

Free, Empowered, and Environmentally Conscious: How Neoliberal and Second Wave
Feminist Ideals Shape Menstrual Commercials and Citizenship

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by

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ABSTRACT

**FREE, EMPOWERED, AND ENVIRONMENTALLY CONSCIOUS: HOW
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COMMERCIALS AND CITIZENSHIP**

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Menstruation carries a dual nature in United States society. It is celebrated as a sign of fertility and womanhood while simultaneously being seen as dirty, wasteful, and shameful. Since the industrial revolution, menstrual hygiene products were advertised as tools to not only keep the body clean and odor free, but also hide all signs of menstruation. In 2021, advertisements of menstrual products convey a message of empowerment and freedom, promoting themselves as champions and leaders of feminism. However, despite this seemingly feminist portrayal, underneath the surface messaging, the same advertisements carry on the same themes of shame and secrecy. Two primary theoretical frameworks are seen in these adverts, Second Wave Feminist ideas of empowerment and universal womanhood and neoliberal concept of solutions

through commerce. Menstrual, neoliberal and environmental citizenship is defined by those who can afford to purchase menstrual hygiene products and participate in the marketplace. In this thesis I examine how neoliberalism and Second Wave Feminist framework shape modern menstrual hygiene commercials that appear in media. I conduct a visual and textual examination of eight feminine hygiene product commercials, ranging from sanitary pads, tampons, and eco-friendly alternatives such as menstrual cups and underwear. This thesis discusses ecological citizenship and how it pertains to menstruation due to the fact that Eco-friendliness of the product and of the consumer is a theme in half of the commercials I examine. Due to their theoretical frameworks and messaging, as well as marketing based on perceived class tastes, the commercials and products end up being racist, classist, and gendered in both the images and language that they use and by creating an exclusion/inclusion dynamic.

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION: FEMINISM, CONSUMERISM, AND MENSTRUATION

Menstruation in the United States carries a dual nature. On the one hand, it is a sign of physical maturity and fertility but also carries negative social and cultural connotations for the individual. It can be a traumatic experience, socially stigmatized, and due to social disgrace, many cause a sense of loss of freedom and control over their bodies (Charlesworth 2001, Tiwary 2018, Stubbs 2008). Menstruation is medicalized by the research community with a heavy focus on hormonal fluctuations. Social conditioning, religion, and cultural influences including the media, contribute greatly to negative perceptions about menstruation (Simes and Berg 2001, Stubbs 2008), which in turn become internalized with feelings of uncleanliness, shame, and secrecy (Dummary 2016 .42). Unpleasant physical symptoms, negative moods, and debilitated performance are associated with menstruating bodies by both pre- and post- menarche individuals. In addition to social and physical symptoms, individuals who menstruate use the act as part of their identity formation in both a positive and negative light (Dummary 2016.114). Preparedness and open dialogue with a parental figure contributed to the positive impact on identity (Stubbs 2008). Menstruation societally is seen as predominantly negative event, which then becomes internalized by the individual. Cultural issues and patriarchal ideas about the female body continue to reinforce this view.

Throughout the twentieth century a pervasive cultural and medical view of the female body and vagina as “dirty, unappealing, and in need of cultural intervention”

(Ferranti 2010) permeated media and advertisements (McKee *et al.* 2009; Jenkins *et al.* 2018). A study by Whisnant, Brett, and Zegans (1975) found that advertisements on feminine hygiene products and menstruation contributed to the negative associations and stereotypes about menstruation. Advertisements have a heavy focus on managing menstrual symptoms as part of hygiene, with mixed messages that while menstruation is normal and natural it does need to be hidden with odor control, minimization of symptoms, and leak prevention (Whisnant, Brett, and Zegans 1975). In advertisements of feminine hygiene products and industry produced material, menstruation remains an American cultural taboo (Houpert 1999, Kissling 2006, Bobel 2010.31). Medicalization and the focus on treatment of menstruation and associated symptoms as well as faux feminist messaging still promote shame, secrecy and waste (Kissling 2006). Stubbs (2008) summarizes that as individuals mature from pre-school to adolescence, the media and advertisements become a more important part of the education about menstruation. Menstruation, being a culturally stigmatized process was and still is used as justification for women's second-class citizenship. The feminist movements in United States aim to equalize women's rights to that of men. Despite alternative presentations of menstruation, along with Third Wave Feminism, which seeks to debunk the pervasive myth of a shared singular experience of feminism (Bobel 2010.18) and move away from consumerism as a solution for menstruating bodies (Bobel 2010.27). Secrecy surround menstruation and the need to be discrete to the point of menstrual suppression contribute to self-objectification and negative body images in menstruating individual (Kalman 2003;

Roberts and Walter 2004). Individuals who menstruate report to feeling pressured to hide all of the symptoms of menstruation (Johnson-Robledo and Chrisler 2013).

Individuals report higher levels of self-consciousness, avoidance of activities such as swimming, and wearing of more concealing clothes (Johnson-Robledo and Chrisler 2013). This self-policing and self-monitoring (Foucault 1979) ensure that an individual's menstruating status is hidden and subsequently has a negative effect on their self-esteem, self-perception, and self-image (Johnson-Robledo and Chrisler 2013). The need to hide one's menstrual status is rooted in historical view of menstruating individuals as a whole. Historically, women's¹ health and pain pertaining to menstruation were deeply racist, classed and gendered (Thompson 2019). The medical field of gynecology in United States began with a hospital built by the enslaved with the treatment/experimentation of slaves in mind (Owens 2017 p. 1). Prevailing myths and hyper sexualization surrounding black bodies such as their inability to feel pain and the faux medical justifications originated in the slave trade (Owens 2017 p. 44). The experience of pain, especially pertaining to reproductive health is heavily cultured, layered with pressure and expectations (Wolf 2009 p. 3). Religious and cultural belief systems influence on the menstruating body, and subsequently the medical field, continue the propagation of second class citizenship (Dammery 2016). While many menstruating individuals of high socioeconomic status are able to afford medical attention and treatment for menstrual issues and access to education, middle and lower class individuals are priced out and excluded from help (Currid-Halkett 2017; Kwak, Kim, and

Baek 2019). The relationship between medicine and menstruating individuals, especially as it pertains to women's reproductive rights¹, has impacts on the general perception as menstruating individuals as second-class citizens (Thompson 2019; Steinem 2020). Feminist activists argue for the removal of stigma and negative perceptions around women's reproductive health, and push for the expansion of menstruating individuals' citizenship and participation in the public sphere (Thompson 2019). During Second Wave Feminism (1960s-80s), we saw the relationship between women's health and broader political rights be brought to light in the United States (Thompson 2019). Much of the discussion during this time surrounding women's health focused on sexuality and control of reproduction (Thompson 2019).

Menstruating individuals are associated with shame, wastefulness, and uncleanliness; the requirement to be secret and discreet created a symbolic higher social status for men (Minakshi 2020). A study in India by Minakshi (2020) explored how the purchase of eco-friendly and sustainable products are transformed into "a complex socially embedded consumption choice" (Minakshi 2020). Many female presenting people in the study, while showing interest in sustainable products, were concerned over the large up-front financial investment (Minakshi 2020). Individuals who have strong environmental beliefs and convictions but did not purchase sustainable products either due to societal pressures or familial pressures, felt guilt and a sense of betrayal (Minakshi 2020). Their ethics and moral identity were tied to their consumption choices, and when

¹ I use the term "woman's health" and "women's reproductive rights" due to historical focus on cisgendered women. Non-binary and individuals who menstruate who may not identify as women would traditionally be included in the umbrella term. Culturally we lump anything to do with vaginas and female reproductive organs as "women's issues" "women's health" etc.

it was not possible to be the most environmentally friendly, they felt a need to legitimize their consumption choices where there was lack of agency (Minakshi 2020). Minakshi (2020) concluded that stigmatization of menstruation leads to a taboo, and lack of conversation and social pressure can lead to a constraint in consumption choices, and ability to participate in the “ethical” marketplace. In United States, studies on menstruating individuals link body shame and self-objectification to shame regarding menstruation and less willingness to use eco-friendly reusable products (JohnstonRobledo *et al.* 2007; Lamont, Wagner, and Incorvati 2019). Ethical participation in the marketplace is further defined by mitigating climate change and the personal responsibility that the individual has as an environmental citizen.

Environmental citizenship can be defined as the idea that environmental conservatism is every individuals responsibility and an active participation in moving towards sustainability (Halim, Meerah, and Nadeson 2010). As compared to environmental activism, environmental citizenship requires “political activities that are less public or present less risk than engaged activism” such as consumer behavior as it pertains to environmental conservationism (Stern *et al.* 1999; Takahashi *et al.* 2017). Media plays as important role in informing what that environmental citizenship looks like (Halim, Meerah, and Nadeson 2010). Environmental citizenship defines consumer choices, activities and lifestyle on what impact they have on the environment (Halim, Meerah, and Nadeson 2010). Lifestyle choices such as what sort of menstrual hygiene products are used and their environmental impact. This thesis looks at environmental citizenship as it pertains to menstrual hygiene products in the United States. I also look at

how environmental citizenship includes and excludes groups individuals based on their socioeconomic status and class.

Statement of Research

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how Second Wave Feminist ideas about empowerment and neoliberalism ethical environmental citizenship influences the messaging of menstrual hygiene advertisements. In the United States, advertisements of menstrual products are framed in terms of empowerment through market participation, ecological sustainability, and Second Wave feminist ideas of sameness or universal womanhood. This framework and the advertisements themselves, are racist, gendered, and classist as it condenses the diverse experience and conceptualization of menstruation into a single cisgender, heteronormative, and middle-class process. The purchasing of the products requires a certain level of economic ability and lifestyle², therefore, it explicitly excludes individuals who have less economic ability, and circumscribes how they are thought of as neoliberal citizens. A neoliberal citizen is someone who participates in the market and takes responsibility for their economic situation.

Methods

For this thesis I conducted a literature review and a visual and textual analysis of advertisement for menstrual hygiene products. The literature review focuses on Second and Third Wave Feminist movements around the menstruating body, consumerism, and neoliberalism and the discourse surrounding menstruation and menstruating bodies.

² Lifestyle choices such as access to transportation, credit/debit card and by extension a bank account, access to the internet and online shopping etc.

Though primarily centered on the United States and Western countries, examples and articles were used from both United States and other nations that embraced neoliberal ideals. In order to get a better understanding of the history and discourse surrounding feminist movements I pulled from both academic and popular sources from 1960s to 2020. Second and Third Wave Feminist Movements were a primary focus due to the predominant messaging of empowerment and freedom for women in commercials. For advertisements I aimed to understand the underlying thought that influences the images and language used beyond just selling the product. Neoliberal economics are the predominant structure and influence on United States, as such, I aimed to understand how neoliberal thought affected the products that were marketed towards women.

For this thesis, I analyzed eight popular feminine hygiene commercials from the years 2018, 2019, and 2020. All the commercials were taken from YouTube and represent a range of female hygiene products such as tampons, cups, underwear, and pads. Three Commercials were from the company Always, one from Kotex, one from Ruby Red Period Panties, one from Tampax, one from the Diva Cup and the last one from Thinx. I looked at the themes surrounding the commercial, such as empowerment, ecological consciousness, and freedom. Due to their universal messaging of empowerment, I linked back to Second and Third Wave Feminist movements to see what ideological thought and base could be driving the message. The climate change issues that we face today is part of both public and private discourse in United States as many are evaluating their choices and becoming more aware of their environmental impact. Some of the commercials cater to this growing body of ecologically conscious

individuals and utilize neoliberal thought of “solution through commerce” to sell the solution not only for social issues facing menstruating individuals today but larger ecological problems. The language in these commercials are clearly marketed to feminine individuals and not necessarily to individuals who menstruate. As such when refereeing to the language used in the commercials, I use the term “women” to designate the target demographic and “menstruating individuals” in my own critique and analysis in order to encompass and include all individuals that would purchase the products. Additionally, when critiquing Second Wave Feminism, I use “women” and “men” when discussing the discourse and thought in the movement. For my own analysis and critique, I use “feminine-presenting” and “masculine-presenting” in order to be more inclusive and acknowledge the gender spectrum.

