

Green but Invisible: Why Sustainable Menstrual Products Receive Limited Advertising

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable menstrual products like menstrual cups, reusable pads, discs, and period underwear benefit the environment, economy, and health. Their presence in advertisements is far less than traditional disposable menstrual products. This study attempts to explore the various reasons that cause the limited promotion for sustainable menstrual products. Qualitatively, this research is based on secondary data and studies the negative promotion of sustainable menstrual products caused by menstruation-related stigmas, historical advertisement bans, the disposable product brand monopolies, and the censorship of promotional advertisements as evidenced by market reports and peer-reviewed academic articles. From the thematic analysis, three major structural barriers were identified: censorship of the menstrual cycle, commercial barriers, and digital barriers combined with inadequate consumer awareness. The findings reveal that the invisibility of sustainable menstrual products is driven by interconnected cultural, commercial, and technological factors rather than product quality or consumer demand. The study recommends more inclusive advertising policies, increased public awareness initiatives, and equitable digital marketing opportunities to promote sustainable menstrual health.

Keywords: Sustainable Menstrual Products, Menstrual Cups, Reusable Pads, Menstrual Advertising / Promotion.

Introduction

Approximately 1.8 billion people worldwide experience menstruation, making it a universal biological phenomenon, but it remains socially stigmatised. It is one of the least studied commercial elements of human health. Recently, environmentally based raw material initiatives and a worldwide reduction in the use of Plastic Packaging have led to a growth in Sustainable Menstruation Products. Sustainable Menstrual Products include menstrual cups, reusable pads, period underwear, and menstrual discs. Menstrual cups are reusable for multiple cycles. Unfortunately, the advertising for sustainable menstruation products is less widespread than that for conventional menstruation products. Most conventional pads are made with 2-3.7 grams of non-biodegradable plastic, and take 500-800 years to decompose.

Understanding why these green products remain invisible in advertising is not merely a marketing question it is a question of gender equity, environmental policy, and consumer empowerment. This research investigates the advertising gap surrounding sustainable menstrual products through a qualitative, secondary-data-based approach. Drawing on peer-reviewed academic literature, published

studies, and credible secondary sources, the study examines the socio-cultural, commercial, and digital forces that restrict the promotional visibility of eco-friendly menstrual products.

Research Aim

The primary aim of this research is to critically examine the reasons why sustainable menstrual products receive limited advertising exposure, and to explore the social, cultural, commercial, and digital factors that contribute to their marketing invisibility despite documented environmental and economic benefits.

Research Objectives

- To explore how historical censorship and menstrual taboo have shaped the advertising landscape for sustainable menstrual products.
- To analyse how market dominance by conventional disposable menstrual product brands suppresses the advertising reach of sustainable alternatives.
- To examine how limited consumer awareness and structural digital platform restrictions further reduce the promotional visibility of eco-friendly menstrual products.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretivist methodology grounded entirely in secondary data. Given the sensitive and socially embedded nature of the research topic, a secondary data approach is both appropriate and effective, allowing for the synthesis of existing scholarly knowledge, published empirical studies, and market analysis reports without the ethical complexities involved in primary data collection on menstruation-related topics.

Research Design

The research follows a qualitative descriptive design. The aim is not to test a hypothesis through numerical measurement, but rather to build an interpretive understanding of a complex social and commercial phenomenon: the advertising invisibility of sustainable menstrual products. This design allows for depth, nuance, and contextual analysis, which are essential when examining the interplay between cultural stigma, commercial power, and digital regulation.

Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data for this research project was obtained from three categories of sources. First, scholarly articles from peer-reviewed journals obtained through Google Scholar, PubMed, and Frontiers in Sustainability, and ResearchGate formed the primary academic foundation. These articles included studies regarding the evolution of advertising for menstrual products, the consumer behaviour of those who purchase reusable menstrual products, and the marketing of products in the presence of the menstrual taboo. Second, public health reports and analyses from businesses engaged in environmental and market research provided context and data. Third, the assessments found in *The Conversation* and similar scholarly periodicals provided a historical and cultural framework.

