

Pushing Period Progressivism: An Analysis of Menstrual Product Advertisements

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Abstract

The messaging surrounding menstruation has long incorporated misconceptions that are often inaccurate, insensitive, and bordering on absurd. This research seeks to define and better understand period stigmatization and how advertising for menstrual products contributes to it. This study analyzes past literature on the history of menstrual advertising, social perceptions of menstruation, and how women perceive themselves while menstruating. Then, this article examines the role of menstrual advertising in perpetuating social stigma surrounding periods by analyzing current social media ads. A contextual analysis of five of the most popular period product brands in 2022 finds that period advertising is adapting and changing in the modern world and embracing a more progressive tone as it shifts away from gender stereotypes, false ideas of femininity, and themes of shame from its past.

I. Introduction

Approximately 26% of the world's population experience menstruation. Women reportedly spend an average of seven years actively menstruating in their lifetime (UNICEF, 2018). Menstruation, or more commonly called someone's "period," is a common occurrence that most women have become accustomed to since their early teenage years. Whether they were taught about it in school, by their parent/guardian, friends, or other sources, adolescent girls typically are taught not only how to manage their symptoms while on their periods (i.e., pads, tampons, pain killers) but are also inherently taught the stigma surrounding menstruation (Chrisler, 2011).

Stigma refers to "any stain or mark that renders the individual's body or character defective" (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011). Period stigma derives itself from a long history of misogyny; societal taboos stem from historical beliefs that menstruating women were unclean or tarnished. These taboos have integrated themselves into modern society to the degree that terms such as "period" and "tampon" are considered socially unacceptable specifically when mentioned in public spaces and around men. The stigmatization of periods negatively affects the attitudes and experiences of women all over the world. This stigma can lead to negative consequences concerning young girls mental and physical health, sexuality, and overall well-being (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011).

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This article examines how menstrual product packaging and advertising perpetuates period stigma. Before discussing the research conducted, this paper examines previous literature and research on the stigmatization of menstruation and menstrual product advertising. It is important to note that the literature discussed in this study primarily used the terms women and womanhood to discuss menstruation. This literature is mostly from the 1990s and early 2000s and reflects the lack of gender inclusivity or awareness of people's experiences outside the gender binary common to that social climate. Following the literature review, this article considers the bounds and limitations of the gender binary while discussing experiences that exist outside of it and their representations through advertising.

II. Literature Review

Past scholarship has examined the history of how society views menstruation, the stigmatization of menstruation, how this stigma affects women's perceptions of themselves, and menstrual product packaging and advertising. This review examines literature from communications-based research and theory, but also literature from sociological and psychological perspectives. Feminist theory, stigma theory, objectification theory, and terror management theory were used in this literature review to explore the positioning of menstruating in society. The literature reviewed for this paper directly examines young menstruating people (specifically cisgender women) in the United States.

Historical Views on Menstruation

Menstruation has been painted in a negative light throughout history. Aristotle once wrote in the 3rd century BCE that the reason women are inferior to men is because they menstruate, the Old Testament of the Bible refers to menstruating women being unclean, and the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, believed that women were inferior because of their reproductive biology (Andrist, 2008). Social scientists have indicated that menstruation has been portrayed as a social stigma and that it is something women must correct, or they forfeit their own femininity. Taboos surrounding menstruation have existed throughout history and have been documented in the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia with beliefs such as:

Drops of menstrual blood upon the ground or in a river kill plants and animals; wells run dry if a menstruating woman draws water from them; men become ill if they are touched by or use any objects that have been touched by a menstruating woman; beer turns sour if a menstruating woman enters a brewery and beer, wine, vinegar, milk, and jam go bad if touched by a menstruating woman (Chrisler, 2011, p. 203).

These taboos and fears surrounding menstruation extend even to biological functioning: "As recently as the 1930s, scientists were attempting to demonstrate that menstruating women exuded menotoxins (i.e., poisonous elements) in their menstrual blood, perspiration, saliva, urine, and tears" (Chrisler, 2011, p. 203).

In modern times these taboos might seem silly or absurd, but current stereotypes and stigma are rooted in these old beliefs. Today it is not uncommon for people to find actively menstruating individuals incapable of many tasks. Women today are not expected to play sports, swim, do extensive labor, eat certain foods, or engage in sexual intercourse while on their periods, and all these expectations come from centuries of misogyny and the social demanding of menstrual suppression (Andrist, 2008). These social contexts and cues impact not only how society views menstruating women but also how they view themselves.

Women's Perceptions of Themselves While Menstruating

The average cisgender woman will menstruate around once every 28 days from around the age of 13-15 until menopause. Even accounting for pregnancies, the average woman will have between 350-400 periods in her lifetime (Ginsburg, 1996). Social perceptions of menstruation help to shape how women feel about themselves while on their period, and period advertisements aid this by providing mass messages about periods and about womanhood, femininity, and body image. Advertising can negatively affect how young girls feel about themselves, with lots of past and current menstrual advertising expressing themes of guilt, secrecy, and shame surrounding periods (Liu et al., 2021).

