

We All Bleed Red: Brand Realism

Consumer Research on Menstrual Product Advertising

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ABSTRACT

Today's digital era promotes cross-cultural narratives and barrier-breaking ideologies. The historically socialised female body has been subject to feminist movements, making it a hot topic for societal change. Current movements, driven by young generations, have enabled the rethinking of menstruation by pushing for menstrual equity, eradicating stigmas, and viewing it as natural instead of dirty. Now consumers demand brands to engage in socio-political issues, to which some brands have responded via the latest advertising trend of brand activism and femvertising, that is recognised by scholars as highly effective. In particular, the brand's recognition of these cultural possibilities and their engagement can result in the perception of a brand as cultural icons while standing out in a saturated market. Within a cultural frame, marketers are seen as cultural mediators as consumption is seen as culturally constituted through the marketplace, indicating that marketers have influential power. To capture the zeitgeist and consumer types for strategic advertising, while understanding culture as subject to change, marketers must understand the tendencies offered within a market by knowing how value can be created. Hence, consumer perceptions and views were analysed to understand how consumers make sense of their world and perceive advertisements as part of this world. Consequently, the study was guided by the question "How do young adults (18-24) understand new advertising strategies on menstrual products?". Theory-driven, semi-structured in-depth interviews yielded rich data analysed via reflexive thematic analysis through Atlas.ti. By adopting a cultural paradigm, via the concepts of social identity, social norms, and the socialised body, young adults' views on menstruation and their perceptions of menstrual product commercials were identified. Results showed that menstruation is seen as natural, whereas the stigmatisation is reinforced by out-groups, resulting in a paradox. Political engagement is seen as risky but also as a big pro. The commercials are perceived to be progressive but often criticised for including too many extremes, lacking realism. Some young adults find themselves supporting the narratives but resisting the product as commercial interest behind the company's motives is detected, whereas others reject both, pointing to a zeitgeist of post-postmodernism with new norms and realist consumption.

KEYWORDS: *consumer research, brand activism, advertising, feminine hygiene, social norms.*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 – Introduction	4
Chapter 2 – Theoretical Framework	8
2.1 Motivations and Morale of Activist Advertising	8
Activist Advertising	10
2.2 Consumer’s Moral Authority and Attitudes	12
Social Norms and Subjectivity	13
Attitude Behaviour Gap	15
2.3 The Female Body and Menstrual Narratives	16
Socialised Female Body and its Narratives	16
2.4 Consumer’s Social Identity	18
2.5 Conclusion	19
Chapter 3 – Research Design	21
3.1 Study Design and Justification of the Method	21
Cultural Consumer Perceptions and In-depth Interviews.....	21
Reflexive Thematic Analysis.....	23
3.2 Sampling and Data Collection	24
Sampling Process	24
Interview Process.....	26
3.3 Operationalisation	27
3.4 Analysis Framework and Process	29
Thematic Analysis Steps.....	30
3.5 Credibility	31
3.6 Research Design in Short	31
Chapter 4: Results	32
4.1 Social Female Identity	32
4.2 Today’s Socialised Female Body	35
4.3 Young Adult’s Views on Menstruation	37
4.4 Societal Progress of Embracing Menstruation	40
4.5 Young Adult’s Brand Positioning	42
4.6 Perception of Advertising Practices	45
4.7 Themes in Brief	49
Chapter 5: Conclusions	50
5.1 Reflexivity	54
5.2 Limitations and Future Recommendations	55
References	57
APPENDIX	65

Chapter 1 – Introduction

In the digital age, where interconnectedness across borders and cultures via the internet and social media is enabled, digital movements and barrier-breaking ideologies drive faster societal change (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Sprout Social, 2020). In the past decades, a hot topic driving societal change is the stereotyping and sexualisation of females and their bodies, resulting in digital movements (Varghese & Kumar, 2020). First, in the early 2000s, feminist movements guided by postmodern beliefs were initiated, changing the socialised female body and feminine hygiene narratives (Malefyt & McCabe, 2016; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Recently, younger generations drove the 4th feminist movement by being overly conscious and politically involved, demanding societal change (Varghese & Kumar, 2020). Currently, movements on menstruation specifically have enabled the rethinking of menstruation and the way it is dealt with and spoken about, pushing for menstrual equity while erasing stigmas (MacMillan, 2021, 27 January).

As a result, menstrual activism has become prevalent over the past years while dealing with complex phenomena surrounding the socialised female body (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). Historically, menstruation has been a taboo that was considered the most embarrassing topic in western culture while neglecting the moral ability of women through objectification (Freitas, 2008; Kissling, 1996). Instead of endorsing these taboos via advertisements as done in the past (Kane, 1990), efforts of change regarding the reframing of menstruation only succeed if advertisers also change their narratives (Kissling, 1996), as supported by the late empirical study of Drake (2017). In essence, the responsibility of marketers is proven as considerate in reliving and reshaping societal stigmas, leading to the point where companies providing menstrual products and medical specialists should also help to not just "make money off the biological needs of women" (MacMillan, 2021, 27 January). Ultimately, via consciousness and activist mindsets, consumers now demand the engagement of brands to initiate new narratives and strive for positive societal change (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021).

Brands have picked up on the societal demand of young adults to engage in the movement (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021), such as menstrual activism, by strategically taking a public stance via the advertising strategy of brand activism (Drake, 2017). In return, by taking a public stance on socio-political issues, brands can differentiate themselves in a saturated market by showing they care for more than the triple bottom (Roper & Fill, 2012; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). In a value and purpose-driven manner, brands can adopt tactics borrowed from social movements to co-shape the identity of consumers via social production, initiating societal change while producing campaigns that benefit society (Manfredi-Sanchez,

2019; Moorman, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). Ultimately, when promoting barrier-breaking ideologies that drive societal movements, the brand-consumer emotional relationship can be enhanced, creating consumer loyalty amongst many other benefits (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Holt, 2016). Specifically, social brand activism and femvertising seeks to empower women via pro-woman narratives and focussing on female talent while fighting stereotyping and objectification. However, the strategy has also received much criticism as it is risky to become politically involved resulting in possible claims of woke washing and cancel-cultures if there is a misalignment of the values communicated and the values held by consumers (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019). Therefore, understanding consumer perceptions and the values they hold is crucial for advertising efficacy.

Taking a cultural approach to advertising and consumption, it is viewed that society is culturally constituted through the marketplace (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). As a result, marketers and advertisers are viewed as cultural mediators who respond to the market's expectations while also having the authorial power to influence consumption beneficially, making advertising a cultural vehicle (Downey & Catterall, 2006; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006; Schroeder, 2009). If brands respond well to the market's expectations by recognising societal tendencies, they can gain cultural significance (McCracken, 2005, Holt, 2012). However, culture is fluid and subject to change, making it hard for marketers to understand and respond to these societal tensions correctly and promptly while recognising different types of consumers and their 'zeitgeist'. Therefore, consumer research can give marketers valuable insights into consumer cultures and societal tendencies to market their products effectively while fostering advertising efficacy.

To contribute to the existing body of research on brand activism, feminine hygiene is analysed through a lens of the female socialised body to understand consumer views and perceptions. In essence, the aim was to evaluate consumer perceptions, how and if brands could change human behaviour, and whether consumers think that brands can genuinely support a cause beyond the triple bottom line. Since marketers can shape someone's social identity by (re)enforcing social norms, it is crucial to understand how trust can be enhanced by establishing a deep emotional relationship through value creation (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Holt, 2016; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).

Accordingly, this study explores the perceptions of young adults regarding the advertising strategy of brand activism on menstrual products and the way they view menstruation by understanding their positioning on the topic. Consequently, the following

research question guides this study: "How do young adults (18-24) understand new advertising strategies on menstrual products?".

To answer this research question, in-depth interviews (N=10) with individuals aged 18-24 were held to explore their perceptions of the advertisements and their views on some sub-themes of this study questioned in the interviews. Stimuli of the brand Libresse/Bodyform have been included, of which the last commercial of 'womb stories' won a black pencil award, making it a well-celebrated commercial within the advertising industry (Hall, 2021, 31 May). To review patterns in the dataset, a reflexive thematic approach has been utilised in a theory-driven manner guided by the operationalisation of chapter 3. This methodological approach insides into whether the (political) brand activist approach of advertising creates added value to consumers by questioning consumers' perceptions and understanding how they frame their reality (Barnham, 2015). In essence, patterns were translated into codes as part of sub-themes and overarching themes in line with the theory and guided by the analysis steps of Braun and Clarke (2006) through the utilisation of the software Atlas.ti. The analysis will be guided by an interpretive approach within a cultural framework, identifying perceptual judgements on which the consumers make sense of their world while exploring underlying and subconscious rules. Only when understanding these rules can the complex and culturally influenced marketplace be targeted and empowered effectively (Varghese & Kumar, 2020). As careful considerations are key when targeting socio-political issues via advertising (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019), marketers have obtained helpful information by identifying consumer perceptions. These include the ideas of how value can be added, what cultural symbols should be included or left out, and what matches which type of consumers best (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006a; Barnham, 2015).

The relevance of this study lies in its expansion on existing literature on femvertising and brand activism. Where advertising is well-studied and has proven its effectiveness on purchase behaviour and favourable brand and ad opinions via empirical studies (Åkestam et al., 2017), the cultural marketing lens to brand activism has remained unexplored (Varghese & Kumar, 2020). Moreover, reactions to femvertising depictions (Åkestam et al., 2017), including male perceptions, were understudied (Drake, 2017). In essence, most studies concerning advertising on controversies took a quantitative approach, neglecting consumer perceptions. As these ads do impact consumers via unrepresentative depictions, a qualitative approach seems to be relevant (Sabri, 2012; Varghese & Kumur, 2020). Nonetheless, only when knowing perceptions of advertisements, this effect can be enhanced by increasing authenticity and driving positive societal change.

Hence, the scientific advancement of this study lies in the identification of consumer perceptions regarding the cultural marketing approach to brand activism. This will expand upon the existing brand perspectives and feminist critique from a business communicational perspective. By adopting this consumer view, marketers gain access to valuable and rich information, pointing out a zeitgeist shift amongst young adults, meaning brands need to be even more aware of how to approach their advertising strategies effectively.

Societal relevance of the present research is implicit in the socialised representation of female bodies and menstrual negativity. Within society, menstruation has been stigmatised over time, socialising the female body while viewing it as defective and seeing women as morally incapable (Kissling, 1996; Kellie et al., 2019). This points out the power of marketers, making it crucial to identify amongst citizen-consumers how the new advertising strategies are perceived. Additionally, as the title indicates, 'we all bleed red' showcases a specific aspect of 'blood' as part of the ever complexity of menstruation and the womb. It is not only a matter concerning women but also men. Trans men are also affected by menstruation, which is a necessary expansion of 'who' menstruates while changing the narratives (Bobel & Fahs, 2020), which has been ignored in the past simplifying the phenomena of menstruation. As Malefyt and McCabe (2016) indicate, adverse effects can be the result of advertisements via exposure to patriarchal narratives. The newer advertising strategy of femvertising, on the other hand, does have positive effects on the empowerment of consumers (Drake, 2016). Since consumers' social identity can be shaped through consumption (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006), it is of societal relevance to understand how consumers perceive new commercials.

Hopefully, this study can inspire other researchers, activists and marketers to explore and openly talk about the the complexity behind menstruation and societal norms, and keep investigating a personal matter that is also political as it concerns gender, sexism, bodies, embodied resistance and more (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). This is a call to action.

Chapter 2 – Theoretical Framework

This chapter starts with an overview of concepts and relevant literature related to feminine hygiene and advertising concerning the paradigm of consumer perceptions within the postmodern and cultural frame. In conformity, two sides to this phenomenon are included, which are the production and reception side.

On the production side, considering that marketers are co-constructors of cultural society, the advertising strategies of brand activism are explored, by highlighting its contested definitions of brand activism, besides the and motivations and emerging moral obligations to engage in brand activism. The chosen form of engagement in brand activism is essential for consumer evaluation to legitimise brand activist practices. Therefore, a framework of brand activist lenses is set forth as it provides an important context to analyse how brands justify their communicative actions in a culturally symbolised society.

On the reception side, moral authority is explored as a conceptual framework. In essence, this will guide the analysis within the paradigm of consumer perceptions in cultural society by understanding underlying rules and structures of how consumers construct their reality to answer the research sub-questions. As part of moral authority, the concepts of social norms, subjectivity are explored.

Bridging the production and reception side, the socialised female body is evaluated by emphasising the role of media in constructing and reinforcing social norms and shaping social identity. Ultimately, when linking this to feminine hygiene, the cultural and postmodern discourses, including stereotyping, on menstruation and its origins are explored.

Finally, the citizen's consumer social identity is explored in relation to the above-mentioned parts. The concept, the construction and reconstruction is explored, while highlighting all factors involved that appear to be fundamental in forming one's personal identity in a demanding society.

2.1 Motivations and Morale of Activist Advertising

To stand out in a crowded marketplace of consumer goods, one needs to carefully consider how to advertise successfully to target consumers. Therefore, strategic advertising approaches are crucial, enabled by understanding the fundamentals of how consumer value creation and emotional relationships are endorsed while personal identity is enhanced (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Holt, 2016; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Whilst taking a cultural perspective in this study, to set out the theoretical position within the marketplace (Moisander &

Valtonen, 2011), it must be emphasized that cultural society is viewed as constituted through the consumption and the marketplace (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). In conformity with this perspective, 'culture' refers to the representational systems utilized by individuals in society to make sense of their daily lives and being.

As pointed out by Moisander and Valtonen (2006), consumer's value lies in the provision of cultural values in the current era. The authors note that marketers and advertisers are cultural mediators who face both the side of responding to market expectations while also having authority and power to change consumption in a beneficial way to the company. Hence, for optimal cultural mediating, while viewing marketers as both co-constructors and actors in society, it is crucial to evaluate how they give meaning to consumers via the constructed representational images and narratives as part of their advertisements. It can therefore also be noted that advertisements are fundamental actors in producing cultural signs and values in society and is therefore referred to as the "vehicle for cultural meaning" (Downey & Catterall, 2006; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006a p556; Schroeder, 2009). Cultural meaning is viewed to be built discursively through social interaction, which is enabled and restrained with the discourses as part of the current representational system and is situational as the use of discourses and its cultural meaning is subject to change (Moisander & Valtonen, 2011). McCracken (2005) elaborates that cultural significance is gained if a brand recognizes societal tendencies while creating cultural patterns. Since cultural meaning is subject to change, continuous awareness of the market's societal tendencies is needed. When finding room within these tendencies to drive change, barrier-breaking ideologies can be enforced, enhancing the brand-consumer emotional relationship (Holt, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2012). With the rise of social media and online presence subcultural groups are reached via cultural conventions challenged by brands, urging brands to engage in societal tensions (Holt, 2016). Ultimately, advertising is central to the (re)enforcement of ideologies via products and consumption (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006 p556).

As part of post-cultural beliefs, consumption is seen as vital when constructing and recreating self-identity (Downey & Catterall, 2006; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Even though consumers obtain cultural narratives via advertisements and might internalize them and adapt them to their own self (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006), consumers also become more conscious and activist, demanding new narratives and positive societal change (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). Hence, understanding consumer perceptions as part of the target market is crucial for successful advertising and value creation, as mentioned before. In essence, brands

can become cultural icons if advertising strategies align with societal opportunities (Holt, 2012). Moisander and Valtoten (2006) add that commercial symbolisms are viewed as successful if they target contradictory matters in culture to enable individuals to act on and overcome tensions experienced in their life by promoting activism and agency. Consequently, we live in a society with increasingly activist and conscious consumers, demanding societal change and involvement of brands, yielding in new advertising strategies including brand activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021).