I first wrote descriptions of each commercial including images used, soundtracks, texts, behavior and description of the actors, and the language used. The product that each commercial is advertising was then given a brief description including the type (pads, tampons, or underwear). I then described the intended messaging of the commercial and how its imagery and meaning reflected the greater neoliberal ideals of United States society, and Second Wave Feminist

The advertisements surrounding period products historically have been about concealing menstrual odor and any signs of menstruation such as blood, mood changes and cramping, cloaked in ideals of femininity and beauty. Historically, even the liquid used in portraying menstrual blood is a pleasant semi-translucent blue. These ads play into and promote the cultural taboos and stigma surrounding menstruation: fear of bodily

odor, stains, anyone even knowing that a woman is menstruating. Companies sold their products not just because of their necessity, but also due to internal shame that women felt about their bodies. And if the product can alleviate the shame and any physical symptoms of menstruation, then the more alluring it is to consumers.

With Third Wave Feminism and the rise of more body positivity, the commercials shifted their focus away from traditional femininity and appealed to a younger and more politically aware audience. Post 1990's feminist activism focused on intersectionality and body positivity played out on both private and public scenes. Intersectionality is a framework that takes into account spheres of social categories such as race, gender, and class and applies them to the overlapping systems of discrimination and experiences (Evans and Lépinard 2019 p. 1). The rise of the internet and easy access to information shifted the societal expectations and understanding of the culture surround menstrual hygiene products. Therefore, advertisements surrounding menstrual products shifted towards the faux feminist empowerment seen today. The surface messaging endorses equality and empowerment, however, themes of shame and waste with the menstruating body are still prevalent. Gone are the days of blue liquid, but the need for discreteness and odor control continues. Modern feminine hygiene ads situate themselves as champions of feminism with images of working women and ideas that women are capable of anything. However, it is important to note that the association made is that a woman must still power through and disguise her menstruation in order to succeed. The core idea about shame and disgust are still heavily present in the commercials.

Commercials pertaining to periods primarily fall into two categories, empowerment of women through the use of positive language and second wave feminist ideals, and neoliberal concepts of self-responsibility of the consumer in the market as pertaining to the ongoing discourse of climate change.

This thesis was organized into multiple chapters. The Introduction establishes the historical view on menstruating bodies and a statement of research. Concepts of environmental citizenship, empowerment, and neoliberalism as it pertains to menstruation were briefly discussed and set up as an introduction to the literature review. The literature review is divided into three chapters. The first examines the Second and Third Wave Feminist movements and how they framed the female body. Empowerment and consumption are discussed, specifically how they each influence each other and feminine-presenting people. Critiques of Second Wave Feminism are addressed, the homogeneous portrayal of social issues and marginalization of non-white voices. Chapter 3 is a short introduction on neoliberalism in United States, with a history review and ethical participation in the marketplace. Chapter 4 touches on the privatized nature of menstruation and how society and individuals feel the need to hide menstruating bodies. Chapter 5 discusses how menstrual suppression and secrecy surrounding menstruation not only affect self-perception of women, but how they stem from Second Wave Feminist ideas about empowerment. Following the literature review and the theoretical framework set up, chapter 6 delves into the visual and textual analysis of the advertisements themselves. The thesis finishes up with a discussion how Second Wave Feminism and neoliberalism especially empowerment through consumption is portrayed in the

messaging of the advertisements. Even though the explicit surface messaging talks of female empowerment, it still relies on archaic beliefs and shame surrounding menstruation.

Limitations

Only eight commercials were analyzed for this study, with the menstrual cup and tampons having only one commercial. The scope of the commercials does not reflect all of the product types available on the market. I focused on Second and Third Wave Feminist Movements and Neoliberalism as the thoughts behind the advertisements. The themes that were discussed were those of empowerment, environmental consciousness, and shame. While the lack of diversity in the actors used was noticed and discussed, the reasoning behind it was not. Other factors such as corporate competition and politics were not discussed. No interviews or surveys were conducted on how these specific commercials were perceived.

Future studies should look into how environmentally conscious commercial products are perceived by different groups of individuals based on class, ethnic background, and gender identity. How environmental and neoliberal citizenship changes as the class and economic gaps continue to grow. With initiatives that ban single use plastic products more and more individuals will be priced out of menstrual hygiene products and will be forced to utilize rags as alternatives. Therefore, the menstrual crisis in United States that is already growing can become a bigger issue with many menstruating individuals having to miss work and school locking themselves into

poverty. However, there is talk of removing the luxury tax on menstrual products, and certain initiatives talking about giving free reusable menstrual products to schools.

Regardless, how menstruation is viewed and dealt with on both private and public levels needs to change otherwise menstruating individuals will fall into second class citizenship.

CHAPTER TWO: BODIES, CONSUMPTION, AND SECOND AND THIRD WAVE FEMINISM

In United States, feminism is divided into three (now possibly four) waves. The first wave, which is generally accepted to have occurred between 1842 and 1920 (Molony and Nelson 2017 p.2) is characterized by its focus on voting rights and legal issues surrounding white-, middle- and upper-class women. Second Wave Feminism 1963-1980s was a reaction to women's return to the role of housewife and caretaker in the 1950s following World War II (Molony and Nelson 2017 p.2). First triggered by the publishing of *The Feminist Mystique* by Betty Friedan in 1963³, which centered on the general dissatisfaction that women felt in their constricted roles as housewives despite being in relative material comfort. Products were already marketed to women to alleviate the difficulties of housework, and consumption was an integral part of middle-class American life. Women however lacked many rights and protection in both the public and private spheres. The topics that Friedan wrote about were white middle to upper class cisgender women and their struggles. Individuals especially women of color and ethnic minorities, as well as nonbinary or transgender were explicitly absent in the discourse surrounding Second Wave Feminism. As such, the movement focused on systemic workplace sexism, such as pay gaps, lack of job opportunities, domestic violence, rape,

³ *The Feminist Mystique* has been heavily critiqued surrounding its binary view of gender. The book which is so influential is endemic of the issues surrounding The Second Wave Feminist Movement.

and reproductive rights (Anand 2018). While the right to vote was achieved in the 1920s in the United States, the paradigm in Western society still relegated women as being in the home and mothers, not suited for the male-dominated career force. The second wave feminist movement therefore focused on changing laws and societal perception of women's sexuality, role, and bodily autonomy.⁴ Notable achievements of Second Wave Feminism include: the approval of the contraceptive pill, Equal Pay Act of 1963, The Woman's Educational Equity Act of 1973 and 1974, and outlaw of marital rape in all states in 1993 (Anand 2018). Second Wave Feminism coincided with the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. The sexual liberation movement aimed to destigmatize women's sexuality, contraception, abortion, sex work premarital sex, same sex relations, and public nudity. Married women with children only comprised 26 percent of the workforce in 1950 while in the mid-1980s that number rose to 67 percent (Gilder 1986).

Second Wave Feminism can be dissected into two schools of thought centering on the concept of equality (Evans 1995). The first is characterized by adequate similarity focusing on the idea that there are no biological differences that would justify discrimination based on sex (Evans 1995). Inequality between men and women in all spheres (social, economic, cultural etc.) is seen as a result of societal response to sexual dimorphism and social restraints on women (Bamberger, Lamphere, and Rosaldo 1974). Anthropological discourse during the height of Second Wave Feminism and

⁴ Second wave feminist discourse and paradigms do not hold a uniform perspective.

anthropological writings explores and argue against the inescapable inequality between genders. Biological determinism, i.e., simply that women are biologically inferior to men is no longer seen as an accurate thought and is rejected in academic spheres (Bamberger, Lamphere, and Rosaldo 1974; Ortner 1972). Still, Second Wave Feminist argued that there is a seemingly universal, trans-cultural fact that women are seen as inferior to men, or at least hold inferior societal roles. Bamberger, Lamphere, and Rosaldo (1974) refer to women's unequal status as "the second sex" and argue that it is a "sociocultural assignation of value" and not a reflection of an individual's access to power. Sherry B. Ortner tackles the problem of trans-cultural inequality in her 1972 paper *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture*. She attributes this inequality to the perception that uniquely female bodily functions (menstruation and childbirth) are closer to nature. Men on the other hand lack this ability to create life and assert their creativity through culturally less perishable means. For a woman that creates life that will one day die, follows the cycle of birth and death in nature, while a man creates cultural and technological objects that are not so easily perishable (Ortner 1972). Ortner (1972) does not assert that women are fully in the natural sphere but rather that they are between "culture" and "nature", while men are firmly in the culture. Therefore, she is seen as a lesser being simply because of her association with nature⁵. The first idea of equality heavily relies on the concept of sameness between men and women. Specifically, sameness of attainment and achievement in society. Proponents of sameness focus on showing that linguistic,

⁵ Ortner's 1972 work is heavily critiqued in her depiction of culture/nature as binary oppositional spheres, as well as her lack of consideration other sexually dimorphic traits such as strength, height, etc.

psychological, and behavioral differences between men and women are few and are socialized and not innate (Evans 1995). As with race, variation between the sexes is lesser than variation within the sexes and non-categorical (Ainsworth 2015; Rapp and Kilpatrick 2020). With the concept of sameness, a woman's role and ability is more like the man's.

The second school of thought which came about with the Civil Rights Act in 1964, consist of discourse surrounding capitalism, patriarchy, and the detrimental negative effects on both men and women (Evans 1995). It is important to note that there were a variety of perspectives within Second Wave Feminism. Ruth Behar and Beth Gordon's, *Women Writing Culture* (1995) collected writings from female anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedicts, and Zora Neal Hurston. The collection of writings and essays show the different perspectives and backgrounds of feminist writers that came about during the 20th century. There were radical, liberal, black, and lesbian perspectives and critiques within feminism. Behar (1993) introduction 1986 *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* draws attention the larger politics and structures in anthropology that both depends on and marginalizes the voices of women and especially "less privileged" (Behar 1993.308). However outside of academia, groups of both men and women have been oppressed by societal structures and equality can only be achieved with the dismantling of these systems of oppression engrained in United States society (Evans 1995). That is not to say academic structures are above these systems of oppression, voices of female presenting individual and people of color have been systematically oppressed (Rodríguez 2018). The larger overarching structures that

govern and influence oppression permeate all aspects of society, and undoubtedly not only influence the choices that individuals make when purchasing products, but the type of products that are available and how they are advertised.

Women and Consumption

A prominent aspect of Second Wave Feminism and promotion of sameness came hand in hand with the rejection of domestic femininity (Gills and Hollows 2009). Friedan (1963) argued that a rejection of domesticity and the citizenship as a housewife started with the rejection of household consumerism, such as vacuum cleaners, and domestic helpers as they play a centralized roles in a woman's oppression. Hollows (2013) summarizes the prevailing discourse during Second Wave Feminism literature that argues a resistance towards patriarchal ideas of femininity through consumption. However, she argues that consumption is an everyday part of life for all feminists, and there is a lack of examination and understanding of consumption practices as it pertains to feminist policies and citizenship (Hollows 2013). Consumption in our current economic system is impossible to escape, especially as it pertains to necessities such as feminine hygiene products. When so much of our citizenship is framed through our consumption practices, a question arises regarding how feminist policies and ideals align with our consumption choices, and how corporations utilize feminist policies or thought to influence our consumption.

