Carmilla notes before she devours Laura's blood, are developing 'caterpillars' to be shaped and moulded. In the story it is Laura who ultimately gains control over the situation, engages in a relationship with Carmilla, and eventually banishes the vampire.[78] Laura has been underestimated by Carmilla, her father, and the narrator throughout the story, but shows bravery, focus and agency throughout. Likewise, the underestimating of girls and menstruators by corporations often backfires. In December 2018, when Kimberly-Clark recalled a line of Kotex tampons that left fragments in the body requiring medical attention for removal, young consumers were the first to bring the issue into public light, using the same social media platforms that the company had successfully applied to the 'Carmilla' campaign.[79] This echoes the consumer boycotts of products from earlier decades, and the effective social media campaign #MyAlwaysExperience headed by Kenyans which we encountered in the previous chapter. Consumers are complicated entities for menstrual product corporations like Kimberly-Clark and P&G: they are users of products, devourers of corporate media content, and critical receptors of both. Like Laura, real girls are of course not just developing caterpillars ripe for influence, but also agents of change.

What does it mean that consumers consistently decline direct association with brands and increasingly critique traditional menstrual product companies, despite products like Kotex's popularity?[80] Does this

tell us something about how menstruation itself is still undervalued and stigmatised, and/or underline the ways in which menstrual product technology and advertising never really served *all* menstruators? Kotex's recent inclusion of (initially only white) queerness in its advertising suggests a realisation on the part of the brand that expansion will now have to go hand in hand with reaching 'diverse' audiences. But will 'diverse' audiences in and beyond North America respond positively to such late inclusion? We have seen how queer fans of 'Carmilla' consume the series without celebrating the brand, for instance. And how Kotex's late inclusion of Black models and spokespeople rendered its historic output overwhelmingly white and thus exclusionary to many potential consumers in contrast. 'Diversity' may be recognised as a good advertising strategy today, but it is difficult to do authentically against a historic backdrop of corporate uniformity. Like Saba, Essity and P&G, Kimberly-Clark used to present a Western world view of menstruation in which it had to be overcome and hidden through purchasing of items. Realising that many vocal consumers have moved on, Kotex and similar long-standing traditional brands have changed their marketing strategies and are trying to speak directly to a broader audience, including queer and/or Black consumers (but still not Indigenous groups). In the next chapter we will meet menstrual product companies founded in the 2010s who appear to be able to sidestep such historic debates entirely by way of claiming that their own undeveloped 'caterpillar' stage renders them free from traditional menstrual bias.

Notes

1 Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla* (Dumfries and Galloway: Anodos Books, 2019). First published as a serial in *The Dark Blue* magazine, 1871–2.
2 Carsten Schwemmer and Sandra Ziewiecki note how this tendency decreased since 2005 as YouTube began promoting more product placement and advertising, 'Social Media Sellout: The Increasing Role of Product Promotion on YouTube', *Social Media + Society* Vol 4, No 3 (2018).
3 Root, *Cannibal Culture,* 198.
4 Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, 24.
5 Eimear McBride, *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (Norwich: Galley Beggar Press, 2013).
6 The Kimberly-Clark Corporation Legacy Archives are available by appointment, and are located in the Knoxville archives. I am grateful to Senior Records Analyst and Archivist Susan Middleton and Manager of Global Records and Information Control Louisea Suggs for their expertise and help with scanning and sharing information digitally during the Coronavirus pandemic.
7 Robert Spector, *Shared Values: A History of Kimberly-Clark* (Lyme, CO: Greenwich Publishing Group, 1997), 21.
8 Spector, *Shared Values,* 35.
9 'Ho-Chunk Culture: Gender Roles and Responsibilities', Education 565 Ho-Chunk Nation Documentation (undated webpage): https://hochunkproject565.weebly.com/gender-roles-and-clans.html; on the appropriation of Native American traditions in the menstrual movement see Bobel, *New Blood*, 38; 43; 65.

10 'Ho-Chunk Culture: Gender Roles and Responsibilities'.
11 Spector, *Shared Values,* 55–6.
12 Spector, *Shared Values,* 56–7.
13 R. W. Ebert, 'History of Kotex Feminine Napkins' (30 July 1959), 2, Legacy number 09-01-00-006-0018, Kimberly-Clark Corporation Legacy Collection. Mercy Hospital was established in 1852 by Irish Catholic nuns, and established a maternity care centre soon after, thus leading to a focus on women's health and associated research projects.
14 R. W. Ebert, 'History of Kotex Feminine Napkins' (30 July 1959), 3, Legacy number 09-01-00-006-0018, Kimberly-Clark Corporation Legacy Collection.
15 Spector, *Shared Values,* 62.
16 Spector, *Shared Values,* 62.
17 Spector, *Shared Values,* 58.
18 'Overview of advertising program from 1925–26' (undated), 2, Legacy number 09-01-00-006-0018, Kimberly-Clark Corporation Legacy Collection.
19 Spector, *Shared Values,* 58.
20 Spector, *Shared Values,* 58.
21 On menstrual product brand names and euphemism see Kaite Berkeley, *Menstruation Now: What Does Blood Perform?* (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2019), 8–9.
22 J. S. Sensenbrenner, 'History of Kotex belts' (1 January 1959), 8, Legacy number 09-01-00-006-004, Kimberly-Clark Corporation Legacy Collection.
23 J. S. Sensenbrenner, 'History of Kotex belts' (1 January 1959), 8, Legacy number 09-01-00-006-004, Kimberly-Clark Corporation Legacy Collection.
24 Daniel Alef, *Albert Lasker: Father of Modern Advertising* (Santa Barbara, CA: Titans of Fortune Publishing, 2009).
25 Roseann M. Mandziuk, '"Ending Women's Greatest Hygienic Mistake": Modernity and the Mortification of Menstruation in Kotex Advertising, 1921–1926', *Women's Studies Quarterly* Vol 38, No 3–4 (2010), 43. Vostral notes that Lasker also 'invested one million dollars in International Cellucotton, confident of its market potential', *Under Wraps,* 83.
26 Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 22.
27 Spector, *Shared Values,* 66.
28 Mandziuk, '"Ending Women's Greatest Hygienic Mistake"', 43.
29 On African American and Jewish menstrual culture and adaptation of commercial products, see Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period*, 177.
30 Jason Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 1.
31 Advertising overview for 1941 (undated), 4, Legacy number 09-01-00-006-0018, Kimberly-Clark Corporation Legacy Collection.
32 Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World/Penguin Random House, 2021).
33 Advertising overview for 1966 (undated), 19, Legacy number 09-01-00-006-0018, Kimberly-Clark Corporation Legacy Collection; Adriana Ayers, 'The Evolution of Kotex Advertising and the Introduction of the "Negro Market"', *Constellations* Vol 2, No 2 (2011), 52; Vostral, *Under Wraps*, 143.
34 Ayers, 'The Evolution of Kotex Advertising', 53; 59.
35 These campaigns were likely made by African American advertisers, as detailed in Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line*, 1–2.
36 Menstrual advertising in *Ebony* was usually the only inclusion of menstruation in the issue. With the exception of a short article on PMS and cramps in the context of health problems more broadly in 1983 (Vol 38, No 4), and several Depo-Povera contraceptive ads during the 1990s, menstruation was not covered; Ayers, 'The Evolution of Kotex Advertising', 60.
37 Ayers, 'The Evolution of Kotex Advertising', 53; Vostral, *Under Wraps*, 143.
38 Sara Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', *Feminist Theory* Vol 8, No 2 (2007), 149.
39 Sensenbrenner, 'History of Kotex belts', 10.
40 Sensenbrenner, 'History of Kotex belts', 10.
41 Sensenbrenner, 'History of Kotex belts', 18.
42 Makers of Modess, Personal Products, maintained their popular 'Modess because…' campaign for decades, whereas competitors changed strategies frequently, R.W. Ebert 'History of Kotex

Feminine Napkins' (30 July 1959), Legacy number 09-01-00-006-0018, Kimberly-Clark Corporation Legacy Collection.

43 Spector (*Shared Values*, 67) notes that a Kotex salesman met the patent holder of Tampax in 1935 (this was Gertrude Tendrich in Colorado Springs, who is confused with the inventor of the product Ernst Haas by Spector [or possibly the salesman]), and that her asking price for selling the brand was $7,200; she was turned down. On Kotams, see Harry Finley, 'Kotams', Museum of Menstruation, *mum.org* (2009): http://www.mum.org/kotams.htm.

44 Sensenbrenner, 'History of Kotex belts', 4.

45 Sensenbrenner, 'History of Kotex belts', 1.

46 Sensenbrenner, 'History of Kotex belts', 2.

47 Sensenbrenner, 'History of Kotex belts', 5.

48 Sensenbrenner, 'History of Kotex belts', 2.

49 Sensenbrenner, 'History of Kotex belts', 3–4.

50 Sensenbrenner summarising data on belts from the fiscal year of 1967–8 in 'History of Kotex belts', 2.

51 Vostral, 'Of Mice and (Wo)Men: Tampons, Menstruation, and Testing', in Bobel et al. (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, 673.

52 'Letter to Educators from the Life Cycle Center by Kotex Products advertising educational film and literature' (undated 1968), Legacy number 0904010050024, file number 9R3F-09-543, Kimberly-Clark Legacy collection.

53 'Letter to Educators', 2.

54 'Letter to Educators', 2.

55 'Letter to Educators', 2.

56 'Letter to Educators', 2; 3; Saniya Lee Ghanoui, 'From Home to School: Menstrual Education Films of the 1950s' in Bobel et al. (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies,* chapter 67.

57 'There was to be an added emphasis in our advertising efforts toward the women we defined as being younger … Specifically, we would be advertising more heavily in magazines appealing to the younger women and girls…'; from 'Advertising overview of 1962' (undated), 20, Legacy number 09-01-00-006-0018, Kimberly-Clark Corporation Legacy Collection.

58 'Kotex belts and panties, May 1968–December 1969' (1969), 11, Legacy number missing, Kimberly-Clark Legacy collection.

59 Bobel, *New Blood*, 53–6; 108.

60 Vostral, *Toxic Shock Syndrome*, 75; 11; 24–5; 165; 152; 103.

61 'Advertisements, 1973, Israel – Kotex Napkins' (1973), Legacy number 2201000010671; 'Advertisements, 1954: South Africa – Kotex Napkins' (1954), Legacy number 2201000010937; 'Product packaging, 1979: Ceylon – Kotex Napkins' (1979), Legacy number 2201000030058; 'Product Packaging, 1972: Kenya – New Kotex Napkins' (1972), Legacy number 2201000030271; 'Advertisements, circa 1950–1955: Central/South America – Kotex, Kleenex, Delsey Products' (1950s), Legacy number 2201000010225; 'Advertisements, 1975–1986: Canada – Kotex' (1970s–80s), Legacy number 2201000011057; 'Slides, 1990–1999: UK Advertisements of Kotex and Huggies, color'(1990s), Legacy number 1705000560011; 'Instruction Sheets, 1938: Sweden – Kotex Napkins' (1938), Legacy number 2201000020047; 'Product packaging/sample, no date: Sweden/Norway – Kotex inserts' (undated), Legacy number 2201000030604.

62 Jim George, 'New Kotex Brand: Discreetness Makes a Bold Statement', *Packaging World* (3 July 2010).

63 Lauren Michele Jackson, *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue… and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation* (New York: Penguin, 2019).

64 Thomas Waugh and Brandon Arroyo, *I Confess! Constructing the Sexual Self in the Internet Age* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019).

65 Roger Dobson, 'The Scarlet and the Black: A Curiosity in "Carmilla"', *The Green Book: Writings on Irish Gothic, Supernatural and Fantastic Literature* No 4 (2014), 32.

66 While there is little evidence of Le Fanu being interested in anti-racism, he lived in a time when figures such as Frederick Douglass had visited Ireland and the question of anti-Black racism and anti-Irish xenophobia was eagerly discussed in the country. Some Black and Irish people share a history of discrimination which has seen activists across racial and national lines join in solidarity on causes including British colonialism, the Easter rebellion, Apartheid, lynching, and, recently, Black Lives Matter. Bill Rolston explores this history starting with Douglass' 1845

lecture series in Ireland in '"The Brothers on the Walls": International Solidarity and Irish Political Murals', *Journal of Black Studies* Vol 39, No 3 (2009), 446–70.

67 Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, 26.

68 Aviva Briefel, 'Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film', *Film Quarterly* Vol 58, No 3 (2005), 16–27; Sarah Sceats, 'Oral Sex: Vampiric Transgression and the Writing of Angela Carter', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* Vol 20, No 1 (2001), 107–21; April Miller, '"The Hair That Wasn't There Before": Demystifying Monstrosity and Menstruation in "Ginger Snaps" and "Ginger Snaps Unleashed"', *Western Folklore* Vol 64, No 3–4 (2005), 281–303.

69 Victoria Newton, '"Auntie's Come to Tea": Menstrual Euphemism', in *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation: Cultural and Social Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 133–45.

70 Elizabeth Signorotti, 'Repossessing the Body: Transgressive Desire in *Carmilla* and *Dracula*', *Criticism* Vol 38, No 4 (1996), 607–32. For a history of lesbian culture and its impact on the arts (focused on the early twentieth century but with discussion of earlier culture), see Diana Souhami, *No Modernism Without Lesbians* (London: Head of Zeus, 2020).

71 Bonnie Morris, *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2016).

72 One of the series' producers explained that the lack of diversity was due to the show's low budget and operation outside the union system, to which many people of colour approached for the series belong. After the success of the first season, more funding was made available, meaning that union actors were hired, salaries increased, and more people of colour began emerging in the narrative. Original Tumblr post deleted, but reported by Stuart McDonald, 'LGBT Vampire Web Series Carmilla Brings in More Diverse Cast', *PRIDE* (14 May 2015).

73 Dobson, 'The Scarlet and the Black', 32.

74 Kinda TV Channel, 'Do Vampires Get their Periods? Carmilla. U by Kotex', *YouTube* video, 3:35 min (16 October 2014): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAwtIyPvvQI&t=121s.

75 Elena Chatzopoulou and Adrian de Kiewiet, 'Millennials' Evaluation of Corporate Social Responsibility: The Wants and Needs of the Largest and Most Ethical Generation', *Journal of Consumer Behaviour,* online version of record before inclusion in issue (2020): https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1882.

76 Chatzopoulou, Kiewiet, 'Millennials'.

77 Menstrual charities active in Canada include Canadian Menstruators (who petition to end the 'tampon tax'), Free Periods Canada, the 'Bleed the North' initiative to end stigma started by girls, and the Kwek Society working to end Period Poverty amongst Indigenous people in North America.

78 The connection between tampons and vampires has also been made in the industry. In March 2009 advertising agency Lowe created a vampire-centric campaign for the Johnson & Johnson brand o.b. It featured a male vampire with tampons instead of fangs, and was not widely disseminated.

79 'Kimberly-Clark Announces Voluntary Recall of U by Kotex® Sleek® Tampons, Regular Absorbency, throughout U.S. and Canada', posted on the US Food & Drug Administration website (12 December 2018).