A new emerging zeitgeist of post-postmodernism might change this. As predicted by Holt (2002), this zeitgeist comes after postmodernism and will change the way of consumption, where it is not about authenticity, but about engagement, sincerity, and enthusiasm (Cantone et al., 2020). Through reflexivity, consumers detect branding as commercial, with negative effects for marketing efficacy via scepticism (Holt, 2002). In a post-cultural frame, brands should become citizen-artists to target the imagination of consumers while providing cultural materials to reconstruct their self-concept.

Therefore, it is relevant to explore brand activist strategies and cultural narratives as part of the cultural frame adopted in this study.

Activist Advertising

Brand activism is a form of advertising which is viewed as an evolution of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). The main difference between CSR and brand activism is that the former is more marketing-driven, emphasising actions and their consequences (e.g., reputation), whereas the latter is value and purpose-driven (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In essence, the aim is to raise awareness, support or oppose a partisan cause, or take a societal (public) stance while changing human behaviour (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). The purposefulness lies in the aim to enhance reputation beyond economic interest (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Hence, brand activism seeks to influence consumers as part of society, referred to as the citizen-consumer, through political campaigns that benefit society (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Moorman, 2020). Tactics of social movements are utilised to co-shape the citizen-consumer identity via social production (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019).

Consequently, brand activism targets and voices controversies in society via symbols and barrier-breaking ideologies. Henceforth, activism and agency are promoted while everyday life tensions are dealt with (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019). When done accordingly,

political brand activism aligns management of public good, corporate actions and values, besides the individual's identity in a political sphere (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be seen, as with other advertising strategies, as a co-creator and reinforcer of culture. However, Vredenburg et al. (2020) state that on a long-term scale, brand activist campaigns can foster more significant societal impact while differentiating in a saturated market, which can be one of the main drivers for marketers to engage. On the other hand, marketers must be aware that brand activism can be perceived as irrelevant to the citizen-consumers who do not view the targeted matter as an issue since issues are subjective and cultural and therefore interpreted differently.

Even though brand activism appears as a strategic advertising method, Manfredi-Sanchez (2019) argues that the practice of this advertising type has received considerable criticism in a social context due to a lack of trust in institutions. Consequently, consumers might perceive the practice as woke washing resulting in boycotting brands, making it a risky practice. Particularly woke washing occurs if an authentic factor (the alignment of purpose, values, messages, and practice) is missing (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Especially when targeting a partisan issue, a misalignment between the brand's communication and the values held by consumers is seen as a violation of norms (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019). Therefore, it is relevant to explore the motives and chosen form of brand activism, as the correct type of engagement enables consumer's moral justification and is seen as a crucial matter in its success factor whilst limiting woke washing.

Varying motives and obligations lead to the engagement of marketers in brand activism. First, there has been a shift in company values to a rather political sphere, where even controversial societal matters are included (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019). Sherer and Palazzo (2011) stated that besides having competitive differentiation, being political is justified through moral legitimacy, seeing it as a good cause to act beyond corporate interest. An increasing feminist and equality attitude by brands is adopted and seen within their brand activist practices (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019). Moreover, younger generations demand interest and engagement in socio-political causes. When promoting barrier-breaking ideologies that drive societal movements, brand-consumer emotional relationships are enhanced, creating loyalty (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Holt, 2016). Also, respect can be gained if consumers perceive authentic engagement due to value alignment to the movement (Roper & Fill, 2012). As marketers are seen as part of society, while they also have the power to reinforce and shape ideologies, it can be said that there is an increasing moral obligation to do good and listen to

consumer demands of driving societal change. To do so, brands can either engage in social or political brand activism.

Social brand activism is one specific type of brand activist approach that explores social matters such as female empowerment and gender equality (Champlin et al., 2019; Craddock et al., 2018). One social strategy to branding is 'femvertising', where the aim is to empower women with new feminist discourses (Drake, 2017), focussing on female talent while targeting stereotyping (Varghese & Kumar, 2019). The effectiveness of female empowerment depends on how brands target the social cause, demanding authentic narratives and direct communication (Åkestam et al., 2017). Ideally, as with any brand activist strategy, the company's values are aligned with the movement they stand for while fostering honesty and adopting the credible language of the citizen-consumers to increase authenticity towards society resulting in more respect for the brand (Knight, 2010; Roper & Fill, 2012).

The political brand activist stream targets partisan issues, such as social conventions, meaning they either challenge or support the status quo (Moorman, 2020). Manfredi-Sanchez (2019) states that the political issues included should exist of values that come from the political sphere and minimise the commercial sphere, including feminism and equality. This type of brand activism includes seven motives for marketers to engage (Moorman, 2020). The fifth is approached in this paper, concerning brands as an educator. In essence, this motive seeks to teach citizen-consumers new ideas and behaviours to drive societal change serving the greater good while motivating activism via moral imperatives and prescribed ideologies conceived via powerful myths within the advertisements (Moorman, 2020; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).

Thus, depending on whether the matter is feminist or political and partisan, the brand activist approach will differ from seeking to empower women via feminist discourses or change behaviour to drive societal change with new ideologies accomplishing a progressive society.

2.2 Consumer's Moral Authority and Attitudes

Judgements about what is good or bad is seen as practical and a moral judgement within cultural marketing (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Historical and cultural fundamentals make the production and reproduction of meaning and knowledge something subjective, that is subject to change over time. To explore the dynamics behind moral

authority, social norms, subjectivity, and the attitude behaviour gap must be explored, seeking to understand consumer behaviour.

Social Norms and Subjectivity

In a society shared by many people, norms guide human behaviour and minimise joint problems (Schultz et al., 2007). Social norms are referred to as an individual's informal understandings and rules that guide people's behaviour in a widely accepted, popular and ideological manner within a culture (Bicchieri et al., 2018; Parker & Smith, 2007; Rodgers & Thorson, 2017). In essence, social scientists indicate that social norms are central to the production of social guidance and order of human actions, which are shaped and reconstructed continuously through human interaction (Schultz et al., 2007). As a result, philosophers view social norms as a social construct (Bicchieri et al., 2018). Since a cultural approach is adopted, social reality and social norms and values are seen as culturally constructed (Moisander & Valtonen, 2011).

Reese et al. (2019) emphasised two main ways that social norms are used. On the one hand, they serve as guidance for behaviours, cognitions, and emotions, which refers to injunctive norms. On the other hand, they are used as measures to which one can judge someone else's acts, which are descriptive norms. The authors add that those social norms exert total influence and are internalised only when they originate from in-groups (Reese et al., 2019), and therefore vary within different cultures and social groups. Additionally, highlighted by Bicchieri et al. (2018), several contextual factors, such as social identification and framings or characteristics of issues, result in variances of preferred and appropriate behaviour within a society. Therefore, norms can be seen as situational and are changing over time as they are shaped and justified on moral judgements that serve a specific and situational purpose within a given culture (Hove, 2020).

On an individual level, norms can be seen as strategic games constructed for self-fulfilling prophecy (Bicchieri et al., 2018). Nevertheless, Park and Smith (2007) explain that individuals tend to act according to in-group norms and are therefore never utterly subjective as others influence it. Therefore, when aiming to change a norm, the behavioural driver needs to be understood. To do so, Bicchieri et al. (2018) state that attention needs to be paid to an individual's expectations behind the social norms, which is made possible through the distinction of all norms into social and descriptive norms and conventions, such as legal rules and moral codes.

The following different types of norms have been identified and divided within individual, group, and societal levels. Firstly, on an individual level, there are subjective norms, which translate to the individual's perception of how popular (descriptive) and accepted (injunctive) the act is within the in-group (Rodgers & Thorson, 2017; Schultz et al., 2007). Secondly, on a group level, referred to as intersubjectivity, there are descriptive and injunctive norms. The former includes perceptions of how people behave (what is), and the latter injunctive concerns perceptions of the approved and unapproved behaviour by others among groups (what ought to be) (Rodgers & Thorson, 2017). Social norms are used here to evaluate how much one deviates from the accepted and widespread behaviour. Ultimately, people want to be part of groups as an out-group member is perceived to be less human, resulting in distancing to out-groups (Kellie et al., 2019). Lastly, there is normativity in place on a societal level, which is the acceptance and popularity of behaviour among more prominent people (Park & Smith, 2007). Therefore, it can be stated that social norms have asserted power (Schultz et al., 2007), and normative info is required, as mentioned above, to strive for social change in behaviours.

Postmodern perspectives within a cultural marketing frame hint that there is no true subjectivity and a core to the true self, yet it still holds on to the idea of resistance and agency (Bicchieri et al., 2018; Moisander & Valtonen, 2011). Subjectivity itself is referred to as “a product of the individual's positioning within a system of representation or discourses in a field of power” (p12). An individual's predisposition of representations and narratives in a field of power is perceived to be shaped because they are (1) taken and given, (2) subverted and resisted, and (3) constructed and obtained through historical discourses in a situational setting (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Therefore, subjectivity, also referred to as human agency, is reflexive and interactive in a social setting. Thus, the agency is constructed and reconstructed through interactivity (statements of an individual influence the position of others) and reflexivity (mostly unconscious and unintentional positioning of themselves) within social settings (Moisander & Valtonen, 2011).

Taking the interactive and reflexive perspective of subjectivity, feminist consumption can be seen as subject to norms and discourses internalised to this type of consumerism, creating in-group norms evaluated as appropriate (Moisander & Valtonen, 2011). Therefore, consumers are denaturalised as autonomous, politicising the transformative and fluid nature of consumerism. Thus, individuals are constrained by consumed discourse, making feminist consumption not subjective but a social construction. Nevertheless, to some degree,

consumers are believed to shape their lives, creating different positions by people subject to the same discourses, meaning subjectivity is seen as created, recreated, and resisted over time (Moisander & Valtonen, 2011).

Knowing that social norms are shaped in multiple ways, it must not be surprising that brands and advertisements also take part in this process. Schroeder (2009) stated that brands are ideological symbols in the eyes of consumers that are part of the shaping of social norms, cultural myths, and economic behaviour. Schultz et al. (2007) add that the degree advertisements are accepted on someone's social identity depends on the in-group norms. Meaning that the stronger the social identity is within a group, the more positive effect the communicated social norms have on their intentions.

Attitude Behaviour Gap

Intentions can be pointing to a particular brand, a positive direction, and support for societal change. Nevertheless, if a person does not act on their intentions, a gap between their intentions and behaviour occurs, referred to as the attitude-behaviour gap (Caruana et al., 2016). The attitude-behaviour gap is a result of a practical issue regarding the attitude. Here, the consumer tries to appear like a good citizen by answering the desired responses (Caruana et al., 2016). These responses are related to social norms in place of being a good citizen. On the behaviour side, the observed factors for not acting upon initial intentions are factors including budget, not wanting to change convenience shopping and product (des)information.

Socio-cultural norms have led to ethical consumption and consumer activism, including collective and more community-based actors, limiting an individual's autonomous decision (Caruana et al., 2016; Moisander & Valtonen, 2011). However, according to Caruana et al. (2016), other scholars argue that there is an ethic of care as part of consumer morality where there seem to be links between commitment and caring for ethical behaviour. However, this moral frame is understudied, pointing out the uncertainty and the incohesive factors causing the attitude-behaviour gap among consumers. On the other hand, Carrington et al. (2015) argued that by not living up to their intentions, consumers rebel against their own intentions of acting like a 'good citizen' and questioning if they are doing the right thing while increasing the sense of guilt if they do not behave responsibly. In essence, the authors theorized that the attitude-behaviour gap is subject to ideological norms enhancing the unethical behaviour of consumption, that serve to benefit capitalistic structures.

2.3 The Female Body and Menstrual Narratives

To understand how feminine hygiene has resulted in a controversial topic over the years (Thomas, 2016), the concept of the socialised female body must be explored in relation to social identity, advertising and existing narratives that reinforce and reshape the socialised body. Both the production and reception side are included as either side is related to the construction and existence of the socialized body.

Socialised Female Body and its Narratives

The socialised body is shaped by being exposed to social communication and attention throughout life (Booth, 2016). Narratives and knowledge production can have significant political and societal implications since they have both empowering and disempowering effects (Moisander & Valtonen, 2011). The social communication that has shaped the socialised body is overall long-standing cultural narratives that have resulted in female objectification (Kissling, 1996; Thompson & Hirschman 1995). The study of Kellie et al. (2019) found that denial has surfaced of women's moral status and mental ability by focusing on her body due to female objectification. Consequently, such objectification is related to stereotyping by men. However, it is crucial to mention that not only men but also women are responsible for female objectification, pointing to a set of fundamentals that build and reconstruct the socialised female body. Nevertheless, the authors found in their studies that men take a more significant part than women in the decreased attribution to women's mental capacity and moral subjectivity.

Concerning feminine hygiene, the objectification of the female body is substantial. Historically seen, the female body was viewed as aesthetically defective when menstruating, resulting in cultural interventions, initiating protective narratives that reinforce the socialisation (Freitas, 2008; Kissling, 1996; Thomas, 2016). Additionally, menstruation has been viewed as naturally dirty and in need of control to cover up body pollution (Kissling, 1996; Thomas, 2016). Euphemisms were introduced next to concealing narratives of freshness and cleanliness while negatively reinforcing the socialised body (Ferranti, 2010; Freitas, 2008; Kissling, 1996). Consequently, some studies suggest that feminine hygiene has been considered a taboo in western societies as negative connotations of dirtiness and impurity were associated with the female body (Kissling, 1996). In the past, advertising has endorsed taboos surrounding feminine hygiene by suppressing natural femininity and using notions of cleanliness, aiming to please the male gaze (Kane, 1990; Kissling, 2006; Malefyt

& McCabe, 2016). According to Freitas (2008), the stigma surrounding menstruation has been so substantial that feminine hygiene is evaluated to be the most embarrassing topic within western culture. This can explain the often excluded and silenced topics of body hair and menstrual blood (Thomas, 2016).

In 'modern' times, the agency lacked, allowing cultural narratives to socialise the female body via traditional internalising ideologies surrounding the female body (Kissling, 1996). The later adopted 'postmodern' motives seek to increase agency by including subjectivity, freedom of choice, and individualism (Gill, 2007). Consequently, cultural feminists, guided by postmodern beliefs in the early 2000s, initiated a social movement that called for more authentic subjectivity, resulting in different views and interpretations of menstruation (Malefyt & McCabe, 2016). Therefore, a shift occurred where women started to embrace the female body and see menstruation as something natural, while the narratives in advertising remained protective. As a result, a divide occurred between perceptions and narratives.

This divide results in a paradox, guided by historical power relations, where the protective discourse as part of advertisements is still internalised as part of social identity by the consumer but assimilated in a way that suits their life purpose by only including some parts of the message (Bartholomew, 2010; Malefyt & McCabe, 2016). Within the cultural perspective, discourses are seen as mirrors of reality and utilised to construct reality (Moisander & Valtonen, 2011). Therefore, the consumer research conducted by Thompson and Hirschman (1995) highlights that a postmodern consumer is part of this paradox as their body is perceived as embodied subjects shaped by historical and social relations. Ultimately, it seems that new female-empowering narratives are needed to enhance self-esteem truly and empower women (Drake, 2017) that liberates women of shame (Thomas, 2016). Yet, a later study by Reese et al. (2019) pointed out that only narratives reflecting in-group norms are internalised, which puts a question on how much effect stereotypical narratives as part of advertisements have on rather progressive and feminist social groups that out-group such brands. Perhaps while out-grouping these narratives, new narratives are adopted putting the urge of new narratives and the internalisation of patriarchal narratives in question.