Hollows (2013) notices several trends in their examination of a feminist popular journal, *The Spare Rib*, between 1972 and 1974 in Great Britain. Health and the body are contextualized within ecological and environmental publishing of globalism that

transcends borders (Hollows 2013). Articles surrounding beauty and hygiene are framed in environmental terms, such as “waste and world’s creatures” (Hollows 2013). Though Hollow does not explicitly state it, by linking individual practices to greater global discourse follows the main paradigm of Second Wave Feminism is a single female identity, citizenship, and oneness. Articles surrounding healthy versus unhealthy consumption are linked to natural versus unnatural products (Hollows 2013). The journal, while being secure in its identity as a feminist publication, had an interest in selling branded products and linking consumerism and ethically participation in the marketplace to feminist identity and citizenship (Hollows 2013). Hollows (2013) raises serious concerns surrounding consumption and feminist literature, especially about the commodification of feminism in the greater economy.

The Rise of Third Wave Feminism and Critiques of Consumerism

Third Wave Feminism arose as a critique of the glaring inadequacies of Second Wave (Mann 2005). It is important to note that Third Wave Feminism discourse was not a continuation of Second Wave Feminism but rather it was in opposition to the problematic second wave ideals (Mann 2005). Second wave feminist discourse primarily and exclusively focused on white, cisgender, straight women of middle to high economic status. The Third Wave discourse and critique was started by women of color working transnationally (Mann 2005; Crenshaw 2017). Internationality arose as a response to the glaring shortcomings in the thought surrounding Second Wave Feminism. The voices and struggles of Black and LGBTQA+ were continually ignored and marginalizes and their experiences ignored. Black feminist writers and activists began exploring the interplay of

class, race, and gender on their oppression (Crenshaw 1989; Frazier, Smith, and Smith 1977). These systems oppression and interlocking cannot be separated from each other, similarly how the multiple identities cannot be separated from an individual. As such for a black feminist it is impossible to separate oppression due to her gender and oppression due to her race. Critique of Second Wave Feminism centered on intersectionality and the singular framework that the movement centered on (Crenshaw 1989). Their critique was centered on the concept of the woman itself, that women are a homogenous beings and that ignored or downplayed the differences that exist between the lived experiences and identities of white and black women (Mann 2005). The external oppressor force that effected all women, such as patriarchy or discrimination, was the focal point of Second Wave feminist thought (Mann 2005). Third wave thinkers argued that in addition to the external force, there are internalized sexism and discrimination that affect women. Issues of race, class, and imperialism and the different effects on women were mostly ignored by the Second Wave (Mann 2005).

In spite of the critique of Second Wave Feminism, the concepts and values had a profound effect on the media and consumer market. Products typically associated with men such as cars were starting to be advertised to women. An association between brands and the movement played into the concept of equality. Concepts of liberalism⁶, and freedom were the focal point of both the movement and the media. Advertisements focused on the importance of middle-class woman's independence and newfound

⁶ Liberalism is a political thought that promotes the philosophy of individual rights, free enterprise, civil liberties, and democracy.

freedoms. Marketing for women focused freedom which can be bought whether through traditionally male products, or material success a definitively consumeristic brand of independence (Howard 2010). Third Wave Feminism, however, criticizes this shared experience and a singular path towards independence and empowerment. By marketing a singular path towards freedom and independence, it excludes the bodies and experiences that do not fall into this grouping. In plainer words, intersectionality was not considered.

Advertisements surrounding menstrual products have a dual nature around their messaging; On one hand they cater to Second Wave Feminist concepts and ideas of equality and empowerment, while simultaneously promoting secrecy and shame. Menstrual hygiene advertisements and corporate ideology emphasize certain traditional beliefs about menstruation that contrasted and melded with the views held by women (Malefy and McCabe 2015). Advertisements categorize and compartmentalize women as being either on or off their periods, while women in research viewed their periods in terms of flow and rhythm (Malefy and McCabe 2015). A predominant theme in these advertisements stems from vulnerability of women on their periods and therefore, in need of protection (Malefy and McCabe 2015). Discourse surrounding menstrual hygiene products has shifted from shame and embarrassment to embodiment, personal, control, and comfort (Malefy and McCabe 2015). However, that is not to say that modern advertisements have moved from patriarchal concepts. A study by Mindy J. Erchull (2011) looked at images of women bodies in menstrual sanitary products advertisements. Erchull (2011) found that sexualized and idealized bodies were the norm in the advertisements. Women in advertisements were commonly placed in tight or white

clothes, which the author contributes to disidentifying clothing. Research contextualized “disidentifying” (Erchul 2011.34) clothes as way of maintaining secrecy surrounding menstruation and avoiding shame, since the advertised product is not visible underneath tight or white clothes. In a paper analyzing beauty advertisements and self-objectification Couture Bue and Harrison (2019) observed that despite seemingly empowering messaging, advertisements conformed to traditional beauty standards. Though not explicitly sexual many actors displayed traditional sexual behavior such as open mouths, open lips, and gazes at the camera. Erchul (2011) suggests that by also wearing tight or white clothing, a distance between the viewer and the menstruating woman is created. This binary and somewhat contradictory messaging in advertisements stems from the influence of feminism on culture, it is no longer appropriate to classify female presenting individuals as second-class citizens who belong at home.

Advertisements are a commentary look into discourse into current societal and cultural environment and tenets, a way to make sense of it (Giaccardi 1995; Windels 2016). Windels (2106) study on advertisement and its effects on consumers concluded that the prevailing sentiment surrounding stereotypes in advertisements is that they are based in truth. When menstrual hygiene advertisements which already discuss deeply personal aspect and function of bodies partake in negative stereotypes it not only becomes internalized but effects the lived experiences. Messaging of empowerment for women is common throughout advertisements, however, there is an underlying patriarchal theme that disempowers female presenting individuals. Due to the ubiquitous presence of advertising in the lives of individuals in United States, the effects of these

adverts are inescapable and do not necessarily require the individual to critically look at one's own body (Harper and Tiggemann 2008). Individuals who viewed advertisements targeting female presenting individuals reported a greater state of objectification (Couture Bue and Harrison 2019). A study in 2014 of young collage aged women's attitudes surrounding menstrual and alternative products found that self-objectification can lead to women rejecting menstrual products that required intimate contact with their bodies (Grabe and Grose 2014). Grabe and Grose (2014) argued that self-objectification is a predictor of negative attitudes towards menstruation and willingness to use alternative menstrual products. The relationship between consumerism and attitudes towards one's body is circular in nature. Self-objectification influences the purchasing of specific menstrual products which in turn influence the advertisements that propagate negative stereotypes and attitudes towards the menstruating body. Since one of the most identifying physiological features of biologically female bodies is menstruation, concealment of the fact allows not only ease of discomfort for the viewer but also eliminates potential shame and possible reminder of lower status for the menstruating individual.

This singular conformation of beauty and empowerment is reminiscent of Second Wave homogenous thought on women liberation and neoliberal solution through commerce. The advertisement of a singular image of female body ideal through the lens of empowerment excludes the diversity of bodies from that empowerment and freedom. What that empowerment would look like can differ for white and non-white women and as such non-white individuals might resist this form of citizenship. A lack of

representation in these advertisements is reminiscent of the lack of non-white non cisgender voices in the mainstream Second Wave Feminist discourse. Third Wave Feminism arose as a response to the lack of intersectionality, yet still the same bodies and experiences are being excluded from modern advertisements which in turn negatively influences the lived experiences of the same individuals. Studies surrounding selfobjectification were conducted on mostly white middle-upper class women, and conclusions expanded towards all other races and ethnicities. It is important to note here that all this research on self-objectification and advertisements is done with predominantly white cisgender women. An issue arises where despite Third Wave Feminist attempts towards intersectionality and inclusion of marginalized voices, there is an explicit exclusion of these voices and bodies from the discourse. Especially the participation of these individuals in the neo-liberal citizenship and consumerism.

Class and Consumption

Max Weber (2004) defines class as a group of people that are found in the same set of “class situation” represented by their economic interest and commodities such as access to resources, skills and way of life. Class or group action and behavior however, is more dependent on social status or “status honor” rather than economic ability and standing (Weber 2004). As such, purchasing behavior, though constricted by economic status is not necessarily wholly predicted by it. Group tastes, marketplace, and class consciousness⁷ influence the consumption patterns and preferences of the different

⁷ Time is another factor in this, as tastes and consumption change through time. However, for this thesis I am interested in a more of a cross-sectional look rather than longitudinal.

classes. The consumption patterns of a given class, and by extension the marketing of products to that class establishes class specific tastes and focus on societal issues through commerce.

Class-based taste can be defined as a group's subjective preference towards consumption of goods, experiences, and services. These tastes are not just simple opinion but rather not only inform consumption behavior but also the realities and lived experiences of class itself (Bourdieu 1984). Pierre Boudreau (1984) stratifies⁸ class taste by necessity, middlebrow, and legitimate, which correspond to the socioeconomic and cultural status of the group. There are two primary definers of class tastes, economic and cultural. Upper class tastes such as Opera and high-class dining experiences define legitimate taste. However, those who accumulate high "cultural capital" such as academics also define their taste as legitimate. Conversely the working class with low "economic capital" and "cultural capital" have their tastes defined in more practical and necessary terms (i.e. practical clothes and meals that are in large portions and nutritionally dense rather than fancy) (Bourdieu 1984). However, it is important to point out that class taste is a self-fulfilling prophecy where those who are lower on socioeconomic ladder do not feel that a certain consumer item or experience is for them simply because they are not high on cultural/economic capital and vice versa. When it comes to menstrual hygiene goods for those with low economic and cultural capital, products that are practical with fewer additional features become a definitional staple of

⁸ That is not to say that there is no overlap, change, or clear borders between these categories.

their identity and experience. While those who are of higher cultural and/or economic capital are more interested in goods and experience that reflect their higher societal position. However, this oversimplification of class taste is inaccurate as it disregards social and ecological issues that affect and are of interest to all classes. Marketing of menstrual hygiene products reflect this perception that only those of higher socioeconomic status would be interested in additional benefits beyond the simple practical aspects of the product. Class tastes and marketing creates a social hierarchy of the consumer (Bourdieu 1984, p. 1) that generates a means of assessing the status and citizenship of individuals and differentiating between groups (Currid-Halkett 2017). Divisions between class taste inadvertently excludes the low socioeconomic class from participation in certain market-based solution of societal issues. Which in turn influence the marketing and association of these solution to that class and further solidifying their class taste. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy of consumerism where the market and taste feed into each other.

Beyond class taste and economic status, consumer behavior is further influenced by location. The urban versus rural consumerism divide is well studied (Kubendran and Vanniarajan 2005; Sun and Wu 2004; Talukdar 2008; Zeng and Ramaswami 2020) but even amongst cities, consumption patterns differ (Currid-Halkett 2017; Handbury 2019). Currid-Halkett (2017) identifies two types of consumption, conspicuous and inconspicuous as indicators of wealth and social status. Conspicuous consumption is material goods that are visible such as cars, houses, watches, organic foods etc. Inconspicuous consumption is more nebulous, things such as good education and college

degrees, nannies, and healthcare. The luxury of inconspicuous consumption comes from leisure time and preservation of wealth and betterment of not only one's own economic status but of the offspring as well. The American Dream is built upon a high level of consumption despite the increasing difficulty for many to achieve it. Status and identity become irreversibly linked to consumer behavior. With industrialization and cheap production, many Americans can afford goods and materials while being priced out of healthcare, education and vacations among other things. As such, despite availability of goods, a divide between conspicuous and inconspicuous consumers emerges, continuing the "us" versus "other" mentality; those who can afford inconspicuous consumption and those who cannot. Because today's status is dependent on both conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption, morality becomes entangled with consumer choices such as healthcare and food when they are truly about economic ability. These consumer choices are not existent for the poor and large swaths of middle-class, and exclude them from participation in certain types of citizenships (Currid-Halkett 2017). On a much smaller scale, menstrual hygiene products are conspicuous consumption that encapsulates inconspicuous ideals.

Menstrual hygiene products are classified as necessities and are objects that are purchased. However, due to the unseen nature of the product, additional features and benefits would fall under the inconspicuous umbrella. The marketing surrounding menstrual hygiene products promises that the purchase and consumption of their goods enables individuals the ability to participate in inconspicuous consumption. Empowerment in itself goes beyond the economic ability to purchase more and

better things but also have the ability and time to pursue goals, education, and leisure.