80 This is not unique to menstrual products, and bears striking resemblance to consumer rejection of condom marketing, Borge, *Protective Practices,* 147.

Chapter 6
Thinx and Clue: startups and the unsettling of the menstrual product industry

> Understand how your body works.
> Get (period, PMS and fertile window) predictions you can trust.
>
> For people with periods.
>
> Clue and Thinx slogans from 2017.

Despite a century-long history of menstrual entrepreneurship, something felt different in 2015.[1] The year marked a large, global and sudden increase in the visibility of menstrual issues, covered by journalists in detail.[2] As explored in this book, this caught many menstrual product advertisers and manufacturers by surprise, projecting them into a bigger career trajectory, making them prouder of their work, or more aware of their place in dismantling taboos. But no wakeup call was louder than that presented by the menstrual entrepreneurial culture of the 2010s.[3] After lying dormant for decades, menstrual technology began attracting entrepreneurs and funding again. Mirroring the 1920s, the 2010s rediscovered the unique social, cultural, visual and commercial potential of menstruation. In this chapter, I focus on the spirit of that entrepreneurial moment by exploring the role of two energetic startups from the 2010s, reusable menstrual underwear company Thinx, and menstrual tracking mobile application Clue, both of which utilised menstrual technologies, social justice advocacy, and bold visual strategies to great success.

New York-based Thinx and Berlin-based Clue both capitalised on the increased openness of menstrual discourse long fought by activists, and were in turn part of pushing for even more realistic and frank menstrual representation. Both were celebrated as exciting newcomers

by media and business institutions, raised money from investors, and orbited around the personality of their female leaders.[4] Thinx and Clue offered important tweaks to already existing menstrual technology – re-washable underwear and a system for examining menstrual periodicity respectively – accompanied by campaigns that made headlines internationally. While industry giants like P&G, Essity and Kimberly-Clark had to rewrite their marketing strategies to fit a new generation of feminist debate – yet again – Thinx and Clue followed in the footsteps of activists rather than competitors. Despite their origins in the large Western cities of New York and Berlin, the companies also emerged at a time when instant global dissemination of branding, digital technologies and cheap international shipping of products made it possible for a national company to be active across the world from the start. The same is true for many other startup companies from the 2010s and 2020s. This chapter could just as well have covered the rediscovery of the menstrual cup, or the invention of reusable tampon applicators, and future scholarship will hopefully explore how the broader landscape of menstrual startups operated in the 2010s and beyond. For now, however, Clue and Thinx serve our purpose as noteworthy early players on the reinvented menstrual product scene of the 2010s, both centred on women in the 'Femtech' (rather than 'femcare') industry, and promising the attractive option of a feminist business strategy at a time when feminism was gaining popularity again.

By examining the press packages, products and official visual guidelines of these companies, we gain a sense of how this recent history links to the longer narrative of menstrual product corporations as trendsetters and icon makers, self-defined 'disrupters', and re-inventers.[5] Thinx did not respond to my request for interviews, but I was able to talk with graphic designer Katrin Friedman at Clue, whilst news coverage of both brands helped underline a contemporary startup's lifecycle in the media and popular discourse. Furthermore, Clue and Thinx are examples of the blurred lines between activism, corporation and appropriation in the 2010s, and underline both the potential and complexities of claiming to operate a business as feminist. While it is impossible to summarise the status and ultimate success or failure of these contemporary brands, their early years show the ways in which the industry as a whole adapted to the new energy in the sector.

From 'Femcare' to 'Femtech'

Clue was founded in 2012 by Ida Tin, Hans Raffauf (Chairman and Co-founder, married to Ida), Mike LaVigne (former lead developer), and Moritz von Buttlar (formerly lead scientist) in Berlin. From the start, Tin became the face and voice of the company. Meanwhile, Thinx's prototype of menstrual underwear was in development in the US, and launched in 2013. The company was founded by Canadian sisters Miki and Radha Agrawal, with Miki becoming the frontwoman and brand personality. Both companies were started by people with no prior expertise of the 'femcare' sector. Instead, Tin and the Agrawals drew on their experiences as unsatisfied consumers of existing products as motivation for innovating the market. The company founders wrote about how pads and tampons had failed them in terms of comfort, leakage, price and branding – noting some of the same historic problems that we have encountered in the chapters about Saba, Tampax and Kotex, for example. Inherent in this critique, however, was a tendency to present the corporate brands as historic and monolithic entities which had never changed. These Western founders, who had come of age after the saturation of the market by multinational corporations, grew up in a world where the use of tampons and pads was seldom questioned in public, and where betting on menstrual technology was genuinely risky.

Both companies claimed to improve existing menstrual technologies. Clue made the simple concept of tracking a menstrual cycle digital. Many menstruators were already using this system in an analogue and private way. They may have circled a date in their diary, kept a spreadsheet, or a calculation in their minds as a means of keeping track of ovulation, menstrual bleeding and other symptoms during the month. Some may have undertaken the more detailed approach described by feminist health care providers (and beginning in the 1970s) who advocated for tracking not only menstrual blood, but vaginal mucous and other bodily symptoms in the service of obtaining or avoiding pregnancy, curiosity and self-exploration, or as part of tracking health in general.[6] From the 1930s onwards, menstrual product companies also offered tracking devices, such as the printed calendars circulated by Kimberly-Clark and Mölnlycke, and the digital versions offered by P&G and SCA.[7] In the 2010s, the internet's combination with smartphones provided a new way for small companies to reach enormous audiences, and the emerging field of gendered digital technology took full advantage of this. Body tracking was everywhere, but menstruation was not included.

Clue's founders asked why menstruation was not a part of early digital body tracking options, invoking the questions asked by 'data feminists' who challenge the dominance and privileging of some data over others.[8] Their target was the male-dominated US-based Silicon Valley, and the ways in which the sector had overlooked women's health in general. Clue therefore positioned itself as a technology that empowered women within the male-dominated space of data digitalisation and phone technologies. In 2016, a study evaluating smartphone menstrual apps concluded that 'most free smartphone menstrual cycle tracking apps for patient use are inaccurate', and that few 'cite medical literature or health professional involvement'.[9] In the vacuum following Apple and other tech companies' initial neglect of menstrual tracking, countless startups flourished. Clue was simply one of many, and used scientific discourse, citation of scientific papers and gender-neutral design to set itself apart from the pink-tinted options available elsewhere. Co-founder Tin entered the stage as a technological innovator of a new medium, a pioneering activist in the digital space, and as an outsider by virtue of being a woman. Early media coverage was universally positive, hailing the app as an invention and Tin as a feminist business icon.[10] When she began using the word 'Femtech' to define all technology aimed at women, Tin further solidified her position as a moral leader, and Clue as the obvious choice for feminist consumers.

Similarly, Thinx developed existing technology substantially. The first Thinx product consisted of a washable and reusable multilayer leak proof pad (each layer between 100 to 500 grams per square metre) inside a moisture-impermeable anti-microbial layer.[11] A study from 2020 found that the product had high levels of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), copper, and zinc (used as antimicrobials) in the crotch area.[12] The focus on absorption mirrors the model already fronted by P&G's 'Dri-Weave' technology, adding to the decades-long increased focus on experiencing menstruation as invisible and dry. The products could be cleaned in a washing machine with cold water, after being soaked manually first, and reused for years. Thinx argued that the reusability made their product a more environmentally friendly option than disposable single-use pads and tampons, offering a moral incentive for consumers who were concerned about climate change. These undergarments had previously been plagued by association with the taboo topic of incontinence and were often only available in a limited number of sizes, styles and colours. In contrast, Thinx offered sexy black lace, comfortable boxers, sportswear, and an increasing number of sizes. Throughout the development phase, Clue and Thinx referenced the poor

quality of their technological competitors. As a contrast, they set up their companies as producers of modern ideas which would move menstruation into the twenty-first century.

Reusable menstrual underwear, like menstrual cycle tracking, was not a new concept.[13] Saba invented a 'Saba pantie' in the 1960s, whereas rubber and cloth underwear designed to protect outer clothing from blood dates back to the late eighteenth century.[14] None of these inventions gripped the public imagination or excelled economically, possibly due to the difficulty of selling the idea under times of extreme menstrual taboos, the expenses of manufacturing, the challenge of monetising one-time purchases, or because it could not compete with pads and tampons. Nevertheless, menstrual underwear and reusable options also have a legacy in the homemade offerings that were made and washed by women for centuries. Despite menstrual product companies' insistence that no one wanted to return to the handwashing, wringing, drying processes from their grandmother's generation, women in the 2010s unsettled this assumption as some began experimenting with reusable and washable cloth options yet again.[15] Likewise, the increased popularity and use of hormonal birth control rendered the need for tracking nearly obsolete, as new generations of the pill in particular create a systematised and predictable menstrual cycle. Nevertheless, consumers flocked to Clue, enthusiastically embracing the opportunity to learn more about menstruation through tracking the entire cycle on or off contraception.

Inventing a new menstrual language

From the start, visual marketing and product design were extremely important parts of rendering Clue and Thinx alternatives to the mainstream brands. In Clue's 2017 *Brand Book*, the company detailed their design principles to date: 'Clue Design is cross-platform, cross-media and cross-gender'.[16] The latter referred to the company's use of terms like 'menstruator' rather than 'women', and their interest in attracting trans, non-binary, intersex, and/or queer consumers to their platform. To complement these values, Clue introduced 'pillars of design: Beautiful, Happy, Fast, Balanced'. The logo, a red flower or seed made up of six intersecting circles, reflected these values by being 'balanced and beautiful, fast and happy not aggressive'.[17] The logo was important to Clue, revealing ambitions for growing the brand to an international icon of instant recognisability: 'wouldn't it be great if one day we were recognised simply by the 'seed' (like the Nike "swoosh" or the Apple

"apple")?'.[18] This also invokes the view of Tampax as 'the Microsoft of tampons', discussed in Chapter 3, and the menstrual product industry's fight to be recognised as equally important to other mainstream technologies. Clue's goal of becoming the 'Apple of menstrual tracking' reveals how the brand took aim at the male-dominated technology sector, rather than well-known menstrual brands like Tampax and Kotex. It also shows how the company's aims were not fundamentally radical on this point, seeking to compete and mimic the mechanics of Apple and Nike rather than tearing up the rule books of modern capitalism.

In stark comparison to brands such as Apple, Nike, Tampax and Kotex, however, Clue's branding was also grounded in a wish to engage deeply with activism through visual semiotics. Clue's favoured typeface, 'Mrs Eaves', had historically been named after the eighteenth-century typographer John Baskerville's wife Sarah, whereas Clue used type designer Zuzana Lucko's 1990s version and swapped the pronoun to 'Mr Eaves'.[19] The colours also invoked queer visual history, with a selection of seven colours symbolising equality, and referencing the LGBTQ+ rainbow flag designed by artist Gilbert Baker in the late 1970s.[20] Skin colour was defined in six wide-ranging shades, setting Clue apart from the use of white or abstract yellow skin tones in emojis at the time. These symbolic and visual touches were important to Clue, showing their commitment to intersectional feminism. It was also important to their earliest users, who stated that the gender-neutral, inclusive and colourful design made Clue their favourite menstrual tracking app.[21]

From a consumer perspective, Clue looked different from older apps on the market. It was neither pink-tinted nor gendered, did not assume users wanted to conceive or avoid pregnancy, included a vast number of menstrual symptoms, and was both easy to use and, initially, free. Users charted their symptoms by selecting small cartoons symbolising activities, blood loss, and emotions during the month. As they continued to add information, Clue began predicting their next period, and would send reminders to the consumer. The app could be used in many different ways, for instance to only track bleeding, or to chart a complex network of disease, nutrition, sleep cycles, mental health, feelings, and sexual activity. Over time, consumers' selection of icons therefore turned into a data set, which was fed back to them as personalised predictions, and in turn sold or shared with Clue's stakeholders, making the app free to use. This web of tracking and sharing became popular, and Clue grew through word-of-mouth recommendation, and its active presence on social media.

Likewise, Thinx carefully considered how to make branding a core component of product identity, despite setting out with few competitors

in the field. A press kit from 2017 gives insight into the image Thinx wanted to promote at the time, relying as much on visuals as text. The front image featured a peeled grapefruit on a pink background, suggestive of a vulva. When Thinx shared details of potential censorship of this campaign by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority of New York, media covered the issue extensively and the company's profile grew quickly, despite reports that the reality of actual censorship was 'smoke and mirrors'.[22] Nevertheless, this public example of transgressive menstrual imagery raised media and consumer consciousness about censorship mechanisms that still existed for menstrual product advertising, resulting in an audience that became more media literate about menstrual image control (see Figure 6.1). While censorship had irritated and hampered advertisers in the sector for decades, Thinx benefitted from the swift publicity of new media platforms in the 2010s, and made the problem of marketing suppression widely known.

Speaking about the shift in branding during this time, Clue graphic designer Katrin Friedman suggested that the company was in part 'inventing menstrual language'.[23] Design had been a 'driving force' in the early days, necessary to differentiate the company from cold clinical medical information as well as gendered tropes.[24] When Clue occasionally failed to live up to its own high standards, such as when consumers pointed out the heterosexual assumptions implied in the symbols for tracking sexual activity within the app, Clue responded quickly and changed accordingly.

Figure 6.1. Advertisement for Thinx underwear, 2017.

In these ways, Clue and Thinx were indeed part of 'inventing a menstrual language' for the twenty-first century, centring contemporary visual design in their imagery, and social justice in their textual output. Their early work was done against a backdrop of increasing menstrual activism, which questioned whether anyone should be paying for menstrual products at all. Increasingly, activists behind the international 'Period Poverty', 'End the Tampon Tax', and 'Free Menstrual Products' campaigns were challenging the sector, asking: why should an involuntary bodily action that happens to half of the population be priced, taxed, or sold? Instead of defending their industry, Thinx and Clue succeeded in joining these campaigns by turning against the traditional corporations in the sector, and promising consumers that they were nothing like those old dinosaurs.

'She-E-O'

Clue, Thinx, and other 2010s startups made many claims about being different, and no argument was stronger than the fact that most new companies were run by women. The 2010s saw the hyper-gendered concept of the 'girl boss' become mainstream, suggesting that all young women had the ability to rise to the top of their profession through intense work and perseverance, an aspirational goal that was anchored in the difficult labour market of the post-2008 recession.[25] The 'girl boss' type was legitimately successful by the parameters of Western neoliberalism: Facebook's Sharyl Sandberg, clothing brand Nasty Gal's Sophia Amoruso, women's networking space The Wing's Audrey Gelman, and lifestyle blog Goop founder Gwyneth Paltrow all became influential figures in the 2010s.[26] Collectively, they formed the iconography of successful womanhood alongside figures like Tin and Agrawal despite not really being 'girls' at all. In a way, this was the ultimate conclusion of P&G's 'Like A Girl' campaign from 2014, seeing the confident girl child of the past join the corporate ranks as a woman of the future: menstruation would not hold the 'girl boss' back.