The main secondary data sources are as follows: (1) Braverman et al., a systematic review published in *BMC Women's Health*, which studied the challenges of using reusable menstrual products by university students worldwide; (2) The research of Kasuga et al., which studied consumer preference for menstrual cups in France, Japan, and Indonesia, using a discrete choice experiment and published in *Frontiers of Sustainability*; and (3) the work of Røstvik, published in *The Conversation*, which reviewed the last 100 years of Australian menstrual product advertising. Røstvik remarked that shame, secrecy, and taboo were, and remain, the dominant themes of menstrual product advertising in Australia.

Data Analysis Approach

Approximately 1.8 billion people worldwide share the universal biological experience of menstruation, but it is still one of the most socially stigmatized and commercially understudied elements of human health. Growing environmental awareness and a global push to reduce single-use plastic waste have propelled the market for sustainable menstruation goods, such as menstrual cups, reusable cloth pads, period underwear, and menstrual discs, to significant growth in recent decades. Despite these advancements, these items' promotional and advertising visibility is far lower than that of their throwaway competitors, which nevertheless predominate on store shelves and in the media.

Literature Review

The literature on menstrual product advertising, sustainable consumption and gender-based marketing taboos provides a rich foundation for understanding the advertising invisibility of eco-friendly menstrual products. This chapter reviews existing scholarship across three thematic domains aligned with the research objectives.

• The History of Menstrual Taboo and Its Impact on Advertising

Johnson, et al., (2025) stated that the social construction of menstruation as a shameful and secretive phenomenon is reflected in the advertising of and for menstrual products. Røstvik (2018) looks at 100 years of menstrual product advertising in Australia and finds that, throughout the 20th century, menstruation taboos were largely reinforced by advertising. Røstvik provides examples such as the advertising of 'Whisper' products, which relied on 'She must remain a mystery' messaging and other advertising copy which further reinforced concealment and shame advertising. It is also notable that advertising copy from this era explained menstruation as 'nature's handicap' and in contrast to natural processes, described the phenomenon in the context of a medical problem (Prima Citta et al., 2024).

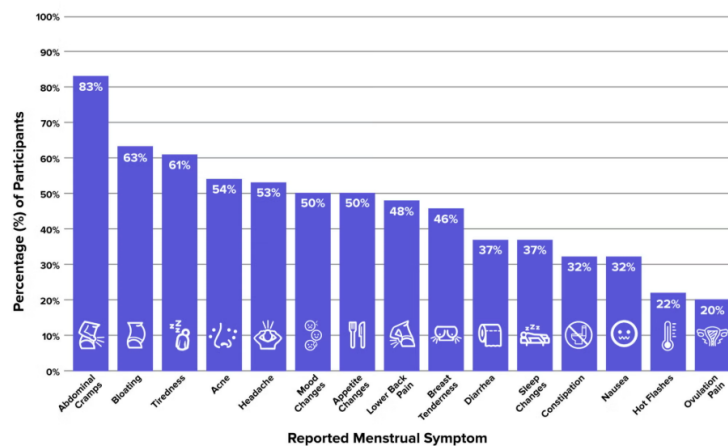


Figure 1: Menstrual symptom data can help end period stigma. Apple Women's Health Study

(Source: Harvard T.H., 2021)

In the United States, 20th-century advertisements of menstrual products reflected taboos and stigmas of menstruation which extended beyond the advertisement of menstrual products. This was more broadly a societal taboo and stigma. For example, all television and radio networks banned the advertising of menstrual products until 1972. Additionally, it was not until 1985 that the word "period" was used for the first time in a television advertisement. Further, the use of the word "vagina," which is a part of the product anatomy, was banned by most networks until 2010. In that year, three major television networks banned the airing of a Kotex tampon advertisement because it used the word "vagina."

