

Clóda O'Loughlin

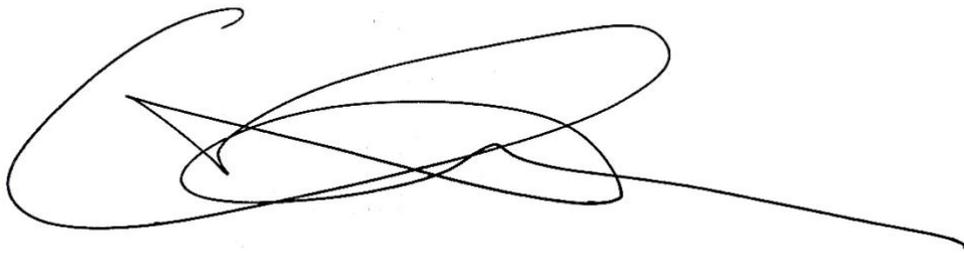
Menstruation Marketing- The female experience of menstruation and period product advertising through the lens of Tampax.

Submitted to the Department of Technology and Psychology in candidacy
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This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment for the BA (Hons) in Interaction + User Experience Design. It is entirely the author's own work, except where noted, and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal tail extending to the right.

Abstract

Between solving problems that don't exist for women, sexualising women in adverts that are meant to be for them and implicitly teaching women for years that their period is something to be ashamed of through using light blues and purples in replacement of accurate period blood representation, period product companies have betrayed and isolated their own target audience for eternity. In this thesis I research and frame the female experience of menstruation and period product advertising. This includes contextual history, analysis of Tampax advertising and user experience analysis done through primary research and focus groups.

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Introduction

“Menstruation is that stage of the menstrual cycle during which the endometrium, thickened in readiness to receive a fertilized egg cell (ovum), is shed because fertilization has not occurred.”

The Oxford dictionary defines menstruation as a repercussion of a woman not getting pregnant. While this is scientifically true, periods are so much more than that. Women have always menstruated; which begs the question, why is there still so much stigma around periods? Society still has a very archaic approach to the treatment and discussion of menstruation. In 2024 we are surrounded by stigma regarding the discussion of women's bodies, sexuality, and menstruation. Consequentially, women feel ashamed of their periods, feel misrepresented by period product advertising, and feel not listened to, or not taken seriously in relation to menstruation.

In this thesis I explore the female experience of menstruation and the marketing that surrounds period products. With Tampax as the main brand of focus, I am analysing the representation of women in period product advertisements from the 1960s until present, how it has changed, and how it makes women feel. I provide contextual history and a user experience centered approach. Section I is an analysis of past Tampax advertisements. Section II is a UX focused exploration of current Tampax advertising, accompanied by a report on two focus groups I conducted on the female experience of menstruation and its marketing. I provide a brief contextual history on menstruation, particularly its medicalization, before leading into Section I which focuses specifically on Tampax. Between solving problems that don't exist for women, sexualising women in adverts and teaching women for years that their period is something to be ashamed of, period product companies have betrayed and isolated their own target audience historically.

The History of Menstruation in the Western World- 1840-1960

In 1976, Fred E.H. Schroeder reported that while ‘tribal’¹ cultures celebrated menstruation with rituals, Western societies functioning under capitalism chooses to ignore menstruation and the effect it has on women. In Western culture, medical professionals historically spread misinformation about menstruation, furthering the hardship endured by women during their periods. In the early nineteenth century, it was thought that menstruation occurred because of an ‘excess of nutrient’² in women. At this time, Victorians also believed that ovulation only occurred because of intercourse. This, however inaccurate, could have been justified in a sense that many women that lived in poverty at the time were malnourished and therefore, didn’t menstruate regularly. Women were also thought of as unclean when menstruating, backed by a statement from John Elliotson in 1840 when he wrote that "To regard women during menstruation as unclean is certainly very useful."³

In the late nineteenth century, physicians and scientists theorised on menstruation. John Power of London presupposed that ‘menstruation and ovulation were connected’⁴. The possibility that menstruation was a result of the moons effect on women was also considered. Aristotle’s Masterpiece theorised that menstruation was a casting out of excess blood which would’ve provided nutrients for an embryo had the woman been impregnated. In 1861, E.F.W. Pflüger found that menstruation did not occur in women whose ovaries had been removed. The tradition of refraining from operating on menstruating women was actively challenged by William Goodell, a British doctor, in 1891.

A 1931 article on the ‘definition of menstruation’ from the British Medical Journal shows the hysteria surrounding male physicians due to the conflicting views on an “apparently simple conception”⁵. Cannon refers to a separate article written by M.B. Oxen which declares that the conflicting views of men in the medical field on menstruation was causing a “scandal in the

¹ Schroeder, Fred E. H. “Feminine Hygiene, Fashion and the Emancipation of American Women.” *American Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1976, pp. 101–10. Accessed 17 Jan. 2024.

² Showalter, Elaine, and English Showalter. “Victorian Women and Menstruation.” *Victorian Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1970, pp. 83–89. Accessed 17 Jan. 2024.

³ Showalter, Elaine, and English Showalter. “Victorian Women and Menstruation.” *Victorian Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1970, pp. 83–89. Accessed 17 Jan. 2024.

⁴ Bullough, Vern, and Martha Voght. “Women, Menstruation, and Nineteenth-Century Medicine.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 47, no. 1, 1973, pp. 66–82. Accessed 17 Jan. 2024.

⁵ Cannon, D. J. “Definition Of Menstruation.” *The British Medical Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3824, 1934, pp. 728–29. Accessed 26 Jan. 2024.

history of gynecology".⁶ The article gives important insight that until the early twentieth century, "menstruation was defined as a periodic shedding of blood from the uterus occurring at the time of ovulation" until it was found that it actually occurred approximately fourteen days after ovulation. This discovery was not immediately accepted by medical professionals.

Jumping to the mid-to-late twentieth century we see that the stigma around menstruation has lessened, though not fully. The oral contraceptive was approved in 1960 in America, with over a third of American women using the pill as a means of contraception⁷. Similarly, the oral contraceptive pill was marketed as a 'cycle regulator' from the mid-1960s in Ireland⁸. This meant that women were menstruating in a new way. Modern contraceptives caused "intermenstrual bleeding and changes in regular menstrual patterns."⁹

Some women using modern contraception methods such as the injection, IUD and the pill experienced spotting, breakthrough bleeding and irregular bleeding, affecting the willingness of women to use these contraception methods. Cultural variables regarding the disruption of natural menstruation led to women, and society, to have a sense of apprehension regarding modern contraceptives¹⁰. Cultural institutions such as the Catholic Church became involved in the conversation around how women should be menstruating. Contraceptive pills were designed in the 1960s to have a seven-day break which caused women to experience menstruation-like bleeding every month. The reasoning for this 'break' was initially said to be to put women at ease by mimicking what society viewed as 'natural'. However, in a lecture in 2015, Carl Djerassi, the 'father of the pill' revealed that the seven-day pill-break was designed to persuade the Catholic Church and Pope Paul VI to allow women to take oral contraception while 'maintaining their innocence'¹¹. However, this pill break may increase the risk of unplanned pregnancy and is thought to be a hazard. This is further evidence of medical

⁶ Cannon, D. J. "Definition Of Menstruation." *The British Medical Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3824, 1934, pp. 728-29. Accessed 26 Jan. 2024.

⁷ Watkins, Elizabeth Siegel. "How the pill became a lifestyle drug: the pharmaceutical industry and birth control in the United States since 1960." *American journal of public health* vol. 102,8 (2012): 1462-72. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2012.300706

⁸ Kelly, Laura. "The Contraceptive Pill in Ireland c.1964-79: Activism, Women and Patient-Doctor Relationships." *Medical history* vol. 64,2 (2020): 195-218. doi:10.1017/mdh.2020.3

⁹ Whelan, Elizabeth M. "Attitudes toward Menstruation." *Studies in Family Planning*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1975, pp. 106-08. Accessed 26 Jan. 2024.

¹⁰ Whelan, Elizabeth M. "Attitudes toward Menstruation." *Studies in Family Planning*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1975, pp. 106-08. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1964817>. Accessed 26 Jan. 2024.

¹¹ Walker, Susan. "Contraception: The Way You Take the Pill Has More to Do with the Pope than Your Health." *The Conversation*, 2 Nov. 2023, theconversation.com/contraception-the-way-you-take-the-pill-has-more-to-do-with-the-pope-than-your-health

professionals and cultural institutions making decisions on women's menstruation and sexual health for social reasons.

The tampon was invented in 1931 by Dr. Earle Haas. He developed a cardboard applicator tampon with tightly bound cotton. It is said that a female friend of Haas' had shared that she inserted a sponge to soak up menstrual blood during her period, which gave Haas the idea to develop the tampon¹².