Silence and Shame

Messaging surrounding menstruation can lead to young women feeling as if they must suppress and conceal all signs of menstruation so that they can fit into society. Women often feel as though they must hide the fact that they are on their period and instead portray an appearance society would view as clean and pure. They commonly feel as if they are weakened during their period, a mindset reinforced by the social expectations that women hide their period symptoms such as cramps, fatigue, and bloating, as well as any sign of bleeding (Liu et al., 2021). Often the message is sent to young women that “it is okay to menstruate as long as you do not mention it and no one knows you are doing it” (Chrisler, 2011, p. 202). The social expectation that a woman is silent about their period produces feelings of shame concerning all aspects of menstruation and this leads to feelings of embarrassment that encourages young girls to loath and regret their periods, even though menstruation is a sign of a healthy female body (Simes & Berg, 2001). This embarrassment and shame lead women to often obsess over being fresh, secure, and discreet on their periods sometimes to the degree where they do not properly or healthily take care of their physical and mental state while menstruating (Simes & Berg, 2001).

Fear and Avoidance

Society conditions women to fear the discovery by others that they are on their period (even people as close as their own family), but they also must fear the threat of how others will perceive their actions. The stereotype of the “erratic” and “out-of-control” premenstrual woman is a topic of great concern for many women every day, menstruating or not (Chrisler, 2011). PMS (premenstrual syndrome) has been coined as the “menstrual monster” in modern times and has sparked self-help books and seminars on how to teach women to overcome their unfeminine behavior and reject the consequences of their own hormones (Chrisler, 2011). The lack of menstrual education causes adolescent women to easily believe these stereotypes and messages about their periods, creating a false sense of shame and silence for a shared, natural experience. Young women often hear statements about women not being rational or logical while “suffering” from their periods, such as when Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor was nominated for the Supreme Court and many people made comments about how she would act when working on her period. Such as when G. Gordon Liddy said “Let’s hope that the key conferences aren’t when she’s menstruating or something, or just before she’s going to menstruate. That would be bad. Lord knows what we would get then!” (Chrisler, 2011, p. 204). Statements like this perpetuate the idea that women are not competent while menstruating and when left unchecked in society, women internalize them and begin to believe not only that others will perceive them as inept, but that they are inherently inept because of their periods.

History of Period Advertising

Menstrual product advertising poses a crucial point in the development of young women’s views, feelings, and perceptions of menstruation. According to the Grand View Research (2018), in 2017 the menstrual product market was valued at \$29.62 billion with an expected compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6.5% from 2018 to 2025. From new technologies and the ever-changing social landscape, menstrual advertisements are projected to become more personalized from the use of social media data and audience analytics. As this market grows, new menstrual campaigns should adapt and change to become more inclusive, and as it continues to grow, the relative modernity of menstrual advertisements must be discussed. According to Liu et al. (2021), until 1972, menstrual product advertisements were banned from TV and radio, and the word period didn’t occur onscreen until 1985. As evidenced by previously discussed literature, the history of periods and the social stigma connected to them is considerably longer than the history of menstrual product advertising. It wasn’t until 11 years ago that red liquid was used to advertise period products instead of the commonly used blue liquid. Fluid was often not shown at all as to not portray a too graphic view of periods (Stamper, 2011).

Period Packaging and Advertising Issues

In the last 30 years, menstrual product advertising has evolved. The colors, people, circumstances, and designs have changed, but the message that these products portray is deeply rooted in the shame and misogyny associated with periods. Ginsburg (1996) states that “the very design of menstrual products encourages their discretionary handling,” such as, “the packaging, the casings in which the products are

individually wrapped, and the actual pads and tampons themselves” (p. 367). Ginsburg studied 150 boxes of tampons and pads and found that menstruation itself was rarely referred to on the packaging of period products. Menstrual product packaging appeared to lack any suggestion of how the product was intended for use and did this in two main ways. The packaging often had no reference to women visually, whether that be a drawing or picture, and featured no use of the color red (instead common colors were white and light pastel blues and pinks). In a similar study, menstrual product advertisements from 1985-2001 from magazines were analyzed, and five themes were revealed: silence and shame, embarrassment, ways to get caught, how to avoid getting caught, and always dirty (Simes & Berg, 2001). It is important to note that the themes found and described by Simes and Berg are consistent with themes found by other scholars from the late 1990s onwards, silence and shame being a considerably popular discussion point.