Like other CEOs in the 2010s, Agrawal and Tin went far beyond the brief of their roles, both setting out their plans in books aimed at the general public. Agrawal's *Disrupt-Her: A Manifesto for the Modern Woman*, was 'meant to empower women to question the status quo'.[27] Connecting Agrawal's entrance onto the menstrual product market to the revolutionary qualities of feminism, the book made the case that the 'She-E-O' was more than a business entrepreneur.[28] It promised readers that the book would unlock secrets about:

> How to think differently and disruptively in this day and age; How to overcome self-doubt and insecurities regardless of the ups and downs you go through;
>
> How to bypass old patterns and belief systems that still run your mind both consciously and subconsciously;
>
> How to finally give yourself permission to be FULLY YOU.
>
> Why follow an inauthentic, suppressed life to live inside someone else's truth?
>
> *Disrupt-Her* reminds us that we can create the most disruptive, vibrant, joyful, self-expressed TRUTHFUL life, filled with love, purpose, abundance, and intention.
>
> This book is that roadmap to your highest self.[29]

The goals outlined in the book were utopic, suggesting that Thinx and Agrawal would not only improve consumers' periods, but their entire life – and the collective life experience of women.[30] Throughout, Agrawal was not a typical backstage CEO but one of the most important and visible parts of Thinx's branding strategy. While the New York subway campaign controversy was an early indicator that the brand was adept at utilising scandal, interviews with Agrawal were exciting and tantalising, as she engaged in frank discussions of the body, including menstruation and sex. Agrawal's star power was mentioned in *TIME*'s 2015 overview of best new inventions, while *Fast Company* termed Thinx one of the most innovative companies of 2017, pointing specifically to Agrawal's strategies and role as CEO.

Agrawal, who is 10 years younger than Tin, built her brand personality during and after the launch of Thinx, whereas Tin already had a public following in her native Denmark to utilise for the launch of Clue. Her first book, *Directøs* (a derogatory Danish portmanteau of 'director' and 'slut') was a bestseller in Denmark, chronicling her work running a motorcycle tour company.[31] The book's subtitle – *A Fairy Tale about How to Live a Simple Life, Listen to Your Heart and Meet the World* – invoked the feminist movement. Tin sought to subvert the male-dominated field of corporate culture, writing that the use of 'slut' in the title was her attempt to reclaim what had so often been used to bully Danish businesswomen. Her parallel critique and embrace of her native country counters some of the Scandinavian exceptionalism narratives encountered at Saba and

Essity, and shows a recent willingness to forego nationalism in favour of a more global business strategy amongst startups. Similar to Agrawal's use of the term 'She-E-O', Tin flirted with gender binaries, seeking to disrupt them while suggesting that consumers could trust her knowledge of menstruation as a woman. Like Agrawal, she was listed on *Fast Company*'s overview of the Most Creative People of 2016, profiled in *Forbes*, and appeared as a frequent contributor to Clue's expanding multi-platform media projects. Both Tin and Agrawal became favourites of the 'Femtech' world. In detailing the limitations of a male-dominated technology sphere, both women set themselves apart.

Tin and Agrawal were obvious candidates for emulation, maybe even adoration. When they succeeded – in advocacy or business – they were celebrated. However, by building a brand around one personality, Thinx and Clue linked their branding strategies to the lives and choices of their leaders. How many consumers of Tampax, Libresse, or Kotex could name the brand's CEO, inventor, or owner? Was consumer and media scrutiny of menstrual startups part of the older structures of the menstrual taboo, or a sign that stigma has shifted to such a degree that scrutiny was actually possible? When women leaders become the most effective part of the branding strategy for companies such as Clue and Thinx, what would happen if they made mistakes?

Trust me

Of all the values associated with female leaders, trust and care remain core pillars.[32] Building trust was important to both companies. Clue asked consumers to upload intimate details about their lives: when they had sex, if they were trying to conceive, if they were on medication or illegal drugs, had sexually transmitted diseases, felt depressed, or experienced food or alcohol cravings. If they had concerns about data security, they could email trust@helloclue.com. Tin wrote that this exercise in sharing provided many opportunities for learning about the 'female health gap', but also that the company 'fully acknowledged the responsibility that comes with being the safekeepers of so much intimate data'.[33] She argued that by collecting data, 'we are building up a resource' – and a resource is by definition a form of capital that can be sold, traded and invested.[34] In Tin's view, consumers should share intimate data to improve their own health:

> With this resource, you can let people or organizations you trust derive insights that could greatly improve your quality of life and

> lead to better health outcomes. Maybe even save your life. The people and organizations who have longitudinal data will benefit. The ones who have a treasure trove of years of tracking will have an asset that no money can buy.[35]

Despite Clue's echoing of the goals of the historic radical women's health movement, the former had always had a strong focus on consent and privacy when sharing personal experiences. Likewise, this was not a vision of 'data feminism' which rang true for activism: the 'personal is political', not personal data to be sold.[36] Critical Clue consumers soon began questioning the underlying motivation and profit-structures inherent in the tracking system, and pointed out that the entire menstrual calendar seemed to benefit many people who do not menstruate: 'They're designed for marketers, for (cis-)men, for hypothetical unborn children, and perhaps weirdest of all, a kind of voluntary surveillance stance'.[37]

Clue acknowledged these dangers, and positioned its services as a contrast to the status quo of male-led menstrual tracking apps. Tin was especially transparent about the economic realities of data production and wrote about the ways in which this is a 'question of trust' for both Clue and the consumer:

> Now the question is, who do you trust with your data, what algorithms do you want to rely on, and what level of transparency do you demand as a user? I believe all these questions are key for all of us to think about. Who do you trust?[38]

So how can a company make money and appear trustworthy? Before debates about user security, privacy and storage of intimate information became a larger part of mainstream cyber security discourse, Clue operated in a pioneering time for phone health apps when consumers were still in a learning process about terms and conditions of data usage. The issue of trust was largely built on the figure of Tin, who emphasised her gender as a trustworthy fact; she was different from Silicon Valley and the menstrual industry because of her gender, menstrual experience and outsider status. She even used Clue herself! In comparison to competing brands founded by men, such as Glow (started by PayPal investor Max Levchin), Tin could at least guarantee that she had personally tested the product.[39]

The issue of trust was further underlined by the language used in Clue's Terms & Conditions, which it frequently reminded its 12 million users to read.[40] These set out in simple language how Clue made money and how consumer data was used, clearly stating that the company sold

data to external platforms. Tin and Clue took a pro-active approach to building trust, writing blog posts to explain their financial strategy. In 2017, Tin wrote about her plans to take Clue from an investor phase to a profit-making stage.[41] Potential options for future use were listed: paid Clue membership with a monthly fee, sponsored content, partnership with companies (which already included a deal with sleep and productivity tracking app OURA), non-intrusive advertising on the app that tracked browsing histories, launch of merchandise (for example a Clue-logo branded bag, T-shirt and water bottle), and 'an agreement where we sell anonymous aggregate user data that further academic research into female health'.[42] Clue's paid membership soon also included partners and friends who may want to track someone else's cycle, optimising the number of accounts beyond those who menstruate. This was part of a digital landscape where the normalisation of body tracking was increasing. Clue's gathering and selling of menstrual data is an example of what legal scholar Karen E.C. Levy terms 'intimate surveillance' in which the monitoring of fertility and the menstrual cycle becomes useful to corporations (for example through paid partnerships with pharmaceutical companies) and male partners (seeking to avoid menstrual sex or pregnancy), thus fulfilling Preciado's vision of a pharmacopornographical society in which reproductive (including menstrual) control renders the gendered body predictable and commercialised.[43] In the 2010s, Levy pointed out that law and policy makers had still not begun safeguarding this new world of body surveillance, meaning that large parts of fertility and menstrual cycle tracking apps operated for years without regulation as 'intimate relations become permeated by the data paradigm'.[44]

Thinx, likewise, asked users to trust the safety of their product. Agrawal argued that she was the first to try the Thinx product and that it had changed the way she felt about menstruation. While taking a stand against gender essentialism in their advertising, Tin and Agrawal suggested that they had succeeded because – not despite – of the fact that they were women, and because they had embodied menstrual experience. The notion of embodied or 'situated' bodily knowledge has long been described as an important, yet undervalued, aspect of technological expertise, usually analysed in terms of user experience, rather than as an aspect of corporate growth.[45] Since no cis-male menstrual product CEO in history had been able to claim that they had tested a product, this message was likely reassuring to many consumers. Agrawal, Tin, and other female CEOs of the 2010s, claimed that it was empowering to use and buy their products, promising freedom through 'feminist capitalism'.[46]

On the other hand, since consumers in part relied on these female CEOs' embodied knowledge, any experience deviating from theirs might automatically be construed as a lie or, at the least, deviant marketing.

'Feminist void'?[47]

Journalists and economic reporters have covered the swift and public downfall of Agrawal in great detail since 2017. She was sued by an employee for sexual harassment and for creating a work environment in which body details were discussed in unprofessional ways, and subsequently left the company to found bidet company Tushy. What concerns us here is not the details of the scandal. Rather, our focus is to connect Agrawal's crisis to the history of menstrual product entrepreneurship and the workers who underpin it. Cases of sexual harassment have been filed against plant managers at P&G,[48] Kimberly-Clark[49], and others (because of the lack of transparency, it is difficult to understand if these were connected to menstrual brands), while older or historic companies like Saba, Mölnlycke, and Tambrands' atmosphere of gendered power hierarchies created an uneven playing field for women and men. Throughout, trans and non-binary people have been so routinely overlooked by the industry that 2010 marked the *beginning* of consistent inclusion. For most multinational corporations in the twentieth century, settling sexual harassment lawsuits could be done discreetly through non-disclosure agreements. Having anonymous CEOs and brand managers ensured that cases did not become scandals.

Workers at Clue and Thinx are likewise part of a long history of making menstrual products. The Agrawal case points to the downfalls of operating a business that transgresses against all forms of traditional hierarchies, and where CEOs become friends with few boundaries for appropriate conversation. In addition to the typical patterns of sexual harassment, Thinx had not established an HR office, leading to confusion about salary negotiations, maternity leave, and bullying.

Agrawal had excellent timing in terms of her business invention, but she also faced the anger of the feminist community when her business was exposed as lacking the values it flaunted. Her behaviour was publicised soon after Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's fall from grace, when the public discourse around sexual harassment and corporate culture exploded around the MeToo movement. One commentator called Agrawal's approach a 'feminist void', suggesting that it would have been better if Thinx had promoted itself as an old-fashioned menstrual product

company that revelled in gendered stereotypes.[50] By 2017, some Thinx consumers felt patronised by the brand's earlier messages: 'should the term "feminist" ever be attached to companies, CEOs, or their products?', they asked, terming Agrawal's company and similar projects 'corporate feminism' and 'trickle-down feminism'.[51] One concerned consumer recruited scientific expertise to test whether or not Thinx products contained toxic ingredients, concluding that they did, and asking what this meant for the workers who made the product, and which organisations certify the company, if any.[52] The idea of utilising the language and visual culture of empowerment and environmentalism to sell gendered products such as tampons or pads has emerged as the strongest current running through the histories told in this book, from the early twentieth century to the present. While Thinx was not being accused of anything new on a sector-wide level, its own high standards of ethics and transparency had set it up to fail spectacularly once it was revealed that the company was indeed just . . . a company.[53] The critique of Thinx by their own and other consumers of menstrual products underlined the tension in being a 'feminist consumer', but also feeds into the 'feminist contemporary' in which action and self-reflection join uncertainty and criticism as feminisms adapt and orient themselves.[54]

While Agrawal broke the law in relation to her employees, Clue broke its trust with consumers when its data was breached. In June 2018, app users were informed that the tool Clue utilised to conduct user surveys, Typeform, had been breached by an unknown third party.[55] For consumers who were hacked, this meant that their name, email address, and answers to questions about Pre-Menstrual Syndrome symptoms were accessed. An apology was offered via email, as well as a warning to stay alert about scams.

When trust is broken between brand and consumer, companies respond in many ways. Recall for instance the approach taken by P&G during TSS and #MyAlwaysExperience, or Kimberly-Clark's public fall from grace when Kotex products were found dangerous in 2018; denial, removal from the market, reinvention, or a new commitment to safety were typical safeguards. Rebranding or 'reclassifying' of menstrual products often followed.[56] Soon after the hack, Clue reinforced its aim to use Clue data to improve research. Also in 2018, scholars could apply for data access and funding from Clue to study its (anonymous) consumers' habits. As a result, projects at various prestigious research institutions were established.[57] The Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Science was awarded funding for a postdoctoral project about psychological changes around ovulation, especially concerning sexual desire, self-perception of

attractiveness, and links to contraceptive use.[58] Health scientists at Columbia University termed the Clue data 'in essence the largest observational study about menstrual health' which sought to 'consider the hormonal cycle as a set of observations through time', and planned to use it to identify patterns of symptoms.[59] Stanford University accessed the data to understand the diversity and patterns of menstrual pain, as well as an additional project examining cycle modelling methods, and an ongoing study examining menstruation as a vital sign of health. At the University of Oxford, Clue data provided the foundations for anthropologist Alexandra Alvergne's paper 'Is Female Health Cyclical? Evolutionary Perspectives on Menstruation'.[60] Columbia University public health scholars examined links between menstrual pain, chronic disease, and primary breast cancer, and the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University explored if Clue data revealed changes in dating and relationship patterns. The latter institution also utilised the information as part of its long-running Condom Use research project.[61] Partnering with prestigious institutions, Clue promised to contribute to collective understandings of women's health by sharing their data with experts when no similar intimate information exists.[62] As a trust-building exercise, it was a smart move.

Clue users began tracking their periods, sexual preferences and personal details several years ago, providing researchers with a big data set that was truly unique. Their data represented the gap in knowledge about menstruation more generally, but also shows how researchers increasingly rely on private companies to collect datasets that their own institutions cannot collect or fund (at the time, the Cambridge Analytica episode surrounding the 2016 US presidential election alerted many technology consumers to this problem). This tendency is a hallmark of late capitalism, seeing companies and corporations act not only as pseudo-activists but also as partners for independent researchers. Ultimately, Clue cited the research as a part of how it maintained an ethical and transparent company stance.

In these ways, Clue and Thinx survived their first crises as brands: Clue by becoming more transparent in the ways it utilised data and collaborating with traditional centres of elite Western knowledge, Thinx by dropping Miki Agrawal entirely. As such, both companies had done what successful menstrual product companies have been doing as far back as the establishment of the Saba, Tampax, and Kotex brands. When problems occur, a successful company understands that it must shed whatever caused the public problem, whether that be faulty products or individuals. By doing so, the longevity of the brand itself can be secured, taking one more step towards iconic status in the vein of Apple, Nike or Tampax.