More recent postfeminist discourses bounded by neoliberal ethics strive to encourage women to invest, manage and work on their sexual lives (Rome & Lambert, 2020). Gill (2007) clarifies that post-feminism is characterised by neoliberal principles of agency, choice and individualism while limiting collective action (Phipps, 2016). Due to the MeToo

movement, there is a comeback in feminism, striving for societal change by intensified principles and more extensive reach (Rome & Lambert, 2020). However, it has been noted that recent feminist activism does not target patriarchal narratives, resulting in the extension of its use.

The discourses that signify postmodernity or post-feminism indicate cleanliness and transformability of their appearance (Fahs, 2014; Gill, 2017). Consequently, the patriarchal effect of these discourses results in the conceptualisation of the vagina as shameful, repulsive, and unclean. Additionally, there is pressure towards females to realise unrealistic standards while limiting possible toxic states (Rome & Lambert, 2020). This means that women should be balanced and avoid either a too positive state of confidence or too negative state of insecurity, self-doubt, and low self-esteem. However, there is also an increasing indication of female control over their bodies and sexuality (Rome & Lambert, 2020). Considering the above-mentioned historical socialisation of the female body, the shift towards more control can hint at an increasing perceived female agency over their own body, possibly limiting the internalisation of patriarchal narratives.

2.4 Consumer's Social Identity

Taking the stigma surrounding the female body into account, it is no surprise that the socialized body has shaped an individual's self-identity. Via the historical-cultural narratives communicated in society and received through advertising, the female identification is shaped via consumption, as mentioned earlier (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). To truly understand what this means, the concept of self-identity is explored.

Social identity concerns individuals' self-concept as part of social groups within society (Leaper, 2011). As explained by Downey and Catterall (2006), according to postmodern views, it is an ongoing process of creation through consumption. Even though modernism views social identity construction as less guiding, postmodernity views it as a reflexive and dynamic process (Bartholomew, 2010; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). In essence, we borrow from the outside world to re-construct parts of ourselves that we want to change. In a somewhat optimistic view adopted by postmodern beliefs, self-identity is seen as a personal selection of images on a spectrum to form our identity at will whilst discarding the other images that are not taken as part of the identity (Downey & Catterall, 2006). Moisander and Valtonen (2006) explained that the cultural approach to consumer research supports this belief of social identity construction through culture. Therefore, it is argued that consumers'

consciousness can be shaped, invaded, and reflected through advertisements. However, some scholars argue that postmodernism has come to an end (Cantone et al., 2020), shifting to post-postmodern consumption. Post-postmodernism refers to sincerity, enthusiasm, and engagement (Cantone et al., 2020). Here, it has been predicted that consumers might cultivate themselves through brands where they either thrive on the cultural meaning communicated by brands by fully adopting this material to construct their identity, they internalise some parts of it or reject it fully via semiotic vertigo (being overwhelmed), depending on the consumer type (Holt, 2002).

The body is a fundamental part of someone's self-identity. According to consumer culture in a postmodern view, the body acts as a communicator of the owner's identity-values. Moreover, it is someone's social symbol, on which individuals judge one another (Downey & Catterall, 2006). Relating this to feminine hygiene, it can be stated that the cultural narratives on menstruation present in society and communicated via advertisements have also shaped female identification. Taking the stigma surrounding the female body into account, it is no surprise that the socialized body has shaped an individual's self-identity. Via the historical-cultural narratives communicated in society and received through advertising, the female identification is (re)constructed and shaped (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Additionally, as cultural meaning and its discourses change over time, individuals experience a different social identity through different situations (Moisander & Valtonen, 2011).

Concerning advertising and brand perceptions of young adults, the social identity theory must be explored. According to Leaper (2011), this theory states that someone's social identity influences behaviour and attitudes concerning the person's in and out-groups. The author elaborates that the stronger the individual's social concept is to the group concept, the stronger the emotional ties and positive impact on self-esteem. Therefore, it would be logical that aligned advertising messages of a brand to a person's self-concept enhance emotional relationships and self-identification, as mentioned before (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Holt, 2016; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).

2.5 Conclusion

The present study adopts a cultural frame to answering the research question on consumer perceptions of activist advertising concerning menstrual products

Careful considerations by brands are a necessity when seeking to stand out in a saturated consumer marketplace. Consumers demand action, meaning brands must

strategically engage. However, brands need to iteratively understand how consumers values are built through consumption while aligning the values to the in-group norms of the consumers to establish a deep emotional brand-consumer relationship. Societal norms, representational systems, social tensions should be iteratively monitored as cultural norms and self-conceptualisation is seen as timely and reflexive.

Brands have an essential part in society as they can shape social identity through consumption. More specifically, advertisements use narratives that reinforce the socialised female body by asserting power via social norms, resulting in objectified female bodies as the vagina is seen as shameful and unclean. Hence, marketers take part in the construction and reconstruction of the consumer's self-concept, but also controversies in society. However, a shift occurred due to feminist movements that resulted in a more embodied experience for the female body whilst increasing agency and control. Nevertheless, patriarchal narratives are partially internalised, reinforcing the socialised body. Yet, if a narrative does not reflect in-group norms, the narratives are not internalised and therefore rejected for shaping the self-concept. Hence, stereotypical narratives might have little effect on progressive and feminist social groups who already reject these norms before consumption, showing some form of subjectivity. Yet, an evolution towards a new zeitgeist might change these views.

No matter the zeitgeist, consumers have demanded brands to become politically involved and strive for positive societal change. Depending on the issue targeted via advertising, a brand activist approach can be taken. But one must be aware of the risks.

The above-mentioned observations point out the interconnectedness of citizen-consumers self-concept, their social norms and the advertising practices created by marketers reflecting society. This shows the complicated system behind societal norms on which individuals base their perceptual judgements, which is a significant insight for this study and its analysis. It also shows that advertising is reactive to the demands of society, resulting in engagement of societal tensions pointing to the dynamics of commercialism.

Chapter 3 – Research Design

This chapter explains the chosen research design applied in conformity with the aim of this study. The study design and justification of the method are described to answer the research question of how young adults perceive brand activist advertisements on feminine hygiene. As of next, the data collection, including the sampling process, is described in detail. Then, operationalisation, including the concepts used in this study, conforms with the previous chapter's theoretical framework. The data analysis is explained by highlighting the different phases that allowed for in-depth analysis whilst following the coding framework. Lastly, the credibility of this chosen method is highlighted via a reliability and validity check.

3.1 Study Design and Justification of the Method

Following the purpose of this study, the method chosen is a qualitative approach employing in-depth interviews to acquire consumer perceptions. Morse (2003) explained that if only little is known about a phenomenon, a qualitative approach is required as more depth is created, which allows for a deeper analysis of the unknown, simply by assuming that more is more (Brennen, 2017). In essence, qualitative research searches for meaning and experiences within a given context to understand motives via the researcher's interpretation, a cultural frame based on constructivism (Brennen, 2017; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). By adopting a qualitative approach, experiences can be identified by comprehending myriad meanings made by individuals in a social sphere (Brennen, 2017).

Cultural Consumer Perceptions and In-depth Interviews

This study adopted a cultural approach to consumer perceptions via in-depth interviews. Morse (2003) explained that consumer perception could not be quantified, requiring a qualitative approach. Consequently, an in-depth understanding of consumers motives, attitudes and behaviours were gained (Barnham, 2015). By understanding what they think first, it can later be understood why consumers think and act in a particular way. However, whilst aiming to understand what consumers feel as part of their perceptions, preliminary understanding of 'how' they think was necessary, enabled via in-depth interviews.

Consequently, the task was to understand how the interviewees classify their perceptions by investigating how distinctions are made within experiences and between

phenomena (Barnham, 2015). The constructivist paradigm reflects human experiences and explores how consumers construct reality (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Essentially, their reality is socially constructed and interpretable in varying ways (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The above-mentioned cultural approach enabled to acquire a deeper understanding of the increasingly culturally complex market environments via consumer perceptions (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). The cultural approach to consumer research sees the marketplace and consumer perceptions as established via mutual cultural meanings created in a culturally constituted world through the marketplace (Johnson, 2011; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Hence, both consumers and marketers mutually construct cultural meaning. Within this cultural frame, social groups' practices and interactions are considered constructed through representation and power, contested, reproduced, changed, and negotiated over time.

Interviews were seen as the suitable research method considering that a large amount of data broadens knowledge and points out possible alternating views (Brennen, 2017). Varghese and Kumar (2020) noted insufficient knowledge about brand activism and feminist approaches in advertising, needing more rich data to understand consumer perceptions. The relevance of in-depth interviews lies in the possibility to dive into the inner worlds of respondents, including their feelings, experiences, values, and emotions about the phenomena at a given time (Brennen, 2017) while enabling prolonged discussion to retrieve mental facts (Barnham, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were adopted, guided by the theories and operationalisation, that allowed flexibility for the researcher to change the order of questions for a more natural conversation (Brennen, 2017). When more depth was needed on a specific topic to clarify, probing questions were used to explore the unexplored (Barnham, 2015; Levers, 2013).

In essence, for marketers to create added value, the marketplace rules need to be understood (Barnham, 2015). This methodological approach insides into whether the (political) brand activist approach of advertising creates added value to consumers by questioning consumers' perceptions and understanding how they frame their reality (Barnham, 2015). As careful considerations are key when targeting socio-political issues via advertising (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019), marketers have obtained helpful information by identifying consumer perceptions. These include the ideas of how value can be added, what cultural symbols should be included or left out, and what matches which type of consumers best (Barnham, 2015; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Ultimately, via interpretation of the phenomena at hand, the researcher made sense of the data obtained.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The data has been analysed via a reflexive thematic analysis. Here the patterns yielded were translated into themes deriving from the dataset that are perceived necessary to sketch the phenomenon (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This has complemented the research question by including consumer perceptions: reporting their views, experiences, and representations of the phenomena at hand. It is seen as a method that can both “reflect reality and unpick or unravel the surface of reality” (Braun & Clarke, 2006 p81). Both inductive and deductive approaches can be taken, depending on the nature of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021). It is reflexive as the researcher’s central position regarding the end product is recognised, viewing results as co-produced by the researcher and participant (Terry & Hayfield, 2020). Therefore, a reflection is included in the conclusions chapter to evaluate the factors that have shaped the outcomes, such as interests, experiences, values, and social location.

A theoretically driven (deductive) approach has been adopted for this study, meaning it is flexible in its approach and explicitly analyst driven. Hence, themes are partly determined a priori and echoed in the interview protocol (Terry et al., 2017). Consequently, the analytical strategies of contrasting, comparing, and identifying absences in previous theories were enabled. Essentially, this in-depth interview approach yielded rich, complex, but detailed data within a specific frame (see operationalisation), to which thematic analysis has been judged as the best method and is therefore employed (Guest et al., 2012).

Themes yielded as overarching patterns of the codes detected in the dataset. A code is considered reliable if it encompasses the richness and evidence of the matter at hand. Then, before interpreting, the codes were encoded into overarching themes that conceptualised shared meanings (patterns) carried by main organising concepts while uniting latent and implicit meanings (Guest et al., 2012; Terry & Hayfield, 2020). To ensure a solid methodological approach, the constructivist paradigm was taken where latent levels are incorporated to encompass human experiences (Levers, 2013). Reality is seen as co-constructed by the researcher and participant while recognising the subjectivity of both parties concerning the phenomena. Thus, the ideologies, underlying assumptions, and ideas are included and theorised in a socio-cultural context of the phenomena by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Essentially, the participants’ sense-making and subjective experiences were explored across the ‘full’ dataset. Thus, themes are seen as representations and meanings as part of the consumer’s perceptions within a socio-cultural frame, interpreted by the researcher, resulting in co-produced data analysis. The interpretive and analytic style

leads to these themes, which are “generated by the researcher through data engagement mediated by all they bring to this process” (Braun & Clarke, 2021 p.39).

Consequently, the researcher’s interpretation is subject to personal assumptions and social positioning besides scholarly knowledge. Lastly, reflexive thematic analysis is a reasonably approachable tool for new researchers, making it a well-suited fit for this study.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

This study includes in-depth interviews (N=10) that lasted 50-120 minutes, which is considered a sufficient sample for the purpose of this study (Terry et al., 2017). At first thirteen interviewees were confirmed, but three did not show up and could not be reached. Within the theoretical approach, the semi-structured interviews were guided by pre-established questions that concern the main concepts of this study, as highlighted in the operationalisation. Additionally, stimuli have been included (*Table 3.2*) to ask consumer perceptions about specific advertisements that are brand activist or seen as femvertising, depending on the consumer’s interpretive perceptions.

Sampling Process

Via maximum purposive sampling, this study included a sample with different backgrounds via pre-selecting criteria (Flick, 2007). Ultimately, as Sarkar and Kotler (2021) state, a more significant societal impact is reached by collaborating via numerous interconnect systems, stakeholder groups and countries. Only by analysing these interconnected systems, countries, and stakeholder groups (consumers), as mentioned above, insights will be gathered into how these ads are perceived in our complex society. Understanding different consumers’ perceptions enables marketers’ insights into how effective activist advertising can be performed strategically (Varghese & Kumar, 2020).

Consequently, the following criteria were adopted: (1) individual born in 1996-2015 (Gen-Z), (2) above 18 years old, (3) 8 female and 2 male sexes, (4) residing or have lived most of their life in Europe, (5) not studying at Erasmus University, (6) not personally connected to the researcher, to go beyond the researcher’s social capital. As part of maximum purposive sampling, the researcher has tried within the time limitations to include as many different backgrounds concerning the country of residence, age, and education to include varying cultural influences. Initially, Gen Z was chosen as a target sample as this generation is more conscious and political than millennials by driving the demand for societal change

(Sarkar & Kotler, 2021), besides being the new/future consumers of feminine hygiene products, millennials have already studied (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2020). However, due to ethical reasons towards minorities and psychological sense-making capabilities, only individuals as part of the Gen Z aged 18 and above are included. Additionally, the sampling process respected the LGBTQIA+ community, to not exclude participants based on their ‘sex’ (born in a female body who identify otherwise), by viewing ‘gender’ as a social construct within this study’s cultural frame that shares similarities (Levant et al., 2017; West & Zimmerman, 1987), and should therefore not be discriminated. Ultimately, all respondents have been reached via LinkedIn via the message posted by the researcher and shared by followers and connections.

The stimuli as part of the interview have been collected via the online platform of YouTube and the Video option of Google. To find the stimuli, keyword research was performed in line with the purpose and theoretical frame: female empowerment, feminine hygiene, advertisement, femvertising and brand activism. The stimuli have been reviewed to see if it fits the purpose of this study and see if different advertising strategies or forms were adopted. The first advertisement includes a sense of humour, namely irony and targets the male viewer. The second campaign is rather visual while using euphemisms for the vulva, such as fruits and art. The last one includes a more modern depiction of the vulva by adopting different views on what women can experience due to their vulva and throughout life. By having these various forms in storytelling, message and visualisation, the perception of authenticity of the message and feminist/political strategy to advertise the socio-cultural issue could be questioned and evaluated. Also, the attitude-behaviour gap was examined.