Menstrual hygiene products that market themselves as enablers of inconspicuous consumption are marketed towards the modern middle class, those who can afford to spend extra on conspicuous consumption but not enough on inconspicuous consumption.

CHAPTER THREE: NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM

While Second Wave Feminism worked towards inclusion of women in the public sphere and participation in the workforce, a rise in a new economic and political ideology in the 1990's started to define what that sort of citizenship would look like in the 21st century. However before understanding neoliberalism, it is important to define capitalism as it pertains to United States. Capitalism goes beyond acquisition, pursuit, and gain of money, according to Weber (1948 p.17) it is economic actions that requires "expectation of profit by utilization of opportunities of exchange", continuous profit being an end in it of itself. Neoliberalism is an anthropological and economic concept that can be defined as: a particular form of capitalism that focus on deregulation of the economy and privatization of state-owned enterprise such as welfare programs (Ganti 2014; Kotz 2015 p. 14). More importantly for this thesis, is the idea of a self-regulating market that links morality to participation in the marketplace (Ganti 2014; Kotz 2015). As such it leads to the concept that participation in the marketplace is not only moral in it of itself but also a solution to societal and global problems.

Neoliberalism redefines the citizen in terms of the market, a consumer whose choices are ethically exercised through their participation in the economy (Monbiot

2016). The term was first coined in Paris in 1938 by Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek (Monbiot 2016), but not truly implemented until Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Ragan came to power in the 1980s and 1990s. Choice and freedom are both important concepts in neoliberal ideology.

The implementation of neoliberal thought of ethical participation in the marketplace can be seen the advertisement and implementation surrounding HIV/Aids medication. It is similar to the marketing surrounding the medicalization of menstruating bodies and hygiene where moral citizenship is applied to management and process of menstruation. Ethical participation in the marketplace and society is defined by consumption of hygiene products that minimize any signs of menstruation. The definition of what it means to be an ethical and moral citizen is framed in the consumption and purchase of medications in order to control and normalize disease. In the 2010s, the invention and advertisements of PrEP as a preventative HIV medication redefined of what it meant to me an ethical sexual citizen (Thomann 2018). “The neoliberal sexual subject” (Thomann 2018; 999) is one who takes responsibility for his or her actions and shoulders the responsibility taking rational actions by utilizing condoms and mitigating their own HIV risks. The modern trend is towards reliance on pharmaceutical intervention to not only treat disease but to “normalize” diseases, de-marginalize people and, control populations (Persson *et al.* 2016). With the FDA approval of PrEP medication in 2012, the advertisements already fit neatly into the already preestablished concepts of responsibility and sexual citizenship (Thomann 2018). HIV/AIDS treatment is an expensive endeavor, and PrEP as a preventative measure follows the cost reduction ideology of neoliberalism and puts the

responsibility of the disease on the individuals (Thomann 2018; Persson *et al.* 2016).

Globally, early and universal treatment imperatives are heavily promoted as a way to curb the HIV/AIDS pandemic (Persson *et al.* 2016). Persson *et al.* (2016) raises a concern about conceptualizing groups of individuals as pharmaceutical citizens, where treatment imperatives could stigmatize people with HIV even further. Thomann (2018) worries that with the scaling up of PrEP production, funding for community support and global treatments would be scaled down. Neoliberalism as a political and economic structure idealizes personal responsibility over social support and social structures. This personal responsibility permeates other biomedical spheres beyond disease treatment and prevention such as contraception and menstrual hygiene⁹.

Large institutions and corporations have adopted and promoted a neoliberal approach to gender (Wilson 2015). As such gender equality is greater participation in labor markets and understanding of empowerment through material gain and accumulation (Wilson 2015; Cornwall and Edwards 2010). Wilson (2005) argues that neoliberal practices and discourse surrounding gender produce ideals of hyper-industrious, altruistic, entrepreneurial female subjects which are contrasted against individuals who are passive and devoid of agencies. The corporate approach of neoliberal economics and feminism is especially seen in gendered advertisement for products. Menstrual hygiene products incorporate both empowerment through participation in the economy and accumulation of

⁹ Clinical trials surrounding HIV/AIDS medication have been traditionally conducted in “offshore settings” like Cambodia, Thailand etc. by companies in the North Atlantic. Critiques of the trials include erasure of voices in the local communities, exploitation, and inaccessibility of the same medication in these same communities Folayan and Peterson (2020).

material wealth and through passive reception of gendered roles. Neoliberal feminism shifts the feminist discourse away from larger structural issues such as gendered wage gap, sexual harassment, rape, or medical inequalities, and instead focuses on participation on the workforce, the economy, and society in general as both the problem and the solution (Rottenberg 2014). With an intense focus on empowerment through participation, neoliberal feminism creates two types of subjects; a small class of aspirational individuals who self-invest wisely and acquire material wealth and a larger class of individuals who are expendable, exploitable, and disposable (Rottenberg 2017). These two clear and separate categories of subjects or types of citizens is not only a reduction of the type of citizenship that is sanctioned in a neoliberal society, but fails to take into consideration the intersectionality of factors and experience that would prevent groups of individuals to escape the second class of citizenship.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONTRACEPTION & SANITARY PRODUCTS: PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY AND THE PRIVATE NATURE OF MENSTRUATION

In the United States, society has moved on towards a life of convenience and consumerism, relying on the purchasing of products to produce comfort and happiness. Greater reliance on technological advancements and an overall confidence in scientific developments have led to a reliance on disposable and one-time use feminine hygiene products. Since the 1970s, scientists, researchers, and media have brought the issues surrounding waste and harmful effects of unregulated consumerism on the environment. Eco-friendly alternatives to essential products have been slowly trickling into the market. Throughout the 21st century discourse of climate change moved away from academia and into public discourse, and corporations started to advertise products that were “ecofriendly”. Today, the discourse around climate change looms over public and personal choices. More individuals are turning towards reusable and sustainable products and practices such as shampoo bars, recycled paper, reusable grocery bags, reusable water bottles, and recycling. Essential consumer goods such as toiletries, towels, and paper are being reinvented towards more ecological sustainability. The manufacturing and marketing of feminine sanitary products are just one of the essentials to start a move towards more eco-friendly products.

Research shows that menstruating individuals¹⁰ are open to reusable and ecofriendly products. A study examining women's movement towards eco-friendly hygiene products revealed that environmental concerns were the primary motivators (Tu *et al.* 2021). Their openness towards these products were determined to be related to their identity and perspective towards environmental protection (Tu *et al.* 2021). The authors examined a wide variety of products from reusable pads, to underwear, to menstrual cups and determined that lifestyle¹¹ of the individual was a determinant of which type of product that they purchased (Tu *et al.* 2021). As such, marketing of such products should reflect different lifestyles and needs. Individuals who were seeking information and interested in the environmental trends¹² attached value towards eco-friendly characteristics of the products as well as novelty of the product itself. Individuals who were of lower socioeconomic status attached value to economic benefits and convenience (Tu *et al.* 2021). Those who were pursuing conservative and stable life that aligns more closely to traditional gender roles were less likely to show interest in the products and use of the products (Tu *et al.* 2021). Overall, the study showed that consumers were not overly concerned with the inconvenience when learning and dealing with menstrual hygiene products (Tu *et al.* 2021). Environmental sustainability and protection have become linked to economic and marketplace participation, where price and potential

¹⁰ This particular study was done in Taiwan.

¹¹ Tu *et al.* (2021) do not provide a definition of lifestyle but the questionnaire included lifestyle choices such as: leading a fast passed and busy lives, seeking excitement, self-reliance, concern of how others thought about the individual etc.

¹² Things such as reusable water bottles, recycling etc.

savings become an integral part of the discussion surrounding eco-friendly feminine hygiene products. These types of products are at the forefront of the discussion about the environment and link the consumption of goods towards political and moral stances. The ability or inability to consume environmentally friendly products divides the public into two groups that carry political and moral connotations.

For female-presenting people of low economic status, barriers exist that prevent adequate menstrual hygiene care, eco-friendly or not. Money, adequate transportation, and safety and security where bathrooms can be accessed safely are all contributing factors to poor menstrual hygiene (Kuhlaman *et al.* 2019). Public surveys show that up to 25% of women had financial difficulties purchasing basic sanitary products while 20% reported missing school or work due to menstruation (Kuhlaman *et al.* 2019). With a move towards online shopping and more sustainable products such as menstruation underwear being sold only in online stores, other barriers such as access to the internet and computer, as well as P.O. box and accesses to credit or debit card, pushes out a large percentage of individuals from participating in ethical consumption, and thus removes them from the predominant discourse in United States surrounding climate change.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISEASE MESSAGING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORAL CONTRACEPTION

Historically the topics of menstruation and menstruating people have carried negative connotations and views in the United States context (Chrisler 2011; Jenkins and

McMillian 2016). Both a social and physiological construct (Newton 2012), menstruation had often been a taboo subject in the public and medical spheres. Menstruating individuals face constant social pressure to conceal or otherwise face disgust, shame, and stigma (Chrisler 2011; Davies *et al.* 2021). Misinformation is widespread amongst menstruating and non-menstruating individuals (Moon *et al.* 2020) and especially those of lower socioeconomic status¹³ (Moon *et al.* 2020; Rani and Reddy 2019). Inadequate menstrual knowledge can lead to inadequate hygienic practices and further misinformation (Rani and Reddy 2019). An important note here is that the marketing surrounding and Associations with disease and uncleanness especially amongst adolescents (Rani and Reddy 2019) is an extension of social taboo and stigma. The social need to conceal all signs of menstrual blood and symptoms puts a significant financial pressure on individuals with purchases and access of sanitary products and menstrual suppressants. The marketing of menstrual hygiene is enveloped in traditional femininity and pleasantry. Menstrual odor while usually cannot be smelled by others¹⁴ is a major advertising focus, it is primarily rooted in shame and self-objectification. While in United States a major hygiene crisis is occurring where many menstruating individuals do not have access to basic products and are forced to skip school and/or work (Rapp and Kilpatrick 2020). Fueled by profit, pharmaceutical and sanitary companies have a vested interest in

¹³ The connection between low socioeconomic status and misinformation is not inherent in nature, but rather unequal access to information and resources.

¹⁴ "Period Blood Smell: What You Need to Know." 2019. July 26, 2019.
<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/325878>.

continuing this stigma and shame. Even as social movements follow more liberal trends and acceptance of menstrual blood on television, the neoliberal ideas of choice and responsibility are promoted to women. With talk of climate justice and change, menstruating people in United States are pressured to buy luxury taxed products in order to save the environment and minimize their carbon footprint while still being feminine and discrete. We may say that capitalism and the rise of industry is the primary driving force of innovation in the menstrual product market.

However, it is important to note that industry does not necessarily mean just business, but rather larger structures such as the Medical-Industrial complex where corporations work to satisfy basic needs at a profit. Before the food and drug administration (FDA) approval of Envoid on June 23rd, 1960 (Knowles 2013) a hormonal oral contraceptive, condoms were the predominant form of birth control in the US (Tone 2002). The sexual revolution was in full swing with a greater focus on women's autonomy and sexual freedoms lobbied by planned parenthood founder Margaret Sander (Zorea 2012) and her support of the birth control pill. The pharmaceutical industry was at the forefront of this movement (Watkins 2012), with multiple companies developing and testing hormonal birth control. The pill was marketed in medical journals as allowing menstruating people greater sexual freedom and alleviated fears of unwanted pregnancy (May 2010; Watkins 2012), in addition to opening opportunities in education, careers, and social mobility (May 2010). The first advertisement for Envoid showed the mythical

Andromeda¹⁵ breaking away from manacles around her wrist as a symbol of liberation from unwanted pregnancy (Watkins 2012).