Brand as menstrual activism

Menstrual product marketing has always explored feminist messages and promised empowerment through consumerism, but the 2010s marked a distinct galvanisation of this tendency amongst brands aimed at female consumers.[63] For sceptics, feminist values are incompatible with capitalism, but for consumers (who are of course often also sceptics *and* feminists), the combination could work. The number of companies that included social justice messages about environmentalism and equality soared in this decade, blurring the line between marketing and advocacy through 'brand activism'.[64] Clue, Thinx, and similar brands declared themselves 'feminist companies', and their CEO's self-identified as feminists.[65] Agrawal noted that the company was made up of 'young badass feminists', and that feminism was not cynically used by Thinx as a ploy.[66]

Like Clue, the Thinx company was interested in activism with a mission to 'sustain our planet', 'break taboos', and 'empower people'.[67] Similar to Clue's use of trans and non-binary representation in emojis, Thinx hired models from across the gender spectrum, and centred one of their campaigns on the everyday experiences of menstruation facing men. The models were positioned in situations that clearly contrasted with the use of models in traditional menstrual product campaigns, which tended to include a lot of smiling faces, white women and girls, sports, and the outdoors. In Thinx campaigns, the models instead read books, sit, stand, hold items, or walk, using this range of unexciting activities to illustrate the comfort of the underwear. Despite these realistic activities, however, the models were stylised and choreographed in abstract ways, sometimes hunched over furniture, repeating movements, or staring blankly ahead. Visually, the campaign looked more like art than advertising, utilising blank spaces and minimalist settings drenched in calm colours. The sparse backgrounds ensured that the models seemed even more alien as they moved around in underwear, never smiling. Models with disabilities were included alongside people of all sizes, lovingly photographed to highlight each individual's beauty when wearing the product. Importantly, blood was not shown, underlining Thinx's success in controlling menstruation. When the brand tried to include bloodstains or a visible tampon string in the campaign centred on men, both scenes were censored. Later, the brand expanded with period-proof sportswear and nightwear, organic tampons and organic cotton underwear, in addition to garments designed in a more traditionally masculine style. Similar to Clue, Thinx's visual style linked to its underpinning efforts to appear consistent and

transparent regarding social justice. For instance, the website detailed the company's mentorship work with Global Girls Club and its work with 'a local coalition of activists and educators'.[68] The details remind us of the longstanding relationship between educational institutions like schools and menstrual product companies, solidifying their presence in the classroom and public for a new millennium.

Both Clue and Thinx created visual languages that intersected directly with the dominating social justice issues of the political left in Europe and North America. This was sometimes focused on menstruation, but often not. Specifically, both brands supported the Black Lives Matter movement and the campaign for better trans rights and visibility in the aftermath of acts of violence against members of these communities, and in the atmosphere of president Donald Trump's embrace of the far right in 2016. Featuring racial, bodily, and queer diversity in graphics and photographs, Clue and Thinx communicated visually with consumers who might be attending marches or protesting for these causes. In their written output, published on social media platforms, via interviews with CEOs, or on company blogs, most referenced battles for gender, racial, reproductive, or class equality. In 2019, Thinx staff signed a letter condemning abortion bans in the US, while Clue sought to normalise conversations about taboos such as abortion, miscarriage, menopause, and menstrual sex. Clue's #JustSayPeriod campaign argued that people should stop using euphemism to describe menstruation, predating the Scottish government's 'Let's call periods, periods' campaign by three years (but nearly a full decade after campaigner Chella Quint had first made this exact point and over 50 years since the women's health movement galvanised around similar debates).[69] These moves, not unique to either company, were intrinsically tied to the rise of feminist and social justice debates in general. Yet, multinational corporations were slow to get involved with this visual and rhetorical aspect of branding, leaving space for startups to differentiate themselves by 'caring' (or, 'femcaring', if you will), an attribute in itself associated more with women, and, by extension, the 'girl boss'.

'Caring' became one of the largest marketing trends of the decade, one that the world's largest multinational corporations invested in, eventually. Large brands like Nike have emerged as institutions that are big and economically viable enough to take on political causes and messages, joining or eclipsing the work of activists. This leaves pioneering advertisers and brands in a difficult position. A few years after Thinx's and Clue's foundation, a range of menstrual underwear brands appeared (Dear Kates, Modibodi, WUKA…), as well as menstrual tracking applications (Natural Cycles, Glow, Flo, Ovia, MagicGirl, MyFlo, Cycles,

and, later, options from Apple and Google).[70] Nearly all included human rights issues in their branding strategies, specifically regarding LGBTQ+ communities. The readiness with which companies embraced and responded to trans and non-binary consumers is noteworthy, and likely played some part in the discussion around the terminology of menstruation, including the use of the term menstruator or people who menstruate in the media. Some of this work was done visually, by including models previously excluded from menstrual product marketing, such as transmen. The inclusion of racially diverse models followed the development in marketing seen more generally (especially after the public re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement) and borrowed heavily from the digital visual cultures of Black women in particular.[71]

'Femtech' futures

Although the lines are increasingly blurred, the relationship between company and consumer is not the same as that between NGO and activist. In Preciado's concept of 'pharmacopornographic capitalism', pharmaceutical, contraceptive, and porn industries retain control over the body and render it profitable by promising individual choice, appropriating the language of activists and charities.[72] Preciado's idea predicted a world in which the documentation of the menstrual cycle becomes profitable data beyond the body, circling back on itself in the form of menstrual merchandise (like Clue's plan for tote bags, water bottles, underwear, birth control), and investment in companies that are not overseen by policy or law. Both Thinx and Clue promised menstrual control in such a system. Thinx promised control over the menstrual cycle by rendering it invisible, stylish, and marketable. Clue suggested consumers track all symptoms of the cycle, ensuring that the 'spontaneity of menstruation' was observed and, if needed, controlled.[73] Regulating the body with Clue tracking or Thinx underwear renders menstruation socially acceptable: clean, predictable, profitable, and organised in a documented data system. The products contribute to the technology-focused 'solutionist' view of the world, in which messiness is fundamentally bad, and all bodily ailments (including, at its extreme conclusion, disabilities) can be 'cured' with scientific control.[74] This type of control renders the 'personal (informatics) political' and encourages users to extract intimate information about their body which in turn becomes valuable quantifiable data in the broader big data landscape.[75] Clue and Thinx's promise of tracking, controlling, or containing menstrual blood

can be seen as part of the equipment needed for the 'girl boss' to operate in the world. In her analysis of NGOs' role in 'menstrual hygiene management' programmes in the Global South, Bobel captures the paradox: 'Freedom, ironically, depends on containment'.[76] As in the Global South, the startups residing in and aiming at consumers in the Global North tend to promise emancipation through control and purchases.

In the years since Thinx and Clue were launched, problems have emerged in the 'Femtech' world. The tracking app Natural Cycles is one of the more extreme examples, leaning on 'natural family planning', while failing to support consumers whose bodies did not 'conform' to rigid datafication, and became 'unwillingly pregnant'.[77] The ensuing legal battle will tell us a lot about what the law considers regarding these complex ethical questions, while Clue's 2021 approval from the US Food and Drug Administration to launch their own digital contraceptive ('Clue Birth Control') suggests that the future direction of travel is already decided. For experts and scholars in the emerging field of feminist and critical data, communication and internet studies, the solution is better apps that take consumers' diverse needs into account before creation, not after.[78] The rise of economic systems centred around the commodification of personal data, or 'Surveillance Capitalism', benefits corporations like Facebook and Google, but also pharmaceutical and menstrual product companies seeking to learn more about the private lives of potential customers.[79] 'Intimate surveillance', like all other surveillance of citizens, will likely be regulated some day. In hindsight, the early days of menstrual startups may appear as a rather lawless time.[80]

Clue and Thinx are part of the legacy of menstrual product companies and consumers that believe in the correlation between equality and technology. Similar to other claims of invention and modernity seen throughout this book and throughout the industry, the use of digital technologies has witnessed menstrual and gendered tropes survive, change, and collapse in new online environments.[81] Both Clue and Thinx relied heavily on digital strategies, whether for branding purposes or as part of the product.[82] Similarly, early studies of anti-rape technology and gendered digital corporeal surveillance see innovation colliding with tradition in corporate goals to entice female consumers by promising protection.[83] New studies on postfeminist digital cultures place these innovations in a larger digital landscape, showing how the monitoring and marketing of menstruation online is just one small part of the commodification of the gendered body in the longer trajectory of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[84] This is part of a much bigger

context of control for the reproductive body. In advertising for hormonal birth control, for example, the entrance of postfeminist language and subversive invocations of feminism became the new norm in the 2000s.[85] Postfeminist advertising often referred to feminist content, but would undermine the structural implication of feminist critique by offering up a worldview in which the individual had unlimited freedom and choice.[86] Under this system, the sexual objectification of women and minorities shifts to represent women as sexual subjects, media increases sexualised content generally, self-monitoring and surveillance of the body becomes a value, and self-transformation through consumerism is offered up as a genuine feminist choice and 'sensibility'.[87]

Yet, both companies also signal a change in the ways postfeminism operates, reaping the rewards of an upswing in popular feminism since the 2010s and engaging with contemporary political causes. Thinx and Clue actively invited consumers to question authority, including censorship rules, the medical establishment, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, Silicon Valley, and traditional menstrual product corporations. Operating from outside the confines of traditional spaces of protest and activism, startups forced traditional companies to be more vocal about social justice causes. Will this lead to a better consumer experience for menstruators, or is this yet another cycle of progress claims?

As noted, in 2016 Tin coined the word 'Femtech' as a category of software, products, services, and diagnostics that utilised technology to focus on women's health.[88] This intervention was both marketing for Clue, and a call to arms for fellow 'Femtech' entrepreneurs. For readers of this book, the word 'Femtech' is old news. The US-Soviet project Femtech, which we examined in Chapter 3, also sought social impact. The company's stated mission was to improve women's lives with Tampax, while making a profit. Both versions of Femtech have something in common: a moralistic dismissal of older menstrual technologies, a promise of progress and choice, and a belief in linear scientific progress. Clue and Thinx may dismiss Tampax as old-fashioned, but once upon a time, Tampax dismissed older technologies in the same way. This recipe is followed by newer companies, all of which utilise substantial funds and energy to create marketing that differentiates their product from the past, outspending the competition. This reminds us of the problem first identified by the UK House of Commons in the 1970s regarding spending on marketing versus innovation in the sector, and the subsequent lack of genuine benefits to the consumer.

What type of industry will emerge as a consequence of companies like Clue and Thinx, and who will ultimately reign over it? Changes are again under way. In the 2010s, P&G launched a Tampax-branded

menstrual cup and acquired the organic tampon company L. In Sweden, Essity promptly launched its own range of reusable menstrual underwear and a cup, while Kimberly-Clark promoted a 'tween' line of Kotex products aimed at younger consumers. All the companies discussed in this book have made efforts of varying degree to diversify their use of models, visuals, and language. They have also innovated their use of storefronts through packaging and messaging in order to compete with their new digital-only rivals, while quickly launching digital shop platforms and social media accounts of their own. These moves may indicate that there has indeed been an unsettling of the market by menstrual startups, and/or that existing corporations are strong enough to simply absorb new ideas into their own portfolios. For people working with older brands, the buzz created by startups is fundamentally exciting.[89] The basic rules of any market is improvement through competition, and as the sector broadens and diversifies, this is fundamentally good news for the menstrual product industry as a whole and those who work in it.

Notes

1 Bobel (*New Blood*, 59) noted that 15 alternative menstrual product companies were founded between 1992 and 1999. While this shows that innovation in the sector is not new, it is a small number compared to the 2010s.

2 Journalists have always been important to menstrual advocacy, covering emerging menstrual equity movements and ensuring a written legacy of activist work. For instance, Steinem's 'If Men Could Menstruate' is often cited as a marker of menstrual activism in 1970s America, while Houppert's 'Pulling the Plug' functions in similar ways for the 1990s. In the 2010s, Abigail Jones, 'The Fight to End Period Shaming is Going Mainstream' in *Newsweek* and Sophie Elmhirst, 'Tampon Wars' in *The Guardian* both detailed the contemporary debate about menstrual activism through investigative journalism, and have been frequently cited.

3 Maria Punzi and Mirjam Werner, 'Challenging the Menstruation Taboo One Sale at a Time: The Role of Social Entrepreneurs in the Period Revolution', in Bobel et al., *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, 833–51.

4 'Femtech: Digital Revolution in Women's Health', Frost & Sullivan (2018): https://ww2.frost.com/files/1015/2043/3691/Frost__Sullivan_Femtech.pdf; Reenita Das, 'Women's Healthcare Comes out of the Shadows: Femtech Shows the Way to Billion-Dollar Opportunities', *Forbes* (12 April 2018); Mimi Billing, 'Europe's Top Femtech Startups 2020', *Sifted* (15 September 2020) – note this article was sponsored by Essity Ventures.

5 Primary sources consisted of *Clue's Brand Book* (2017), an interview with Clue graphic designer Kathrin Friedman (10 October 2017), a THINX Media Kit (2017), THINX underwear, and a one-year free subscription to Clue, where I tracked a fake menstrual cycle. The fact that it is possible to track fake cycles which feed into the overall algorithm is in itself noteworthy.

6 Most notably through the publication and translation of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Boston: New England Free Press, 1970) and formalised menstrual tracking systems such as the Justisse Method (1987) for fertility awareness and body literacy, and The Daily Diaries developed in the 1980s via the Centre for Menstrual Cycle and Ovulation Research.

7 For a very early example of corporations suggesting calendar-based tracking, Vostral notes that the Kotex 1935 booklet *Marjorie May's Twelfth Birthday* is authored by a (likely fictional) author with the last name Callender, suggesting that it would 'reinforce the need to count

"calendar days" between menstrual cycles', *Under Wraps,* 137, footnote 23; on Second Wave Feminist approaches to tracking cycles in the US see Bobel, *New Blood*, 85.

8 Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, *Data Feminism* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

9 Michelle Moglia et al., 'Evaluation of Smartphone Menstrual Cycle Tracking Applications Using an Adapted APPLICATIONS Scoring System', *Obstetrics & Gynaecology* Vol 127, No 6 (2016), 1160.

10 For example, Charmaine Li, 'A Close-Up of Clue, the Startup that Aims to Help Women Make Sense of their Fertility Cycle', *Tech.eu*, 5 September 2014; Susan Price, 'How This Period Tracking App is Helping Scientists Fight Disease', *Fortune*, 14 December 2015; Natasha Lomas, 'Period Tracker App Clue Gets $7M to Build a Platform for Female Health', *Tech Crunch*, 9 October 2015; 'Europe's 100 Hottest Startups', *Wired*, 5 August 2015.

11 Patent number EP2879534B1 for 'Moisture-Wicking and Leak-Resistant Underwear Garments' invented by Antonia Saint Dunbar, Miki Agrawal and Radha Agrawal, filed 2 August 2013 by Thinx Inc. to the European Patent Office: https://patents.google.com/patent/EP2879534B1/en.

12 Jessian Choy, 'My Menstrual Underwear Has Toxic Chemicals in It', *Sierraclub.org* (7 January 2020). Klintner discusses the lack of legislation for new menstrual products (as opposed to, for example, sex toys) and notes how much confusion existed about how to categorise items like menstrual underwear and cups in the 2010s, *Normalizing the Natural,* 140–55.