Stimuli	Campaign Name	Brand	Launch Date
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bpy75q2DDow	Bodyform Responds: The Truth	Bodyform UK (Libresse EU)	16 th of October, 2012
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0k-_4WIoY6Y	VIVA LA VULVA		23 rd of November, 2018
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZoFqIxlbk0	Bodyform: #wombstories		1 st of July, 2020

Table 3.2 Interview Stimuli

Interview Process

The interviews were semi-structured and guided via an interview protocol (Appendix A). As mentioned in the justification section, this type of interviewing allows for more natural conversation and probing questions to clarify topics that remained vague or needed clarification for the researcher's understanding (Levers, 2013). The protocol that guided this interview included concepts in line with the theoretical frame and operationalization that were sectioned as follows: (1) background information (2) generational identification, (3) body identification, socialized body, and social norms, (4) branding perceptions and attitude-behaviour gap, and (5) stimuli with brand advertising strategy perceptions.

Before the start, the informed consent would be confirmed, including confidentiality, and requesting approval for audiotaping to enable verbatim transcriptions, ensuring reliability (Brennen, 2017). For ethical concerns, it was highlighted that the interviewees could interrupt or stop the conversation at any point and were not obliged to answer questions against their will. Concerning the privacy of the tapes, the recordings have been saved in a private cloud until the study has been finalized and reviewed (Johnson, 2011) and afterwards deleted for privacy reasons.

Starting off the interview, the researcher first established rapport before proceeding with the questions, which required interpersonal skills to win the respondents' trust and create an open setting for a deeper conversation (Flick, 2016). Whilst being flexible, the question sequence was ordered by concepts incorporated to keep the respondent focused and only move on if the perception was clear or saturation occurred. In later interviews, some topics resulted in more profound probing questions through the iterative nature of interviewing as the researcher was familiarised with themes (Johnson, 2011; Brennen, 2017). As confirmed by Owen and Chandler (2011), researchers should enable responsiveness and fluidity to ensure the outcomes will not be constrained or inhibited, meaning researchers need to adapt to the situations. After the questions were finalized, the respondent could add comments if they wanted to include something noteworthy that was not questioned or clarified throughout the interview. Finally, the respondents were thanked and asked if they wish to receive the results or complete the study after it is finalized and reviewed.

Considering the global covid-19 pandemic currently ongoing, face-to-face interviews were not allowed by the Dutch government's guidelines. Since the sample included respondents in many different countries, Zoom was used to conduct the interviews, allowing for all interviews' same processes and settings while enabling screen sharing to showcase the stimuli—this mitigated distance and travel issues. Ensuring a natural environment and

establishing a virtual connection, the respondents were requested to turn on the video if they approved. Since this can be seen as a virtual face-to-face setting, the ways of talking by both the delivery and context of expressions can be understood (Flick, 2017). Lastly, the transcription software of Otter.AI has been utilized during the interviews to audiotape the conversations while later transcribing via their cloud service.

3.3 Operationalisation

This study was operationalized by utilizing a framework that guided the process (*Figure 3.3*). In essence, thematic analysis is criticized and celebrated for its flexibility. However, to mitigate the limitations of clear and concise guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a framework has been introduced that safeguards the scope and aim of this study, namely discovering consumer perceptions on brand activist practices concerning feminine hygiene. The concepts aimed to answer the research question transparently and concisely: self-identity (and body identification), social norms, branding perceptions, brand activist advertising perceptions, and attitude behaviour gap. Additionally, the sociology of critique by Hove (2020) has been included to analyse moral judgements as part of consumer perceptions enabling the understanding of how sense is made of their world while identifying moral priorities used to justify media practices. This provides the researcher with a theoretically founded framework for rather complex analysis by having clarity and precision in the analysis process.

To explain the framework, first, the relevance of incorporating the sociology of critique and its characteristics had to be explored. Hove (2020) states that media practices can establish relationships (referred to as a coherent association) by serving a specific social purpose in a particular way, which is, in this case, the topic of feminine hygiene. If this act is perceived as unwanted, harmful, or intrusive to the consumer (a misalignment to values held by consumers), an imperative arises that the consumer either tends to justify or criticize, depending on what moral priority is taken. The author clarifies that this process is perceived to be a response to social demand. Ultimately, the interactive procedures facing this imperative can be explained by utilizing the sociology of critique and its justification model. The moral judgement occurring in a social situation (coherent association) includes two parts: (1) moral principle prioritized in the context where the imperative occurs, (2) how this moral principle should be applied. Ultimately, the moment where moral judgements are made

aiming to preserve something that is perceived to be morally good or should foresee unfavourable changes refers to the normative theory.

In essence, the justification model of the sociology of critique has been based on a set of requirements that individuals expect their justifications to satisfy (Hove, 2002). The model focuses on three aspects taken from the study by Boltanski and Thévenot, adopted by Hove (2020): (1) a higher common good transcending personal interest, (2) a universal capacity to achieve that good by having agreement on what the higher common good (state of ‘worth’) is that will be ranked to moral priorities based on personal values, (3) and a formula for evaluating such achievements by knowing how much self-fulfilling prophecy needs to be rejected to reach the higher common good. The degree of sacrificing your self-fulfilling purpose for the sake of the common good reflects the degree to which you are seen as ‘worthy’.

Consequently, whilst evaluating these requirements, two divisive issues occur: (1) a disagreement about moral priority, (2) a dispute about the formula of evaluation while acknowledging the higher common good. By identifying these divisive issues through justification, the model helps to identify their “social origins of contradictions that we might otherwise assume to be logical or theoretical in nature” (Hove, 2020 p11). As highlighted by Hove (2020), different scholars have recognized that the sociology of critique can serve media and communication research to analyse the variety of disputing issues within a moral debate and is therefore considered a justified approach for this study.

Applying the sociology of critique to this study concerning consumer perspectives in evaluating branding and brand activist perceptions is framed. The higher common good serves the socio-political matter of feminine hygiene whilst sacrificing the self-fulfilling prophecy of solely focussing on the triple bottom line to maximize profit. In doing so, a company can become ‘worthy’ if this is morally prioritized over other aspects by consumers seeing that the (1) company serves a higher common good, (2) there is the universal capacity to achieve that good and (3) the company is believed to suffer enough to reach the higher common good (Hove, 2020).

Ultimately, the theory-driven approach forces the included concepts (*Table 3.3*) within the cultural paradigm to encompass the phenomena to be able to question consumer perceptions whilst incorporating the moral justification as part of their perceptions.

Additionally, the attitude behaviour gap has been added to analyse the effectiveness of the advertising by evaluating whether both attitudes and behaviour were favourable to

understand the advertising strategy’s efficacy. Consequently, the model has been developed as follows, guided by the below-mentioned definitions of the included concepts.

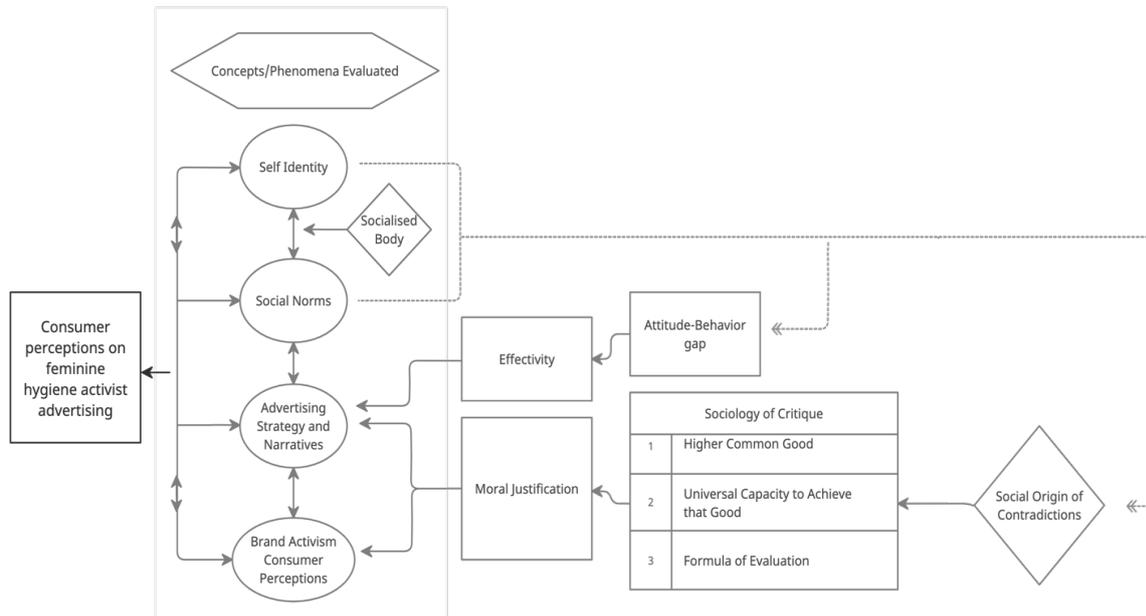


Figure 3.3 Operationalisation framework

Concept	Definition
Social Identity	Individual’s’ self-concept as part of a social group within society in a given time. It is a reflexive, dynamic and ongoing process, that is shaped through self-selected cultural representational images (Downey & Catterall, 2006; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).
Social Norms	Individual’s informal understandings and rules that guide people’s behaviour in a widely accepted, popular and ideological manner within a culture (Bicchieri et al., 2018; Park & Smith, 2007; Rodgers & Thorson, 2017).
Socialised Body	Is shaped by being exposed to social communication and attention throughout life, resulting in objectification and stereotyping (Booth, 2016; Kissling, 1996; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995).

Table 3.3 Concepts operationalisation

3.4 Analysis Framework and Process

Following this study's aim, the transcripts have been analysed employing reflexive thematic analysis. Because the researcher's interpretations guided the research through latent levels, it was necessary to re-read and repeatedly reflect as part of the iterative nature of this method to safeguard unbiased outcomes and capture the bigger picture (Braun & Clarke,

2006; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Additionally, a justified theoretical (deductive) approach has guided the interpretation to foster reliability while enabling flexibility to acquire a rich and complex dataset with sophisticated detail as part of the constructivist approach (Guest et al., 2012; Levers, 2013). The iterative aspect of thematic analysis has resulted in analysing relationships within and between codes that have given explanatory power, complexity and sophistication to all themes and codes derived from the entire dataset.

The analysis has been thoroughly conducted via the software Atlas.ti provided by Erasmus University, as it allows for transparent overviews of the results (Lewis, 1998) and allows for the flexible but structured and iterative analysis (Woolf, 2014). The thematic analysis was conducted via word searching (counting words), which was coloured and grouped to find patterns and create meaning, facilitated by the software's features. Ultimately, a structured and transparent analysis has been realized by the utilization of this software.

Thematic Analysis Steps

Taking the constructivist theory-driven approach to thematic analysis within a cultural frame, Braun & Clarke's (2006) widely used six-step approach was taken as a guideline while reviewing the checklist visualized by Terry et al. (2017) to increase credibility results. First, the researcher got familiar with the dataset while transcribing, where initial notes were made. Second, initial codes have been generated within the software of Atlas.ti that was open and inclusive. Third, the initial codes were reviewed multiple times, transformed, assessed, and formed into potential themes (code grouping) and sub-themes (colour coded) concerning the concepts and operationalization framework. To ensure coding reliability, a coding scheme (Appendix B) was made for a systematic application, where only codes that occurred in at least two of the interviews were translated into themes, indicating relevance. Fourth, the themes were reviewed by checking if they could be applied to individual codes and the entire dataset whilst establishing the first thematic map. Again, this stage is evaluated with the operationalization framework. Fifth, themes were finally assigned a name to be described academically later as part of the results and discussion within this. Only here the name was included to limit the narrow mindedness of the researcher in earlier stages. Sixth, conforming with the theory-driven deductive nature, a report was written per theme where a complete analysis encompassed the relation of the themes and concepts of the operationalization to interpret the results. Code frequencies and the coding scheme have been included to display

the nature of the dataset obtained and highlight the researcher's interpretations clearly and concisely (Guest et al., 2012).

3.5 Credibility

Methodological rigour should be at the foundation of a study to acquire meaningful and trustworthy results via a credible analysis to be transferable (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Whilst aligning the complete methodological approach to the cultural frame adopted in this study in a theory-driven manner, this study is perceived to be focussed, well contextualized, and justified. To be transparent and credible, all the codes have been defined to highlight the angles taken while transparently showing the interpretations and angle of each code, resulting in replicability (Silverman, 2011). By recognizing the reliability concerns of thematic analysis and its flexibility (Guest et al., 2012), the researcher has reflected on her backgrounds and personal stance regarding this phenomenon to point out factors that have possibly shaped the outcomes (Brennen, 2017; Terry & Hayfield, 2020). Lastly, to foster credibility via methodological rigour and trustworthiness, methodological triangulation was enabled by including stimuli in the in-depth interviews to have both questions and visuals as part of the data collection phase (Guba, 1981). Due to time constraints, member checks could not be performed, but the results will be shared with the respondents who indicated interest.

3.6 Research Design in Short

Through in-depth interviews (N=10), reflexive thematic analysis enabled a deep analysis exploring consumer perceptions about a phenomenon to which little was known. Maximum purposive sampling outside of the researcher's social capital yielded unbiased respondents. A clear research focus, interpretive direction, and approach were indicated via the cultural frame, operationalization, and theory-driven process. Hence, credible analysis and systematic coding through Atlas.ti resulted in trustworthy results answering the research question. At the end of this study, the researcher has reflected upon her role and stance, acknowledging the co-creation of the results as part of the cultural and reflexive approach taken.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter explores the results obtained via in-depth interviews with young adults. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis in a theory-driven manner, six overarching themes surfaced via all analysed codes (N=66) assigned to one of these themes. To structure the results to create clarity, sub-themes (N=18) were created (see appendix B).

The six main themes are discussed in line with the interview layout and the operationalisation framework. They are as follows: 'Social Female Identity', 'Socialised Female Body', 'Young Adult's Views on Menstruation', 'Societal Progress of Embracing Menstruation', 'Young Adult's Brand Positioning', and 'Perception on Advertising Practices'. Each theme is explored within a subsection in this chapter, where the main findings and relevant codes are explained and interpreted. Hence, at some points, quotes of interviews are included to enhance the discussion and justify interpretations of the results concerning the theoretical and operational framework adopted in this study. For the last theme of advertising practices, the stimuli were used to acquire consumer perceptions making the codes related to the chosen campaigns being thought provocative but not generalisable.

4.1 Social Female Identity

This section explores the findings and theory on the patterns that have surfaced when talking to young adults about their female social identity, or how the males view female's identity perceptions. Among the patterns, the sub-themes of characteristics, influential factors, and generational identification yielded (*Table 4.1*). Because literature sees social identity construction as reflexive, dynamic and an ongoing process, it must be emphasised that these identities are situational and subject to change. Adopting a theoretically driven approach, this section is guided by the belief that one's self-concept as part of a social group (in-group) reflects representational images as part of society.