The advert was marketed towards physicians and not consumers, direct advertisements of the birth control pill to consumers would not occur until the 1980s. The language used reflects the contradicting views on the woman's body and women's reproductive health. The woman's body is described as being a "vassal" and in "chains" reflecting the lack of control and bodily autonomy. It is important to note that the ad explicitly focuses on the cessation of menstruation as its primary benefit, and not just birth control. The ad uses the word "aberration" when describing the cyclical nature of menstruation and bodily functions. Making normal bodily behavior seem abnormal and in need of correction. In Western medicine, with its focus on diagnosis and treatment of disease, the abnormal is usually synonymous with disease (Scully 2004), leading the healthy body of a woman and menstruation has become medicalized.

The pill is meant to regulate a woman's natural bodily function and provide them greater freedom in terms of their (hetero-)sexuality. This freedom, however, is quite complex. The advertisement for oral contraception, though marketed with freedom and choice, is layered with patriarchal undertones. We also see the beginnings of the idea that menstruation is somehow limiting to a woman's well-being and social mobility, and therefore, should be regulated and limited. In order for a woman to be "free" and successful, her body must be controlled through this medical development. Staring

¹⁵ A Greek mythological figure who was chained and sacrificed to the god Poseidon and rescued by Perseus.

in the 1970s with the feminist health movement, discourses emerged around the perception of women and menstruation. Questions regarding the necessity of menstruation and whether monthly menstruation was even harmful were being asked in academic circles with notable participants such as Coutinho and Segal in their book, *Is Menstruation Obsolete*, published in 1999. Some harmful effects can include inconvenience, certain medical diseases¹⁶, anemia, and financial hardships whether by the costs of sanitary products and/or loss of productivity at work (Coutinho and Segal 1999; Thomas 2000). Research on the negative impacts of menstruation on an individual's life is ongoing. Some female athletes reported a perceived loss of performance (Findlay *et al.* 2020; Sakamaki-Sunaga *et al.* 2015). Some adolescence and teenagers with dysmenorrhea report loss of attendance as well as participation in social, sports, and classroom activities (Banikarim *et al.* 2000).

Scholars and medical researchers have argued that monthly menstruation is a uniquely modern industrial phenomenon an unintentional consequence of earlier onset of menses, fewer births, and shorter breastfeeding periods (Ellertson and Thomas 2000). Ellertson and Thomas (2000) recognize that by framing menstruation as unnecessary and optional can lead to association of menstruation with disease. Framing of menstruation as pathological in nature and debilitating to women (Zief 2010) created a growing market of women and doctors with interest to use medicine as a solution to menstrual issues.

¹⁶ Coutinho and Segal (1999) state that menstruation is a causative factor of diseases such as endometriosis, uterine and ovarian cancers.

That is not to say that suppression of menstruation is not controversial. Discourse surrounding whether or not menstruation is necessary or even beneficial is ongoing within the medical, research, and feminist communities (Curtis 2008). Largely fueled by the multimillion pharmaceutical industry (Curtis 2008). Some researchers see menstruation as necessary and natural; they view it as a form of identity building and as connecting women through the experience (Brantelid *et al.* 2014). Women who use methods to suppress menstruation tend to report more negative symptoms of menstruation and psychosocial stress (Andrist *et al.* 2005). There is an oppositional view on menstruation and menstrual suppression, while it can be framed as liberating or unnecessary, it is also associated with gender identity¹⁷, femininity (Elson 2002) and positive experiences.

Research on the pill stagnated after the 1960's with fewer companies focusing on developing new application of the same hormonal methods (Djerassi 1989; Watkins 2012). Watkins (2012), and Djerassi (1989) attribute this stagnation to the withdrawal of pharmaceutical companies from the field. At the turn of 21st century, the pharmaceutical industry shifted away from developing birth control as primary pregnancy prevention and towards curing women's uterine issues (Watkins 2012). In 2003, the FDA approved Seasonale, a birth control pill that promised to reduce the number of periods to just four

¹⁷ Menstruation and by extension childbirth is a uniquely biologically female phenomenon, and as such the feminine identity i.e. what it means to be a woman is closely related to the ability to menstruate and reproduce.

per year (Watkins 2012). Marketing emphasized the benefits of the pill as a treatment for acne and PMS shifting away from its primary use as a birth control method (Watkins 2012). The primary motivator for this change in use is marketing rather than innovation (Watkins 2012). Marketing for the pill paralleled earlier concepts of liberation and freedom though from periods instead of pregnancy. The pill was starting to be promoted as a lifestyle drug (Moldrup 2004) to physicians whom in turn passed it on to consumers (Watkins 2012).

There does not seem to be a clear and concise definition to the term “lifestyle drug,” but it has been used with increased frequency in the last half of the 20th century (Moldrup 2004, (Rahman *et al.* 2010). Some definitions have been offered by Gilbert *et al.* (2000) and Rahman *et al.* (2010); they suggest “lifestyle drug” is used for “non health” issues or issues that lie at the margins of health and wellbeing. Gilbert *et al.* (2010) offers several examples of lifestyle drugs that are used to treat skin aging, male pattern baldness, obesity, smoking cessation, patient convenience, pregnancy prevention, and menstruation cessation. The use of such drugs is delegated to the treatment of lifestyle illnesses that come about partly due to lifestyle choices (Rahman *et al.* 2010) or are often deemed as a non-medical issue (Gilbert *et al.* 2000). Menstruation, which is treated as both a disease and a natural phenomenon, typically falls neatly into the lifestyle drug trend.

Research suggests that menstruation suppression is a result not only the medicalization of bodily functions but a way for menstruating individuals to retain the illusion of their bodies as idealized objects (Andrist 2008). The female body is socially

constructed as a thing of beauty and as a sexual object for the male gaze (Harvey and Zurbriggen 2020) which is then internalized by the individual (Andrist 2008). Suppressing menstruation is therefore a way distance from the “wasteful” and “dirty” process, creating an idealized version of the biologically female body. The ideal is of a female body that is not menstruating but still retains her sexual characteristics ready to please (Harvey and Zurbriggen 2020). Menstruation can remind women that their bodies are “creaturely” (Erchull 2011), and self-objectification can lead to women express the sentiment that they would not miss their period (Johnson Roberdo *et al.* 2003). Despite the fact the regular menstruation cycle is a sign of good reproductive health. Therefore, Erchull (2011) argues that advertisements try to distance women from the menstrual cycle.

Menstrual suppression is the result of the contradictory messaging and views surrounding female presenting bodies and menstruation that stems from the unease, shame, and identity that arises from menstruating. Pressure to hide and always present as non-menstruating leads to the desire to get rid of menstruation as a whole. Menstrual suppression is framed as empowering just like menstrual hygiene products are, by liberating the individual from the unpleasant symptoms of menstruation and hiding it from public view. It utilizes the same concepts of empowerment through sameness and participation in the public sphere, while taking the self-objectifying views of menstruating individuals as a given.

CHAPTER SIX: VISUAL AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED ADVERTISEMENTS

Pre-teen and teenagers in the United States rely on advertisements and commercials as accurate sources of information on menstruation (Stubbs 2008). Advertisements inform not only the basics of menstruation¹⁸ but societal impressions and reactions to menstruating individuals and bodies (Malefy and McCabe 2015). In order to appeal to a more modern audience, advertisements adopt a more feminist approach and position themselves as champions of feminism while simultaneously promoting negative stereotypes surrounding menstruation. The companies behind the commercials pose their products as a solution to all problems that face women in current society, both social and menstrual ones. The commercials are analyzed with a particular attention to race, class, gender and environmentalism. As such they experience the same shortcomings that Second Wave Feminism did, through focusing primarily on white, middle/upper class cisgender women and ignoring other class, gender, and race as factors. Environmentalism has become a more prominent part of the public discourse as more individuals are interested in becoming environmentally sustainable. In the United States, neoliberal thought indicates that the panacea for the variety of problems that a society is facing is through participation in commerce. The act of purchasing reusable products is framed as a solution for the global climate change that faces us today. The discourse surrounding

¹⁸ Young individuals often do not get reliable sex education in schools or at home. Accurate sex education is not a requirement in many states, and the level and depth vary state by state.

solid waste and its effect on the environment¹⁹ is often at the forefront of eco-citizenship. One use menstrual hygiene products contribute to the growing waste in the landfills and oceans and as such minimizing one's waste is part of the discussion on eco-citizenship. I use visual and textual analysis of commercials to decipher the underlying theories that influence their messaging.

Always Platinum

The Always Platinum is a twenty second commercial with voiceless music in the background. The commercial begins with a female voice stating "As women we deserve Zero" as woman works on a computer. The music scratches when a face of a confused woman looks at the camera, the voice continues "Wait what? We deserve zero feels on our periods". With a short introduction to the product the voice continues "it's possible with up to zero leaks, up to zero odor, up to zero bunching". She continues "because with always platinum you get more life rewrite the rules." Throughout the commercial there are short clips of women doing different activities such as working in an office, dancing, and playing with children.

Throughout the commercial the word "zero" is often used as both a description for the benefits for the product as well as a hook. The commercial states "as women we deserve zero" and then quickly rejects that sentiment. The statement is meant to be absurd and a play on the word zero. However, it does show the theoretical mindset that the

¹⁹ "Climate Change and Municipal Solid Waste Fact Sheet | Pay-As-You-Throw | US EPA." n.d. Accessed July 18, 2021. <https://archive.epa.gov/wastes/conserve/tools/payt/web/html/factfin.html>.

commercial is working under. Women deserving “zero” can be read as a statement not about inequality, but rather about the perception of inequality. Even pre-First Wave Feminism, white cisgender women²⁰ had some rights and it is hard to argue that they had “zero” of anything. However, by making such a statement that white cis gendered middle-class women would disagree on it not only hooks the viewer but creates a sense of togetherness.

Empowerment through participation in the market is seen when the commercial utilizes words such as “you get more life” and “rewrite the rules”. This sentiment stems from neo-liberal feminist ideas about the individual responsibility and participation as a solution to the issues surrounding women. By stating “you get more life” implies that without the product and when women are on their period there is an experience and expectations of “less life”. The images that accompany the phrase more “more life” are of women in the office and playing with her children. For neoliberal feminism, the work/life balance is an individualistic choice with the expectations that women will both be a primary caretaker of their children as well as active participants in the economy. The issue of representation is seen in this commercial with all of the women being presumably cisgender and seen as traditionally successful and mostly white. Success and happiness were measured in the commercial through either working or motherhood, with a singular exception of a woman doing sports. The utilization of middle-class white women as the baseline and representative of all menstruating individuals is problematic

²⁰ Individuals who do not fall into the cisgender, white women had even less rights, especially slave or women of African descent. Since this advertisement subscribes to Second Wave Feminism, and the “zero” statement is meant to be humorous/provocative, their struggles are often ignored.

because it excludes a large portion of the population who do not see themselves and their lifestyle represented and targeted by these companies.

While neoliberal concepts of solution through marketplace are presented in the Always Platinum commercial through participation in the market and economy, the target audience of the commercial reflect the class taste that Bourdieu (1984) and CurridHalkett (2017) write about. Capitalistic and neoliberal citizenship is not only shaped by the products purchased but also by the inconspicuous consumption. The target audience for this sort of consumption is the Middle class who cannot always afford all the inconspicuous consumption. “Getting more life” refers to the lack of leisure and family time that those not of the higher class lack. Images of female presenting individuals spending time with family and participating in non-work activities flash across the screen, linking “more life” to this type of inconspicuous consumption. Getting access to that sort of leisure and ability to participate in inconspicuous consumption is not marketed towards those who are not middle or high classes.