Røstvik (2018) writes for The Conversation. Here, Røstvik presents the idea that even though menstrual product advertisements have transformed and improved to include more truth, this has mostly happened with large, and well-funded, mainstream companies (e.g. Body form and Tampax). In contrast, smaller, sustainable companies do not have the financial resources, or the media relationships, of larger companies and are therefore much more likely to be the victims of censorship, advertising rejection, and suppression within social media.

• Market Dominance by Conventional Brands

The advertising invisibility of sustainable alternatives to single-use menstrual products can be attributed to the commercial industry dominance of disposable products. A cross-national study by Kasuga et al. (2024) found published in Frontiers in Sustainability that the dominant consumer preference for single-use products was found in all three of the selected study countries of France, Japan, and

Indonesia, even though those countries have different cultures and socioeconomic make-ups from one another (Grider, 2022).

- **Consumer Awareness, Digital Restrictions, and the Visibility Gap**

In addition to cultural taboos and commercial imbalances, sustainable menstrual products often encounter a new barrier with digital platform restrictions, where bans disproportionately target menstruation product advertisements. Braverman et al. (2025) examined the adoption of reusable menstrual products for a systematic review among university students and identified what they called a limited awareness of the available options as the most widespread barrier in different countries. Most important, the limited awareness of reusable options was not due to a lack of interest from potential consumers; it was due to the absence of promotional materials that are both available and accessible for young consumers (Frost, K. et al. 2026).

For smaller brands that are sustainable and don't have the budget to use TV or print advertisements, social media is meant to be a replacement. But it has repeatedly flagged, restricted, and banned menstruation related content. Australia based Modibodi had a short film that contained menstrual blood banned by Facebook. THINX's advertising in the NY subway system was terminated. These are just examples of the many advertising and content bans that menstruation brands encounter in an attempt to promote sustainable, safe, and health-positive menstruation related content (Thomas, et al. 2024).

The Frontiers in Sustainability study by Kasuga et al. (2024) further found that psychological factors including the internalisation of menstruation as disgusting or shameful directly influenced consumer willingness to even engage with information about menstrual cups.

Data Analysis

- **Thematic Analysis**

The thematic analysis of the three key secondary sources identified three primary themes, each corresponding to a research objective. These themes were constructed by systematically coding recurring ideas, patterns, and findings across the literature and synthesising them into coherent analytical categories.

Theme 1: The Taboo-Censorship Cycle

In the secondary literature, the taboo-censorship cycle emerges as a pattern established by the relationship between menstrual taboos and censorship of menstrual advertising. In this cycle, censorship of menstrual advertising reinforces the taboo by maintaining the subject of menstrual advertising censorship in the shadows of public discourse.

The censorship of menstrual advertising and social control is documented within its cultural aspects. Historically, the advertising of menstrual products has been shrouded in secrecy. A sanitization of the advertising has been carried out that has reinforced advertising secrecy for over a century. This has established advertising standards that make public advertising of menstrual products uncomfortable(Punzi and Werner, 2020).

Theme 2: Structural Commercial Disadvantage

The thematic analysis of market data and consumer behaviour studies reveals a second major theme: sustainable menstrual product companies operate under conditions of profound structural commercial disadvantage. This disadvantage manifests in three interconnected dimensions advertising budget asymmetry, retail shelf invisibility, and the trust deficit generated by consumer unfamiliarity (Vishwakarma, et al., 2020).

Advertising budget asymmetry is perhaps the most straightforward dimension. While global disposable menstrual product companies invest massively in omnichannel advertising strategies, sustainable brands most of which are small businesses or social enterprises operate on a fraction of those budgets. The literature from Kasuga et al. (2024) demonstrates that even across economically diverse countries such as France, Japan, and Indonesia, consumer familiarity with conventional products consistently overrides environmental values when making purchasing decisions(Sharma et al. 2025).

Theme 3: Digital Suppression and the Awareness Deficit

The third theme resulting from the thematic analysis examines the relationship between the content restrictions of digital platforms, low consumer knowledge, and the advertising gap for sustainable menstrual products. The study by Braverman et al. (2025) and their systematic review of 10 studies (with a total of 4,721 participants), offers compelling proof that consumer knowledge is key to the adoption of sustainable menstrual products. Braverman et al. (2025) argue that limited consumer knowledge is a major barrier for the adoption of sustainable menstrual products, in addition to the practical and cultural barriers that they describe.