13 Bobel, *New Blood*, 9; 59.

14 Amy Kesselman, 'The "Freedom Suit": Feminism and Dress Reform in the United States, 1848–1875', *Gender and Society* Vol 5, No 4 (1991), 495–510.

15 Owen, *Innovations in Menstrual Organisation*, 47.

16 *Clue Brand Book*, 3.

17 *Clue Brand Book*, 12.

18 *Clue Brand Book*, 21.

19 *Clue Brand Book*, 13.

20 *Clue Brand Book*, 25; 27.

21 Sarah Fox and Daniel A. Epstein, 'Monitoring Menses: Design-Based Investigations of Menstrual Tracking Applications', in Bobel et al. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, 737.

22 Katie Rogers, 'Twitter Fury Misplaced? M.T.A. is Fine with Underwear Ads on Subway', *New York Times* (22 October 2015).

23 Interview with Katrin Friedman via Skype, 10 October 2017.

24 Interview with Friedman, 10 October 2017.

25 Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), introduction.

26 Sheryl Strandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013); Sophia Amoruso, *#Girlboss* (London: Penguin, 2015).

27 Agrawal, *Do Cool Sh*it: Quit Your Day Job, Start Your Own Business and Live Happily Ever After* (New York: Harper Business, 2013); Agrawal, *Disrupt-Her: A Manifesto for the Modern Woman* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2018).

28 The origins of the term 'She-e-o' may be rooted in the SheEO Foundation, created by Vicky Saunders as a community support system for women and non-binary people in 1999. Email from Operation Manager at SheEO Natalie Geffen, 10 May 2021; 'About Us', SHE-E-O website (2021): https://sheeo.world/about-us/.

29 Agrawal, *Disrupt-Her,* back cover.

30 'Disruptive innovation' has been a buzzword in the startup sector since the 1990s, but scholars argue that the term has been widely misunderstood to stand in for any threat against a sector. True disruptive innovation must create a new market, and change existing markets. Clayton M. Christensen (who defined the term), Rory McDonald, Elizabeth J. Altman, Jonathan E. Palmer, 'Disruptive Innovation: An Intellectual History and Directions for Future Research', *Journal of Management Studies* Vol 44, No 7 (2018), 1043–78.

31 Tin, *Direktøs: Et eventyr om at leve enkelt, lytte til sit hjerte og møde verden* (Copenhagen: Rosinante, 2009).

32 Corinne Post, Ioana Latu and Liuba Belkin, 'A Female Leadership Trust Advantage in Times of Crisis: Under What Conditions?', *Psychology of Women Quarterly* Vol 43, No 2 (2019), 215.

33 Tin, 'What Promise Do Data and Femtech Hold for Female Health?', *HelloClue.com* (14 November 2017).

34 Tin, 'What Promise'
35 Tin, 'What Promise'.
36 D'Ignazio and Klein, *Data Feminism,* introduction.
37 Kaitlyn Tiffany, 'Period-Tracking Apps Are Not for Women', *Vox* (16 November 2018).
38 Tin, 'What Promise'
39 Fox and Epstein discuss how Levchin seemingly compared menstrual and financial tracking in terms of risk assessment, 'Monitoring Menses: Design-Based Investigations of Menstrual Tracking Applications' in Bobel et al. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies,* 735.
40 Number of users in April 2020, according to Clue.
41 Tin, 'Making Clue a Sustainable Business', *Medium* (16 August 2017). Tin wrote through an editorial Medium portal called 'CluedIn', which is difficult to find information about, but seems to be a paid collaboration between Clue and Medium.
42 Tin, 'Making Clue a Sustainable Business'
43 Karen E.C. Levy, 'Intimate Surveillance', *Idaho Law Review* Vol 51 (2015), 686.
44 Levy, 'Intimate Surveillance', 693.
45 Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges'.
46 For contemporary critiques of such claims, see for example Kasey Windels, Sara Champlin, Summer Shelton, Yvette Sterbenk and Maddison Poteet, 'Selling Feminism: How Female Empowerment Campaigns Employ Postfeminist Discourses', *Journal of Advertising* Vol 48, No 1 (2020), 18–33; Nosheen Iqbal, 'Femvertising: How Brands Are Selling #Empowerment to Women', *The Guardian* (12 October 2015); the 'Faux Feminism Project': https://www.fauxfeminism.com/; Rebecca Jennings, 'Why "Feminist" Advertising Doesn't Make Us Better Feminists', *Vox* (5 November 2018); Amy Otto, 'Sorry, Feminists, "Girlboss" Epitomizes How Capitalism Empowers Women', *The Federalist* (25 April 2017); Klintner, *Normalizing the Natural*, 171. Note how the writers are published in scholarly, right-wing, left-wing and mainstream media outlets.
47 Marie Solis, 'A Peek Inside Miki Agrawal's Feminist Void', *VICE* (7 February 2019).
48 Russell Gray, 'Staffing Agency for Procter & Gamble's KCK Plant Faces EEOC Lawsuit', *Kansas City Business Journal* (2 February 2018).
49 Veronica Darby, Plaintiff-appellant, v. Kimberly-Clark Corporation Defendant-appellee, 77 F.3d 488 (9th Cir. 1996).
50 Solis, 'A Peek Inside'.
51 Solis, 'A Peek Inside'.
52 Choy, 'My Menstrual Underwear Has Toxic Chemicals in It'.
53 Scholars have attempted to verbalise the paradox of critiquing feminist advertising. Amanda Laird muses about being the target consumer and critical recipient for such ads in *Heavy Flow: Breaking the Curse of Menstruation* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2019), 28, noting that both Bobel and Kissling verbalised similar arguments at earlier stages of menstrual commercialisation.
54 Catherine Dale and Rosemary Overell, 'Introduction: Orienting Feminism: Media, Activism, and Cultural Representation', in Dale and Overell (eds) *Orienting Feminism, Media, Activism and Cultural Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
55 For transparency, I should add that my own Clue data – entered to test and track the app rather than for personal use – was accessed. As mentioned, this data was fake.
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57 Anna Druet, 'Scientific Research at Clue', *HelloClue.com* (27 March 2018).
58 Ruben Arslan, Katharina Schilling, Tanja Gerlach and Lars Penke, 'Using 26,000 Diary Entries to Show Ovulatory Changes in Sexual Desire and Behaviour', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2018).
59 Inigo Urteaga, David Albers, Marija Vlajic Wheeler, Anna Druet, Hans Raffauf and Noémie Elhadad, 'Towards Personalized Modelling of the Female Hormonal Cycle: Experiments with Mechanistic Models and Gaussian Processes', paper presented at the Workshop on Machine Learning for Health in 2017.
60 Alexandra Alvergne, 'Is Female Health Cyclical? Evolutionary Perspectives on Menstruation', *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* Vol 33, No 6 (2018), 399–414.
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65 Agrawal, 'An Open Letter to Respectfully Quit Telling Me How to "Do Feminism" (and to Just Support One Another, Please!)', *Medium* (5 February 2016); Tin, 'What Promise'.
66 Agrawal, 'An Open Letter'.
67 *Thinx Press Kit 2017*, 2.
68 *Thinx Press Kit 2017*, 9.
69 Chella Quint, 'My Adventures with *Adventures in Menstruating:* A Case Study of Feminist Zinemaking and Period Positivity', *Pages on Art and Design* Vol 19 (2020); 'Let's Call Periods, Periods', Scottish Government website (20 January 2020): https://www.gov.scot/news/lets-call-periods-periods/.
70 Clue has since integrated with Apple's health app.
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72 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, introduction.
73 Elizabeth Arveda Kissling, 'Pills, Periods, and Postfeminism: The New Politics of Marketing Birth Control', *Feminist Media Studies* Vol 13, No 3 (2013), 500.
74 For a critical reading of the concept of 'curing' from a disability studies perspective, see Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
75 Fox and Epstein, 'Monitoring Menses', 733.
76 Bobel, *The Managed Body*, 34; on the lack of benefits from visibly menstruating, Vostral, *Toxic Shock*, 27.
77 Bobel, *The Managed Body*, 34.
78 Fox and Epstein, 'Monitoring Menses', 746.
79 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).
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81 Jeremy Hunsinger, Matthew M. Allen and Lisbeth Klastrup (eds), *Second International Handbook of Internet Studies* (New York: Springer, 2018); Alison Harvey, *Feminist Media Studies* (New York: Polity Books, 2020); Amy Shields Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015).
82 Deborah Lupton, 'Australian Women's Use of Health and Fitness Apps and Wearable Devices: A Feminist New Materialism Analysis', *Feminist Media Studies* Vol 20, No 7 (2019).
83 Renee Marie Shelby, 'Techno-Physical Feminism: Anti-Rape Technology, Gender, and Corporeal Surveillance', *Feminist Media Studies* Vol 20, No 8 (2019).
84 Fox, Epstein, 'Monitoring Menses', 733–49.
85 Kissling, 'Pills, Periods and Postfeminism', 500; Shelley M. Park, 'From Sanitation to Liberation? The Modern and Postmodern Marketing of Menstrual Products', *Journal of Popular Culture* Vol 30, No 2 (1996), 149–67.
86 Angela McRobbie, 'Post-Feminism and Popular Culture', *Feminist Media Studies* Vol 4, No 3 (2004), 255.
87 Rosalind Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of Sensibility', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* Vol 10, No 2 (2007), 147.
88 Tin, 'The Rise of a New Category: Femtech', *HelloClue.com* (15 September 2016).
89 Interview with Steinmyller, 3 March 2021.

Conclusion
Free bleeding? Menstruation beyond consumption

> I ran with blood dripping down my legs for sisters who don't have access to tampons and sisters who, despite cramping and pain, hide it away and pretend like it doesn't exist. I ran to say, it does exist, and we overcome it every day.
>
> Madame Gandhi, after running the 2015 London Marathon visibly bleeding.[1]

As censorship and taboos ease, and it becomes more societally acceptable to both discuss menstruation and sell new types of menstrual products, how does the industry adapt? During the last century, advertisers and corporations have been grappling with the challenge of marketing a topic that could not be shown realistically due to a combination of factors, including media censorship, consumer preferences, and menstrual taboos. Throughout this book I have documented how the industry therefore became experts on creating and adapting menstrual symbols, euphemism, and marketing that straddled the boundary between censorship and activism. What happens next? At the time of writing, innovative products and advertising campaigns are entering the market at unprecedented speed, making it challenging to guess who will succeed in shaping the menstrual economy for the next century. Even so, there are some trends from the past that may help us make sense of the menstrual economy of the future.

During the 2010s surge in menstrual activism and discourse, many of the industry's old sales tactics were ridiculed (including by the industry itself), notably the tropes of using blue liquid and hyper-gendered language in advertisements.[2] It was easier for startup companies to enter the market during this period, as they were free from the heavy baggage of menstrual symbolism and could start their work in a time when the

Figure 7.1. Menstrual blood, artwork title 'Floral 1', Wellcome Collection. Courtesy of Beauty in Blood.

rules were being rewritten (see Figure 7.1). In the span of a few years, the way users engaged with products had begun to change. In Scotland, the buy-one-donate-one social enterprise Hey Girls went from an idea in 2018 to a major supplier of Scotland's free product scheme and 'Scotland's top business startup' by 2020.[3] Around the world, subscription services providing direct and discreet access have flourished – with Covid-19 accelerating the trend.[4] New inventions, including reusable applicators (DAME), gloves to wear when handling menstrual products (Pinky, Mami), a combined liner and tampon (Tampliner), and cannabis-infused tampons surfaced (Daye, Whoopi & Maya). Charities welcoming donations of menstrual products have gained public attention (to the point where, in 2021, Bloody Good Period started asking for cash donations instead).[5] In 2021, the United Nations published its bid for the supply of menstrual products to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), inviting traditional and startup companies to compete for long-term tender agreements to supply the organisation's programmes and third-party clients worldwide.[6] Today, some users do not purchase menstrual products at all, relying instead on free items via school, work, foodbanks, charities, prisons, libraries, cafés and more.

For the industry as a whole, the buzz generated by menstrual activism was largely positive. New companies could ride the wave of viral debate surrounding menstruation, whereas teams working in large multinational corporations won the attention of their leadership and were delegated larger budgets from executive management. Yet, people who had worked in the menstrual product industry for decades also watched the new players and frenzied attention with concern.[7] Claims of environmental, feminist, and inclusive business strategies were frequently being made by startups, in a landscape where little legislation existed.[8] While traditional brands like Tampax and Kotex had to conform to media censorship and medical legislation in the post-TSS era, new companies and products were largely free from such scrutiny.[9]

Novel products and ways of providing products have all fundamentally changed the ways some people interact with brands, moving the point of engagement from shops to schools, from advertising to policy, from adult women to children. Predictors note that the field is likely to shift again – and soon – based on consumer interest in sustainable menstrual products, in addition to the growing potential for increasing consumption in large countries such as Brazil and China.[10] These factors present both a threat and an opportunity for the traditional industry, with the corporations discussed in this book adapting in various ways. While Essity has engaged more and more with visual representations of realistic looking menstruation, advocacy work, and creation of award-winning short films, P&G remains firmly invested in their international donation and education programme. The latter's history as a more conservative advertiser and trend-averse company has meant a slow pivot towards more radical branding content, while its launch of a Tampax menstrual cup and acquisition of the organic subscription service L. signals a deeper technological engagement, with product development soon followed by Essity's own launch of a Libresse cup and reusable underwear in 2021.[11] In these ways, startups have forced dinosaurs in the industry to join in a sector-wide reconsideration of what it means to make menstrual products.[12] In my interviews with people in the industry, the question of company responsibility surfaced many times, with advertisers and product developers actively critiquing their own companies' pasts and praising their new competition. Yet, they were keen to stress that the younger companies do not have the same testing or development facilities as they have, nor the 100-year-old expertise in consumer research or trend forecasting. Questions about the workers and their rights also remain obscured, and it is difficult to find out exactly *who* makes menstrual products today, whether they work in a new startup or a more traditional

corporation. Observed in a historical light, many of the long-term norms and strategies of the industry have already resurfaced in new guises, despite the appearance of more choice for the consumer. Workers and management are still largely missing from public discourse, advertising is driving competition, and innovation is not always connected to larger debates about corporate responsibility or safety standards. So, is the industry genuinely changing, simply rebooting, or truly coming of age?

The mature menstrual economy

Beginning in post-war Norway and ending with international digital menstrual tracing, the business landscape that has emerged in these chapters exemplifies the diverse and paradoxical nature of this industry, and shows the many creative ways in which it has adapted to consumers, cultures, and controversy since the 1940s. Stepping back from the specific national examples of each chapter, the contours of this agile, responsive and specific market appears fixed. It still revolves, at its core, around the idea of menstruators as consumers and menstruation as a renewable resource for commercialisation.