More recent menstrual product advertisements have begun to deviate from the themes of shame and silence. Period advertisements from the late 2010s highlight ideal body types, femininity, and traditional beauty norms less than previous advertisements (Liu et al., 2021). This move toward more inclusive, shameless period advertising can help to empower specifically younger consumers and begin to oppose menstrual stigma. This transition of messaging and progress is important to track and can give important insight into where the industry has left to go.

III. Methods

This study aims to answer the following questions about period stigmatization:

RQ1: How do period advertisements amplify social stigma associated with menstruating?

RQ2: Does the use of color, body imagery, and text in period advertisements emphasize themes of shame and a societally constructed idea of femininity?

To further investigate the role of period advertisements in social stigmatization surrounding menstruation, this study analyzes a combination of social media and print advertisements from five popular period product brands: Always, Kotex, DivaCup, Tampax, and Playtex. These five brands were chosen from a study gathered by the Statista Research Department for their Feminine Hygiene Market report where the best-selling tampon brands of 2018 and the most used pad and napkin brands of 2020 in the United States were compiled by based on the United Nations data and Simmons National Consumer Survey (Statista 2020; Drug Store News 2018). A mixed methods analysis that combines qualitative contextual analysis with quantitative measurement of imagery on social media posts was chosen to explore this topic. The aim of this method is to analyze and contextualize the uses of color, body imagery, and text used in social media and print advertisements to further understand their role in the social stigmatization of periods.

For social media advertisements, Instagram and Facebook were chosen, as they are the most popular social media platforms for 13-to-17-year-old girls and adult women (Liu et al., 2021). On the two platforms public posts of images were indexed. The most recent 15 posts (starting from March 31st) from Always, Kotex, DivaCup, Tampax, and Playtex’s social media accounts were analyzed, for a total of 150 social media posts (75 from Instagram and 75 from Facebook). Only the images posted were analyzed for the qualitative textual analysis – this excludes any captions or hashtags, but does include any text on the posted image itself. If posts included multiple images, all images posted together were considered as one post from this page. Videos were also excluded in this research.

Table 1: Codebook for Quantitative Analysis

Variables	Yes	No
Period Ads Containing Red	12	138
Period Ads Containing Pink	83	67
Period Ads Visually Referencing Female Reproductive Organs	6	144
Period Ads Visually Showing Period Product/Period Product Packaging	40	110
Period Ads Without Text	119	31
Period Ads Not Deliberately Depicting White Cisgender Women	58	92

IV. Findings

From the 150 social media posts collected for this study, three key themes emerged: the use of color, the use of language, and racial, gender, and body-type inclusivity. These three themes aligned with the research questions presented for this study and will be further explored individually and in conjunction with the findings from Liu et al. in their past research on the evolving landscape of menstrual product advertising.

Use of Color and Imagery

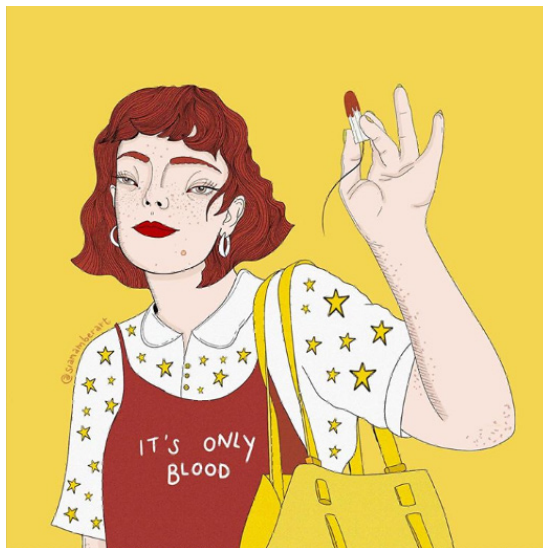


Figure 1: Tampax Facebook Post 5/20/20

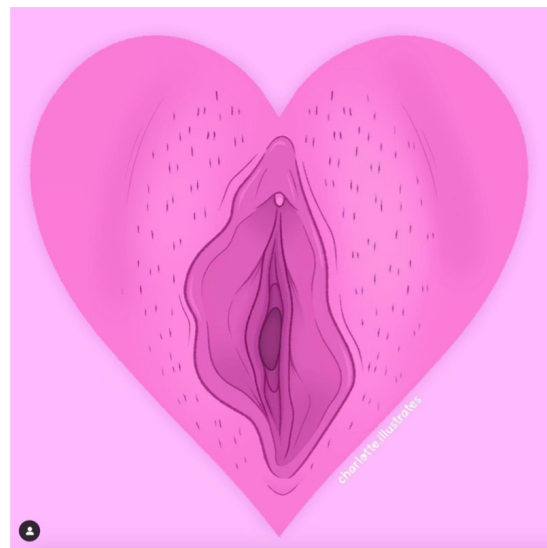


Figure 2: Always Instagram Post 2/14/22

Color

Of the 150 social media posts from the five period-product brands analyzed, only 12 posts (8 percent) included the use of the color red. This is in stark comparison to the use of the color pink in the posts analyzed, nearly 55% of the sample. For many of these posts, pink was not only used as an accent or text color, but it was also commonly used as the background color or main color in the image.