Tampax- The Beginning (1934-1960)

Tampax started in 1934 when their female founder bought the patent for the tampon and started to develop tampons with applicators. Although Tampax self-describes as being a 'female focused, female-led company' they interestingly never mention their female founder by name, mentioning her only in a singular social media post in 2020.¹³ Gertrude Tenderich bought the patent and trademark for the tampon (Fig 23) from Dr. Earle Haas in 1933 for \$32,000.¹⁴

¹² Horwitz, Rainey, "[Menstrual Tampon](https://hdl.handle.net/10776/13151)". Embryo Project Encyclopedia (2020-05-25). ISSN: 1940-5030 <https://hdl.handle.net/10776/13151>

¹³ Tampax, 2020. "The History of Tampax." The History of Tampax | Tampax®, Tampax, 13 May 2020, tampax.com/en-us/about/our-story/history-of-tampax/.

¹⁴ Finley, Harry. "Tampax Patent and History." Tampax Patent and History at Mum, 1998, www.mum.org/Tampaxpatent.htm.

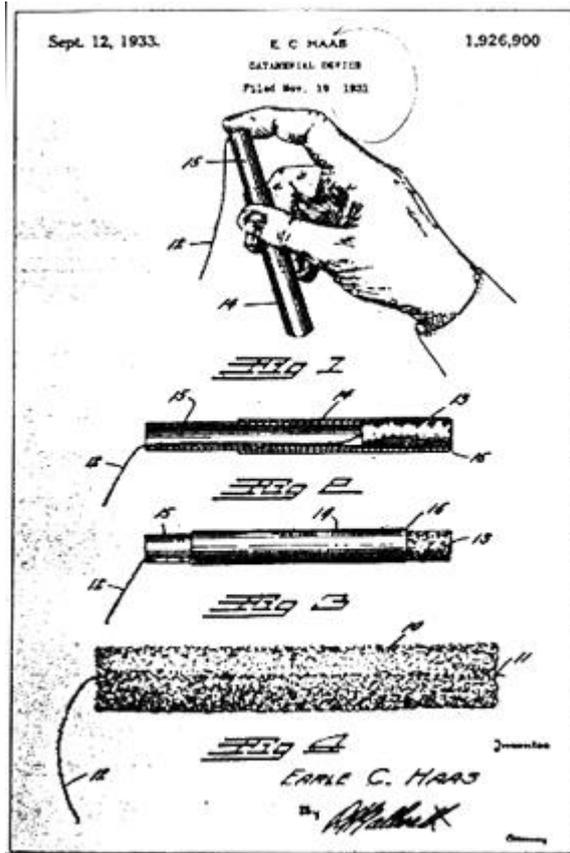


Figure 1- “Part of the Tampax menstrual tampon patent.” Source- Museum of Menstruation, <http://www.mum.org/Tampaxpatent.htm> , 1998.

As World War II began, more women were forced to join the workforce, therefore the demand for tampons increased as tampons were seen as a positive solution for working women experiencing periods. Tampax responded to this increase in demand by developing a formal education program, teaching women how to use tampons. ‘Tampax Ladies’ traveled throughout the US to promote the safe and correct use of tampons. Tampax also “produced cotton bandages and surgical dressings for the U.S. military alongside the tampon assembly lines.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Tampax, 2020.-“The History of Tampax.” The History of Tampax | Tampax®, Tampax, 13 May 2020, tampax.com/en-us/about/our-story/history-of-tampax/.



Figure 2-- "Tampax assembly line, World War II." Source- Tampax, 2020.

Tampax have always been on the forefront of developments in period products and menstruation education. In the 1980s, Tampax conducted vital research into Toxic Shock Syndrome, a rare but life-threatening condition caused by an infection when using a tampon or menstrual cup¹⁶. They championed an educational campaign about TSS, educating women on the effects, symptoms and treatment options¹⁷. In 1997, after being acquired by Procter and Gamble, Tampax began further innovation and research leading to the re-design of the tampon. Tampax revealed that the vaginal cavity was not cylindrical, but was flat, meaning tampons

¹⁶ "Toxic Shock Syndrome." NHS, NHS, 6 June 2023, www.nhs.uk/conditions/toxic-shock-syndrome/

¹⁷ Tampax, 2020.-"The History of Tampax." The History of Tampax | Tampax®, Tampax, 13 May 2020, tampax.com/en-us/about/our-story/history-of-tampax/.

had been wrongfully designed for women for 50 years. Taking this research into consideration, Tampax then led the re-creation of the tampon to better accommodate women¹⁸.

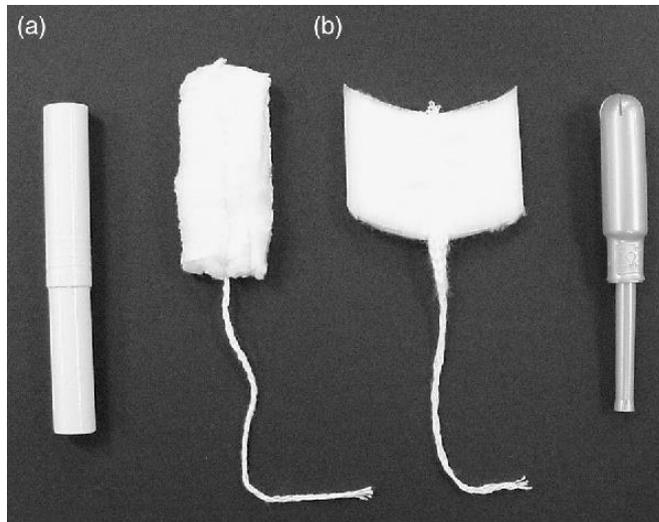


Figure 1 Tampon products (prior to compression)

Figure 3--“Clinical Safety-in-Use Study of a New Tampon Design.” Source- Shehin, Stacey E. et al.

Progress aside, women still feel misrepresented by menstruation marketing. Section I will focus mainly on Tampax and their advertising history. Section II will be a female user experience focused analysis of period product advertisements. With Tampax’s history directly correlating to the mass production of ‘feminine hygiene’ products, Section I serves to explore who Tampax are to their customers, through analysis of their advertising and customer engagement.

¹⁸ Tampax, 2020-“The History of Tampax.” The History of Tampax | Tampax®, Tampax, 13 May 2020, tampax.com/en-us/about/our-story/history-of-tampax/.

Section I

The History and Advertising of Tampax as a Product: 1960-2010.



Figure 4- "Tampax 1931-Today" Source- Tampax URL, May 2020.

This Section is an exploration of one of the leading competitors in the menstrual product market, Tampax. It contextualizes Tampax's history and innovation. Using Tampax as an accurate representation of period product advertising, this chapter examines how women have been represented in menstrual advertising through the years. Aspects such as the use of colour, marketing principles, narrative, and setting will be explored in addition to different sources of advertising such as television, print and social media.

Period product advertising has always been a source of controversy. The controversy constantly dwindles between an inaccurate portrayal of women or menstruation, or accurate representation which upsets certain people. Tampax has been vital in the breaking down of stigma around menstruation. However, they have also consistently perpetuated stigmas around women and periods in their advertisements for years.

One of Tampax's most culturally significant advertisements was their 1985 ad with Courtney Cox, (Fig 5). It was the first time that the word 'period' was said in a commercial on American Television. This was a groundbreaking cultural moment that aided in partially breaking the

stigma around periods. Before this advertisement, there were major restrictions on what companies could say in relation to periods in their advertisements on American TV¹⁹. The advert itself sees Courtney Cox explain the benefits of using a tampon instead of a pad, as a proactive and ‘cleaner’ way to deal with your period. Cox states that Tampax can “change the way you feel about your period”, a simple line that changed period advertising forever.



Figure 5-Recording of Tampax commercial (1985), republished on YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=shared&v=kOHCtOfFn7E>

Twenty years later, in 2005, Tampax takes a new approach towards period advertising by choosing to perpetuate the idea that periods should be hidden. In a 2005 television advertisement (Fig 6), Tampax shows two young girls passing a tampon in class and getting ‘caught’ by their teacher. The ad aims to show that Tampax’s new product, the ‘Compak’ tampon, has discreet packaging that women can easily hide their tampons and consequently,

¹⁹ “From ‘gory’ to Glory, the Evolution of Period Advertising.” *The Drum*, www.thedrum.com/news/2020/10/12/gory-glory-the-evolution-period-advertising. Accessed 4 Dec. 2023.

can hide the fact that they are on their period. This is a prime example of conflicting messaging from Tampax showing that periods are something that women should be embarrassed of.



Figure 6-Recording of Tampax commercial (2005), republished on YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbCvzYOUonU>

In the mid 20th century, period product ads were rooted in misrepresentation and stigma. While the approach seen in Fig 5 may be shocking, it is quite progressive in comparison to the early period product advertisements that pushed the idea of shame around menstruation onto women. Figs 7-9 show magazine advertisements commissioned by Tampax from 1939-1960s. The 1940s advertisement (Fig 7) shows a white woman playing tennis while on her period. The premise of the ad is to show that using tampons allows you to be active ‘every day’ as it is worn internally. One could question why women could not be active when using alternative period products. This is an early example of women depicted engaging in sport while on their

periods. The narrative that tampons give women the strength to overcome their period and be active while menstruating has caused controversy throughout the years. While it could be empowering, in many cases it can be dismissive of the struggles that women experience when menstruating.