Kotex Love Yourself a Little More

The Kotex Luxe Commercial is titled “Love Yourself a Little More.” It is 31 seconds long, with no spoken words. The song playing in the background is “Bold” by the Highfields. It begins with a presumably cisgender woman in a medical setting responding to a medical emergency that requires her to perform or lead a surgery. She is young and conventionally attractive, of white or Hispanic descent. Throughout most of her screen time, she is focused on the task at hand is clearly in a stressful situation. The woman who is implied to be a doctor successfully completes surgery, smiling as she pulls

down her surgical mask and the words, “Nothing is Compromised” in bold white letters play on the screen. The scene then changes to a baker who is helping a customer with their order. The woman is young and of African American descent, she is smiling throughout her screen time. The bakery is surrounded in warm colors and does not appear to be from a chain, but rather a small independent business. The implication is that the female presenting person is a small business owner of said bakery. The words, “To Bring Happiness” in the same font and color play across the screen. Lastly the third individual who gets the majority of the screen time is a ballerina practicing in a studio. Once again, she is young and white. The words, “Its Time She Loves Herself the Same Way” followed by “Especially On Her Red Days” flash across the screen, followed by a bold colorful image of the company logo. It is important to note here that the studio is incredibly lavish with large floor to ceiling windows, chandeliers, and mirrors. The commercial then follows by giving a short explanation on the product itself, using vocabulary such as “luxurious skin comfort + protection”. The scene changes to the baker, the dancer, the doctor all smiling with the words “period or not love yourself a little more”.

The general messaging of the commercial by using images of “powerful” and conventionally successful woman with the song in the background is that of empowerment and achievement. It is implied as with all commercials that these women are currently menstruating. It is important to note that the product itself is meant to create comfort and protection from leaks and odor. There is a theme of success despite these women menstruating, and without anyone around them knowing. The commercial

follows a general trope that women are either on or off their periods. Still unlike the experience of many menstruating people, the actors are perfectly happy and at ease, always smiling.

The title and the text that accompany the Kotex commercial are interesting in the fact that they continue this idea of sameness and sisterhood. The words “love yourself even on your red days” not so subtly implies that women who are on their periods tend to love themselves less than when they are not. It continues the trend of earlier corporate verbiage of women either being on or off their periods. The commercial acknowledges that there is a societal stigma and shame associated with menstruation, but it shifts the blame of this stigma on the individual. By saying “love yourself” it puts the responsibility of eradicating this stigma on the individual and for the individual to remove that shame. Women have a diverse experience when it comes to menstruation, however that fact is not acknowledged by the commercial and instead it lumps all women’s experience into one, that of shame and stigma and lack of self-love.

The benefits that the Kotex product provides according to the commercial are that of comfort and discreteness. With the theme of empowerment, the need to hide any and all sign of menstruation is still present. None of the women shown experience any of the symptoms of menstruation nor shown menstruation. The need for discreteness is not framed as hygiene issue but rather a social one. The framing of the commercial is such that success comes from discreteness and minimization of menstruation. Individuals who menstruate despite their different biological functions are framed as needing to be more like cisgender men in this regard.

While the first two menstruating individuals are shown in work environments the third is a dancer. Traditionally seen as a more feminine endeavor, the dancer both symbolize the “femininity” of menstruating individuals and the target audience of the commercial. The other actors though are of middle to high socioeconomic class, the dancer is an example of how status is based on inconspicuous consumption. Dancing is an expensive endeavor, and the individual is not a beginner. Large amounts of time and money are required to be able to dance on a semi regular bases, especially ballet. The socioeconomic status of this dancer is displayed not only the dancing but by the environment that they are in. The dancer is practicing alone in a large extravagant studio, something is not affordable to those outside of the upper economic class or professionals. Thus, the dancer serves two purposes, to reaffirm the positively “feminine” act of menstruation and to signify that the Kotex product is looking to attract those of high economic or high cultural classes.

Always Radiant

Always is a popular brand of sanitary hygiene products for women, they sell both pads and tampons. The Always Radiant commercial has no spoken words but rather a series of stop motion video with white word text and the Like We Do it by Grace Mesa playing in the background. The commercial begins with bright colors of pinks and purples, leafy motifs playing across the screen and the product in packaging is displayed. White bold letters state “You Can Stay Protected and Wear what you want” followed by two young presumably cisgender women on the screen smiling and posing. One of the women is of African American descent while the other one is White or Hispanic. Both are

dressed in fashionable bright modern clothes and one of them has a larger body size than the other. The text continues “up to 100% Leak and Odor Free Protection...with zero feels experience made with flex foam wrapped in neon vibes...wear what moves you....get your radiant on”.

The advert is minimal in its nature with no greater story or elaborate scenes of working women. The message of empowerment is still however, present. The choice of music to accompany the commercial has a female singer singing “No one can do it like we can do it”, as two confident women pose with their arms crossed.

Sameness, a fundamental idea of Second Wave is portrayed by the usage of the limited diversity of the actors and the presentation. The packaging of neon colors and bright pinks is definitively feminine in nature. The two actors are conventionally attractive and while one is somewhat larger on size, she would still be smaller compared to the average woman in the United States. There is this perceived “sisterhood” between the actors as they strike the same poses and wear the same style of clothing. It is a singular representation of the female identity. Continuing of this theme of sameness, wearing what you want on your period and the ability to wear what you want implies that people who menstruate are not usually comfortable wearing clothes that they like on their periods. The commercial continues by implying that there is a lack of freedom that women experience on their periods and that the freedom can be achieved through purchasing their product. Freedom being another tenant of second wave feminism. These concepts, reflect the constrained and limited feminist thought which are problematic in their exclusion of the experience of many menstruating individuals. By having the

experience of women being the same *i.e.* lacking freedoms during their menstruation but presenting all actors as smiling and always happy it leaves to a very limited number of ways that individuals can participate in the menstruation experience.

The text explaining the products benefits follows the established tropes of odor control and protection. The messaging is that feminine hygiene products must only be discreet, comfortable and have loud, fun packaging to be empowering for people who menstruate. Once again promoting this need to control menstrual odor, the commercial states that successful empowerment and the ability to “do it” requires for the individual to hide all symptoms of menstruation.

Always Pure Cotton

The Always Pure Cotton commercial begins with a pleasant green/blue screen with hand drawn white cotton plants on the borders as a nondescript song plays in the background. There are no spoken words just text that relays the information on the product and the core message of the advertisement. With a short introduction to the pad itself, the text continues “make no compromises... pads changed for good... pads free of chlorine bleach, fragrances, dyes... 100% pure cotton top layer...made with flexfoam core...for up to zero leaks and zero feel... 10x drier vs. leading cotton pad with a cotton top layer...try the only pad made with cotton top layer and flex foam core...pads changed for good.”

The commercial is much simpler and straight forward compared to others, there is no message of empowerment or feminist ideas about work and accomplishments. This commercial instead capitalizes on the growing societal trend towards more naturally

derived products and environmentally conscious consumerism. Cotton is notoriously resource heavy and pesticide intensive material to grow and process however its association with environmentally friendly practices is a common misconception in United States (Williams 2018). Here the commercial relies on the societal association with natural equaling better than synthetic and equates cotton with the concept of being “good.”

Neoliberal ideas about the market and citizenship put the responsibility of ethical consumerism on the individual, who is assumed to be able to spend the money on these products. By purchasing a cotton pad, the consumer is doing something good for themselves and for the environment. A responsible citizen, a good citizen, should purchase products that are good. The advertisement also markets the pad as being without bleach, fragrances and dyes, something that the majority of menstruating individuals would associate with healthier habits.

But being healthy and “good” requires a higher investment. The pads are also marked up from the company’s regular pads. As of July 2021 a thirty-six count box of Always cotton pads are \$6.99 at Target while their regular pads are \$6.99 for forty-six count box. Here we see the ideas about who is a “good” neoliberal citizen being played out. In order to participate in healthier living and “good” environmental impact, the individual is encouraged to spend more money on less product. The market is driving sustainability. This markup of price pushes out individuals of lower socioeconomic statuses who would like to participate in being environmentally conscious but cannot do so due to the higher price. The commercial markets environmental sustainability to those

of middle and high classes. The thought behind this is that class taste differs between the classes and the lower class would only be interested in practical rather than fighting larger environmental issues. Neoliberal thought and society implicate the individual as having sole responsibility to purchase ethical and non-harmful products, but they can only do so only if they have the financial resources. It is the individual's responsibility to acquire the said resources in order to be eco-friendly; the relationship among morality, the market, and citizenship becomes clear in the messaging in this advertisement.

Ruby Love

The Ruby Love commercial is the longest of all advertisements analyzed in this paper, lasting for a total of two minutes and forty-eight seconds. The premise is that periods are personified as humans and a discussion occurs between a mother, child, and their respective periods. Several things should be stated upfront -all of the actors are white and cisgender, they are situated in their house with some flashbacks, and it is safe to say based on their environment that the actors represent a family of middle to upper class people. The commercial begins by the mother stating to her daughter that "Periods can be rough" as her period interrupts her with a dramatic voice "excuse me?! Being a period is rough". The mother is named Pam and the personified period is named as "Pam's period". Pam is dressed modestly and in casual clothes, while Pam's period is wearing red business suite, red stilettos, red beret, and red lipstick. Pam's period begins to recollect how a teenage Pam in middle or high school in the year 1989 while presenting a paper, sneezes with an adult Pam's period popping out behind her. She questioningly

states “gesundheit”²¹ to a somewhat shocked classroom full of teenagers. Pam awkwardly shuffles out of the classroom, while Pam’s period waves at the classroom. Pam clearly annoyed and incredibly embarrassed tells Pam’s period to “Stop it”.

The next flashback starts with Pam’s telling the audience “or at your slumber party.” The scene is set as Pam sleeping on the floor with several girls around her. Pam’s period pops up from underneath her blanket nudges Pam awake and dramatically states, “things are not looking good down there”. Switching back to present, Pam is shown sighing deeply as the Pam’s period continues to remind her of all the times that Pam’s period ruined her experiences. Pam’s period continues “or at summer camp”. The scene changes to Pam playing twister with her friends as one friend states “right hand red” towards Pam. Pam is bent over in white shorts in a very exposed position, as Pam’s period pop’s up from one of her legs and screams “Hi!” at Pam while waving frantically. Young Pam pops her head up, clearly surprised and shocked as a distracted Pam’s period states “Oooh twister.” The scene once again shifts to the present with Pam’s period center frame stating, “The real problems are the messy period products that you’ve been using,” the text “stop using messy period products” is on the screen at the same time. Pam’s period strikes an overly dramatic angry pose with her brows furrowed and her hands on her hips. Pam’s period continues onto a monologue where she goes, “I believe ladies should feel free and comfortable to do whatever they want every single day of the month! Who’s with me?!” Her dramatic speech is accompanied by her standing on the couch fist in the air reminiscent of an activist feminist gesture, as an effeminate husband comes into

²¹ Gesundheit is German for bless you

the shot clapping and saying, “I’m in.” The child is somewhat embarrassed by this display puts her hand into her hands and says, “Dad.”

Pam’s period continues describing the product, which is a period underwear. She describes it as “for a comfortable truly leak-free period you got to get Ruby Love.” Some benefits of the underwear are that it does not require pads or tampons. Pam’s period describes it as, “Yeah...I’m saying you can just wear underwear on your period.” As Pam’s period continues to explain the product, text on the screen states that it is leak free from all sides and is made with organic cotton. The underwear is machine washable and drier safe, the words “Easy to clean” are used. Pam’s period continues that the underwear can last for up to three years, and that’s “roughly 700 pads or 800 tampons” as a large amount of pads rain down on both the mom and the daughter. The same thing happens with tampons further bombarding Pam and Poppy. This delights Pam’s period. Pam’s period continues “or you can just use Ruby love and avoid all this waste” the word “waste” is emphasized. On the screen the text “environmentally friendly” pops up. Some humor is portrayed by a pad being stuck onto Pam’s face.

The conversation continues with the cost of the Ruby love underwear being half as much as other period underwear brands. Pam’s period states, “If you want a leak-free period click the link below to get your period proof underwear.” I would like to note here that we are only halfway across the commercial. The word protection is used when talking about heavier days. The commercial then shifts to explaining, “With ruby love you can feel confident any time of the month,” turning to Pam, Pam’s period states

“while our first-time meeting was.....traumatic.” Another flashback to Pam in 1989 again, this time Pam is in a pool swimming away her period, which is yelling, “were going to be best friends!”