Digital censorship of menstruation-related content on Facebook and Instagram (and in outdoor advertising) poses a particular challenge for sustainable brands that, due to budgetary constraints, must rely on digital advertising (Global Citizen, 2020). While a global brand like Procter and Gamble can advertise their products on other platforms after having their products advertised on one platform blocked, a sustainable brand may have their advertising completely blocked on all the social media platforms they rely on. The analysis shows that unequal exposure to digital censorship is a form of structural inequality.

Furthermore, the psychological barrier of menstrual disgust identified by Kasuga et al. (2024) compounds the digital suppression problem (Lather and Singh, 2025).

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The following key findings emerged from the thematic analysis of the secondary literature:

Finding 1: Menstrual Taboo and Institutional Censorship Actively Restrict Advertising

- Until 1972, advertising for menstrual products was banned from radio and television in the United States. The first use of the word 'period' in an advertisement was not until 1985 (Connory, 2021).
- As late as 2010, a Kotex tampon advertisement was rejected by three major television networks in the United States for use of the word 'vagina'. Censorship for mentioning anything related to menstruation continues to the present day (Peberdy, et al., 2019).

Finding 2: Conventional Disposable Brands Hold Structural Commercial Dominance

- Procter & Gamble (Always) and Kimberly-Clark (Kotex) are examples of multinational corporations that spend services advertising budgets in the hundreds of millions. This is something that small sustainable brands cannot compete with.
- For purchasing decisions, consumers primarily use brand familiarity, and therefore allow market dominance of disposable brands, as these brands only have to advertise and not be of good quality (Ramírez-Morales, et al. 2025).

Finding 3: Digital Platform Restrictions and Consumer Awareness Deficits Reinforce Invisibility

- Limited consumer awareness was identified as the most consistent barrier to the adoption of reusable menstrual products across ten international studies involving 4,721 participants (Kaur, et al., 2018).
- Social media platforms the primary affordable advertising channel for sustainable brands repeatedly censor or restrict menstruation-related content, including Modibodi's film (banned by Facebook) and THINX's advertisements (restricted in the New York subway system).

Discussion

The findings collectively reveal that the advertising invisibility of sustainable menstrual products is not accidental, nor is it a reflection of inferior product quality or weak consumer demand for sustainability. Rather, it is the outcome of at least three mutually reinforcing structural forces cultural taboo and censorship, commercial market dominance, and digital platform restrictions each of which independently disadvantages eco-friendly brands and all of which, operating in combination, create a near-impenetrable barrier to promotional visibility (Khanna, et al., 2017).

The historical dimension of this problem is particularly significant. Røstvik (2018) century-long analysis demonstrates that the advertising norms governing menstrual products were constructed over generations with an explicit emphasis on concealment, shame, and secrecy.

Conclusion

This research aimed to analyse how sustainable menstrual products advertise based on existing literature. It considered existing empirical studies as well as market analyses, and established three intertwined forces explaining the lack promotional visibility of eco-friendly menstrual products. These three forces consisted of the cultural stigma surrounding menstruation, the monopolizing presence of conventional disposable products, and the digital consumer awareness gap. The research indicated that sustainable menstrual products are accurately defined by the expression "green, but invisible". The research focused on three specific objectives, and related to the first of these objectives, this research demonstrated that the extensive history of shame-filled, censorship-led advertising for menstrual products, has created both psychological and structural barriers for the provision of advertising for sustainable products.

With respect to the second objective, the analysis revealed that the advertising and familiarity advantage held by conventional disposable menstrual product brands creates a structural inequality that sustainable alternatives cannot overcome through product quality or environmental credentials alone. With respect to objective 3, the study found that digital platform restrictions disproportionately affect sustainable brands reliant on social media, while persistent consumer awareness deficits compound this disadvantage at every stage of the consumer decision journey.

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