MODERN WOMAN

Active every day now that Sanitary Protection is Worn Internally

WOMEN have found a new freedom thanks to Tampax and the doctor who made it possible. Now every day of the month can be full and strenuous and untrodden. So comfortable, so safe, so certain, Tampax is recommended by doctors as the most hygienic means to sanitary protection. More women every week are putting it so for themselves.

PRICES 1/4, 1/2, 3/4 & 1. Sold by Boots, Timothy White & Partners, and other chemists; all good department stores and druggists; Woodworth Store and Marks & Spencer Ltd.

TAMPAX
Worn Internally

FREE For more information regarding Tampax, write to: TAMPOX, 125, Tottenham Court Road, London, W.1. A coupon will be sent to you in reply. This offer does not apply in Eire.

PRO-PAX Tablets

more good reasons for using Tampax...

TAMPAX IS WORN INTERNALLY - NO BELTS, PINS OR PADS. THAT MEANS COMFORT - NO CHAFING! YOU'RE QUITE UNAWARE OF ITS PRESENCE!

IT'S DISCREET AS WELL AS DAINTY - NO CHANCE OF EMBARRASSMENT TO ME OR OTHERS. COMPLETE PROTECTION. IT'S A BLESSING.

YES! TAMPAX FREEDOM IS PRICELESS! YET TAMPAX IS LOW IN PRICE: ONLY 1/6 AND 2/- FOR TEN!

WOMEN who use Tampax have a host of reasons for blessing the Doctor who invented it! For in addition to the wonderful freedom it brings—apart from its assurance of peace of mind—over and above its hygiene and immaculate cleanliness—Tampax is so simple to use, so safe, so sure! Yes, Tampax is protection in its daintiest, neatest, completest form—made modern for modern women. Yet it costs no more than old-fashioned methods!

TAMPAX
SANITARY PROTECTION WORN INTERNALLY

* REGULAR TAMPAX No. 1—1/3 FOR 10; SUPER ABSORBENT TAMPAX No. 2 2/- FOR 10—ALSO BOTH ABSORBENCY SIZES IN 40'S AT 6/6 AND 7/6

Free from Embarrassment

Sanitary Protection is Now Worn Internally

This summer, whatever the day of the month, you can be on the beach in your chosen dress, skirlion swimsuit without embarrassment—even and play games in perfect freedom—or dance all evening in a gossamer gown. Tampax is invisible, and so comfortable that you are not even conscious of its presence. It is worn internally. No belts. No pins. No pads. Tampax is completely protective—cannot become dislodged even during the most strenuous exercise. All chafing and irritation are ruled—obscure banished. Each Tampax is individually sealed in its own applicator for safety and hygienic insertion. Tampax is strongly recommended by doctors and nurses in preference to the old-fashioned, unhygienic methods of sanitary protection. Already over one hundred and thirty million have been sold!

Tampax may continue to be used by all women, those young girls who are not in trouble with Tampax, and those who are not, until the world is free from the old-fashioned, unhygienic methods of sanitary protection.

TAMPAX
Worn Internally

NO BELTS - NO PINS - NO PADS

Price 10/- 12/- 15/- 18/- 21/- 24/- 27/- 30/- 33/- 36/- 39/- 42/- 45/- 48/- 51/- 54/- 57/- 60/- 63/- 66/- 69/- 72/- 75/- 78/- 81/- 84/- 87/- 90/- 93/- 96/- 99/- 102/- 105/- 108/- 111/- 114/- 117/- 120/- 123/- 126/- 129/- 132/- 135/- 138/- 141/- 144/- 147/- 150/- 153/- 156/- 159/- 162/- 165/- 168/- 171/- 174/- 177/- 180/- 183/- 186/- 189/- 192/- 195/- 198/- 201/- 204/- 207/- 210/- 213/- 216/- 219/- 222/- 225/- 228/- 231/- 234/- 237/- 240/- 243/- 246/- 249/- 252/- 255/- 258/- 261/- 264/- 267/- 270/- 273/- 276/- 279/- 282/- 285/- 288/- 291/- 294/- 297/- 300/- 303/- 306/- 309/- 312/- 315/- 318/- 321/- 324/- 327/- 330/- 333/- 336/- 339/- 342/- 345/- 348/- 351/- 354/- 357/- 360/- 363/- 366/- 369/- 372/- 375/- 378/- 381/- 384/- 387/- 390/- 393/- 396/- 399/- 402/- 405/- 408/- 411/- 414/- 417/- 420/- 423/- 426/- 429/- 432/- 435/- 438/- 441/- 444/- 447/- 450/- 453/- 456/- 459/- 462/- 465/- 468/- 471/- 474/- 477/- 480/- 483/- 486/- 489/- 492/- 495/- 498/- 501/- 504/- 507/- 510/- 513/- 516/- 519/- 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1875/- 1878/- 1881/- 1884/- 1887/- 1890/- 1893/- 1896/- 1899/- 1902/- 1905/- 1908/- 1911/- 1914/- 1917/- 1920/- 1923/- 1926/- 1929/- 1932/- 1935/- 1938/- 1941/- 1944/- 1947/- 1950/- 1953/- 1956/- 1959/- 1962/- 1965/- 1968/- 1971/- 1974/- 1977/- 1980/- 1983/- 1986/- 1989/- 1992/- 1995/- 1998/- 2001/- 2004/- 2007/- 2010/- 2013/- 2016/- 2019/- 2022/- 2025/- 2028/- 2031/- 2034/- 2037/- 2040/- 2043/- 2046/- 2049/- 2052/- 2055/- 2058/- 2061/- 2064/- 2067/- 2070/- 2073/- 2076/- 2079/- 2082/- 2085/- 2088/- 2091/- 2094/- 2097/- 2100/- 2103/- 2106/- 2109/- 2112/- 2115/- 2118/- 2121/- 2124/- 2127/- 2130/- 2133/- 2136/- 2139/- 2142/- 2145/- 2148/- 2151/- 2154/- 2157/- 2160/- 2163/- 2166/- 2169/- 2172/- 2175/- 2178/- 2181/- 2184/- 2187/- 2190/- 2193/- 2196/- 2199/- 2202/- 2205/- 2208/- 2211/- 2214/- 2217/- 2220/- 2223/- 2226/- 2229/- 2232/- 2235/- 2238/- 2241/- 2244/- 2247/- 2250/- 2253/- 2256/- 2259/- 2262/- 2265/- 2268/- 2271/- 2274/- 2277/- 2280/- 2283/- 2286/- 2289/- 2292/- 2295/- 2298/- 2301/- 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5736

they are. Interestingly, the housewife says that Tampax reduces the chances of embarrassment to herself “and others” which is an old-fashioned and harmful narrative.

The 1939 advertisement (Fig 9) shows a young white woman in bathing suit. The advert boasts the benefits of wearing tampons as it makes it much easier to enjoy the beach. However, one of the main issues with these advertisements is the lack of representation. From an array of advertisements done by Tampax from 1939-1960s, only young, slim white women are portrayed. This is a harmful form of advertising which unfortunately did not change until recent years. Even with changes and more open representation in period advertising, the general undertones of lack of representation still rings through today. It is harmful to only portray women in period product advertising as slim white women for the sake of it being easily digestible to certain audiences.

Thankfully, Tampax has taken steps in the right direction to being more inclusive in recent years, their 2009 campaign with Serena Williams being a great example (Figs 11-15). Williams appeared in many different ‘playful, lighthearted advertisements and online videos’²⁰. The ‘Outsmart Mother Nature’ ad campaign sees Serena Williams being challenged by Mother Nature, a small white woman, and her ‘monthly gift’, which presents as a small red gift box. There are many scenarios in which Mother Nature's monthly gift is challenging Williams, on and off the court, however Williams is shown to ‘overcome’ these challenges. While this ad campaign is inclusive in the sense of body types and race, it could be considered exclusive in its general portrayal of the reality of menstruation.

Menstruation can be a painful and uncomfortable experience for a lot of women. Using a professional female athlete to show how active you can be while using Tampax is therefore, not an accurate representation of menstruating women. In addition to this, the ad campaign may perpetuate the idea of the period as a burden. Tampax is demonstrating two opposing views of menstruation with the overwhelming message being that periods are something Tampax can aid women to ‘outsmart’²¹. The choice of representing a woman's period in a perfectly dainty, red gift box is an interesting choice. It could be said that this is another

²⁰ P&G , 2009“P&G’s Tampax Announces Advertising Campaign with Serena Williams.” P&G’s Tampax Announces Advertising Campaign With Serena Williams | Procter & Gamble News, P&G, news.pg.com/news-releases/news-details/2009/PGs-Tampax-Announces-Advertising-Campaign-With-Serena-Williams/default.aspx

²¹ P&G , 2009“P&G’s Tampax Announces Advertising Campaign with Serena Williams.” P&G’s Tampax Announces Advertising Campaign With Serena Williams | Procter & Gamble News, P&G, news.pg.com/news-releases/news-details/2009/PGs-Tampax-Announces-Advertising-Campaign-With-Serena-Williams/default.aspx.

example of inaccurate representation as, while I'm sure most women would be overjoyed if periods were so dainty, that is not the reality.