The commercial shifts back to the present and onto the daughter, who is named Poppy, and Poppy’s period. Poppy’s period has a rocker aesthetic, still wearing all red. Pam is looking at her daughter and somewhat uncomfortably states. “With Ruby Love periods aren’t that bad.” This makes Pam’s period burst into tears: “this is the nicest thing that anyone ever said to me.” The mom also cries while saying, “my daughter got her period.” The daughter joins in stating, “I’m a grown woman now.” Poppy’s period invites the Dad to join, everyone hugging in one long hug. The Dad comforting the three crying women while saying, “let it flow.” Lastly Pam’s period comes back on the screen and says, “Basically with Ruby Love you can do anything you love do while on your period.” She describes the underwear as “cute” and promoting their sleepwear, active wear, and swimwear. Other products on offer are first period kit, which Pam’s period explains, “your daughter and her period can get along from day one.” Pam’s period continues, “Women everywhere are learning to appreciate their periods or at least tolerate them.” The scene is Pam and Poppy in the pool playing with a ball as both periods calmly relax on lounging chairs. After some quotes from non-descript, satisfied customers who bought the product, Pam states, “Have the time of your month with Ruby love.” The commercial ends with everyone taking a selfie together and Pam’s period talking to Poppy while everyone looks through a wedding album; it says, “I wasn’t on the guest list,

but I wouldn't miss your mom's wedding for the world!" Pam looks increasingly annoyed and sighs deeply.

The commercial frames periods as being inherently negative and disruptive to the individual's life. Every time Pam's period pops up is unexpected and menstruation is portrayed in a negative light. The flashbacks portray the period coming in at the most inconvenient time and making the young Pam always uncomfortable and embarrassed. Pam's period is portrayed as loud, obnoxious, not understanding the effect she has on Pam and even traumatic. The word "traumatic" is used to describe menarche. The commercial tries to portray the actors as an average family.

Pam and her family are from upper to middle class socioeconomic bracket. She is also explicitly cisgender and "normal." Pam experienced the same events that everyone from the same bracket did, public schooling, camp, sleepovers, twister and marriage. All part of middle- and higher-class inconspicuous consumption. Her class is further solidified by conspicuous wealth such as her current house has a new washer and drier, as well as having modern, immaculate decorations and is seemingly large. Pam's experience is also meant to a near universal life event. Her period has been disruptive of her activities and events while her response is the expected of shame and embarrassment. The commercial targets individuals who can relate to Pam and her lifestyle. The negative portrayal of periods harkens back to older commercials where companies would utilize blue liquid and subtly promote shame and negative stereotypes.

Throughout the commercial there is a segment that directly relates the consumption of pads and tampons to being environmentally damaging. When Pam's

period discusses the number of tampons and pads that are consumed by an average individual in three years, the phrase “Earth-friendly” pops up on the screen. The implication being that using tampons or pads are not “Earth-friendly” and wasteful. Reusability and garbage waste is a large part of the discourse surrounding global climate change²³, as such minimizing waste produced by an individual is part of the initiative to curb climate issues. When “roughly 700 pads or 800 tampons” drop from the sky on Pam and Poppy, it serves as a visual representation of the amount of waste that an individual who menstruates produces. The onus is on the individual to reduce their waste and purchase a reusable environmentally friendly product as a neoliberal citizen. It is important to note here that with neoliberalism, no attention is paid to the steps that the company takes in being environmentally friendly. With climate change discourse happening on both individual and global levels, menstrual hygiene companies are creating products that reflect the environmentally conscious public. Neoliberal ideas put the emphasis of personal responsibility on the individual, specifically as it reflects to the market. The purchase of underwear that are environmentally friendly is ethically correct. The commercial advertises to individuals whom they think will not only connect with Pam and her middle/upper class white experience with camp, school, and slumber parties, but also who could afford said product. By having no individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, the company excludes them from participating in the freedom, environmental and economic benefits. This exclusion and focus on only the experience of

²³“Climate Change and Municipal Solid Waste Fact Sheet | Pay-As-You-Throw | US EPA.” n.d.

Accessed July 18, 2021.

<https://archive.epa.gov/wastes/conserve/tools/payt/web/html/factfin.html>.

white middle class women is one of the criticisms of Second Wave Feminism by Third Wave thinkers. Regardless of individual preference, if the advertisement targets the experience of white cisgender women, then individuals who get their information from commercials might feel like they are not allowed to participate, that they and their needs are not part of the conversation. The marketing in it of itself is targeted to an awfully specific demographic and class. White, cisgender, middle class, straight women are the target because corporate believes that their class taste is that which would appreciate and desire environmentally friendly, reusable products. This inclusion-exclusion based on class, economic and social status, can become more apparent when advertisements specifically for environmentally friendly menstrual products.

Thinx

An example of a menstrual product that focuses almost exclusively on the environmental impact of the product is Thinx. The commercial begins by a woman's voice stating, "Switching from plastic bags and bottles to reusable ones makes our planet a little less plastic. Why not make your period more sustainable too? A person with a period uses 17,000 pads or tampons in their lifetime. Which weighs as much as polar bear. And every year, 12 billion pads and tampons are thrown out. That's why we created Thinx." After a short description of the product the voice continues, "With Thinx, a million people saved up to 300 million pounds of period products from the landfills.

Better period. Better planet. Help us start a new cycle when you shop Thinx". The commercial has a heavy environmental message especially as it pertains to period waste and pollution. It targets individuals who wish to be environmentally more conscious with images of polar bears and large numbers meant to produce shock at the amount of waste that period products produce. It even makes an association between reusable products such as water bottles and bags to buying reusable period products. It is important to note here that the individual's social and economic class has a significant impact on their willingness and ability to purchase eco-friendly products, those of middle and upper class tend to be more interested in eco-friendly behavior (Amin, Farid, and Manzoor 2020; Gifford and Nilsson 2014; Medina *et al.* 2019). Those of higher economic status are able to participate more neoliberal eco citizenship and behavior however, that does not mean their behavior is more eco-friendly than those of lower economic status. Due to the prevailing neoliberal thought marketing only acknowledges this type of eco-friendly behavior. Class taste and the perception that eco-friendly behavior corresponds with higher cultural and economic wealth further divides the population into those who can participate and not solely based on their economic status. This distinction between class and socioeconomic status can be attributed to educational differences and accessibility to information, specifically access to inconspicuous consumption such as good schooling. That is not to say that those who do not have the ability to participate in inconspicuous consumption are less ecologically knowledgeable than the rich. Studies show that individuals from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds do hold strong pro-environmental beliefs and activism

(Ballew *et al.* 2019; Bryant and Mohai 1998). However, it is important to note that studies that examine between ethnicity and eco-friendly behavior/concern do produce inconsistent results (Medina *et al.* 2019).

Due to the onus and responsibility on the individual to be a moral neoliberal citizen, those who cannot afford the eco-friendly product are excluded from that citizenship. Socioeconomic constraints and structural inequalities do stiffen the ability and accessibility of ecofriendly products to those of lower socioeconomic status. This creates a class divide between those who can and cannot purchase eco-friendly products and participate as eco-friendly neoliberal citizens.

Throughout the commercial, the responsibility to be ethical is put on the individual. There is meant to be guilt associated with purchasing one time use period products. The commercial states the large number of period products being used in an individual lifetime as a way to make the viewer question how much their own usage of pads and tampons contribute to the growing landfill and wastage. The implication is that if one wants to be environmentally friendly, they need to not to use one-time, disposable products. In a neoliberal economic society, individual purchasing is directly related to morals and ethics. Being moral and ethical and preserving the planet as stated by the commercial, requires the individual to purchase reusable products.

The commercial, though not explicitly stated, does market towards individuals of middle to high economic status. The initial price for purchasing Thinx is higher than those of traditional hygiene products. On July 2021 their website products range from \$32 to \$95. It is safe to assume that an individual will need at least three underwear for

the duration of their period, many needing more. Such high initial cost excludes an evergrowing portion of the population who are priced out. This exclusion through pricing out can be seen with the purchase and consumption of organic products. Environmentally friendlier, “healthier” products are sold at a premium in stores and their significantly vary between stores (Colonescu and Islam 2019). For organic foods which is a considered to be healthier and more eco-friendly, half of consumers had considered the price of the items before any health benefits or environmental benefits (Ghali 2019; Paul R. *et al.* 2012). Organic foods are considered to be a luxury to individuals of lower socioeconomic status, that is meant for rich consumers (Ghali 2019; Ghali-Zinoubi 2021). When looking at only price as a factor, individuals of lower socioeconomic status are still charged higher prices for groceries and items in their neighborhoods as compared to richer areas (Talukdar 2008). Even if better priced items are available and are cheaper in the long term, individuals of low socioeconomic status are unable to get them without access to cars or ability to travel long distances which puts them in a worse socioeconomic state (Ehrenreic 2014; Talukdar 2008). For necessities such as period hygiene products, long term cheaper alternatives are unattainable due to the myriad of socioeconomic factors. The association of ethics and purchase is problematic especially when pertaining to necessities such as feminine hygiene products, which cannot be avoided. It creates a system where the individual is ethically responsible for not only their hygiene but the environment as well. Pressure is put onto the individual to purchase products because they are ethical not necessarily because they are wanted or needed. Menstruating individuals who cannot do so due to economic reason (Carroll 2019; Rafanelli 2019) can

resort towards dangerous practices such leaving tampons in too long or miss school or work due to their periods (Goldberg 2021; Rapp and Kilpatrick 2020). Individuals who do not participate with the same purchase are therefore deemed unethical and seen as contributors to climate change. Because the feminine hygiene products are a necessity this moral alignment cannot be avoided. Two groups are then created which is dependent on their purchasing choices and morality. The moral group who takes care of their menstruating bodies and the environment through their individualist purchases and those who do not or cannot do so.

Tampax

The Tampax tampon commercial stars the popular American standup comedian Amy Schumer who has addressed social issues surrounding body, women, and politics through her medium (Ray 2021), as the protagonist playing as herself visiting a Tampax sponsored OBGYN. The commercial/infographic lasts 4 minutes and 33 seconds. Amy proceeds to ask several questions pertaining to menstruation and tampons in general. Some of the questions are humorous in nature others touch on fears and issues that many menstruating people experience about their own menstruation. The doctor proceeds to answer the questions and Amy interjects with humorous comments. The commercial is set in a clinical setting with an actual OBGYN and is meant to be an informational source for individuals who have questions about their bodies and tampons.

Amy first asks about the myth that using tampons will mean that you can lose your virginity, to which the doctor answers “no.” Virginity is not a physiological construct but rather a social one (Allan, Santos, and Spahr 2016; Carpenter 2001). It is the

patriarchal ideas about women's worth being in their ability to reproduce and raise children. Though not explicitly linked to empowerment through participation in the marketplace and workplace it is noteworthy that a commercial that is explicitly constructed for accurate information would ask and answer such question with the assumption that virginity is physiological.

The commercial continues with several more questions from Amy, such as whether it is safe to sleep with a tampon, and whether a tampon will just fall out. The most noteworthy part of this conversations is Amy's responses to the doctor's answers. An example with the virginity issue, Amy responds after the one-word answer "no" with, "What if it takes you to a beautiful dinner and a concert and then you go home together?" The statement is done for comedic value first and is absurd in its nature, however, Amy's comments are enigmatic of a larger societal and cultural perception of women. There are questions regarding Toxic Shock Syndrome followed by a conversation. The doctor suggests that Amy and by extension menstruating people need to be their own advocates in the medical office. To which Amy responds, "It's embarrassing." Embarrassment and self-objectification are common with women. This perception that women need to be embarrassed to talk about their health once again is linked back to the cultural view of menstruating women. That this is something that should be embarrassing, and that women²² are uncomfortable asking such questions. It reinforces the negative connotations that society expects the individual to be embarrassed.