Theme		
Social Female Identity		
Sub-theme	Code	Code explanation
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open minded • Passionate • Pride • Insecurity 	<p>Being tolerant to differences without judgement or prejudice and accepting or considering new ideas or opinions new or different to personal views/practices</p> <p>Having strong feelings and emotions about something</p> <p>Sense of pride about oneself resulting in the embracing themselves and their body</p> <p>Experience of insecurities regarding oneself/body (e.g. uncomfortable being naked)</p>
Influential factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body identification • Social group • Transitional age • Global interconnectedness 	<p>The way in which women feel about their body (e.g. confident, insecure)</p> <p>The in-group norms and values adopted</p> <p>The transitional moment between puberty and adolescence where views and feelings about oneself changes from insecure to more embodied and confident</p> <p>The thought that travelling and intercultural society shape social identification and norms</p>
Generational identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gen Z ingroup • Gen Z outgroup • Intergenerational • Distancing from elderly 	<p>Identifying oneself as Gen Z</p> <p>Distancing from Gen Z, indicating there is no identification within this generation</p> <p>Having internalised norms of multiple generations, being unable to identify as part of 'one' generation</p> <p>Showing a distance to the perceived norms of older generations than Gen-Z or Millennials</p>

Table 4.1 Theme 1: sub-themes, codes, and code explanation

First, as part of the first sub-theme ‘characteristics’, the most prominent code as part of this sub-theme was ‘open-mindedness’(N=51) of respondents. Overall, respondents believe that they are tolerating differences within society such as sexual orientation, gender identification, religion, their own body, and menstruation. Supported by the theory in chapter 2, younger generations are perceived to be more open-minded. Also, most of the respondents agreed upon this theory: *“I think if we compared to our parents or even like cousins who are, you know, a few years older. I feel like we are so open minded, (...). And I feel like we are from such different backgrounds, not only ethnicity wise, also sexuality wise, religious wise. I think having so many different influences is what makes us so different”* (respondent 9).

Here the Gen Z ingroup (N=24) identification, as part of sub-theme 3, is visible where the respondent distances from older generations (N=5), pointing out they are less open-minded. One recurring factor that seems to influence the open-mindedness of respondents and distancing themselves from older generations is growing up in a digital environment (N=9) next to the global interconnectedness between cultures (N=4). Even though the digital environment is part of another theme, it is related to this theme as well. Also, quite a few respondents agreed with the statement that Gen Z is the most diverse and multicultural generation so far. As stated by an in-group member: *“I think I might say that, mostly because I think Generation Z travels more than generations before us did, and due to all the social media and internet that is now worldwide...We actually get to have more contact with different cultures, ... different people from different countries”* (Respondent 3).

However, some respondents were more sceptical about the open-mindedness of youngsters compared to older generations, stating: *“This is a very case by case thing for me. I would say in the traditional topics that we may be addressing today's interview, yes. And in many other topics, no”* (Respondent 1). It seemed that defining one’s social identity according to a generation was not adequate for many respondents as generations cannot be simplified. They emphasised that they do not identify fully with one generation, making that a case-by-case thing on the topics at hand. Even though all respondents were within the age category of Gen Z, some claimed to align more with millennials. This resulted in the intergenerational (N=8) code where participants indicated to have adopted/being influenced by other generations and even in-group with them.

Being passionate (N=8), however, is something that they all were ‘passionate’ about. Mostly, it was said that young generations demand actions and are willing to go further than older generations. Nonetheless, it was also argued that other generations had their own protest when they were younger (e.g., hippies in the 80s). Even though many respondents realised that others argued that today the movements and passion is stronger and more demanding, confirming Gen Z as the most passionate generation so far. Finally, also here the intergenerational element surfaced, again saying it is a case-by-case and personal thing: *“I think everyone's different, so some would prefer actions, and some are just all about words”* (respondent 3).

When interpreting these results, it has become clear that distinguishing based on a generation is challenging. Mere simplification of a generation as done by scholars seems non-operational, resulting in the need for nuance viewing young adults as intergenerational as they adopt norms beyond one’s generation by being exposed to them while in-grouping them. Intergenerational in-grouping occurs stronger amongst older respondents being closer to the millennial age category, while less strongly identifying as Gen Z, creating a thin generational border. However, when talking about more traditional topics such as accepting any sexual orientation, it was agreed that younger generations are more open-minded and passionate while distancing themselves from the elderly. Consequently, it is interpreted that older generations reinforce stigmas, whereas younger generations try to break stigma via movements by initiating, reconstructing, and adopting new norms and narratives through sub-cultural standards. This is done via reflexivity resulting in more open mindedness. Since many respondents also identified themselves as passionate and said they embrace themselves for who they are, including their flaws, younger generations possibly foster societal change

regarding the female body by taking agency and control over their own bodies, as pointed out by the theory. Therefore, the current paradigm of marketers and consumers also reflects within society through elderly and young adults.

4.2 Today’s Socialised Female Body

Conforming with the theory, a division has been found within the interviews of historical and new characteristics of the socialised female body. Consequently, the sub-themes derived as part of the analysis are ‘embodied experience’, ‘historical socialised body’, ‘enforcer’ within the theme of the socialised female body.

Theme		
Today’s Socialised Female Body		
Sub-theme	Code	Code explanation
Embodied experience	• Agency	Women’s body individuality and ownership
	• Body positivity	The movement of being positive about one’s body neglecting societal standards
	• Empowerment	Feeling empowered in their own body, while embracing the feminine body
Historical socialised body	• Pollutant/defective	The label of aesthetical defective and unhygienic of the female body
	• Stereotyping	Stereotypical labels of the female body, mostly by men
	• Objectification	Objectifying the female body through historical narratives of the socialised body
Enforcer	• Digital environment	The role of social media and the internet in socialising the female body

Table 4.2 Theme 2: sub-themes, codes, and code explanation

The former refers to codes as empowerment (N=30), body positivity (N=16), and agency (N= 9). A male perspective about females acknowledges the existence of the ‘new’ socialised body by stating: *“they're not ashamed. Body positivity is something that is very much out there, that people are very open. And there have been clear movements that have allowed women to (...) achieve a step closer to what one would perhaps call body equality”* (respondent 1). This quote conforms with the theory indicating that feminist movements have enabled women to become more positive. Conforming to this male perspective, all women stated that they feel well in their bodies.

However, the historical socialised body that includes stereotyping (N=7), the objectification (N=4) of women and views the female body as aesthetically defective/unhygienic (N=16) when menstruating, is still present to some degree amongst these young adults (see section 4.4). All respondents, including males, hinted that men are

responsible for stereotyping women for their menstrual behaviour. It was noteworthy that both male respondents indicated that they are not guilty of stereotyping women but do notice the guilt of out-groups on this matter.

The main pattern surfaced to be responsible for enforcing the historically socialised female body is the digital environment (N=8). Even though it is perceived to be a good thing regarding open-mindedness, as mentioned in the previous section, it is seen as rather negative in relation to the female body. One respondent clarified that social media could have adverse effects on females *“because of the social media, that I think many women are influenced by that, and that it decreases self-confidence, what we got due to that bodies”* (respondent 2). What is interesting here is to see that first, the respondent does not identify with feeling less well in her body compared to older generations by saying *“they”*. However, later, she indicates that *“we got”* less self-confidence, referring to an in-group feeling about self-confidence issues in the past. This possibly points to the transitional moment referred to by many respondents where one becomes more confident and starts to embrace all aspects of the body when growing up. One male explained it as follows: *“I think there might be like a transition you know moment, where you at first, you're not really confident with these new with your new body because your body changes at some point in your life”* (respondent 7). Many women said something similar, indicating to be more insecure in puberty and starting to feel well later when becoming more comfortable in their 'new' body.

With respect to the personal body identification, the patterns showed a sense of being proud and embracing (N=16) one's own body and highlighted overall body well-being (N=6), conforming to the theory. Yet, in line with the above-mentioned self-confidence issues usually experienced before the transitional moment, there is a sense of insecurity (N=4), but this remained very limited and was only detected with women at a younger age, possibly closer to the transitional moment.

When reviewing these results, it shows that even though younger generations perceive to have agency over their own body, embrace it as it is and feel well in their own body, the historical socialized body is still present to some degree among out-groups including elderly and youngsters before the transitional moment. Few respondents still hold some of the patriarchal narratives as part of their body identification, but they are not prevalent as the new socialised body outshines these narratives, pointing to a shift amongst young adults.

4.3 Young Adult's Views on Menstruation

The results regarding views on menstruation pointed out that it is still a two-sided phenomenon. Consequently, two sub-categories of on the one hand 'embracing' menstruation amongst women and on the other hand the 'negative' aspect that still surround the topic today (Table 4.3). The somewhat positive side of embracing menstruation includes the codes of menstrual side effects (N=26), viewing menstruation as natural (N=25) and asking for normalisation (N=13). Whereas the negative side includes the view on menstruation as a 'silenced/hidden' (N=20) topic, where there is a 'male distance/unawareness' (N=20), it is seen as 'dirty' (N=10), and there is a 'stigmatised' (N=19) feeling around the topic.

Theme		
Young Adult's View on Menstruation		
Sub-theme	Code	Code explanation
Embrace	• Normalise	To make menstruation normal, opening up the topic and making it an accepted matter in society
	• Menstrual (side) effects	Experiences surrounding menstruation including hormonal changes, aches and bloating
	• Natural	Viewing menstruation as something natural to the female body
Negativity	• Hidden/silenced	Menstruation is perceived to be a hidden or silenced topic by someone or by society
	• Male distance/unawareness	Men (are perceived) distance themselves from menstruation while being unaware of aspects involved in menstruation
	• Dirty	The viewing of menstruation (blood) as something dirty or unhygienic
	• Stigma	Disapproval/unfavorable position in society about menstruation
	• Blood shaming	Experience of shame for blood stains or the hygiene of blood
	• Menstrual shame	Men enforcing shame on girls making menstruation a taboo topic
	• Private	The indication or feeling of viewing the female body and menstruation as a private matter
	• Controversial	The experience of controversies surrounding menstruation and other aspects of the female body
• Unfair	Finding it unfair that women have to deal with menstruation and pregnancy as men do not	

Table 4.3 Theme 3: sub-themes, codes, and code explanation

The experience of menstruation of women is overall something that is part of life, stating it is something natural. Some embrace it more than others. Usually, this seems to depend on the experienced side effects and how strong the body aches are when menstruating. Respondent 9 states that: *"I have like a love hate relationship with it"*, elaborating that: *"I think, not just the menstruation itself but also the days before and the days after really do influence I think my state of mind like how I feel like my body or. So I would say that part of me really dislikes that week, when it comes around. But on the other hand I just look at it like you know this is part of who we are"*. This clearly shows how this respondent struggles between seeing it as natural and part of herself while acknowledging it to be a bad and painful experience while continuing her daily tasks. Even though the

experience is worse for some than for others, there is major support for the normalisation of menstruation amongst the respondents, viewing it would be beneficial for women and young girls: *“I think, because (...) everybody has it. And it's such a normal thing. Everybody goes through it and it would be better if everybody shared how they experience it”* (Respondent 5). As suggested by this respondent, opening the talk about menstruation by normalising the subject by being aware of different stories is a good idea.

One of the reasons why men mostly experience menstruation as a hidden or silenced (N=20) topic, is that women experience a sense of shame, especially regarding blood or hygiene., respondent 3 states *“I would not really want to leak through”*, and about the latter: *“I think it has to do with some kind of shame, you've got, because many people do find it unhygienic...”* (respondent 3, Female). This sense of shame (N=13) and viewing menstruation as dirty (N=19) is perceived to be fostered mainly by men, not women. A male respondent states: *“Men talk about it in a way that they almost look down on it and where most of the time, although I do find that more people are forward thinking (...). Obviously, people coming out of adolescence and puberty see this as a more of ... let's say, repelling topic, something they don't want to necessarily speak about. And I find the older you get, the less you have an issue”* (respondent 1). Even though it is claimed to be an age thing and the respondent might hint at the transitional moment, some women experience this otherwise. Some respondents stated that older generations view this as a more controversial topic. In contrast, others agree that the older you get, the more normal you would view this as you get used to menstruation via your partner. Yet, even with male siblings or fathers, issues are experienced. One respondent who claimed to be grown up in a liberal household said: *“I think my dad would find it a bit uncomfortable”* and *“I think my girlfriends, we're pretty much on the same page... um... and my sisters as well. My mom too but when it comes to boys and men, (...) it's very different. I feel like they really view it as something dirty”* (respondent 2). The male perception of viewing menstruation as dirty is possibly historically shaped when viewing the theory on this subject. However, since respondents also expressed it is a hidden subject to men, they might be unaware of what menstruation is about.

The unawareness regarding menstruation and male distance (N=20) towards the topic is perceived to be an issue amongst women. They experience the imperative of wanting to open about what menstruation entails to enable a better understanding of what women go through, but also have encountered moments where men shame or silence them when opening up: *“even mentioning it is like, I don't want to talk about it (...). Yeah, they think it's*

gross” (respondent 10). Women have expressed that they understand and know that men cannot relate to menstrual side effects, but would like their understanding “*Well, I think there still is a very different perception that men have towards menstruation and women and I think it would be good if that perception, would be a bit more similar doesn't have to be the same because we cannot... can ever have the same perception. But as I said, I feel like men think about it as being much more dirty or something like that*” (respondent 2). Clearly, there is a gap between attitudes and perceptions on menstruation between males and females when looking at the responses in the interviews. Nonetheless, the male respondents themselves claim to have different views, but do notice distance/unawareness in their surroundings.

The stigma (N=19) around this topic does not seem to be as present amongst the respondents anymore as they all view menstruation as natural, and yet the code stigma as part of negative menstrual associations was quite prevalent. Usually this was in line with the stereotyping of women when having their period as explained in the previous section of the socialised body (chapter 4.2). Additionally, at a younger age many women felt that there was a stigma around the purchasing of menstrual products. “*I think back then, it felt it did feel a little bit for me like a stigma or something, You know, everybody does it but you didn't really talk about it. Yeah, but that changed I think because of getting older and times change*” (participant 8). However, some still experience the stigma today and compare it to buying condoms: “*I just get myself pads, put it in my basket and still look around and just see like, Alright, is there somebody near me, especially a male. I don't know but I just had that feeling of oh gosh I gotta hide it like with my other products. (...) it's almost the same as like, as a female buying condoms, (...), you feel embarrassed doing it*” (respondent 9). Noticing that buying tampons fall for some women in the same category as condoms, it might be a private matter since respondent 9 also states she does not want people to see what she buys.

Conforming with this observation, males have indicated that they do not dare to just start about menstruation, seeing it as a private (N=9) matter to women, meaning they do not want to start the conversation: “*I mean, it's this is something that's in your body, right. And I think I think, because bodies are so stigmatized, and because there's so much, so much talk about how and what our bodies should be. And there's so much talk about that being your choice, and these topics in these trends, these ideas that have manifest themselves in society, that makes me realize that there's some topics that I shouldn't necessarily, and this is my opinion, and my opinion here aligned with society, (...) that I shouldn't necessarily be pushing those topics. So, I would not be I would not be asking a woman about her cycle out*”

of the blue. But if it's someone that we want to talk about it, I'm there to listen still" (respondent 1). When asked whether the topic is also uncomfortable to talk about, both men claimed they do not mind talking about it, but it depends on the setting and the person. A friend would not be an issue, but at work or talking excessively would be off.

When putting these results together, it has been noted that women feel like they cannot talk to men, thinking there is a male stigma surrounding the topic. In contrast, males believe it is a hidden and private topic by women, making them avoid the issue unless they start about it themselves. This results in males distancing from the case, enhancing the attitude gap between genders towards menstruation. Therefore, women perceive the stigma to be reinforced by men due to bad experiences of being shamed and seen as dirty. However, in essence, both males and females notice the stereotyping of women by out-groups.

4.4 Societal Progress of Embracing Menstruation

This theme concerns the different characteristics that surfaced in conversation with young adults regarding societal progress on menstruation. As seen in the previous section, the taboo surrounding menstruation seems not to be as present amongst the respondents, but a sense of stigmatisation, stereotyping, and silence still surrounds the topic. Therefore, to drive societal progress in accepting menstruation as natural by both females and males, a societal shift is needed. To do so, three sub-themes surfaced of ‘responsible parties’, ‘drivers’ that can foster societal progress, and ‘retainers’ that hold back societal progress.