The industry's agility is one of its defining features, as is its willingness to engage deeply with menstrual themes and discourse in the face of adversity. Yes, it profits from the menstrual taboo, but it has also had to battle it. In order to be profitable, this industry must always stay one step ahead of the taboo, understanding the morphing qualities of menstrual stigma, trying to balance on the hazardous tightrope between bad and good taste, and outrunning its own rapidly outdated claims from the past. For instance, as it becomes more difficult to market disposable plastic products due to increased political commitment to environmentalism, the industry has pivoted towards 'greener' messaging, while also knowing that a big percentage of their consumers still prefer plastic applicator tampons and disposable pads.[13] Whether consumers like it or not, no one knows as much about their menstrual habits, problems, and wishes as the industry, and it remains adept at reflecting both consumers' stated and actual preferences through its communication strategies.

Writing in the 2000s, Elizabeth Kissling was already outlining the ways in which the industry had changed since its beginnings in the early twentieth century. She described how menstruators had become 'consumers', and how the menstrual product industry worked like other successful profiters of late capitalism.[14] But Kissling also pointed to an

emerging resistance, citing policy work and literary critiques as examples. Since the publication of her book, both tendencies have increased, with capitalist and countercultural forces embracing menstrual themes warmly. These two tendencies have also, at times, worked together to dismantle menstrual taboos – for both profitable and activist aims. This suggests a break away from the world Kissling was describing 15 years ago, and the emergence of a more fluid system of intersecting profitable and charitable aims. Most notably, the chapters in this book have traced the ways successful menstrual product companies have embraced criticism and listened to diverse consumers, whereas those who failed tried to serve up old taboos in new shapes. To succeed in this business, you have to love your critics.

The turn towards welcoming criticism as an important part of brand growth and development also includes corporate engagement with research and scholarship. In archival material and interviews conducted for this study, scholarly critiques of menstrual products often appeared, and are enthusiastically cited and discussed. Clue's partnership with academic institutions, Essity's copy of *The Curse*, and Always's citation of social science studies for the LAG campaign are some of many recent examples. Delighted to see serious (even negative) engagement with their work, the collective menstrual industry has increasingly embraced its analysts, welcomed feedback, changed in response, and actively distanced itself from its past. Interviewees would always insist that they got into the industry to help their consumers, and mentions of feminism were frequent. What seems to have happened sometime in the 2010s is that the industry and its critics found each other, rendering the industry a pseudo-activist space, and menstrual-activist and scholarly spaces into recruitment landscapes for branding ideas. Whether or not the blurring of lines between menstrual product corporations and activism is good for consumers remains to be seen, but the examples in this book (and the wider historiography of menstrual products written by Kissling, Vostral, Freidenfelds and others) provide a corrective by reminding us that this is not the first time this has happened. As such, I offer some lenses through which to approach the industry going forward, namely the industry as employer, private enterprise, educator, and Western.

Industry as employer

Contemporary menstrual habits are 100 years old or so. In cases such as Norway and former Soviet countries, less time has elapsed since the tampon and pad market was saturated. During these decades, Western

consumers have seen more choices for menstrual management, and generally no longer make their own. Therefore, the gap between maker and consumer has widened, from being the same person, to a relationship between national company and consumer, to the advent of multinational corporate production and mass markets and production.[15] The distance between those who produce and those who consume these products has increased substantially since the industry's beginnings, in tandem with larger developments in personal care. In this book, encounters with some of the workers who made pads and tampons are reminders of the labour inherent in this industry, for example the Norwegian 'housewives' fighting for equal access to training and pay, and the Ukrainian women who made the first years of Femtech a financial success. At Essity, mill workers become textile-experts, followed by a shift towards wood-pulp production and links to the forestry industry. Scientists and product developers at Kimberly-Clark, Essity and P&G furthermore underscore the industry's close relationship to the sciences, while advertisers who see their own work as pioneering in an era of stigmas remind us that many in the industry sincerely wish to dismantle taboos. These are the men and, mostly, women who physically made these popular and habit-changing products, day after day, usually working shifts, low-paid, and unable to describe what they did to outsiders for fear of seeming vulgar. Many of these women, whether working for Saba in the 1950s or for Tambrands in the 1980s, link directly to the turbulent history of low-waged factory work combined with unwaged housework, and the parallel political movement organised around the International Wages for Housework Campaign and Women's Strikes during the same century.[16] The history of menstrual products is therefore also a history of hidden labour, as well as of the stigma attached to making pads and tampons.

While menstrual product manufacturing is a story populated by working-class women, leadership was male. Many of these chapters document the hyper-gendered nature of the industry, whereby women dominate the factory floor and men occupy the boardroom. By no means unique to this industry, the case of menstrual product manufacturing illustrates facets of wider heteronormativity in the twentieth century. On one hand, women workers were given the opportunity to work because male leaders thought it would be more appropriate for them to make 'feminine' products. On the other hand, the gender binary was held tightly in place in terms of actual influence over products, technological development, or working practices. For anyone seeking to blur the gender boundary, for instance when Saba workers asked for access to stereotypical

male skills training or Thinx hired cis- and trans-male models in their campaigns, ridicule often followed.

How could some male leaders, who were admittedly ahead of their time in terms of breaking menstrual taboos, still not really see the women they claimed to want as their consumers and workers as full human beings? Even when it would have been in the company's best interest, they often neglected to ask women's opinions about products and marketing, sometimes resulting in failures like Kotex's unpopular pad cases, SCA's divisive and expensive Anatomic brand, and the roll-out of technologically inferior products by P&G on the African market. In contrast, the times workers and women made their way into decision-making, success often followed. At Saba, women pressured the management to put an end to the environmental 'Saba snow' problem, resulting in higher productivity. At Essity, the product development team were proud of their ability to test their own products while menstruating. For Kotex, the entire company lore became tied to female nurses at war and, at P&G, feedback from consumers regarding TSS and other negative experiences of menstrual products led to the development of the thin and super-absorbent Always product, and more focus on product safety and transparency.[17] Today, when most menstrual product companies and startups rely heavily on the charisma of their female leaders or founders, a new gender boundary has been created in which women – by virtue of being women – are seen as best suited to deal with menstrual products. Interestingly, this comes at a time when the visual inclusion of non-binary and trans menstruators through advertising is increasing – suggesting the potential for solidarity across the gender spectrum, while also making sense in terms of growing the market beyond cis-women and expanding into 'pink capitalism'.[18] In the words of one brand manager, the fundamental question for the industry continues to be: 'How can we play a role in tackling the issues that prevent the category from growing?'[19] Whether the issues are TSS, low productivity on the factory floor, Period Poverty, or trans-exclusion, the industry's agile approach to consumer wishes has helped it grow. Since so many of the workers who make up the industry are also menstruators and product consumers, the sector's role as employer automatically connects it to embodied expertise.

Industry as private enterprise

It may be obvious to note that the sector is simply a business, but it is worth remembering. In this book, we have met a collective industry which is fundamentally a group of private enterprises competing for consumer

attention, jealously watching each other, and always competing. It is neither more villainous nor angelic than any other capitalist endeavour.

As a group of private enterprises, the menstrual product industry has made many promises to consumers and is quick to include messages of social justice in order to gain their attention. Throughout, the promise of emancipation through products has been made frequently. In Norway, women were promised an 'exotic', Orientalist and luxurious menstrual experience invoking female royalty. In Sweden, pin-up models and Mimosa flowers presented a hygienic and feminine ideal. In the Soviet Union, Tampax were launched on International Women's Day to underline its link to women's rights. In Thatcher's Britain, Gorbachev's Russia, and Reagan's America, menstrual product manufacturing was part of a political commitment to free market liberalism. In the segregated United States, Black and white women were sold dreams of emancipation through pads while being visually separated in marketing. Online, Clue pledges that its product will help fill the female health gap, while Thinx suggests its inclusion of trans models equals the work done by queer activists outside the for-profit world.

Despite its promises, this collective of private enterprises has also contributed to many of the problems associated with menstrual habits today, including Period Poverty, the Tampon Tax, TSS, and the paradigm of menstrual invisibility that keeps consumers from seeking help when facing severe pain.[20] The stories explored in this book suggest two interlinked truths: it is nearly impossible to experience a free period, and, because of this, it is easy to profit from menstruation. While earlier scholars have shown how patriarchal structures benefit from keeping menstrual taboos alive, this book provides more evidence regarding how capitalism has also been a driving force in keeping menstruation embarrassing and, by extension, profitable. The menstrual taboo is an excellent business strategy, which may be part of why it is so difficult to root out completely.

As a group of private enterprises, the menstrual economy fits into a larger world of personal care capitalism. For example, contraceptives, diapers, formula milk, bras, and makeup share many of the same hyper-gendered power hierarchies. Similar to menstruation, these items have also transgressed the boundaries of private enterprise and entered the arena of activism or state intervention in recent decades.[21] In this way, the menstrual economy and other parts of personal care capitalism function differently from sectors which simply lobby governments to gain more influence. Instead, their elevation into conversations about social justice means that these entities operate beyond the private sphere and engage also with public and political arenas.

Because menstruation has been such a taboo topic, the industry is an obvious and well-organised potential partner for any group or nation-state seeking to tackle menstrual taboos. And for states that champion private enterprise and capitalism, partnering with menstrual product companies makes good financial sense. Examples of this traversing of private and public influence is clearly seen in the prominent role of corporations on the TSS-related Tampon Task Force in 1980s North America, the End Period Poverty Task Force in 2010s Britain, the Scottish roll-out of free products, as well as in campaigns to end menstrual product marketing censorship, and the push for gender diversity in health tracking.[22] The case studies in this book underline the power and potential of the collective industry to fill the gap of menstrual knowledge where nothing else exists. The advent of a better organised, international, and properly funded field of independent critical menstruation studies research may in time provide an alternative to this paradigm. In the meantime, while the industry continues to get involved in policy and causes, it is useful to remember that the sector is a business and large employer first and foremost, and makes its decisions from that point of view.

Industry as educator

In the early part of the twentieth century, menstrual product companies accessed their consumers through education as well as advertising. These educational projects were often aimed at schools, encompassing films, pamphlets and sessions with skilled nurses. As censorship eased and advertising became easier, educational efforts moved from the classroom (although it never completely disappeared there) and into the public realm through mass marketing. By the 2010s, corporations disseminated many of the same ideas that they had previously communicated in schools to a large, varied, international audience, including policy makers and men. Campaigns such as Kimberly-Clark's 'Carmilla' series, Thinx's subway advertisements, Clue's free blog about menstrual health, and Essity's 'Blood Normal' campaign combined some older ideas about menstrual education with new ideas about effective branding. By updating and incorporating the basic ideas about combatting menstrual taboos, companies in the 2020s are seeking to educate everyone, rather than just girl children awaiting menarche. This shift is monumental, moving product placement and educational marketing out of the classroom and into the world.

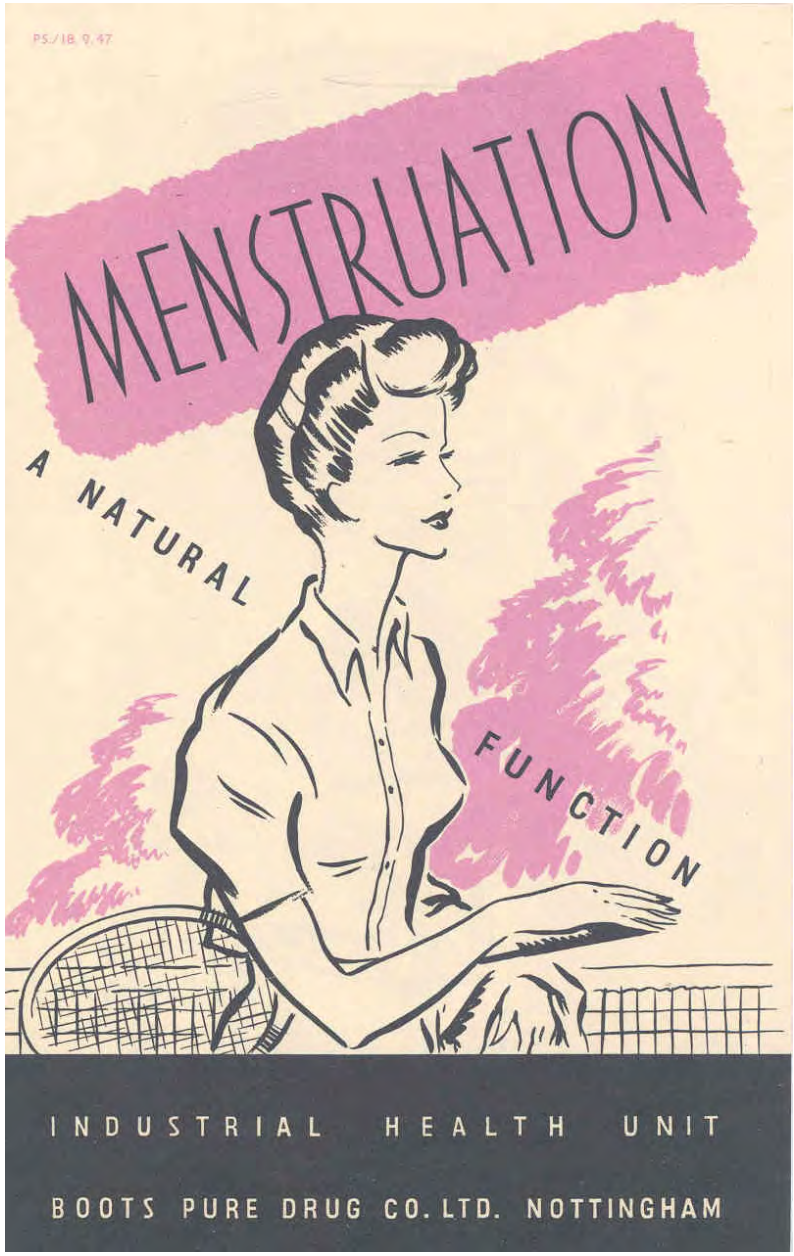

Figure 7.2. 'Menstruation: A Natural Function', leaflet, 1940–1950, issued by the Industrial Health Unit. Archive ref. WBA/BT/6/39/3/14, Walgreens Boots Alliance Heritage.

Why educate large audiences about menstruation rather than rely on the 'concealment imperative' to continue to sell?[23] Reusable options have not yet unsettled the traditional tampon and pad market. For the product industry, hormonal birth control and options that eliminate bleeding altogether are the real enemy, not the occasional cup. As such, the move towards embracing menstrual bleeding is useful for the industry, making the point that 'menstruation matters' exactly during the decades where some argue that it is 'obsolete'.[24]

Throughout the twentieth century, the industry's championing of menstrual education and literacy has served it well, managing to amplify activist and health professionals' messages regarding the positive aspects of bleeding (See Figure 7.2). At the time of writing, the industry's sudden and explosive inclusion of realistic images of blood in advertising illustrates an anxiety regarding hormonal contraceptives, as well as the smaller threats of free bleeding and adaptation of cup and reusable pad habits. It is no wonder that the sector is nervous, because those who step away from disposable options are often very vocal about their choices, becoming educators in their own right.[25] This attitude – and the practice of free bleeding itself – can be seen as part of a broader history of 'culture jamming', which includes artistic and creative disruption of media and advertising through efforts such as ironic subversion of branding tropes and slogans, campaigns that expose negative effects of products, billboard vandalism, events like Buy Nothing Day, and anti-consumerism protest.[26] While older corporations celebrate their products through efforts such as the 'Carmilla' series and reviews of Always pads by YouTube influencers, users of cups in particular are proud of their environmental choices and take on the role of educating others – also often on free, online platforms, and by critiquing and exposing corporate control.[27] In contrast, this is excellent for the cup and reusable pad sector, as word-of-mouth advertising is cheap, quick and, in an age of digital communication, almost global. Zooming out, we can see how the larger ecosystem of the menstrual industry is still thriving by adapting to environmental and technological developments, and how the cup, reusable pad, and hormonal contraceptives all have a role to play in the educational efforts of the industry as a whole. However, as reusable product manufacturers succeed, they will in turn become part of the sector and can no longer claim outsider status. As such, they also run the risk of becoming targets for the already energised anti-consumerist menstrual movement.