Figure 10-Serena Williams – Tampax. Glamour, Aug 2010

Figure 11-Serena Williams – Tampax. Glamour Magazine, April 2010



Figure 12-Serena Williams – Tampax, 2010

Figure 13-Serena Williams – Tampax, 2010

Figure 14-Serena Williams – Tampax. Cosmopolitan, Nov 2010.

Within these ads there is an underlying racial undertone which is quite uncomfortable.

Although these ads are aimed at being progressive, their treatment of Serena Williams is uncomfortable., Williams keeps a very stern face throughout the campaign which may reinforce harmful stereotypes of black women being ‘angry’. Additionally, Mother Nature appearing as a 1960s housewife is a strange choice. The campaign pins a powerful black woman as someone who is attacking a seemingly defenseless white 1960s housewife. This is an uncomfortable narrative which feels unnecessary to the advertisement of tampons. The use of red in the portrayal of periods being packaged as a little red box shows that period product companies are not afraid to use the colour red but are less likely to use it in a more accurate way of representation. Having a strong woman such as Serena Williams ‘challenge’ mother nature and her period in this advertisement, further enforces the ‘period as a struggle’ narrative²².

Having analysed Tampax’s advertisements throughout the years, from 1939 all the way to current day, it is safe to say that Tampax have been vital in destigmatizing menstruation, however they are not without their faults. Tampax still has a long way to go in the sense of representation of different body types, race, and backgrounds as well as a careful consideration of what narratives they push in relation to menstruation. Tampax have long depicted women being active while on their period, a ‘perk’ of using their products, however this can easily be an isolating representation to many women. Although a lot of advertising, especially on social media, is not reality focused, it is important that companies like Tampax understand how much impact their representation and depictions really have on women. Section II will further explore how Tampax’s advertisements make women feel, through focus groups with women of different ages.

²² From Sophia. “Representation of Menstruation in Advertising: Blue & Flowery.” *Vulvani*, 3 Nov. 2022, www.vulvani.com/en/representation-of-menstruation-in-advertising-blue-flowery.

Section II

The Female User Experience of Tampax advertising on social media from 2010 to Present.

In this Section I conduct a female user experience analysis on period product advertising, with a focus on Tampax. This analysis focuses on the experience and opinions of women of different. Two focus groups were carried out, one with women aged 18-25, the other with women aged 40-55. I have gathered and analyze the reactions, experience, and feelings the women in these groups and have reported my findings within this section.

Using examples of how Tampax portrays themselves to a young audience (18-25), as well as how an older audience (40-55) feels about it, I have built a case of how they make their female customers feel.

As part of my research, I took to the official Instagram account of Tampax which is targeted primarily towards a US audience. Tampax's Instagram account is admittedly refreshingly progressive in comparison to their past advertisements. The feed consists of a mix between illustrations/ infographics and Instagram reels showcasing their advertisements.

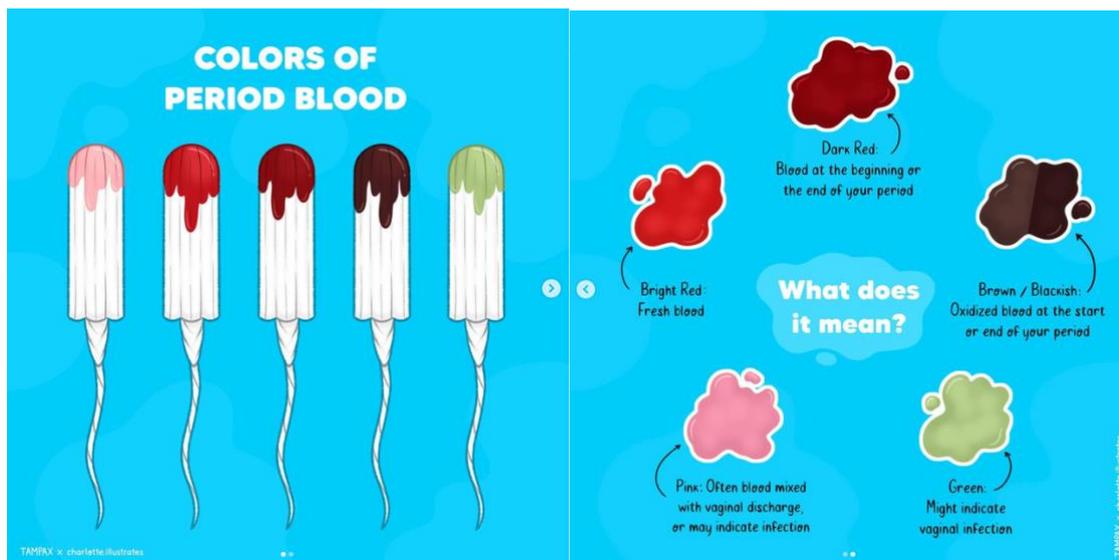


Figure 15 "Colours of Period Blood"- Tampax and Charlotte Willcox, Instagram, 2023

Figure 16 is a collaboration with Tampax and the artist, Charlotte Willcox, who identifies as a feminist illustrator- a refreshingly accurate depiction of period blood. Tampax are using simple, effective campaigns to make menstruation education more accessible. The illustration showcases the various colours of menstruation blood in an attempt to educate.

It could be argued that only having this representation in an illustrated form may still not be representative enough of menstruation. Unfortunately, the issue lies where this borders on misinformation. The green displayed is not period blood, therefore this post is medically incorrect. This problem speaks to a wider issue of miseducation around menstruation, something that Tampax have historically worked against, but actively participate in through this post.

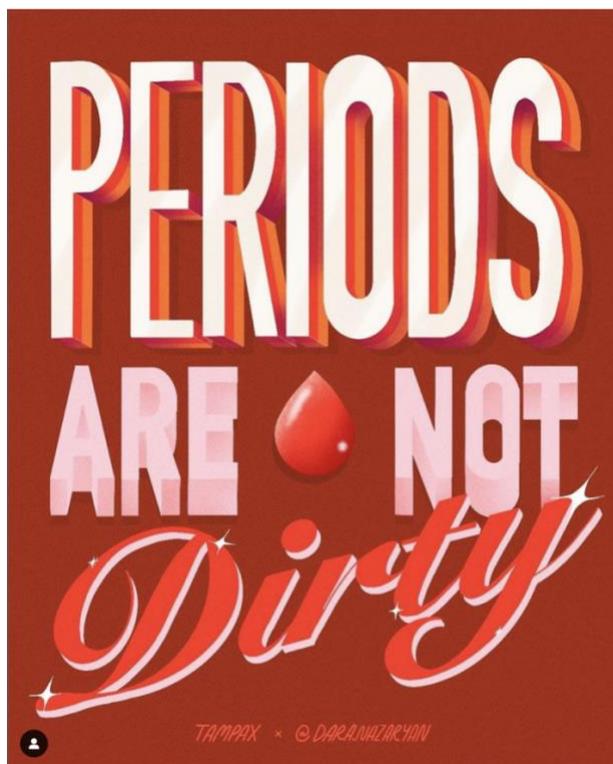


Figure 16- "Periods are not dirty". Instagram, Tampax & Dara Nazaryan, May 2023.

Fig 17 from Tampax's Instagram is a collaboration with Dara Nazaryan, a female multidisciplinary artist. The post employs a heavy use of red tones to convey its message that periods are not dirty, a breakaway from the bright colours Tampax normally use. This post highlights that periods 'are not dirty' and normalises red as a colour associated with menstruation.

A tweet from 2022 found Tampax in controversy due to its treatment of women. Presumably following a social media trend at the time, possibly in order to appeal to a Gen Z audience in efforts to be more relatable, Tampax tweeted a joke that ultimately did not land the way they had hoped.



Figure 17-Tampax Tweet, X, Nov 2022

The controversial tweet (Fig 18) in question read, ““You are in their DMs. We are in them. We are not the same”. This tweet, pictured below, completely backfired on the popular tampon company and led to a ‘#BoycottTampax’ campaign from consumers. Many customers felt that the tweet was ‘creepy’, ‘gross’ and ultimately ‘sexualised’ periods and women. This tweet unnecessarily sexualizes the relationship between women and tampons.

The tweet reinforces fears among young women and conservative cultures around maintaining their ‘innocence’ while using tampons. This is a narrative that Tampax should not be reinforcing. The tweet certainly doesn’t seem to be aimed at women. It seems like a bid to sexualise women an effort to appeal to a male audience that Tampax should not be concerned about. This misogynistic, tone-deaf approach isolated Tampax’s female audience.