²² Once again this mostly refers to white middle/upper class women who would have access to an OBGYN.

Diva Cup

The Diva Cup is a popular brand of menstrual cups. This particular commercial is from 2019, is 31 seconds long and is titled “Join the Inner Revolution.” The commercial starts with a voice calling to the viewer, “Hey you, yeah you. Are you ready to challenge the period status quo?” as several hands (all light skinned) holding the diva cup come up on the screen. “Inner revolution” is interesting in the sense that it puts the responsibility of empowerment in each individual. By purchasing the product, women participate in this revolution of menstruation. The use of the word “revolution” is similar to Second Wave radical Feminism, where the whole system was challenged and needed to be broken. Neoliberal feminism puts emphasis on individual acts of empowerment and empowerment in choice. The commercial continues by describing the eco-friendliness of the menstrual cup. The narrator states that the diva cup has revolutionized the period game. The definition of revolution is: “pertaining to social, economic, or cultural context can be defined as: a sudden, radical or complete change; fundamental change in political organization; a change of paradigm.”²³ By comparing the Diva Cup to a revolutionary change, the commercial tries to implement the company as not only instigators of feminist social change but also as proactive in women’s issues. The commercial ends with the slogan, “Join the inner revolution now.” There is a sense of sisterhood and community, a revolution rarely has only one person. By purchasing the products women are therefore associating themselves with greater social change and “fighting” against menstrual stigma and taboos. Here we see how neoliberal ideals come together with those

²³ Mariam webster

from Second Wave Feminism about empowerment. By pulling from these two separate thoughts the messages of empowerment get blended with solutions through the market. Fighting against or participating in revolutionary change requires only the purchase of a product. While the product is economically less expensive in the long run, the up-front costs \$39.99, and same issues of access for lower socioeconomic individuals applies to the Diva Cup. It is therefore required an active participation not only in the market but capitalist society at large.

The commercial for the Diva Cup has up front messaging about revolution and empowerment and changing the system of menstruation. Second Wave Feminist ideals have a profound influence on the theme of the advert. However, participation in this revolution has less to do with changing the system and access towards menstrual hygiene product especially for those of lower socioeconomic status, and more with purchasing a singular product. A product that not only requires intimate knowledge and comfort of one's own body, something that many may struggle with, (Grabe and Grose 2014) but also the ability to spend significantly more money up front. Therefore, this revolution is dependent on economic ability and socioeconomic status.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A central theme surrounding feminine hygiene commercials is empowerment, following the societal feminist trends of more women in the workplace. The messaging of the advertisements pulls from greater social issues that female presenting people face every day. Images of menstruating individuals entering and succeeding in male dominate

field while hiding their menstrual status and symptoms. Second Wave Feminism has a strong focus on the struggles and experiences of white, middle class, cisgender, women. It extrapolates that struggle to all other demographics of female- and female-presenting bodies. Sameness both within the group and between male presenting individuals and female presenting individuals is a core ideal and it is presented in both imagery and verbiage used in the menstrual hygiene commercials. Empowerment through participation in the workforce is perhaps the most explicit theme seen here. Always Platinum commercial started with an image of a professional white, presumably, cisgender woman in an office. The Kotex “Love Yourself a Little More” continued the trend with two (the doctor and the baker) female presenting individuals in a traditionally male dominated workplace environment. Sameness between and within the feminine and masculine-presenting groups is extended to the sameness of achievement and participation in the workplace. Coupled with empowerment, it is little wonder that marketing of feminine hygiene products often showcases female-presenting individuals as high achievers, economically successful and happy. For the Always Radiant commercial, while distanced from a workplace setting still brings about Second Wave Feminist ideals about female presenting individuals not being different from the male presenting counterparts in any meaningful way. Achievement especially with the “do it” motif is front and center and harkens back to earlier “We Can Do It” poster from World War Two. Sisterhood and universal womanhood is presented as not only through a singular path towards empowerment, but how that empowerment looks like economic success. This puts all

their actors in the commercial into similar socioeconomic status and this idea of sameness and a singular “sisterhood” of women is endemic of Second Wave Feminism.

However, the menstrual capitalist structure even with its talk of empowerment and freedom, requires women to feel insecure about the bodies, odor, and periods.

Empowerment through purchase becomes an issue when considering the myriad of social and economic roadblocks that prevent individuals from commerce. It creates a division of empowerment based on class, where those who are not of economically middle/upper class do not participate in the menstrual “revolution”. That is not to say that individuals outside of those classes are disinterested in eco-friendly menstrual products, but only that the commercials and neoliberal society presents a singular path to eco-friendliness that through the market. Ecological citizenship is only framed through solution through commerce and menstrual products are marketed only to those who are able and are interested in participating in that system. Bordou (1984), Currid-Halkett (2017), and Handbury (2019) discuss how class taste not only influence the products that are marketed towards different classes but how different classes feel what their class taste is. In terms of ecologically friendly menstrual products, advertisements market towards those of middle to high economic class with the belief that they are the only ones who are interested in these products. Thinking beyond class, economical limitations make it difficult of those who would be interested to participate in neoliberal eco-citizenship without having higher economical and in some cases cultural capital. Eco-friendly products though not directly framed with empowerment, do amplify the climate change issues and solution through the marketplace. The framing is such that by not participating

in neoliberal eco-citizenship is analogous to being wasteful. A moral choice is placed on the ability and interest to purchase eco-friendly products and participating in neoliberal commerce.

The issue of waste and its effects on the environment permeates political and media discourse. As society moves towards renewable energy and reusability, questions surrounding how excessive waste can be deal with. Traditional one-time use hygiene products produce large quantities of plastic waste in addition to the manufacturing costs. It has become such a problem that initiatives in Canada urge the government to include tampons on the ban of single use plastics (Collie 2020). President Joseph R. Biden has promised to fight climate change, with a focus on infrastructure and plastics²⁴. With the threat of global temperature change and climate change on the minds of many of the younger generations, it is little wonder that companies are advertising their products as more environmentally friendly. The treat of climate change and an individual's responsibility for it is developed into an opportunity to participate in neoliberal commerce. Personal responsibility and initiative to combat climate change through commerce is definitional to good neoliberal eco-citizenship. Advertisings reflect the concept of solution through commerce by poising their products as the moral choice in combating climate change. This is especially true with reusable period underwear. For some brands like Thinx, the environmental message is front and center. Starting with a listing of movements towards reusable grocery bags and plastic conscious behavior, the

²⁴ "The Biden Plan for Clean Energy Revolution and Environmental Justice," Biden Harris Democrats, accessed July 3, 2021. <https://joebiden.com/climate-plan/>

commercial encourages the consumer to do the same with their period products. The commercial continues by stating that a person with a period uses 17,000 one time use period products through their life. The emphasis is on the individual responsibility of the consumer to make better choices by buying their products and minimizing their carbon footprint. The commercial fails to mention what if anything the company does to minimize its environmental impact. By placing all responsibility on the consumer it exhibits neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility as it pertains to the market and market choices.

Period underwear have a significant higher initial cost for the product than traditional menstrual pads and tampons while being cheaper due to reusability in the long run. They are also less available in traditional shopping outlets, such as pharmacies and grocery stores. They can only be bought online and then shipped to a permanent address or a P.O. Box. Accessibility of period panties is dependent on the individual to have a permanent address, a credit or debit card, and access to a reliable access of washing. They present an issue for those of lower socioeconomic status who would want to minimize their environmental impact with such products but cannot do so due to financial or social limitations. These commercials make an association between personal responsibility and environmental impact and economic status. In order for an individual to have a carbon neutral footprint they must be of higher socioeconomic status and have spending ability to purchase and receive such product.

Second Feminist thought almost exclusively focused on the struggles and issues surrounding white middle/upper class cisgender women, extrapolating their struggles to

other demographics and groups. A concept of universal womanhood and sisterhood are the core tenants of this thought; and that empowerment looks the same for everyone. Out of twenty-two actors on screen in the commercials I analyzed for this thesis, nineteen appeared white, while only three appeared African America or Latinx. Different activities such as sports, work, and leisure were shown, and with the exception of Ruby Love, were performed with a smile. The homogenous experience of women in these commercial and the representation of mostly white middle/upper class indicates that second wave feminist influences of sameness and empowerment though menstrual control are very present. The lack of inclusivity and only rudimentary empowerment though work is a step back in time where feminism only consisted of issues surround white middle class women.

Solutions for complex feminist and social issues were simplified to only purchasing of products and participating in “revolutions” or “getting more life.” Neoliberal feminism empowerment through participation in the public sphere as well as traditionally feminine work²⁵ shows the duality of these commercials. There are references towards shame and the need for discreteness and hiding of menstrual bodies bundles with messaging of breaking of barriers and success through career/childcare balance. The reliance on both powerful imagery as well as self-objectification of women allows the larger corporations to participate and dominate popular media discussions on feminist issues. The somewhat conflicting messaging is a reflection of conflicting societal and individual views towards menstruation and menstrual bodies. Both revered as a natural and empowering phenomenon menstruation is simultaneously seen as a dirty and

²⁵ Such as motherhood

shameful thing indicative of women's lower status. The need to hide menstruation and menstrual odor or even utilize menstrual suppression drugs contribute to a greater sense of shame and discomfort that many individuals feel towards their own bodies. Second Wave Feminism ideas sameness and its lack of attention to the meaningful differences between men and women, and more importantly among women, promotes menstrual suppression and need for concealment of menstruation.

Conclusion

The commercials examined in this study showed underlying themes of Second Wave Feminism as well as more recent neo-liberal capitalism. Ideas about sameness and a sense of collective sisterhood is seen as commercials utilize language such as "joining a revolution" and "we woman" when discussing their products. While simultaneously promoting success through workplace participation and access to the public sphere. Neoliberal ideas about self-responsibility and the market are being marketed the singular solution a wide variety of social and economic issue surrounding women. The term "women" though meant to be all-encompassing of the menstruating public, does fall into the traps of the criticism of Second Wave Feminism. Most of the individuals shown on screen were white, middle-upper class, traditionally feminine, and cisgender. The portrayal of these women as representatives of all menstruating people is indicative of what the corporate system and capitalist society in United States not only sees as success but also moral citizenship in the marketplace. There is a lack of diversity and inclusivity of not only individuals portrayed but also issues that affect them. Instead, the focus is

primarily on the struggles of white middle-class woman and clearly shows the influences of second wave feminism.

Global climate change is an important issue. Public discourse is another issue that has been undertaken by the social justice that is seen in these commercials. Though the focus is on personal responsibility of the individual to purchase products that are environmentally friendly. Once again neoliberal feminism through its idea of solving issues with participation in the marketplace is seen. The relative difficulty in accessing such products either due to financial issues, transportation, credit/debit card access, or internet (where most can be purchased) automatically excludes portions of menstruating public from participating in moral consumption and environmental citizenship. The products are marketed towards this demographic based on class taste and accessibility. A perception that white cisgender middle class women are the ones who would be interested and able to participate in neoliberal commerce. The target demographic whom the corporate structure thinks would be interested in environmentally conscious products are once again white, middle/upper class women. There is a distinct lack of discussion in these commercials what the companies themselves are doing to be environmentally friendly. Industry pollution is one of the leading causes of climate change²⁶. Though modern commercials take on a variety of social and environmental issues, elements of shame, secrecy, and inconvenience of the period are still prevalent in them. Odor and leak control is a selling point of many. Social stigma is shown hand in hand with images of

²⁶ "Industrial Pollution," Journal of Pollution Effects and Control, accessed May 5th 2020.
<https://www.longdom.org/scholarly/industrial-pollution-journals-articles-ppts-list-2683.html>

freedom and empowerment. The menstrual hygiene media and advertisements are stuck between patriarchal ideas about femininity, lesser worth of women, social shame and social issues of inequality, misinformation, and climate change.

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