As seen before, the views of different types of consumers are also likely to change in future, and the efforts to educate the public through branding will likely follow suit. While early menstrual product brands

focused on fronting and educating white middle-class women, the 2010s have seen an eruption of advertising featuring diversity in terms of gender, body, and race, rendering the historical 'invisibility' and dominance of whiteness in the industry clearer by comparison.[28] The Eurocentric beauty standards featured in Saba, Mölnlycke and Kimberly-Clark marketing from the mid-century effectively excluded large groups of potential consumers in favour of courting white women with disposable incomes.[29] In contrast, advertising from the late twentieth century onwards is decidedly multicultural, increasingly queer, and inclusive of different body shapes. Age is the only variant that has not changed, as companies realise that it is in their interest to welcome diverse consumers warmly, as long as they are not too close to menopause. In contrast, disabilities remain largely ignored in terms of both marketing and technological solutions, necessitating parents, carers, and children to take on the work of education and DIY-hacking products.[30] Campaigns from Thinx and Essity in 2021 featured models who use leg prosthesis, signalling a very late inclusion also of this group, and an effort by the industry to educate the public about (some types of) disability that are compatible with menstruation.[31]

Keeping in mind the industry's role as private enterprise rather than charity, these recent changes in marketing and education should be read in the light of business history as well as corporate responsibility. While diversity in advertising can play important roles in challenging stereotypes more broadly, the industry's inclusion of more groups of menstruators is clearly also an effort to court specific consumers at a time when more criticism is being levelled at its products.[32] As the example of the Kenyan #MyAlwaysExperience attests to, this does not mean that consumers have been silent when their preferred products fall beneath expected standards. While the industry frequently patronises some groups as more conservative and prone to menstrual taboos, consumers have asserted agency and power in their critique of the industry, rather than being passive receptors of faulty products. It is an example of consumers educating the industry, and the industry adopting and appropriating their own educational material in response.

Industry as Western

In its quest to solve the problem of the 'leaky feminine body' and to educate consumers, the industry has fronted a specific Western view of menstruation rooted in whiteness, medicine, industrialisation, and mythologies of

modernity.[33] For example, the twentieth-century industry operated mostly in the English-speaking world (including Scandinavia, where English is widely used), creating branding from this specific linguistic and cultural tradition. In a language where menstruation is often signposted through euphemism and codes, there has been an immediate knock-on effect in terms of the marketing of menstrual products through the words used to sell.[34] Furthermore, the dominant corporations of the twentieth century have been operating from a handful of countries and, from there, reached the world. As such, this is not, for example, an African, Asian, Native American, or Sámi narrative of menstruation, but one fundamentally shaped by the US, Scandinavia, and Britain – a distinctive traditional Western approach to the body shaped by corporations with colonial roots. The consequences of this limited viewpoint have been many, from the exclusion of Black models in menstrual product marketing to the fronting of 'dryness' as an ideal menstrual technology experience over any other, to the inclusion of deodorised products and the lack of engagement with religious or coming-of-age rituals linked to menstruation. Alongside popular media, the industry has also fronted a view of 'the Global North as progressive and the Global South as regressive'.[35] The industry therefore had a responsibility in its projection of specific menstrual discourses through the world, a role that has in part shaped the iconography and semiotics of menstruation itself.

In the global roll-out of Western products that galvanized in the 1960s, the industry also experienced the many ways in which their cultural viewpoints of menstruation were not universal. Through the decades, international consumers have been vocal in questioning product price, quality, and marketing – with a sceptical eye to the role of Western imperialism and culture. These critical global insights force the industry to ask: How would menstrual discourse feel and look today if it had been pioneered by African companies, or Asian corporations, or mainland European narratives? How would menstrual culture be different if the industry was led by more women, or not commercialised at all? Some of these answers are currently emerging, as the surge in focus on ethical menstrual products has been driven in part by Kenyan, Indian, Canadian, Scottish and Nepalese people who point out the limitations of the current industry.[36] These countries, and many more, are at the heart of a new reckoning with the menstrual industry, centred on questions of economy, environmentalism and equality.

The geographic locations of the companies explored in this book are part of a rapidly expanding menstrual market which, for the first time, is not centred on Western companies reaching out into the world, but the

reverse. The influence of startups and companies in the Global South is a relatively new development, which has already led to healthier international free-market competition, genuine discussions about cost, quality reassurance, product testing, and inclusive marketing. The basic rule of free-market economies centres on improvement through competition, and the current moment could provide an energizer to the industry akin to the 'Coca-Cola wars', in the words of one P&G employee.[37] This tense market will perhaps even destabilise the major players explored in this book, who have dominated it thus far. Having examined the industry's progress in Norway, Sweden, Britain, North America, the Soviet Union, and Europe, we have witnessed the rise and fall and rise again of Western approaches to menstruation. Will it wobble under the pressure now coming from the rest of the world? Market researchers do not yet think so, although recent reports are noting a shiver of nervousness in the field.[38]

In an era when discussions about colonialism, Black Lives Matter, and racism have been covered extensively in the media from all the traditional corporations' nations, it stands to reason that a reckoning with the industry's own role in colonial history and imperialism will come soon. From its role in Indigenous history in North America and Scandinavia, to the centring of white creators and women, to the whiteness paradigm of product advertising, to the patronising messages about girls in the Global South, and the industry's role in environmental pollution – all of these factors mean that, increasingly, marketing has to do a lot of heavy lifting to balance corporate histories. But consumers do not always accept apologies, excuses or diversions. Startups are providing alternatives to companies with troubled pasts, while the option of free bleeding removes the individual from the industry entirely.

Free bleeding as boycott

If free-market capitalism is about consumer choice through competition, then any menstrual experience should include the freedom to opt out of corporate-driven choices. So, what are the alternatives? Is a period free of any costs possible in the Western world? New startups are expanding to a degree not seen since the 1920s, cups and reusable pads render the need for monthly purchasing nearly obsolete, and hormonal birth control can help eliminate blood almost entirely. Yet, none of these are entirely free, and there are costs other than the obvious financial burden associated with maintaining a body that never visibly bleeds.[39]

While niche, there are several reasons why people might opt out of menstrual consumerism, which has contributed to shifting menstrual politics from private to public spheres through introducing more visual signs such as blood.[40] Menstruators may not always be able to or wish to use products due to reasons as varied as economic constraints or poverty, gender dysmorphia, embarrassment about using menstrual products, disability, and chronic pain. There are also many parts of a typical lifespan that may make consumers revisit or question the products they have habitually used, for example during and after pregnancy, menopause, operations, transition, hysterectomy, or illness. Due to the racial disparity in women's health care, Black, Asian and minority ethnic women in societies dominated by white medical and corporate professions already face added stigma when discussing reproduction, including menstruation and related problems with products.[41] These reasons may lead to a menstruator rejecting traditional products and menstrual bleeding in favour of hormonal birth control or free bleeding, for example. Like Gandhi, people who chose this are not necessarily aggressively against available products, but rather seek out what the alternative might feel like. Free bleeding offers many practical disadvantages, but it can also allow people to experience menstruation in a new way. Gandhi, for instance, insists that she was more comfortable when running, choosing this benefit to the disadvantage of societal stigma and washing of clothing (likely needed after running a marathon at any rate).[42] But she was also making a public transgressive statement about solidarity, and a declaration of sisterhood with people who struggle with poverty.[43] For artists like Gandhi, blood may also be a creative opportunity as subject or material. Since the 1960s at least, artists have revisited and reshaped the iconic forms of tampons and pads in their work – suggesting that also these taboo everyday items can be recontextualised and given new meaning and value.[44] Punk-activists of the 1980s and 1990s were no strangers to visible blood, and musicians like Tori Amos, PJ Harvey, Janet Jackson, and Dolly Parton have featured menstrual blood on their covers and in their texts. More recently, artists have explored the iconicity of tampons and pads, for instance in the life-sized tampon clay sculptures made by Bee Hughes (see Figure 7.3), and in the menstrual pad costume created by drag artist Manila Luzon (banned from appearing on RuPaul's Drag Race in 2019).[45]

For some feminists, boycott of commercial products was a part of their protest against patriarchal systems of oppression.[46] For charities helping those who cannot afford products or media organisations covering 'period poverty', free bleeding offers a moment of radical empathy and understanding.[47] And for those experimenting with the

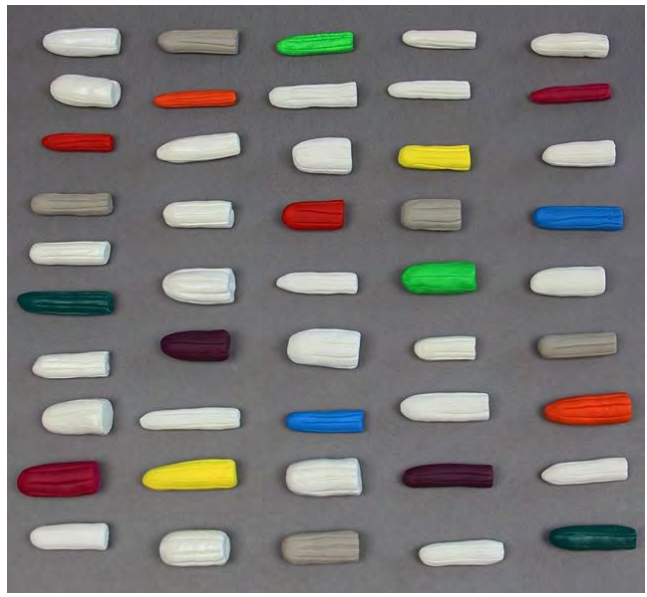

Figure 7.3. Bee Hughes (2018) *Lifetime Supply* (for Being Human festival), hand painted sculptures, size varies, photographed for publicity for Periodical exhibition (curator Bee Hughes) as part of Being Human festival of the humanities, artist's collection. Copyright Bee Hughes, permission courtesy of the artist.

boundaries of their own internalised menstrual shame, trying out free bleeding – if only just once – may challenge an individual's perceptions.

Free bleeding, whether out of necessity or choice, also challenges the industry. When some consumers are actively opting out of the paradigm of menstrual invisibility and embracing the stigma associated with visibly bleeding instead, the modus operandi of the sector is questioned. After Gandhi and other high-profile cases of public bleeding were covered in the media, images of blood began to dominate menstrual product advertising. Essity, P&G, Kimberly-Clark, and most startups are today saturated in red colours, suggesting that menstruation is nothing to hide or feel shame about. But the balance between embracing the radical visual potential of menstrual blood and selling items designed to hide it is tense. Fundamentally, free bleeding has pushed the industry to adapt visually, underlining the role of the 'non-user' within paradigms of consumption and consumer habits, reminding menstruators that the 'naturalness' of the industry and its 'necessary' products can be rejected.[48] These 'non-users' likely have some knowledge of menstrual technologies, and so constitute potential consumers of products in the future. Effectively, they are

boycotting an industry that has become imbued with Western assumptions about gender and hygiene, joining a long history of nonviolent, voluntary, and intentional abstentions from using gendered products fronted by women.[49] How can the industry adapt and include those who are questioning or withdrawing entirely from it? How much further can it bend to messages about the wonders of menstrual blood without actively advocating for free bleeding? And how patient will consumers be while they figure this out? The answers will depend not only on consumer pressure and withdrawal from the industry through boycotts, but on the energy and chaos inserted into the industry by startups and media scrutiny moving forwards.

When Gandhi ran the London Marathon in the 2010s whilst bleeding visibly, the media coverage was notable because journalists found it worthy of the news cycle and connected her decision to the menstrual equity movement more generally. English-language media coverage of free bleeding around the same time included discussion of cartoonist and health educator Cass Clemmer's photograph of free bleeding as a transman, protesters bleeding at End Period Poverty marches, and Yoga instructor Steph Gongora's bloodstained white outfit.[50] In the same decade, even critics of free bleeding unwittingly fronted the practice by creating a fake discussion (with images) showing what was framed as extreme feminist activity. This stunt was also covered by journalists, at first as a real phenomenon.[51] As such, the media's sudden interest in menstruation has been part of reframing the stunts, artworks, and activism that have been going on for much longer, elevating existing free bleeding practices into mainstream public discourse.[52]

Yet, most people are clearly not free bleeding all the time. Gandhi's run shows what that would look like in reality. Blood is still largely categorised as unacceptable to see in public, as it blurs and 'smudges' the categories of cleanliness and dirt, bringing disorder to the longstanding status quo of menstrual invisibility.[53] Setting aside the question as to whether free bleeding is something menstruators actually *want* to do, practitioners still have to solve practical issues such as additional washing of clothes, anxiety about public display, and even the aesthetics of blood stains. The industry knows this, and will continue to balance messages about 'empowered bleeding and dignified menstruation' for as long as it can.[54] Although many corporations have been quick to adopt the queer activist terminology of 'menstruator', it is really a broadening of the term 'consumer'. The radical potential of free bleeding therefore not only suggests solidarity across gender lines, but a move away from being a 'consumer' to being a menstruator or a person free from the industry entirely.

Menstruation as renewable resource

The industry has a role to play in the improvement of menstrual health, recently defined as 'a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle'.[55] This book's focus on the relationship between large Western corporations and the menstrual cycle adds to the growing scholarship that asserts that companies are increasingly functioning as formative actors of international and private systems of power.[56] Recent menstrual product campaigns have done much to change the conversations about period stigma, at times eclipsing the underlying decades-long work done by activists and artists. The media's engagement with the industry's visual and conceptual ideas have also played an important part in shaping governmental and policy approaches to menstrual problems.[57] The inclusion of menstrual product corporations on the very policy boards designated to solving Period Poverty underlines their continued role in creating the economy of menstruation so familiar to consumers in the West today.[58] Having partially created the problem of Period Poverty, the same corporations are now part of solving it. And they do so handsomely, through charitable work, donations, education, and advocacy, using their global platforms to raise awareness of menstrual issues. The industry's collective role, for example, in including transmen and non-binary people in menstrual debates cannot be ignored at a time when both groups are under attack.[59] Similarly, the industry's role in talking about menstruation and breaking the taboos associated with doing so has no doubt been important in raising general awareness about the topic in recent decades. Could the sector be an ally for menstruators and activists, or would such a reading be naïve?