Some considerations on the use of Colour Red- A Wider issue

The colour red continues to breed controversy in the period product advertising industry. People have become accustomed to blue and purple mainly being used to represent menstruation throughout the years. More discourse unfolds when the colour red, which is truer to reality, is used to represent period blood in advertisements. While most period product brands opt against the use of red blood, others embrace it.

In 2020, Facebook banned an advertisement on their platform due to the depiction of blood. Modibodi, a period underwear brand, released a 60 second film titled “The New Way to Period” (see Fig 19) to demonstrate the use of their period underwear as a new, more sustainable way to manage menstruation. The company has a sustainable and ‘honest’ approach to periods and advertising, stating that periods can be “uncomfortable, painful, bloody, messy and emotional” and that it was ‘important’ to them that they represented this in their advertisement.²³ They used “blood-coloured items” in the advertisement to accurately depict periods. Facebook then banned the advertisement due to “shocking, sensational, disrespectful or excessively violent content” which violated their guidelines.

Modibodi published an article in response to the incident, communicating their disappointment at the treatment of an advertisement that aimed to “normalise the conversation around menstruation” and change the idea that period blood is “shocking”²⁴. This sparks an important conversation around the outdated ideas that society and companies alike have surrounding menstruation, specifically period blood. This happening three years ago implies that although we may have come far in period product advertising, we still have many preconceptions about what is appropriate to advertise in relation to menstruation.

²³ Nelson, Sophie. “Facebook Ban Our Advert Due to the Depiction of Blood.” *Modibodi EU*, 30 Sept. 2020, eu.modibodi.com/blogs/womens/facebook-ban-our-advert-due-to-the-depiction-of-blood.

²⁴ Nelson, Sophie. “Facebook Ban Our Advert Due to the Depiction of Blood.” *Modibodi EU*, 30 Sept. 2020, eu.modibodi.com/blogs/womens/facebook-ban-our-advert-due-to-the-depiction-of-blood.



Figure 18- 'The New Way to Period' TV Advertisement. Modibodi. September 2020

In 2017, Bodyform became the first brand to show an accurate period blood representation in an advertisement (Fig 20). The ad included two scenes depicting the realistic red liquid. Initially, they use red liquid in a test tube to show the absorbency test that we are all used to seeing carried out with a blue liquid. The second display of the realistic red liquid was red liquid running down a woman's leg. The scenes are shot in a way that makes them all feel very normal. The brand seems to have mastered the art of representing something that we are familiar with but also scared of. This advertisement is a part of their #bloodnormal campaign which aimed to challenge the taboo and remove the stigma from periods²⁵.

²⁵ Harvey-Jenner, Catriona. "The First Ever Advert Showing Period Blood Has Arrived." *Cosmopolitan.Com*, cosmopolitan, 17 Oct. 2017, www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/reports/a13034226/bodyform-advert-first-show-period-blood/.



Figure 19-#bloodnormal Bodyform – www.bodyform.co.uk 2017

The use of the colour red in period product advertising is something that has sparked controversy from the very beginning of menstrual marketing. In “The Psychology of Red”²⁶, Ellis claims that red has “the most poignantly emotional tone” of all the colours. In some contexts, red is viewed as a “colour of strength, fire, passion, sexual attraction”²⁷. However, the colour red has also been linked to caution and danger, being used for caution signs and warning notices. Red can be known to strike an element of fear because of these associations. In ‘Color Psychology: Effects of Perceiving Color on Psychological Functioning in Humans’²⁸ Elliot and Maier highlight that red, due to its relation to blood, is viewed as “the color of life and (when spilled) death.”. This could provide more context as to why the use of red liquid representing blood is unsettling to some audiences, even if it is in the context of menstruation.

Tampax has begun to implement red in their campaigns in recent years. In 2019, Tampax used the colour red to demonstrate flow levels (Fig 21). Tampax consistently opt for illustrations using red and avoid the use of any red liquid in their campaigns.

²⁶ Ellis, Havelock. *The psychology of red*. McClure, Phillips, 1900.

²⁷ Talafuse, Anna , Brenda Dockery, and Claire Tevaseu. 2022. "Menstruation Product Advertising and Color." *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social and Community Studies* 17 (2): 79-93. doi:10.18848/2324-7576/CGP/v17i02/79-93.

²⁸ Elliot, Andrew J, and Markus A Maier. “Color psychology: effects of perceiving color on psychological functioning in humans.” *Annual review of psychology* vol. 65 (2014): 95-120. doi:10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115035

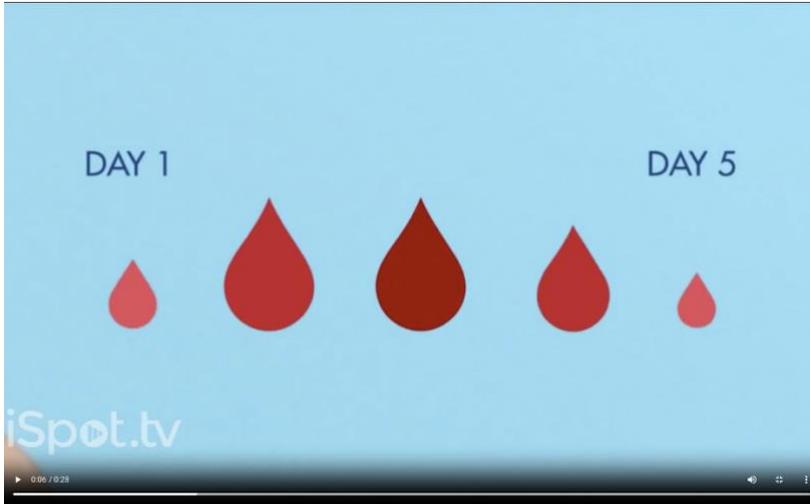


Figure 20-Find Your Flow Combo Ad.Tampax, 2019

Women are familiar with seeing red blood in relation to menstruation. Using a shade of blue or purple, is a step away from what women are familiar with. I wonder what or who the use of an alternative colour protects. Although women are the main consumer of period products and the target audience for period product ads, the blue does not seem to be included for their benefit. The use of alternative colours for blood representation, no blood representation at all or solely animated or illustrated red blood are all examples of inaccurate representation of menstrual blood in period product advertising.

PRIMARY RESEARCH ON THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE

My focus groups were carried out with two separate groups of women. The first group, taking place in November 2023, was focused on women aged 18-25. This aimed to capture the feelings and experience of Tampax's younger users. In December 2023, I carried out my second focus group with women aged 40-55 to capture and analyse the differing and aligning perspectives of an older user of Tampax's products. I conducted my focus groups as open discussions with various topics relating to the female experience and menstruation. I guided the conversation by

proposing topics, asking questions and probing, displaying advertisements and asking for opinions.

I covered the same topics in both focus groups with the intention of comparing the experiences that these women had depending on their age bracket. The main topics covered in the focus groups were the female experience around menstruation, period product advertisement opinions, the colour red in period product advertising and any changes that the participants would like to see.

FOCUS GROUP 1- FINDINGS

To further understand the female experience of menstruation and period product adverts from a 'young' point of view I conducted a focus group with four women aged 18-25.

Generally, the group's experience of menstruation, though it differed between participants, was quite negative. This stemmed from a lack of sufficient education from an early age and the learned shame from societal attitudes. The women also reported difficult experiences with their menstruation itself. Due to a lack of open conversation around menstruation and birth control in the broader social experience of these women, they thought the issues they were experiencing were something that they had to deal with themselves, leading to them feeling isolated in their menstruation experience. Interestingly, a lot of joy and comfort seemed to stem from the conversation as the women discussed their menstruation experience, relating and opening up to each other.

In relation to what motivates the women to buy certain period products, the main factors of influence are cost, comfort and habit. Many women reported having been influenced by their mothers to use the products they had been using, many sticking with the same product from the early years of menstruation. The group agreed that advertising generally doesn't influence their decision on which company to buy from. One participant even commented that they had never seen a period product advertisement that made them feel they should buy it. Generally, they agreed that unless there was something truly revolutionary and groundbreaking about the product being advertised, they wouldn't be overly influenced to buy it. This is an interesting insight in the context of my studies as it would indicate that advertising from companies such as Tampax do not hold huge value to the women they are targeted at.

When asked if they felt represented by period product advertisements, the participants generally agreed that they did not. One participant commented that the advertisements were “just so unrealistic.

The first advertisement that the group was shown was an Instagram based video advertisement by Tampax, ([link](#)). It shows two female African American athletes having an open discussion about Tampax tampons and how the product has been a “game changer” for these women in sport. One of the athletes, Flau'jae Johnson, remarks on how she was a pad user until she had a ‘big game’ coming up in college to which she had to wear a white uniform. In her own words, she felt that she couldn’t wear pads with a white uniform in case of a leak that may be embarrassing. This was an issue among the focus group as the participants widely felt that this pushed an uncomfortable narrative that women need to be embarrassed by their periods. The use of white clothes, especially sportswear, to push the idea of tampons being more effective and freeing by reducing the likelihood of leaks is something that is commonly seen in period product advertisements. This method of advertising was one that many women in the group resented.