Theme		
Societal Progress of Embracing Menstruation		
Sub-theme	Code	Code explanation
Responsible parties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents • Consumers • Company 	<p>Parents perceived responsibility of (re)inforcing societal matters/stigmas on their children</p> <p>Consumer’s responsibility to buy ethically/socially</p> <p>Company’s responsibility towards society while practicing what they preach</p>
Drivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness • Societal shift • Commitment to change 	<p>Awareness of others and different opinions and interests within society, across borders and cultures</p> <p>Shifts occurring in societal norms to a gradually more forward thinking society</p> <p>People are committed to change by seeking action beyond words/statements</p>
Retainers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social pressure • Societal norms 	<p>Societal or peer pressure to conform with societal norms</p> <p>The perceived societal norms in place according to the respondents</p>

Table 4.4 Theme 4: sub-themes, codes, and code explanation

The results show that multiple parties should get involved to foster societal change towards a shame-free, tolerant, and non-stigmatized menstrual experience for women. First, some respondents noted that the stigmatisation starts with parents who partially make menstruation a big deal to their teenagers, stating that parents have responsibility (N=2) towards normalising menstruation. Besides that, some perceive companies to have some responsibility (N=7) as well, especially if the company holds larger brands with an extensive reach that can be used as a platform to foster change. Noteworthy, many did not find that brands have the responsibility of taking a political stance before watching the stimuli but (subconsciously) changed their mind afterwards. *“Yes, a little bit. Yes, I mean, they're, they're a big company. And (...) way they communicate about our product and menstruation has a big impact on society, I think, on how people view menstruation, so I do think that they have some sort of responsibility (...) to make that more acceptable”* (respondent 2). Some also indicated that they support this as the brand targets a matter aligned to their products. Additionally, it has been said that consumers can help and should be responsible (N=7). Regarding how they buy and from who they buy, consumers can also cancel brands that go against their values, demand specific standards, and protest to raise awareness. When asking about awareness creation via protesting, one respondent who first showed scepticism pointing to being woke while expanded by saying: *“I think that that's exactly what protesting is for I think that's useful”* (respondent 7). As some respondents perceive those social issues are out of their hands due to a lack of power, massive protests are still viewed as successful for raising awareness on what is important to citizens.

The drivers yielded for societal change included awareness (N=10). One respondent indicated that being aware goes hand in hand with being involved in social change by stating, *“I think so, yes, I think...I think people my age were aware of the societal issues at the moment so climate change. The gay community, and the problems that they're facing discrimination, and also feminism. Those things are really, I think (...) Gen Z people are very active with those things. So yes, I think (...) we're more involved in those topics, than older generations are”* (respondent 2). Here it becomes clear that younger generations are more aware of societal issues that seem important to them, needing older generations to join to enable more meaningful change. However, as the theory points out, issues are subjective meaning older generations might know about the issue but do not perceive it as an issue.

Also, commitment to change (N=18) is required to push for a more progressive society. It has been perceived that former generations did not act as much on societal issues

compared to today's young adults. Yet, some others do think that protesting and striving for change is part of any generation, but each generation picks its fight. Nonetheless, females are half of this planet's population, and respondents indicated that males should become involved to shift to normalising menstruation. A societal shift (N=4) is needed. If you ask some respondents, it has already started: *“Also, the body image has shifted in a way where, for example, specifically with women curves have become much more accepted. Curves have become desirable. And this is where the status quo has changed”* (respondent 1).

Some aspects are still in the way and will always be in the way of societal shifts as social norms are in place that set the terms of desired and frameworks to judge undesired behaviour establishing guiding societal standards, as mentioned within the theory. According to the results, the retainers for societal change are societal norms (N=9) and social pressure (N=3). As the theory explained, these guide people's behaviour in a certain accepted and desired way. One respondent also notices this, stating it withholds the progress of a societal shift. The respondent indicated that *“sometimes people feel a little bit pressured”* (respondent 6). This showcases how certain social norms within particular social groups pressure people in one way or another. Therefore, the stronger the in-group norms in a certain direction, the more peer pressure is experienced amongst the social group members.

In sum, it shows that the respondents all support societal change towards accepting menstruation as something natural and want it to be normalised by both men and women. But to do so, companies, parents and consumers should take their responsibility. Awareness and commitment to change by these groups is needed for a societal shift that already has started with adopting a newer version of a socialised female body. Even though social pressure and societal norms promote behaviour, these young adults have shown that they are ready for other generations, especially males, to follow the social standards that guide their morality of open-mindedness and acceptance.

4.5 Young Adult's Brand Positioning

In line with the operationalization, the attitude-behaviour gap was part of the analysis. As seen with the theory on ethical consumptions, sometimes consumers state that they have the intention or attitude of buying consciously, whereas their behaviour approves differently due to multiple factors such as budget, convenience and trying to be a good citizen. Consequently, to analyse consumers positioning towards brands who become politically involved, the sub-themes of 'attitude' and 'behaviour' were established, guiding the coding

directions in a theory-driven manner (Table 4.5). These codes include the last two parts of the interview, meaning they can also be in relation to the stimuli shown as part of the interview.

Theme		
Young Adult's Brand Positioning		
Sub-theme	Code	Code explanation
Attitude	• Positive attitude to political brands	Supporting the stance the brand takes and its advertising
	• Prefer/prioritise brands	The practice of preferring one brand over another by agreeing on their statement/practice, viewing the company as worthy, willing to take extra steps (monetary)
	• Menstrual product price	Stressing how expensive menstrual products are resulting in buying the cheapest option
	• Mistrust organisational good-will	Being sceptic about the organisations or managers goodwill beyond the triple bottom line, viewing marketing solely as a commercial strategy to sell products
	• Share friends	Sharing/informing friends about the commercial while supporting its narratives or viewing it as educational
Behaviour	• Purchase behavior	Purchase behaviour of menstrual products
	• Cancel culture	The boycotting or withdrawing of support for brands or persons who practice or state things one objects to or perceives to be offensive

Table 4.5 Theme 5: sub-themes, codes, and code explanation

The attitudes that yielded from the dataset have shown that there is a paradox where consumers want to support causes that they consider as worthy and morally good whereas they also face justification processes that become interrupted by mistrusting brands and companies. The attitude of mistrusting companies aligns with the prediction by Holt (2002) that marketers cannot hide their commercial motivations anymore as consumers know all type of advertising is commercially motivated. On the other hand, the behavioural patterns yielded, showed the existence of cancel cultures and highlighted different purchase behaviours. Yet, as the behaviour is not observed but questioned, it must be emphasized that the results are a product of the respondents who are subject to moral justification influenced by factors founding their social contradictions when answering questions (see operationalisation).

First, on the positive side of the attitudes yielded are the codes of positive attitudes to political brands (N=22), preferring brands (N=3) over others, and sharing activist advertisements with friends (N=4). *“I would only buy Libresse anyway because they are the best. But yes, brands who engage their audience and who you know, do all these cool bold stuff usually will get my attention more and I will consider them more when I go looking for their product”* (respondent 5). This quote comes from a respondent who also considers herself as more progressive and has shown a positive attitude towards political brands. Nonetheless, she also indicates that engaging in politics is a risky move and requires

knowledge while having a match between the issue and the industry or product. Many other respondents indicated a similar attitude towards political brands. Even though many support the narratives used by Libresse as part of their advertisements, they mostly would not share it with others. Only a few would share it with friends who are part of their social group and therefore like-minded, meaning they avoid contrary opinions on this topic. Therefore, it seems that the attitude and behaviour gap is smallest if the brand is in-grouped by a consumer.

Secondly, the negative side includes the code of mistrusting organizational goodwill (N=7) where scepticism on the companies' motives occurs as respondents associate advertising with profit and self-fulfilling commercial prophecy. When using the sociology of critique as part of the operationalization of the analysis, the mistrust indicates that the company does not pass the three steps, making the company not 'worthy'. One respondent showcase this where there was no intention to buy from Libresse after these ads even though she supports the narratives *"I mean, if I was actually gonna take a stance and (...) choose a brand to purchase from. It wouldn't just help to be like, Oh, they had a feminist commercial. Then I have to like actually sit down and again see who's behind all of this, who is actually earning my money. You know if the company is rich enough they can hire whoever marketing person who is newly educated and very woke and technical but it doesn't mean that the person who I'm essentially giving my money to is, is representing the same that they send that into TV commercials. So for now, I think I'm just buying whatever is the cheapest!"* (respondent 4). Here, the mistrust outshines the narrative alignment, resulting in choosing the cheaper option since there are monetary issues involved. Another sceptical respondent confirmed that it is about the intrinsic motivation of a brand that counts where they practice what they preach, meaning they should not be forced by society to engage in the matter. Yet, to prefer one brand over others, only supporting a good cause is for most respondents not enough, the product itself should also create value. If the product itself is considered worthy and it supports a good cause, all respondents confirmed that this would be a big pro. Ultimately, the latter attitude is not confirmed via observing behaviour within this study. Consequently, the behaviour can hint at ethical consumerism where consumers want to be a good consumer and therefore 'say' they would buy the product, or where they truly would prefer this brand over others and will buy the product.

Another consequence of mistrusting the motives of a company is the practice of cancelling a brand or company. The cancel culture (N=10) of withdrawing support due to

opposing views on a matter is considered if a company does not ‘practice what they preach’ or if the product has nothing to do with the matter. However, one respondent has noted that in today’s western society consumers demand brands to be politically involved, as mentioned in the theory, forcing brands to engage: *“If you don’t make a statement that can get you cancelled. If you make a statement that can get you cancelled, you dance that deadline, you’re always on eggshells, So it’s a risk”* (respondent 1).

In short, the positive attitude to political brands depends on the motives of engagement and whether the issues are in line with the product or company industry to avoid woke washing and cancel culture. However, the latter only occurs in some instances where values are completely contradictory, considered as triggering. Additionally, products are only preferred over others if they create personal value. Only a good cause or cultural value is not enough but would be considered a pro. Possibly this gives buyers a good feeling or as it is morally approved via in-group norms. Many consumers complained about menstrual product price, which is one of the reasons why they would not prefer Libresse over other brands as it is not the cheapest option. Since menstrual products are a monthly purchase (necessity product), pricing is perceived to be important. In a more negative light, there is a sense of mistrusting advertisers’ motives amongst the respondents, pointing to the company’s commercial benefit while showing a consumer shift towards post-postmodern standards. Moreover, after watching the stimuli, some females state they might share the ads with friends, where no males would as they find it off topic within a men’s conversation. Noteworthy, no one would share this online, nor with strangers pointing to a public-private sphere. Finally, there were rather positive attitudes towards brands and intentions of purchasing, as well as critical thoughts about brands that become politically involved in societal matters pointing at consumer awareness of risks involved for brands.

4.6 Perception of Advertising Practices

To analyse the perceptions of the citizen-consumer on the advertising practices of Libresse that theoretically appear to be brand activist in its nature, five sub-themes yielded. These include the advertising approach, important factors for consumers, drivers for the advertising approach, positive effects, and negative effects. Importantly, it must be mentioned that the effects are perceived results of the ads through the eyes of the respondents and have not been quantified to measure the true effect. Additionally, as this study concerns consumer views and opinions, these sub-themes are not covering the marketers’ motives.

Theme

Perceptions of Advertising Practices

Sub-theme	Code	Code explanation
Strategy	• Inclusive visualisation	The storyline of the advertisements that includes a full and representative depiction of all factors involving menstruation
	• Humor	The use of irony, humor or sarcasm within advertisements
	• Political stance	The practice of taking a political stance by brands
	• Female empowerment	Perceiving the manner of advertising as a feminist move from the brands while empowering women
Important factors consumers	• Company- customer value alignment	The importance of having values of the company and customer aligned
	• issue-industry alignment	The importance that products of the company should be aligned to the societal matter targeted when issuing a socio-political statement
	• Realism	Recognise reality of the phenomena including all aspects involved
	• Motives company	The perceived importance of the company's motives to participate in a political statement/issue
	• Research target group	A background check is needed to understand the consumers and the way they will perceive the advertisements (e.g. culture, social norms, group narratives)
	• Transparency company	Being transparent to enable consumers understanding why and by who the ads are made to know what they support by buying the product
	• Good cause	Supporting or donating to a good cause as part of the campaign/sales
	• Include men	The necessity of including men in the debate/movement of normalising menstruation
	• Clear/authentic message	The importance of having a clear and authentic message to be considered a successful advertising
	• Practice what you preach	The internal alignment of practices to external claims of values
Drivers	• Competition	The perception of advertising in a certain way to compete within the market
	• Consumer demands	The perception that consumers demand or expect brands to be politically engaged in societal matters such as normalising menstruation
Positive effect	• Opening conversation	The perception that the advertisements can open up the conversation on menstruation
	• Educate	The perception that ads want to or have the ability to educate people, especially men, by making the ads in the way they did
Negative effect	• Problematising menstruation	The practice where advertisements show rather extreme depictions of menstruation possibly problematising menstruation to some degree
	• Uncomfortable (men)	The perception that men will feel uncomfortable watching the stimuli
	• Woke washing/trend washing	Participating in political statements or a certain type of advertising to be part of a trend or be considered woke

Table 4.6 Theme 6: sub-themes, codes, and code explanation

First, the sub-theme of the advertising approach is built upon the codes of humour, inclusive visualisation, being political and female empowerment. In the first stimuli, respondents noticed the use of irony, sarcasm, or a sense of humour. The reactions were diverse in nature as some appreciate the bold sarcasm, whereas some also pointed out it problematizes menstruation as they indicate it is not like dancing on a cloud, but it is way worse. Consequently, humour is interpreted to be too subjective and a sensitive approach in advertising. What respondents did point out to be successful is the inclusive visualisation (N=7) approach in the last ad, where the journey through the womb in a rather educational manner as depicted by including all different aspects involved, such as childbirth, endometriosis, and issues with fertility besides menstrual bleeding.

When testing if the ads are perceived as activist, by questioning its political and feministic nature, respondents gave mixed answers. The ones who are more progressive and liberal saw the feministic (N=9) aspect of striving for equality but did not consider it as feminist themselves. In essence, they said it is not activist as menstruation is something ‘normal’ making the depictions not as provocative. They also did not label it as something

political (N= 14). Whereas the younger or respondents perceived to be more bodily insecure, who do experience taboos and a sense of stigma around menstruation in their surroundings or as part of society, did see it as rather feminist: *“I think the pro-women part is that they, they show that, that it, you need to love yourself, but for others to understand why you’re feeling the way you do and that not only females, men as well, just should appreciate the... all the things you’ve got”* (respondent 3). This clearly points towards the positive effects that consumers stressed to be a result of these stimuli, including the opening of conversations (N=10) and the education (N= 7) of viewers about the womb and menstruation in particular: *“Seeing it, learn about it. Doing like it's normal. Showing it more yes... That's really good. It was the edge of something really big, what what isn't that big”* (respondent 10). By this statement the respondent also indicates that menstruation is often seen as something big, which makes it a heavy topic, while it isn't always that big for all women, resulting in negative effects.