The industry has a much larger, more powerful, and global platform to advocate from than any individual activist or single charity, and it uses this power increasingly to champion issues first identified by queer, Black, postcolonial, feminist, and even Marxist critiques of menstrual taboos. In doing so, the industry fits into a morphed version of late capitalism in which advocates find their messages eerily echoed and even celebrated by for-profit entities. These 'company-states' are hybrid entities who transgress traditional definitions of both corporation and advocacy.[60] Part of a much longer history, in which corporations (some of which have been discussed in this book) occupied Indigenous land in the name of progress, companies function as states in their global enterprises, carving out physical space and power over natural resources and people. In the

menstrual economy, menstruation is akin to a free, natural, and renewable resource, whereas the plastic and disposable products represent the non-reusable 'fossil fuels' of the industry. Despite being 'only a bit of blood', menstruation has become a large economic issue because there is an assumption that 'managing menstruation requires resources'.[61]

Take the example of the Scottish and Kenyan governments, who voted to ensure that menstrual products would be available for free to those who needed them.[62] In both cases, anxiety about period poverty, general poverty, girls' attendance at school, and questions about loss of productivity and the resulting economic impacts were drivers of change, inspired by the decades-long grassroots work of activists and campaigners.[63] The policies, however, of course did not mean that menstrual products themselves changed fiscal value overnight. Rather, the recipient of the bill shifted from individual consumer to national government. This can be taken as a sign that, by the 2010s, Scotland and Kenya – alongside organisations and institutions as vast and different as the Norwegian and Swedish military, Mexico City local governance, supermarkets in Ireland, and countless schools and prisons across the world – accepted that the bill had previously been sent to the wrong recipient. This reversed the historic assumptions about menstrual products being *personal* care items rather than *universal* products akin to toilet paper. However, from an industry perspective it does not really matter who pays the bill as long as people keep consuming products. In these ways, government and policy efforts to 'end period poverty' have come at a good time for the industry, ensuring a steady stream of commissions and funding at the very moment when individual consumers are becoming more critical.

The work of activists in shaping this new discourse about free bleeding should not be underestimated. For 100 years, the menstrual product industry maintained its power despite being challenged repeatedly by consumers. Activists have achieved a lot with few resources. Using digital and traditional media, users have succeeded, for instance, in questioning terms like 'feminine hygiene' and 'sanitary protection', upended the norm of concealing ingredients, advocated for free products to those in need, abolished taxation on products in many countries, championed gender-inclusive terminology, and challenged the very idea of hiding menstruation itself.[64] Today, the industry looks to these critical voices for future trends, as well as its competitors. As such, the market is, by all traditional measures, 'healthier' than ever before, providing consumers with more influence as the historic silence surrounding menstruation and related products thaws.[65]

Yet, the steady, small, unpractical, and messy trickle of free bleeding provides a genuine threat of boycott for the industry as an option that negates the entire system. While homemade menstrual products and free bleeding have been dismissed as unrealistic and similar to the difficult and labour-intense management methods of the past, both strategies also invoke a situation not yet seen in industrialised societies: a truly free period by choice, not necessity. For now, consumers and corporations exist in a twilight love–hate relationship in which both seek better ways of managing menstruation. In this relationship, the consumer is powerful because whomever bleeds controls the profit margins of an industry dependent on a renewable resource. And the corporations remain powerful as an entity with international influence on menstrual discourse.

When Gandhi ran the marathon, her decision to forego the historic 'menstrual concealment imperative' was underpinned by her intentions to raise awareness of menstrual stigma and poverty.[66] For industry and consumer alike, her choice can be seen as a generous move from an artist willing to outline a futuristic vision of menstruation free from capitalism. In glimpsing this future, both industry and consumers have the opportunity to understand what is gained and lost when using menstrual products and, as a consequence, why these items have value as technologies, commodities and symbols.

In the early twentieth century, consumers often asked: Why should I pay for something that was previously free? Today, consumers are rediscovering that question, while the industry prepares a new set of answers. The future interaction between consumers and industry will depend on many factors, but it is nevertheless possible to predict that the days of quiet conversation and underground protest against the industry have already changed. In the 2020s, the menstrual product industry is a part of mainstream debates about gender, poverty and environmentalism. It has ascended to the highest levels of economic and political discourse and, consequentially, new levels of scrutiny. Will this moment result in new menstrual habits free from consumptions, or a tightening of the relationship between corporations and menstruators? The next 100 years will tell.

Notes

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4 'Menstrual Subscription', Trend Hunter (2021): https://www.trendhunter.com/protrends/menstrual-subscription.
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15 Lara Owen has expanded on the idea of redistributing labour in relation to the increasing popularity of the menstrual cup, *Innovations in Menstrual Organisation: Redistributing Boundaries, Capitals, and Labour* (Doctoral thesis, Monash Business School, 2020).
16 Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2020).
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30 Fay Angelo, Heather Anderson and Rose Stewart, *Special Girls' Business* (Secret Girls' Business, 2015); Robyn Stewart, *The Autism-Friendly Guide to Periods* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019); Vikalp and the Pearl Academy of Fashion's 'Kahani Her Mahine Ki' (Menstruation Kit) for visually impaired people (2011): http://www.vikalpdesign.com/sadhvi_thukral.html; Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council in consultation with blind and deaf women, *As We Grow Up* (tactile book for visually impaired people) (2019): https://www.wsscc.org/resources-feed/grow-tactile-book-menstrual-hygiene-management-facilitators-manual/

31 It is notable that leg prosthesis is included, as this is one of several types of abilities that does not render using traditional menstrual products very different to those without prosthesis. On the use of some disabilities over others in advertising see Jonathan Bacon, 'How Brands Are Taking a Proactive Approach to Disability', *Marketing Week* (13 April 2016).

32 J. Finkelstein and A. von Eye provided early evidence about how different groups prefer different products in 'Sanitary Product Use by White, Black, and Mexican American Women', *Public Health Repository* Vol 105, No 5 (1990), 491–596. The reasons for this cannot be untied from the longstanding harm done by corporations and medical institutions towards Black women in particular, as detailed by D. Ojanuga, 'The Medical Ethics of the "Father of Gynaecology", Dr J. Marion Sims', *Journal of Medical Ethics* Vol 19, No 1 (1993), 28–31; Vanessa Gamble, 'Under the Shadow of Tuskegee: African Americans and Health Care', *American Journal of Public Health* Vol 87, No 11 (1997), 1773–8; Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (ed.), *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Harriet Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

33 Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997); for an analysis of leaking as a positive experience see Shauna M. MacDonald, 'Leakey Performances: The Transformative Potential of the Menstrual Leak', *Women's Studies in Communication* Vol 30 No 3 (2007), 340–57.

34 Julie-Marie Strange, 'Menstrual Fictions: Languages of Medicine and Menstruation, c. 1850–1930', *Women's History Review* Vol 9, No 3 (2000), 607–28.

35 Chris Bobel and Inga Winkler, '"Bizarre" and "Backward": Saviorism and Modernity in Representations of Menstrual Beliefs and Practices in the Popular Media', *Feminist Formations* Vol 33, No 2 (2021), 313.

36 See for example the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation (headquartered in Nepal), and global initiatives led by organisers in Africa and Asia such as Menstrual Hygiene (later renamed Health) Day on 28 May each year, and South Africa's 'Minister of Menstruation' Candice Chirwa. Bobel provides a history of menstrual activism in the Global South in 'Making Menstruation Matter in the Global South: Mapping a Critical History', in *The Managed Body,* 69–109.

37 Interview with Steinmyller, 3 March 2021.

38 Potdar, *Feminine Hygiene Product Market by Type*, introduction.

39 For instance, free bleeding in a sexual context may be censored, as evidenced by the long-standing debate about menstrual porn online, see Laura Helen Marks, 'Period Porn: Menstrual Blood at the Margins', in Berkeley, *Menstruation Now*, 59–80.

40 Bobel, Fahs, 'From Bloodless Respectability to Radical Menstrual Embodiment: Shifting Menstrual Politics from Private to Public', *Signs* Vol 45, No 4 (2020), 955–83.

41 Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists, 'RCOG Position Statement: Racial Disparities in Women's Healthcare', *RCOG.co.uk* (6 March 2020).

42 On the social stigma of visibly bleeding, see Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan Chrisler, 'The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma', *Sex Roles* Vol 68, No 1 (2013), 9–18.

43 On menstrual stains as 'graffiti', see Fahs, *Out for Blood: Essays on Menstruation and Resistance* (SUNY Press, 2016), 33.
44 Kathy Battista, 'The Body and Performance Art', in *Renegotiating the Body: Feminist Art in 1970s London* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013); Ruth Green-Cole, 'Gendered Heterotopias: Creating Space for Menstrual Blood in Contemporary Art', in László Munteán and Hans Christian Post, *Landscapes of Monstrosity* (Brill, 2016), 39–47; Fahs, 'Smear It on Your Face: Menstrual Art, Performance, and Zines as Menstrual Activism', in *Out for Blood*, 105–17; Barbara Kutis, 'The Contemporary Art of Menstruation: Embracing Taboos, Breaking Boundaries, and Making Art', in Berkeley, *Menstruation Now,* 109–35.
45 Bee Hughes and Kay Standing, 'Menstrual Art: Why Everyone Should Go and See It', *The Conversation* (12 November 2018); Allison Stubblebine, 'Manila Luzon Tried to Wear Fake Period Blood on Rupaul's Drag Race', *Nylon* (1 July 2019).
46 However, Bobel notes that some menstrual activists do not seek to reform the industry through boycott, but to turn their backs on it for good, in *New Blood*, 106: 215. Bobel questions how this squares with the use of disposable products in protest action, and I would add to this a question about whether a boycott of the industry as a whole (as opposed to boycott of a company or specific product) is possible if consumers continue to use products – including cups or reusable options, both of which must usually be purchased by a person or organisation.
47 For a detailed visual account of how free bleeding can function both as radical empathy and problem in the workplace see As/Is Channel (previously Buzzfeed), 'Women Go Without Period Products for a Day', *YouTube* video, 9:41 min (7 December 2016): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpA_xkUG2yM.
48 Sally Wyatt, 'Non-Users Also Matter: The Construction of Users and Non-Users of the Internet', in Nelly Oudshoorn and Trevor Pinch (eds.), *How Users Matter: The Co-Construction of Users and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 67.
49 For instance, continuous boycotts withholding sex or sex work to end violence against women, against Nestle and Instant Formula baby milk in 1977, against companies that refuse to serve LGBTQ+ and/or non-white customers, and International Buy Nothing Day, started in 1992; on the effectiveness of boycotts through history see Jim Salas, Doreen Shanahan and Gabriel Conzalez, 'Are Boycotts Prone to Factors That May Make Them Ineffective', *Graziadio Business Review: Special Issue on Strategies for Managing in the Age of Boycotts* Vol 22, No 3 (2019).
50 De Elizabeth, 'Artist Cass Clemmer Shares Photo Proving that Periods Are Not Just for Women', *Allure* (19 July 2017); Maria Mercedes Lara, 'Women Protest the UK's "Tampon Tax" by "Free Bleeding" in Front of Parliament: "Periods Are Yucky, That's the Point"', *People* (9 November 2015); Gabrielle Olya, 'Yoga Instructor Practices in White Pants While Free-Bleeding to Make a Point about Period Shame', *People* (14 February 2017).
51 James Delingpole, 'The Feminists Who Fell for a Bleeding Hoax', *The Spectator* (15 August 2015).
52 Fiona McKay, 'Scotland and Period Poverty: A Case Study of Media and Political Agenda' (unpublished draft shared with author, 2021); for an unusual case of political-affiliated free bleeding see Berkeley, 'Bloody Jackie: How Menstrual Blood Speaks for Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's Silence', in *Menstruation Now*, 23–42.
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54 Przybylo and Fahs, 'Empowered Bleeders and Cranky Menstruators', in Bobel et al. (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, 375.
55 Julie Hennegan, Inga T. Winkler, Chris Bobel, Danielle Keiser, Janie Hampton, Gerda Larsson, Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli, Marina Plesons and Thérèse Mahon, 'Menstrual Health: A Definition for Policy, Practice, and Research', *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* Vol 29, No 1 (2021): https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2021.1911618xx.
56 Andrew Phillips and J. C. Sharman, *Outsourcing Empire: How Company-States Made the Modern World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).
57 Fiona McKay, 'Scotland and Period Poverty'.
58 UK Government, 'Taskforce to be co-chaired by Plan International UK, Procter & Gamble and Minister for Women & Equalities' in 'Press release – Period Poverty Taskforce – Minister announces next steps on Menstrual Hygiene Day', (28 May 2019).
59 On the complexities of menstruating and using menstrual products as a man, see Fahs, 'The Menstruating Male Body', in *Out for Blood*, 77–90.
60 Phillips and Sharman, *Outsourcing Empire.*

61 Anna Dahlqvist, *It's Only Blood: Shattering the Taboo of Menstruation* (London: Zed Books, 2018), ix.
62 'Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill' introduced in the Scottish Parliament on 23 April 2019; Vicky Hallett, 'What Kenya Can Teach the US about Menstrual Pads', *NPR* (10 May 2016).
63 Bobel, *New Blood,* introduction; Bobel, 'Disciplining Girls through the Technological Fix: Modernity, Markets, Materials', in *The Managed Body*, 243–80.
64 Newton, '"Auntie's Come to Tea": Menstrual Euphemism', in *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation*, 133–45.
65 Tanya Mahajan, 'Imperfect Information in Menstrual Health and the Role of Informed Choice', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* Vol 26, No 1–2 (2019), 59–78.
66 Wood, '(In)Visible Bleeding', 319.

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Index

'This wonderful book is a compelling and important addition to the fields of critical menstruation studies, labour history and feminist studies. *Cash Flow* interrogates the intersections of technology, capitalism and colonialism at the heart of the late-twentieth-century menstrual economy in the Global North. Focusing on seven powerful corporate brands and start-ups, *Cash Flow* explores the menstrual product industry's capacities for re-invention and appropriation of shifts in menstrual culture to turn a profit, whatever the cost.'

Cathy McClive, Florida State University

The menstrual product industry has played a large role in shaping the last hundred years of menstrual culture, from technological innovation to creative advertising, education in classrooms and as employers of thousands in factories around the world. How much do we know about this sector and how has it changed in later decades? What constitutes 'the industry', who works in it, and how is it adapting to the current menstrual equity movement?

Cash Flow provides a new academic study of the menstrual corporate landscape that links its twentieth-century origins to the current 'menstrual moment'. Drawing on a range of previously unexplored archival materials and interviews with industry insiders, each chapter examines one key company and brand: Saba in Norway, Essity in Sweden, Tambrands in the Soviet Union, Procter & Gamble in Britain and Europe, Kimberly-Clark in North America, and start-ups Clue and Thinx. By engaging with these corporate collections, the book highlights how the industry has survived as its consumers continually change.

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