The second advertisement that the group were shown was another Instagram based video advertisement, ([link](#)). It involved Amy Schumer, the female comedian, in a skit which mimicked a weather forecast to push the Tampax campaign for “knowing your flow”. It consists of three women and a man making menstruation innuendos in a weather show. This ad was not well received by the group. One participant commented that they felt Tampax was focusing “so much on the product and not on the people that they're selling it to at all.” The act of joking about periods is something that the participants were wholly tired of as they felt “periods have been joked about for so long.”

The third piece that the group was shown was Tampax’s “Periods are not dirty” Instagram post (Fig 17). The group felt that this had a completely different tone of voice from the previous two advertisements and therefore felt more like it was geared at Gen Z as it appeared like a trendy, shareable poster.

The fourth advertisement that the group was shown was an Instagram based infographic (Fig 16). It depicts the various colours of period blood. Concern was raised that including the green colour, may be dangerous as many people are not likely to scroll to see the explanation, therefore it may be normalising something that is more of a cause of health concern than anything. They also remarked that they felt it was medically incorrect as the green ‘blood’ that the graphic refers to is more likely to be discharge rather than blood, therefore it is misleading. One participant felt that this was “obviously an attention-grab and not actually educational” and was really doing the “bare minimum”.

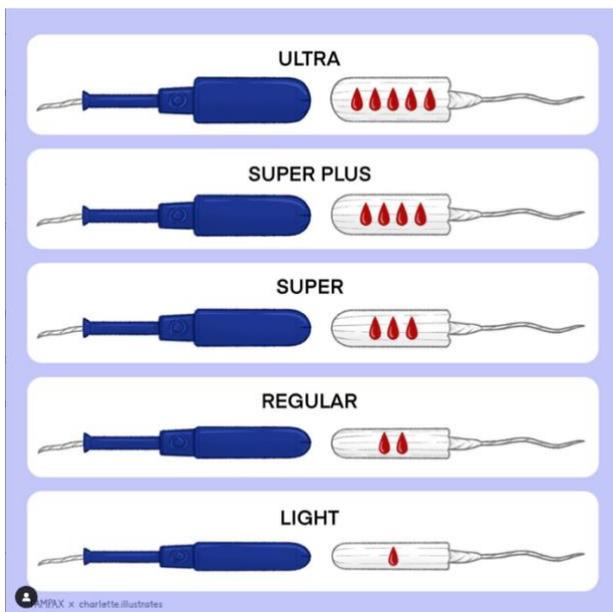


Figure 21- 'Tampax absorbency breakdown' Tampax, Instagram, 2023.

The fifth piece that the group saw was another graphic from Tampax’s Instagram (Fig 22) which is another informational piece on what tampon size is suitable depending on flow. The group did not have much interest in this as it felt like a ploy to get people to buy multiple different boxes of tampons instead of one.

The sixth piece that the group was shown was a tweet from Tampax's X account (Twitter at the time) which was posted in 2020 (Fig 18). The group was unanimously disgusted by this tweet. They remarked that it was very sexual and felt it was definitely "written by a man". The women felt that this was pushing a narrative that Tampax felt "in control of women" and that the tweet was really for men, which they found concerning.

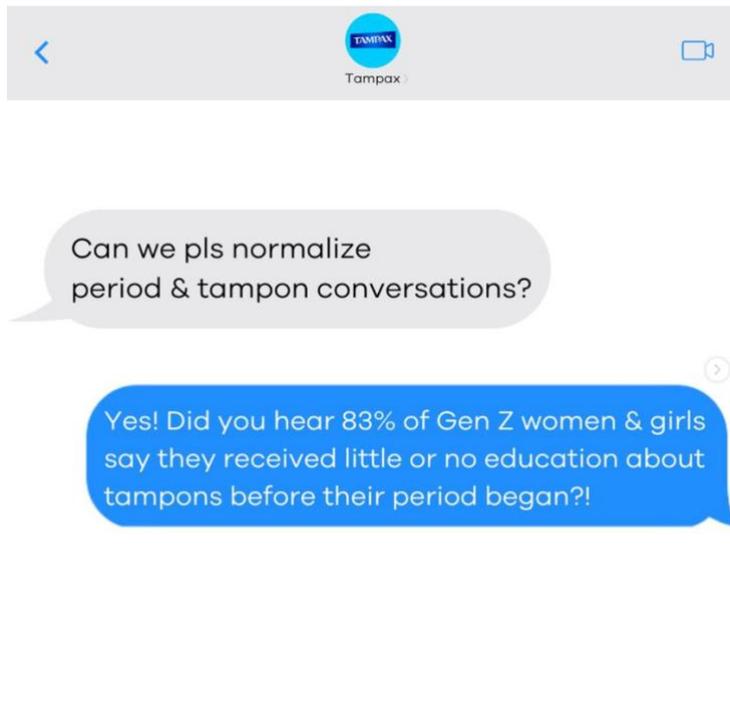


Figure 22- 'Tampax Text', Tampax, Instagram, 2023

This informational piece (Fig 23) from Tampax's Instagram shares statistics around women and menstruation. This statistic did not shock the group participants. This prompted them to open up about the lack of education they had received about menstruation at a young age. Insufficient and confusing education in primary and secondary school led to many participants turning to media outlets such as YouTube to find out more information about their periods. They also mentioned that their education also tied in with how forthcoming the female role models in their lives were with information. The group generally felt like the education they received around sex and menstruation was inadequate and led to a lot of unanswered questions, stigma and misinformation.

Regarding Tampax's 1985 TV commercial with Courtney Cox, previously referenced in Section I ([link](#)) (Fig 5), many in the group felt that they would "much rather" watch this advert over the earlier ones that they were shown due to the "straightforward" nature of the ad. They enjoyed that the ad wasn't "putting on a show" like the others, implying that the more candid approach is what is so appealing about the ad. This could possibly be due to the fact it feels more personal and casual. Others were quick to point out the use of the word "cleaner" which they were not a fan of. They also remarked that the fact that she is in a ballet studio and wearing tight clothes, specifically the white leotard, is reminiscent of issues around the narrative of increased ability in exercise and cleanliness through the depiction of white garments. On one hand some felt that this ad did not work and pushed a narrative that you cannot feel clean with pads while others felt that it was a much more palatable ad than the previous Tampax adverts that they had been shown.



Figure 23- Recording of Tampax commercial (2009), republished on YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1eYV63ap20>

Tampax's Serena Williams campaign, previously referenced in Section I ([link](#)), was met quite negatively and with a lot of questions arising. Participants asked why mother nature was used as the personification of a period as opposed to a period itself as it seemed slightly far removed to them. They felt that by doing this Tampax were "tiptoeing". Another question arose on why the relationship between Serena and mother nature is so negative and competitive. On the topic of representation, the group felt that it was great that Tampax had a "strong black woman" on their campaign, however, they felt that it was uncomfortably pushing the "angry black woman" stereotype at points. This stemmed from the fact that Serena did not smile throughout the entire advert, whereas 'Mother Nature' was seen smiling throughout. They generally did not understand why mother nature was portrayed as a "1950s housewife" and struggled to think of any reason as to why this would be the first thing that came to the mind of Tampax when aiming to portray a motherly figure. One participant remarked "You can do a mom (or Mother Nature) in so many other ways than that...why did it have to be that?". Conclusively, the group held a lot of issues with this ad and felt that there were many odd choices made regarding representation of women, race and menstruation.

The tenth advertisement that the group was shown was this print based Tampax advertisement from the 1960s (Fig 8, Section I). This was shown to give historical context to the group. The group was unanimously shocked and disgusted by the comment that wearing Tampax saves "embarrassment for others". The idea that women should have to worry about embarrassing other people by having a leak was, rightfully, not well received by the group.



Figure 24- Modibodi. 'The New way to Period'. Modibodi, YouTube, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSnZSaWhIJs>

Next we moved on to view the Modibodi period underwear advertisement to move the discussion closer to the use of red in period product advertising, (Fig 26). This was the first ad I had shown the group which showed realistic depictions of period blood. A few participants said that they “felt seen” by the realistic depictions of periods. They were quick to point out the use of the colour red to depict blood instead of the purple or blue that they were used to. Two of the women remarked that while the ad was “nice to see” and “was beautiful” as it was much different to the other ones that they had watched, they would never buy period underwear. So, although they really enjoyed the ad, they were not motivated to buy the product. On the topic of the use of realistic period blood depiction, one participant admitted to feeling “grossed out” by the visual of the woman in the ad washing out the period underwear in the shower. Generally, the use of the colour red seemed to be okay with the group, some finding it more engaging than others.