The sub-theme of negative effects therefore also includes the problematisation of menstruation (N=13). Many have indicated that all three advertisements, the last at least, in some way problematise menstruation by making it something bigger than it is by only highlighting extremes. Consequently, these extremes and visualisation results in the perception that men would feel uncomfortable (N=6), making it a heavy topic amongst men. A male respondent indicates that for non-progressive and less open-minded individuals the taboo is still too present making it: *“really shocking and in your face, which is good every once in a while, of course. But I don’t think it will be very constructive”* (respondent 7). Additionally, it is sometimes also perceived that companies are woke washing with these types of ads, conforming to the theory of brand activism. Many indicated that the risk is that people perceive it too much as a “publicity stunt” (respondent 7), pointing out that it feels like a *“branding thing”* (respondent 6) if they focus too much on women to make women like the brand. All in all, respondents were quite well informed about marketing, enhancing the mistrust of marketers’ good intentions.

Additionally, due to the consciousness about marketing practices amongst respondents, they also pointed out factors that were put into the sub-theme of drivers. The codes within this sub-theme include drivers for marketers to engage in political advertising, such as competing (N=2) with other brands and consumer demands (N=7) or pressure to show the company’s position on matters that are important to their consumers.

Lastly, the sub-theme of important factors for consumers yielded as different aspects seemed repeatedly important in the consumer's eyes that should be considered by marketers. In essence, many of these codes have also been pointed out in the theory included in this study, such as transparency (N=4), a clear and authentic message (N=15), performing a good background check on the market, issue and consumers targeted via research (N=4). Additionally, there must be an alignment, as mentioned before, between the product, the company practices, and issues. Also, the alignment between company and customer values (N=13) was considerable and mentioned by all respondents, even if they are overall not a fan of political engagement.

However, throughout the data collection and analysis, there was one factor that kept on being repeated constantly, which is the need for realism (N=45). In essence, respondents want menstruation to be normalised which can only be done in their view via realistic and inclusive depictions, which is translated into realism within this study. Whereas showing extremes results in the problematization of menstruation, the respondents vow for realness to accept the topic for what it is. *"Okay, let's say so. It was just very dramatic in a sense because like the girl who's laying on the bathroom floor. She's... Since you don't see her when she stands up again. Like it's not that bad for 365 days a year"* (respondent 5). The inclusivity of depiction also means that showing blood is considered as good since menstruation is about bleeding.

Moreover, realism points out that there should not necessarily be activism to provoke menstruation amongst young adults since it is no longer taboo unless women are before the transitional moment and possibly amongst more controversial citizens. *"It is not political but cultural as it triggers the myths surrounding the topic"* (respondent 6). Again normalisation, not activism, is what respondents perceive to be needed to make menstruation accepted by everyone and connect with people on a deeper level: *"I think the only thing is it's what I would love to see in brands and I think that happens like no more. It's like happening to normalization and like the conversation with the people, instead of trying to break certain things (taboos), try to connect with the people"* (respondent 6), and *"just make it normal. Like, don't make a big deal out of it. Last one is really, so extra that it is becoming a big deal. And it's not a big deal. It's just the way it is. So, I will focus on that. And maybe from that point, you first have to start with men"* (respondent 10). Not only do respondents here indicate that brands should not exaggerate to break taboos while reinforcing some myths, but

also it is pointed out that brands should include men (N=5) by targeting them with ads to normalise the topic instead of scaring them off by showing extremes.

To conclude this theme of advertising strategies the following discussion points have yielded. Firstly, the consumers don't alienate these ads but do point out that they rather see less use of extremes and more inclusive and realistic depictions. Although these ads are already better than the traditional ones, they still seem to hold some myths of the historical socialised body. Therefore, realism is found to be a crucial factor of success to help a societal shift towards the normalisation of menstruation. Nonetheless, these ads can increase awareness and can therefore be used as a social function for educational purposes amongst unaware individuals, and especially males. If brands manage to purposefully target myths around menstruation while practising what they preach, consumers morally approve of the advertisements and the brand, creating a favourable brand position, pointing to the efficacy of advertising strategies.

4.7 Themes in Brief

Aiming to acquire meaningful insights, some outcomes of different themes must be linked before concluding this study.

Results show that a mere simplification of young adults within one generation is not operational. Whilst they adopt norms deriving from different generations besides being interculturally involved and open minded, these young adults view themselves as intergenerational.

Additionally, both by advertisers and by out-groups, young adults are exposed to socialized narratives, conforming with the identified paradox. They do not live according to the historically socialised body, but do experience being shamed and devalued when menstruating, resulting in this paradox.

Moreover, the cultural myths adopted in advertisements are part of the problem as they reinforce stigmas and stereotypical depictions. It seems however, that it is not a political or feminist type of advertising in the eyes of the respondents, as menstruation is viewed as normal in the in-groups, perceiving it as not activist. Yet, the advertisements might be provocative to males and more conservative women. For positive societal change amongst young adults, respondents suggested more inclusive and realistic depictions are needed, without showing only extremes which problematizes menstruation. Hence, realism is what they demand.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

The following chapter concludes the findings to answer the research question of this study by discussing the theoretical and societal implications of the results. Thereafter, the limitations and future recommendations for scholars are outlined. Finally, the researcher included a reflective note as part of the reflexive thematic analysis method taken in this study.

The current study explored how young adults view menstruation and perceived brand activist advertising on menstrual products by reviewing stimuli. To answer the research question of this study, the findings and their implications are discussed below.

A marketer's role in shaping and reinforcing social norms and someone's social identity is considerable, making it even more crucial to understand the fundamentals of how value creation can be enabled for consumers while establishing an emotional relationship to enhance trust (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Holt, 2016; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Consequently, the theory has indicated that brands can shape the perception of menstruation as proven via the historically socialised female body (Kissling, 1996; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Consequently, in the past menstruation has been privatised and silenced while stigmas were enforced.

As part of the cultural frame adopted, it is believed that consumers constitute their identity via consumption and the marketplace (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006), making marketers partially responsible for beliefs held by consumers via their authorial and influential power through mediating cultural representations. However, as Holt (2002) predicted and partially confirmed in the results, a shift towards post-postmodern consumerism is occurring where consumers detect commercial motivations of brands. Consequently, more is needed from brands, resulting in consumers searching for brands that directly contribute to their social identity to (partially) adopt cultural aspects communicated. Marketers can shape social meanings adopted through consumption by consumers as part of their social identity, as they contort information in a way that suits themselves (Holt, 2002). Therefore, to overcome the historically enforced stigmas, brands have started to adopt new advertising methods, including brand activism to raise awareness, support a cause or take a societal stance changing human behaviour as consumers demand them to be socially engaged (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Sarkar & Kotler, 2021).

To contribute to this existing body of research on brand activism and feminine hygiene, it was necessary to understand how and if these brands could change consumer behaviour while truly supporting a cause that matters to consumers for the above-mentioned theorised marketer's motives. Hence, consumer views on menstruation and perceptions of the

ads have been questioned via in-depth interviews (N=10: 8 females and 2 males), including advertisements by the menstrual product brand Libresse/Bodyform. Employing theory-driven reflexive thematic analysis, the patterns were translated into complementary but non-overlapping themes that highlight the findings of this study.

The findings have the need for more operational terms to define target consumers instead of generational identification. First, there is no true Gen Z identification as consumers find themselves intergenerational, adopting norms from different age groups. Therefore, this study has adopted a more operational definition of young adults instead of Gen Z. Second, findings confirm respondents do not perceive menstruation as taboo. Therefore, this study contradicts Drake (2016) and Thomas (2016) on the need for female-empowering narratives to overcome shame. However, there might be relevance in adopting empowering narratives for teenagers, as shame and stigmatisation exist before the transitional moment. This study's population, however, views it as something completely natural and points to older generations when indicating stigmas while mentioning stereotyping still exists.

Kellie et al. (2019) shows men are most guilty of objectifying women when menstruating. However, the male participants view menstruation as something natural, not shameful nor dirty. Therefore, it is interpreted that not necessarily men, but out-groups existing of elderly and conservative citizens objectify women by reproducing patriarchal narratives. However, the out-group norms of the historical socialised body are not internalised, as young adults reject these narratives since they are not recognised within their in-groups, confirming Reese et al. (2019).

There has been a shift amongst young adults from understanding feminine hygiene as something controversial (Thomas, 2016), taboo (Kissling, 1996), or even the most embarrassing topic within the western culture (Freitas, 2008), to something natural as identified by Malefy and McCabe (2016). The results of this study can confirm that menstruation is experienced.

To conclude, there is still a divide between perceptions and narratives within society. However, this study has shown that some young adults can reject the patriarchal narratives while releasing themselves from the paradox, transitioning to a new zeitgeist of post-postmodern consumption. This shift of zeitgeist indicates that consumers went from their search of freedom, individualism, and subjectivity (Gill, 2007), to "sincerity challenging irony, reconstructing despite paradoxes, hope despite difficult circumstances" (Cantone et al., 2020 p481) while spotting the commercial motives (Holt, 2002) of brands beyond their socio-

cultural statements. Here, sincerity points to the note of normalisation via realism demanded by consumers instead of activism as seen regarding the stimuli.

This zeitgeist shift points to a more urgency of understanding how consumers make sense of their daily lives via consumer perceptions to succeed in the sociology of critique via moral approval to be perceived as worthy while initiating the first step of consumption. This sense of worthiness comes from product value creation to the personal lives of the consumers but is enhanced if a brand adds to cultural representational systems and does good for society. Consequently, consumers have generated a positive attitude to the last ad by Libresse, stating it shows a full storyline and includes diverse depictions, whereas the other ones seem to be outdated.

Advertising contains false dichotomies where they do not represent the full truth as they exploit stories for commercial interest by misleading consumers. This false dichotomy has reached consumers' awareness, meaning brands cannot hide their commercial motives anymore by only supporting good causes. As a result, consumers might feel less empowered via advertisements as they know the foundational motives of marketers. Instead, brands should practice what they preach and be 'realistic'. If not, consumers will remain sceptic while resisting the narratives and product, resulting in a low advertising efficacy. Hence, marketers should understand the social origins of contradictions that consumers hold, such as their social norms and social identity; they should understand how to optimise moral approval and thus enhance commercial interest even though consumers spot their commercial motives. In essence, moral approval is seen as the first step of consumption. The results of this study yielded a recommendation for marketers of brand realism, where not only the extremes will be shown to be activist and provocative. At the same time, target societal matters and normal situations should be included to avoid problematization of menstruation while connecting with the citizen-consumer on a deeper level within the post-postmodern zeitgeist.

Brand activism, in this case, is not as promising for commercial interests as the theory has indicated. Narratives are celebrated as young adults recognise progressiveness and support for societal change, while products are mostly not bought. As a result, this type of advertising can help to foster societal change amongst postmodern consumers but not necessarily amongst post-postmodern ones, even though they do support these types of advertising to some degree while criticising extremism. Advertisers, therefore, need to be reflective to avoid the false dichotomy and be more realistic. Also, there might be a difference in the moral agency of marketers and consumers, creating a moral gap that endangers the positive outcome of the sociology of critique amongst consumers.

Nonetheless, some consumers have reached “semiotic vertigo” (p87) where they resist the message, meaning they are a lost cause for marketers, which conforms to Holt’s (2002) predictions. Some of the very liberal respondents have reached this stage, where they find the ads okay, but point out realism instead of activism, asking for normalisation instead of commercialisation of societal issues. Hence, it seems that non-cultural consumers have gained more authority to resist marketer’s dominance in shaping their identity and desires via commercial interests while fragmenting the market through self-produced consumption patterns. By resisting a brand’s cultural messages as part of their advertising, consumers more and more construct their identity via other social spaces, evolving in more fragmented consumption cultures. This makes it even harder for marketers to launch effective campaigns while dealing with situational and large variances of preferred and appropriated behaviour in a multicultural sphere, as pointed out by Hove (2020) and Bicchieri et al. (2018).

Therefore, this study seeks to bring nuance to Moisander and Valtonen's (2006) claim concerning the authority of power marketers to change consumption behaviour beneficially. In essence, the post-postmodern consumption style minimises the authority of marketers through the reflexivity of consumers. However, it is perceived that no one has full reflexivity, meaning marketers still have some authorial power to create favourable brand and ad views as part of cultural capitalism, even if consumers reject the message. Yet, these consumers will reject the product that does not suit brands' commercial interest but would help brands become cultural icons as part of the less liberal and open-minded consumer segment. This, in the end, can foster societal change, which will always create new market tensions for marketers to engage in. Therefore, I like to theorise that only when acting as a citizen-brand, a brand that is in-grouped by the consumers while reflecting their norms, the narratives and possibly products will be bought. This is not about being authentic as this is too subjective; it is about how brands contribute to cultural resources (Holt, 2002) or societal shifts

In sum, this study has captured how a rather new advertising strategy is perceived by young adults who are amid a zeitgeist shift from postmodernism to post-postmodernism. Hence, it seems that as seen with feminist consumption, here with realist consumption, there are new in-group norms in place of normalisation instead of activism, confirming the theory of Moisander and Valtonen (2011) while pointing to a zeitgeist shift that holds changed norms. Therefore, a new social construct amongst young citizen-consumers has been identified, highlighting a social movement of normalisation with a minimised ideological sense of cultural symbols communicated by brands, pointing to an evolution of the theories by Schroeder (2009). Yet again, subjectivity is subject to change, where the increasing sub-

cultural groups foster change even faster (Holt, 2002), making it increasingly important for marketers to be iteratively aware of consumer perceptions to increase advertising efficacy for whichever motive is used.

Lastly, it is crucial to mention that the results are thought-provoking while illustrating this shift's elements. Therefore, these results do not generalise or determine any black-and-white claim related to the theorised outcomes.

5.1 Reflexivity

Reflecting upon the researcher's role in co-producing these results, the following must be noted. First, the researcher acknowledges the role within this study. As second, the researcher's interpretation of data is subject to the researcher's subjectivity and moral decision making. Hence, the researcher's position within the framework of this study is of importance.

In essence, the researcher has a keen interest in cultures and social sciences including human behaviour and social norms. Besides that, the researcher does identify as a liberal feminist, believing in gender equality and viewing menstruation as something bigger than a gender issue. Therefore, the researcher recognises personal interest in this study's outcomes but has remained neutral within the context of this study via the systematic and strictly operationalised procedures of the data collection and analysis. Yet, the outcomes are seen as co-constructed by the participants and the researcher.

Due to the researchers limited experience of research analysis, yielding latent levels of analysis took a lot of time and energy. However, as it was theory-driven, and the researcher's high involvement and dedication has enabled a steady learning curve. Therefore, it is believed to not have been a big issue due to the systematic approach and motivation behind this study.

Lastly, while noticing a shift in zeitgeist the researcher started searching for theories of what comes after postmodernity. By strongly believing in this shift, a lot of time went into the search for proof of this observation. Due to the notice amongst late scholars regarding post-postmodernity, it was at first hard to gather academic proof. This resulted in great enthusiasm when discovering the predictions made by Holt in 2002, to which some results could be confirmed. Even though the researcher tried to be fully objective, it is recognised in this study that subjectivity shapes interpretation, meaning it must be noted that the interpretations are meant to be thought provocative for future papers, not generalisable.

5.2 Limitations and Future Recommendations

Even though this study has been executed carefully and systematically, it bears its limitations. Below the limitations are discussed concerning reliability and validity as part of this study's credibility.

In terms of reliability, this study has transparently described the whole research process in chapter 3, and the researcher has also strictly followed these instructions while coding according to the theory and the operationalisation. As part of this transparency, the coding scheme can be found in appendix B. Additionally, all theories have been defined with multiple sources, which were transformed into themes. The sub-themes have been described to show the perspectives and interpretations of the researcher.