Figure 25- Bodyform. "Blood Normal", Bodyform, YouTube, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdW6IRsuXaQ>

Finally, staying with adverts using realistic depictions of the colour red, we viewed Bodyform's 'Blood Normal' campaign video, (Fig 27). While this ad is similar to Modibodi's as it aims to normalise periods and uses red blood representation, this ad is more upbeat and busier. One participant felt overwhelmed by the ad saying that "there was a lot going on, but nothing really said." or that they were "trying to say too many things at once". A criticism that the rest of the group agreed with was that the ad was trying to say, "men can buy pads, look our pads are absorbent also, blood is normal. Look at this blood on her leg in the shower. Also, periods are so silly and funny. Look at us dressed up as a pad. What was I supposed to walk away from that with the message of?". It seems that although the ad set out to promote the normalisation of periods, women mostly just felt overwhelmed and confused by it. When I reiterated that the message of the campaign was that blood is normal and asked whether the group got that from the ad, they all said no. None of the issues that the women had with the ad stemmed from the depiction of blood and it was never commented negatively on, it was mostly surrounding the chaos of the ad itself.

Additionally, to showing various advertisements, I furthered the discussion on the colour red with the group. I asked the group how it made them feel to see red period blood in ads. One participant remarked that brands not using the colour could be due to red being seen as a colour of "danger" generally, but that it didn't mean other colours should be used for blood in the ads. Another said that they prefer to see red used because it's the "reality of it". They continued to

say that “periods are messy and it’s normal for them to be messy” so it did not make sense to them to see a clean staged blue liquid to portray period blood. When asked if they were shocked by the depiction of period blood in the last two adverts that they were shown, they generally agreed that they liked seeing it. One particularly liked seeing the blood in the shower scene as it was something so normal and they felt it was “real”. Another said that the bin full of used pads and the blood-stained sheet brought more of a “reality” to it. They did feel surprised to see how much blood was used in the last two adverts, not because they didn’t like it but because it wasn’t the sort of representation that they were used to. They felt that the use of colours other than red felt “demeaning” and felt like the brands are saying “yes that happens but let’s not actually talk about it because that’s a bit too much for everyone else”. This highlights how a lack of accurate representation of period blood in advertisements has led to a female experience of feeling shame and anxiety around period blood. Another remarked that not using red implies that period blood is “dirty and shouldn’t be seen by others”. Alternatively, one participant raised that the omission of red blood in adverts may be due to some people being sensitive to the sight of blood in general and posed the question of whether those people should be considered. I, too, wonder if it is worthwhile to eradicate accurate representation of period blood, bearing in mind what implications that may have on women and stigma, to consider those who are sensitive to blood. Others in the group felt that while these people were worth considering, having the colour red in period product advertisements was important even if it had to be “diluted” or “unrealistic”.

When asked if the sight of blood in a period product ad feels like seeing blood on TV brought from violence, the group agreed it did not. This may indicate that women, regardless of discomfort around the sight of blood, are okay with seeing blood in relation to menstruation and therefore it could be possible that the only people that alternative colours for blood are protecting is men.

I ended the focus group by asking the group a few closing questions. I firstly asked them how they felt and what their takeaways were. One participant felt angered by how periods were advertised and dealt with. When asked what their ideal future for period product advertising looks like, they agreed that more education and transparency in ads was the ideal way forward for them. One woman said, “If you want us to buy your product, be the ones who are doing the work”. I then asked what they thought the future would look like if nothing changed in the way that period products were being advertised. One participant said that they can see many young women being in a similar situation to the women in group, dealing with miseducation,

mistreatment regarding birth control, shame and confusion. They remarked that “It's only through conversation that we kind of get rid of that shame.” The group felt that if there wasn't more transparency, openness and education from period product ads, women would continue to feel like period products are something that should be “hidden”. Another participant worried that period product companies, instead of focusing on the issues women have, would “keep down the path of solving problems we don't have”. They also joked that period product companies would come out with a product that “some chemical that changes the colour of your period blood, so you don't have to look at it”. However dystopian this may seem; it is not beyond belief. Period product companies have been solving issues that don't exist for years, adding fragrance to pads being a great example. The group all agreed that period product companies were “doing the bare minimum and being praised for it”, something they were sure would continue if period product advertising didn't change for the better.

FOCUS GROUP 2 -- FINDINGS

To further understand the female experience of menstruation and period product adverts from a more ‘mature’ point of view I conducted a focus group with two women in their late 40s. This focus group was much more difficult to organise than the first. One reason being that both women were mothers with very busy schedules. On the other hand, many women that I asked were not comfortable with talking about the topic or were not comfortable with their answers being recorded. This was an interesting difference given that the first group, who were younger, was much easier to recruit.

The women's experience with menstruation was drastically different, one had a very negative experience from the early stages of menstruation whereas the other had a very neutral experience. Where one woman had dealt with a complete lack of education around menstruation due to a stigma and an unwillingness in her mother to educate her on what was happening to her, the other grew up in a very open and progressive household when it came to women's health. One had suffered terrible periods from childhood causing fainting, absence from school, college and then work from childhood until after having children. She had always felt that this was normal until she was in her early 40s due to a lack of education and a culture of not voicing women's health issues. She told us that her “standout experience would be quite

horrific...my memory would be fainting on trains with period pain and trauma around that.” The other had always had very light and manageable periods and was shocked to hear of her friend's experience and sympathised with her. They both agreed that growing up the products were “terrible”. They recalled seeing period products in bathrooms at weddings and other events years ago and how “positive” it was as it “got rid of the taboo”. They also talked about how “new” to them the concept of people openly asking for spare period products in a room was, as they felt “you couldn't possibly ask somebody” when they were younger. They even said that they “felt they couldn't go to the teacher” even if the teacher was female. The woman who had a more neutral experience with menstruation did recall the “phenomenal” fear of getting it given that she participated in showjumping as a teen and had to wear a white uniform. This is a first-hand experience of an issue that was discussed in both focus groups as well as analysed separately by me in the thesis, that of the white uniform dilemma that companies such as Tampax generally use to push their product.

The women both felt that it was “wonderful” and “fascinating” to see period products freely provided in female bathrooms. One participant was a teacher in an all-boys secondary school and remarked that she used to “hide” her bag of sanitary products even as a teacher out of as she felt that it was something she had to do “from day one”, a great example of learned stigma and shame surrounding women owning the period products that they need. She then told us that things had since changed and she now carries her bag of sanitary products freely and without shame, “There's 770 boys around the place. They know exactly why I have that bag. They probably do. I don't care”. They both felt that the “lack of discussion” in early years made them feel like menstruation “wasn't normal”. The women recalled that Tampax came “later on” in their menstruation journeys, presumably it wasn't as widely accepted-especially for young women- in Ireland at the time.

Regarding period product advertising, the women generally did not feel represented by them, recalling one “awful” ad from their childhood that they felt so embarrassed by, wanting it to “just be gone off the TV”. They said that the ad felt like it was “trying to embarrass us as women instead of trying to normalise and educate”. One woman wondered if her feelings of misrepresentation regarding period product advertisements was an “age thing”, something I found quite concerning. I was quick to remind them that they are customers of the period product companies and therefore should be a part of their target audience. This spoke to the feelings of isolation and misrepresentation amongst older women due to companies such as Tampax gearing their marketing more towards a younger demographic. One woman felt the ads were still “quite poor” and “a bit cringey”. She held issue with the fact that none of the ads

she had seen were “inclusive and modern and trying to tell boys and girls about it”, which the other participant agreed with.

In relation to how they chose what products to use, they chose Tampax as they were influenced by advertising, “you heard of Tampax so you just bought Tampax”. They were firstly influenced by what their mother used and then through a process of “trial and error” figured out what was “user-friendly” and worked best for them. As mothers, they both felt that their approach to menstruation with their children would be an open and educational one, regardless of gender.

This advertisement from Tampax’s Instagram had quite a negative reaction from the group ([link](#)). Both women felt that the ad was “cringey” and yet again felt that it may be because the ad was not meant for women their age. One woman enjoyed the start of the ad when the woman was just talking, but the “funny” angle was not appreciated.

The second piece (Fig 17, Section I) was even more negatively received. One woman felt frustrated by the ad. The other just felt that it “meant nothing” to her. They both agreed that the word “dirty” was unnecessary as it just gave more power and drew more attention to a word that the women were so used to hearing in relation to periods. Even though the ‘poster’ was aimed at saying periods are not dirty, the women felt it was unnecessary and did the opposite.

Fig 16 was met with confusion and indifference. One participant felt that the tampons looked more like “lollipops” while the other was startled by the green in the image. While they acknowledged that it was informative, they felt that it “could be better”.

Fig 22 was more well received by the group, one even exclaiming “that’s more like it”. They both felt that this was more “sensible” and “really informative”.

The tweet (Fig 18) brought confusion to both participants saying they “don't get it”. They felt that it didn't “impact” them “at all”. This is yet another form of media from Tampax that made the group feel isolated due to their age as they felt that it wasn't meant for them. Both agreed that the statement didn't align with what they thought Tampax represented.