When it comes to validity, the researcher has included multiple sources for theories used as part of this study, proving its legitimacy. Additionally, the methodological approach has yielded a viable outcome by clearly defining the scope and operationalising via the operational model also backed up by sources. The purposive sampling yielded either female or close ties to females to gain valuable information on menstrual views. Additionally, different ages were used within the age frame to see if there are varying perceptions.

However, due to time constraints, the researcher has not used maximum variance purposive sampling as the respondents were all Caucasian, of western European origin and most highly educated. Yet, via triangulation, research reflexivity, prolonged engagement, thick and rich descriptions and research positioning, the validity of this study has been safeguarded (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Much is left to explore regarding the complexity of the phenomena of menstruation. The following future recommendations have yielded, as further exploration is perceived to be worthy.

Due to the findings of post-postmodern consumerism, the rise of sub-cultural consumer segments seems to be in our future (Holt, 2002). Therefore, cross-cultural research could investigate varying views on menstruation and perceptions of the stimuli across (sub)cultures. Also, post-postmodernism relating to identity construction could be a research focus.

As indicated by the respondents, there is a transitional age where the shame and anxiety of menstruation shifts to accepting menstruation as natural. As recognised by Bobel and Fahs (2020), there should be better education on menstrual health at a younger age. A future study could investigate other urgent matters that could help adolescents deal with

menstruation, questioning their needs and means of communication besides the investigation of where the fear and sense of shame comes from to identify how their overall well-being can be stimulated.

Additionally, a mixed-method study where the attitude behaviour gap is truly measured should give new insights into these ads' effectiveness. It could be that consumers have a misconception of their behaviour, which can be tested when utilising mixed methods. Overall, the attitude-behaviour gap is an understudied phenomenon that needs further exploration.

To conclude this study, the researcher would like to emphasize the title 'we all bleed red' as it showcases the essence of menstruation, which is blood. Light should be shed on 'everyone' who is subject to menstruation, not just women. As explained by Bobel and Fahs (2020), trans men are also affected by menstruation, which is a necessary expansion of 'who' menstruates while changing the narratives (Bobel & Fahs, 2020), which has been ignored in the past simplifying the phenomena of menstruation. To move beyond the historical stigmatization, this should be recognized in all future studies on menstruation, not only as a matter of inclusivity, but as a matter of reflecting and recognizing tensions as part of a phenomena, encompassing all complexities.

Hopefully, this study inspires others to engage in this topic by exploring and openly talking about the unexplored while investigating a personal matter that is also political. Therefore, I would like to end this with a call to action, not words.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A – Interview Protocol

Before start

- Welcome the participant and thank them for participating
- Introduce myself
- Briefly state the purpose of interview: perceptions on feminine hygiene and advertisements targeting controversies of feminine hygiene.
- Ask to sign the consent form and permission to record

Start

Background Participant:

- o What is your name?
- o What is your age (only 18-25 years old)?
- o What is your education (highlight background and eventual skills in media studies)?
- o What is your nationality? Where do you live? Where did you grow up?
- o What is your profession?
- o What gender do you identify with?
- o Are you religious, if yes, which religion?

Gen-Z identification:

Do you agree on the following representation of Gen Z, and why?

- It is the most diverse, multicultural generation in all our history
- They are more open-minded and progressive than their elder millennials
- They openly accept any sexual orientation
- They are passionate about their beliefs and principles, and demand action, not just words
- They are committed to making a difference and will take action to do so

If you do not agree with these representations, what do you identify with?

Body identification, socialised body and social norms:

Do you agree on the following body representations, and why?

- I feel well in my own body.
 - I am not ashamed to talk about my body
 - I am comfortable to be seen naked by my close circle or public space (sauna)
 - I am proud to be a woman. (If identify with other gender, ask if they are proud of that?)
 - I embrace the female aspects of my body such as my boobs, vagina, menstruation, and hormonal body changes.
 - I do not mind talking about my private body parts and its aspects to friends, such as menstruation, sexual transmitted diseases, or sex.
- I am not ashamed of my body hair and do not shave.
- I change the way I feel about my body over time.
- I do not hide parts of my body that I do not like, if having any.
- I go to a public beach/pool/sauna when menstruating.

Questions

- How do you view menstruation? (e.g., Dirty, or natural)
- In what way do you talk about menstruation and all its aspects such as bleeding, mood swings, pain etc. to your friends and family?
- In what way would you talk to strangers about menstruation? Would you feel comfortable to talk openly about the subject?
- How do people around you think and talk about menstruation? How is that different from you?
- Who informed you and how were you informed about menstruation and bleeding?
- Is there, in your opinion, a sense of shame and shaming others around menstruation and private body parts? If so, why?
- What about your purchase behaviour? When you buy feminine hygiene products, how do you feel about that? Why?
- OR (*male*) Have you bought feminine hygiene products for a woman? If yes, how did you feel about that? Why?
- Do you think women need to behave differently when having their period? And why?
- Do others expect you to behave differently when menstruating?

- In your view, does menstruation make the female body defective? If so, why? How are side effects such as mood swings and pain affecting this, or do you take contraception to avoid this?
- In your view, is menstruation a hidden subject that people rather do not talk about (publicly)?
- Can you please explain whether you think menstruation should be normalized, or if that is not needed?
- What is your view on sexual intercourse when having menstruation?
- Do you think that your view on menstruation and the way you behave around this subject is influenced by others? If yes, by who?

Attitude behaviour gap, consumers, and brands, and femvertising

I will now go to the questions that target your brand perceptions.

- Can you name a few brands that you actively follow?
- How do you follow these brands?
- What are the reasons that you follow these brands?
- Among these brands, are there some with a specific orientation towards social causes/issues?
- What does it mean for you if brands become political, please explain?
- How important is it for you that brands take a stance on socio political issues?
- What is your view on brands becoming politically involved in controversial issues?
- What is your view about brands who target the stereotypical representation of women?
 - If so, what is in your view the stereotypical representation of women?
 - Do you support this targeting of stereotyping? If yes, how?
- When a brand supports a socio-political issue that matters to you, what is your reaction?
 - What if it is a brand that you already supported, will you support them even more?
- If a brand takes a stance on which you agree, do you actively engage and or share their stance on social media or with friends?
- In your view, are you more tempted to buy a product from a brand that is political on social causes? If yes, why, and under which conditions?

- Would you prioritise a brand over others if they have the same values/ideologies as you do? If yes, why (can you give an example)?
- Do you think brands should become politically involved more often regarding controversial issues and feminine activism? If so, which brands (any specific)?
- Do you think brands should start the conversation on the controversy around feminine hygiene? If so, how?
- Do you think some brands have more responsibility to support the feminist movements than others? If so, which brands or industries? If so, which feminist movements?
- Do you think that in other countries/cultures, people will have a different opinion on being vocal about feminine hygiene?
 - If so, what is your view on those different opinions?
 - If so, how should brands deal with that if they operate internationally and among different cultures?

Stimuli

Recently, some brands have become involved on feminine societal matters including menopause and feminine hygiene. These brands strive to include a more representative depiction in their advertisement by highlighting different phases of a female body in a rather realistic manner compared to older advertisements.

Bodyform, known as Libresse in north/west Europe, is a feminine hygiene brand who created a series of feminine hygiene ads which I will show you now. Afterwards I will question your view on these commercials and topics related to them.

{SHOW ADVERTISEMENTS}

Bloodnormal (2017)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdW6IRsuXaQ>

Viva la vulva (2018)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0k-4WloY6Y>

Wombstories (2020)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZoFqIxlbk0&feature=emb_rel_end

- What is your first reaction to this commercial? Please explain.
- Is there anything in your view that stands out in this ad?

Next Stimuli (Ask questions above again)

- Now you have seen all the ads, is there anything specific that stands out?
- How authentic do you perceive the messages that Bodyform/Libresse tries to send? In your view, which messages are they trying to send?
- What is your opinion on why body form created this ad in this way?
 - Is it feminist to do so? If yes, is this ad female empowering?
 - If so, how do you perceive the pro-woman narratives and depictions in advertisements?
 - If not, do you find these ads stereotypical? If so, why?
- Do you think it is a political move from Bodyform/Libresse to show blood and vaginas in the ads?
- What is your opinion on the use of blood in this campaign?
- What is your opinion on the depictions of vaginas or similar visuals in this campaign?
 - What do you think about the varying ways of depicting the vagina and womb in these ads? Did something stand out?
- Do you feel this campaign is representing menstruation and the womb in a way that you also experience it? If so, why is this realistic?
- Do you think showing blood and vaginas adds to a more modern view on menstruation and feminism? If so, how?
- Do you support this type of advertising on feminine hygiene?
- Do you think these ads will change the way people speak about feminine hygiene after seeing the campaign?
- Would you advise your friends/family/colleagues to watch these commercials?
 - Would you watch these together and promote them to your parents?
- Would you prefer this brand over other brands, knowing what they stand for?
- Do you think consumers can enhance positive changes in feminine hygiene promoted by Bodyform/Libresse by buying from them? If so, why?

Thank you for all your answers, the interview has almost come to an end, only one question remains to be asked:

- Do you think that your age, gender, or generation matters in the way you answered the questions in this interview? If so, why?

Finish

- Ask if the participant has anything to add
- Thank the participant for their time and answers
- State that the participant can email at any time
- Ask if the participant knows anyone else who would like/want to participate

Appendix B – Coding Scheme

Appendix B.1 Coding scheme including theme, sub-theme, code, count and explanation code

Theme	Sub-theme	Code	Count	Explanation code
Societal Progress of Embracing Menstruation	Responsible parties	Parents	2	Parents perceived responsibility of (re)enforcing societal matters/stigmas on their children
		Consumer	7	Consumer's responsibility to buy ethically/socially
		Company	7	Company's responsibility towards society while practicing what they preach
	Drivers	Awareness	12	Awareness of others and different opinions and interests within society, across borders and cultures
		Societal shift	4	Shifts occurring in societal norms to a gradually more forward-thinking society
		Commitment to change	19	People are committed to change by seeking action beyond words/statements
	Retainers	Social pressure	4	Societal or peer pressure to conform with societal norms
		Societal norms	9	The perceived societal norms in place according to the respondents
	Today's Socialised Female Body	Embodied experience	empowerment	30
Agency			9	The movement of being positive about one's body neglecting societal standards
Body positivity			7	The movement of being positive about one's body whether it conforms with the societal ideals or not
Historical socialised body		Pollutant/defective	17	The label of aesthetical defective and unhygienic of the female body
		Stereotyping	9	Stereotypical labels of the female body, mostly by men
		Objectification	5	Objectifying the female body through historical narratives of the socialised body
Enforcer		Digital environment	9	The role of social media and the internet in socialising the female body
Social Female Identity	Characteristics	Open minded	51	Being tolerant to differences without judgement or prejudice and accepting or considering new ideas or opinions new or different to personal views/practices
		Passionate	8	Having strong feelings and emotions about something
		Pride	17	Sense of pride about oneself resulting in the embracing themselves and their body
		Insecurity	4	Experience of insecurities regarding oneself/body (e.g., uncomfortable being naked)

	Influential factors	Body identification	20	The way in which women feel about their body (e.g., confident, insecure)
		Social group	5	The in-group norms and values adopted
		Transitional age	18	The transitional moment between puberty and adolescence where views and feelings about oneself changes from insecure to more embodied and confident
		Global interconnectedness	4	The thought that travelling and intercultural society shape social identification and norms
	Generational Identification	Gen Z ingroup	24	Identifying oneself as Gen Z
		Gen Z outgroup	10	Distancing from Gen Z, indicating there is no identification within this generation
		Intergenerational	8	Having internalised norms of multiple generations, being unable to identify as part of 'one' generation
		Distancing from elderly	5	Showing a distance to the perceived norms of older generations than Gen-Z or Millennials
Young Adult's view on Menstruation	Embrace			To make menstruation normal, opening the topic and making it an accepted matter in society
		Normalise	25	
		Menstrual (side) effects	27	Experiences surrounding menstruation including hormonal changes, aches, and bloating
	Negativity	Natural	25	Viewing menstruation as something natural to the female body
		Hidden/silenced	20	Menstruation is perceived to be a hidden or silenced topic by someone or by society
		Male distance/unawareness	22	Men (are perceived) distance themselves from menstruation while being unaware of aspects involved in menstruation
		Dirty	19	The viewing of menstruation (blood) as something dirty or unhygienic
		Stigma	19	Disapproval/unfavourable position in society about menstruation
		Blood shaming	19	Experience of shame for blood stains or the hygiene of blood
		Menstrual shame	13	Men enforcing shame on girls making menstruation a taboo topic
		Private	9	Men enforcing shame on girls making menstruation a taboo topic
		Controversial	10	The experience of controversies surrounding menstruation and other aspects of the female body
		Unfair	2	Finding it unfair that women have to deal with menstruation and pregnancy as men do not

Young Adult's Brand Positions	Attitude	Positive attitude political brands	22	Supporting the stance, the brand takes and its advertising
		Prefer/prioritise brands	2	The practice of preferring one brand over another by agreeing on their statement/practice, viewing the company as worthy, willing to take extra steps (monetary)
		Menstrual product price	3	Stressing how expensive menstrual products are resulting in buying the cheapest option
		Mistrust organisational goodwill	7	Being sceptic about the organisations or managers goodwill beyond the triple bottom line, viewing marketing solely as a commercial strategy to sell products
		Share friends	4	Sharing/informing friends about the commercial while supporting its narratives or viewing it as educational
	Behaviour	Purchase behaviour	12	Purchase behaviour of menstrual products
		Cancel culture	10	The boycotting or withdrawing of support for brands or persons who practice or state things one objects to or perceives to be offensive
Perception of Advertising Practices	Strategy	Inclusive visualisation	7	The storyline of the advertisements that includes a full and representative depiction of all factors involving menstruation
		Humour	6	The use of irony, humour, or sarcasm within advertisements
		Political stance	14	The practice of taking a political stance by brands
		Female empowerment	9	Perceiving the manner of advertising as a feminist move from the brands while empowering women
	Important factors consumers	Company-customer value alignment	13	The importance of having values of the company and customer aligned
		Issue-industry alignment	9	The importance that products of the company should be aligned to the societal matter targeted when issuing a socio-political statement
		Realism	45	Recognise reality of the phenomena including all aspects involved
		Motives company	9	The perceived importance of the company's motives to participate in a political statement/issue
		Research target group	4	A background check is needed to understand the consumers and the way they will perceive the advertisements (e.g., culture, social norms, group narratives)
		Transparency company	4	Being transparent to enable consumers understanding why and by who the ads are

			made to know what they support by buying the product
	Good cause	7	Supporting or donating to a good cause as part of the campaign/sales
	Include men	5	The necessity of including men in the debate/movement of normalising menstruation
	Clear authentic message	15	The importance of having a clear and authentic message to be considered a successful advertising
	Practice what you preach	5	The internal alignment of practices to external claims of values
Drivers	Competition	2	The perception of advertising in a certain way to compete within the market
	Consumer demands	7	The perception that consumers demand or expect brands to be politically engaged in societal matters such as normalising menstruation
Positive effect	Opening conversation	10	The perception that the advertisements can open the conversation on menstruation
	Educate	7	The perception that ads want to or have the ability to educate people, especially men, by making the ads in the way they did
Negative effect	Problematising menstruation	13	The practice where advertisements show rather extreme depictions of menstruation possibly problematising menstruation to some degree
	Uncomfortable (men)	6	The perception that men will feel uncomfortable watching the stimuli
	Woke washing/trend washing	11	Participating in political statements or a certain type of advertising to be part of a trend or be considered woke