Regarding Fig 23, both participants agreed that this was better as it was “informative. They also considered that this might be “reassuring” to many people that may be a part of the 83% that is mentioned in the graphic above.

Both participants engaged with the TV advertisement featuring Courtney Cox (Fig 5, Section I) much more than the others. They felt that if they had seen it back in 1985 that they would have thought it was “cool” and that they would have been “jumping to get” Tampax if they had seen it at the time. One participant's initial reaction was that it was “informative” but commented that it was worth noting that “they're all jumping around in leotards” which is possibly not as progressive. They both agreed that there was “nothing a million miles wrong with it” if it was to be shown now in comparison to some of the current and recent adverts that the pair has already seen. They liked that it wasn't “cringey” or “negative towards women”.

When looking at advert from the 1960s (Fig 8, Section I) The group felt that the implication that periods would embarrass “others” as well as the use of the word “dainty” was a “disgrace”. This prompted further discussion on how many years ago, there was no open advertising of period products in shops. The products were normally “hidden away in a corner”.

Next, we moved on to view the Modibodi period underwear advertisement (Fig 26, [link](#)) to move the discussion closer to the use of red in period product advertising. This was the first ad I had shown the group which showed realistic depictions of period blood. The participants reacted well to this advertisement and felt that it was “factual” and “relevant”. One participant said that they “wished it was on every day”. Unlike other adverts that made women feel menstruation was “gross and unnatural” this set out to “normalise it”. In addition to saying they wanted “more of that” due to the ad being “powerful”, they felt that boys should also see it and that it should be “shown in school”. The accurate representation of period blood did not phase the participants. In fact, they thought it was “effective” and “necessary”. It was the first time

they had both ever seen blood in a period ad, and although they admitted to feeling a bit surprised initially, they were very accepting.

The group felt that the Bodyform video/advertisement (Fig 27, [link](#)) was “not as good as the previous one”. They did not like the imagery of a man dressed as a period pad and felt it was “unnecessary” and “vulgar”. They felt that bringing humour into period ads was unnecessary questioning, “what's so funny about it?”. They also felt that while the inclusion of ‘real’ blood and showing a man buying products was good, the humour as well as the sheer amount of content that was in the ad meant it “lost its impact” and was “overkill”. This led to further discussion on how period ads are the one ad the women thought “should not be funny”.

Additionally, to showing various advertisements, I furthered the discussion on the colour red with the group. They both agreed that red period blood should be included in the ads. In terms of how it should be presented they felt it should not be “in your face”. They recalled the blue and purple dyes they had seen in other ads and how harmful and irrelevant it was, “we don’t need that”. The use of purple dyes meant nothing to them and didn’t do anything to sell them the product. They felt that the “staining of clothes” and the “blood dripping down” in the shower was “relevant” and “real”.

I ended the focus group by asking the group a few closing questions. In the future, they wanted to see companies supporting free period product initiatives in places like schools and sporting grounds. To feel more represented in period product ads they would like to see “no puns or jokes”, people of “different ages” as well accurate blood representation. One participant felt that the future of period products may see a rise in more sustainable period products such as moon cups as well as “environmentally friendly” packaging. Generally, they wanted more informational, factual advertisements that did not make periods embarrassing or funny.

Conclusion

After carrying out extensive research on the female experience of menstruation and period product advertisements I have a greater understanding of the industry itself and how the implications of poor representation in period product advertising has led to a lot of shame, embarrassment and stigma for women surrounding menstruation. Considering the history of menstruation and period products, we have, undeniably, made advancements in products and advertising for periods, however, my research suggests we still are nowhere near where we should be. Women should be able to exist in a world where they feel that the natural process of menstruation that they have no choice in, is not “unnatural” or something to feel embarrassed by. As long as we live in a society that markets period products as ‘discreet’, ‘clean’ or something that sells a lifestyle rather than a product, women will never feel heard, understood or seen.

Although menstruation marketing has made some major progress in its treatment and representation of women, diversity and menstruation in advertisements, it simply is not enough. There are still major issues with period product advertising. The lack of accurate period blood representation using unrealistic dyes under the guise of ‘absorbency tests’ is one example. In addition to this being a misrepresentation issue that breeds shame around period blood, it also shows how out of touch many period product companies are, given that they are using dyed saline solution to measure the absorbency of period products that are meant to absorb period blood, which is a completely different consistency. A paper published in 2023 by a team of researchers from Oregon Health & Science University recently found that the absorbency of many period products was “lower or higher” than advertised when “real blood” was used instead of saline solution²⁹. Therefore, not only is the use of dyed saline solution perpetuating the idea that blood is ‘wrong’ and shouldn’t be shown, but it has also led to decades of false advertisement and misinformation regarding the effectiveness of period products. Another issue with period product advertising is the lack of representation of women of different races, ages and body shapes. This was a major reason that many of the participants in the focus groups felt unrepresented by the ads they were shown. It is very harmful to only publish advertisements

²⁹ Thompson, Joanna. “No One Studied Menstrual Product Absorbency Realistically until Now.” *Scientific American*, 27 Nov. 2023, www.scientificamerican.com/article/no-one-studied-menstrual-product-absorbency-realistically-until-now/.

of period products that are centered around slim white women as it isolates anyone outside of that category and makes them feel that the products are not for them. The issue of representation also lies in the way that period product advertising portrays the female experience of menstruation and use of period products. Using narratives such as women being able to “do anything” such as play intense sports can be harmful and rooted in ‘toxic positivity’ which many women do not identify with. This tells women that if they buy the product that is being advertised, they will not have a single struggle during menstruation and will be completely fine and active. While this may be aimed to be positive and empowering, it is wildly inaccurate as it ignores the real struggles that women face during their period. This, in addition to Tampax’s long history of unnecessarily sexualising women in advertisements and other forms of media, speaks to the main issues that women face in relation to menstruation marketing. Most women feel disengaged and misrepresented by ads. In a modern world, women should not have to fight for accurate representation in ads for products that are meant for them. Simple changes can be made to ensure that the period product advertising industry changes for the better and works with women instead of against them. Women want to see more open, factual, informative ads that have a great representation of women as well as an accurate representation of the female experience of menstruation and blood itself. Through my primary research it became increasingly apparent to me that the accurate menstruation in period product advertisements was important to women, implying that the only group that the dyed saline solution is protecting is men.

While this thesis is solely focused on the female experience, it is important to mention that from the beginning to end of my research, I became increasingly aware of male influence on the industry. Between ads portraying women in a way that appeals to the ‘male gaze’ and companies such as Tampax bantering with men over the ownership of women, it begs the question, what do men have to do with periods? It is concerning to see that one of the only industries that applies strictly to women and people who menstruate is so saturated with male influence. As part of the wider issue of stigma around menstruation, it is true that period product advertising is not the only villain at hand. Stigma around menstruation is a wider issue that is bred from years of stigma that is taught to women from a very early age when they are initially introduced to menstruation.

My research has been so engaging and enjoyable that I now aim to further my research into the menstruation education system for young girls in Ireland for my final project as part of my college degree. Both the menstruation education system and period product advertising must

change to be more open, informative, and free of shame for a future where women are not made to feel embarrassed and isolated by their periods to exist.

Appendix

[Thesis Focus Group Script](#) – link to document.

Focus Group Questions:

Objectives

- Capture female experience of period product advertising.
- Understanding of attitudes towards menstruation.
- Highlight cultural factors that influence these experiences.
- Understand this age brackets general reaction to new and old tampon advertisements.

Topics

- Attitudes/relationships with menstruation
- Experience with period product advertising so far- opinions, stand out experiences, representation, etc.
- Opinions on old advertisements.
- Opinions on new advertisements.
- Opinions on red in adverts.
- Solutions to their experience.

Menstruation Experience

What is your relationship with menstruation?- can say it's positive, negative, you hate it, it empowers you, share your story

What menstruation products do you favour?- totally okay to not answer

How was menstruation introduced to you?

What is your opinion on how menstruation is addressed in society

What influences you to buy specific period products?

Advertising

What is your opinion on how menstruation is shown in advertising?

Where do you normally learn about period product?

Do you get ads on period product?- how does that make you feel?

What is your opinion on these advertisements?

Do these adverts feel representative to you?

How do they make you feel?

Do you feel connected to the way they portray menstruation?

Would this advert influence you to buy this product?

Do you like this advert?

If you don't like the advert would that stop you from purchasing the product?

Do adverts normally influence your buying habits?

How do period product ads differ or align?

How do you feel about tampax?

Do you trust period product companies?

Do their adverts influence that

The Colour Red

Should red be used in period product advertisements and in what way?

Show non red period ad

How does the use of non-red blood representation in period ads make you feel.

Show red period ad

How does the use of red blood representation in period ads make you feel?

Solutions/The future

What would make you feel differently- more represented, more likely to buy the product, more trusting.

What does the realistic future of period advertising/ products look like to you

What does your ideal future look like?

What would you most like to change?

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