From the sparse use of the color red by menstrual brands, it can be projected that the use of the color is still perceived as a taboo in 2022. These findings correlate to previous scholarship concerning the themes of silence and shame found from historical perceptions of menstruation. The use of the color red is increasing, as seen in Figure 1, and that should be noted. However, red continues to be one of the least likely colors to be used by menstrual companies even though it is the color most directly associated with periods. This data suggests that the color red still has a negative connotation.

It is important to reference past menstrual advertisements and reiterate how red liquid wasn't even used in menstrual advertisements until 2011 (Stampler, 2011). The use of a red liquid is also perceived differently than the direct reference to blood, as a red liquid that doesn't have the same color, texture, or consistency as period blood or period clots is a much safer, yet still progressive, decision for period brands. All five of these brands use blues, pinks, and purples as their main brand colors and very seldom incorporate red into their advertising.

Imagery

Another visually powerful point made by these social media posts was the lack of images visually representing or referencing female reproductive body parts. Only 4% of the 150 social media posts visually referenced a vagina or uterus. Out of these six images, only one image referenced the vagina and vulva (Figure 2) and only three images referenced the uterus.

The glaring lack of imagery and text portraying and discussing the female reproductive system supports the projected stigmatization of menstruation and the lack of discussion of female reproductive health and education in the 21st century. By seldomly referencing the vagina, vulva, and uterus, period brands make it challenging for young menstruators to visually understand their own body, the intended usage of these products, and the natural occurrence of menstruation.

Notable imagery from the social media posts also includes the visual representation of the period products themselves or of the period product packaging. From the 150 posts, only 40 (approximately 26%) contained a visual representation of a tampon, pad, menstrual cup, or a clear image of the packaging for these items. This, along with the lack of visual imagery referencing the female reproductive system, creates a social silence around tampons, pads, and menstrual cups and how, when, and why they are used. It perhaps can be argued that it is not the place of period brands to educate on the use of their products, but considering society views menstruation as shameful and a taboo occurrence across history and across cultures, brands that are not actively working against period stigma may cause them to become inherently intertwined with it. It becomes paradoxical that products intended for menstrual use further and profit off its stigmatization.

Use of Language



Figure 3: Kotex Instagram Post 1/18/22



Figure 4: Kotex Instagram Post 11/12/21

Femininity and Menstruation

For this study, the captions associated with the images posted on Instagram and Facebook were not analyzed. However, the study did examine any typography that was part of an image or graphic posted. This section of research centers on text-focused images and analyzes the language, tone, and themes of these posts. Figures 3 and 4 were posted on the U by Kotex Instagram account. Figure 3 states “The feminine urge to end period stigma” over a picture of three female-presenting people. The term “feminine urge” became popular on the internet in late 2021 and is used satirically and earnestly on social media through memes (Kambhampaty, 2021). These memes portrayed a societally constructed and rigid version of femininity, and subsequently womanhood – two things not inherently tied to one another. Some use was ironic, but a considerable number of these memes were serious in nature, perpetuating damaging stereotypes around femininity and gender identity firmly within the binary.

The use of this language in Figure 3 is clearly meant to be serious and not satirical, but this specific language can be problematic. Although periods are directly correlated to the female reproductive system, this does not make them inherently “feminine.” By directly correlating femininity and periods, false ideas of womanhood, femininity, and menstruation are perpetuated alongside with furthering period stigma, marginalizing how menstruators who don’t identify as cisgender women experience menstruation. As previous literature discusses, the theme of fear and avoidance is prevalent in period advertisements. The fear and avoidance of menstruation is often experienced differently by those who do not identify as cisgender women because they don’t necessarily identify with femininity and womanhood in the same way and may experience fear or avoidance of menstruation and related discussions that stems from their separate gender identity.

Normalizing the Messy Realities of Menstruation

Figure 4 is an example of a more honest and progressive tone used by period brands that could further education surrounding the seldom-discussed realities of menstruation and people’s experiences outside of binary womanhood. This text-heavy post includes the colors pink and red as its background while stating a fact that many menstruators are well aware of – that period blood isn’t always red. Images such as these are integral to breaking period stigma as they openly show and speak on the reality of periods. Posts such as these help to educate and define what periods are to those that might be unfamiliar with more unspoken details concerning menstruation.

Similarly, Always posted images on Instagram that defined and spoke on what period poverty is (Figure 5). This recent campaign to #endperiodpoverty was used by both Always and Kotex during the bounds of this study and suggest that period brands are looking to more accurately define periods and educate all people on issues surrounding menstruation.

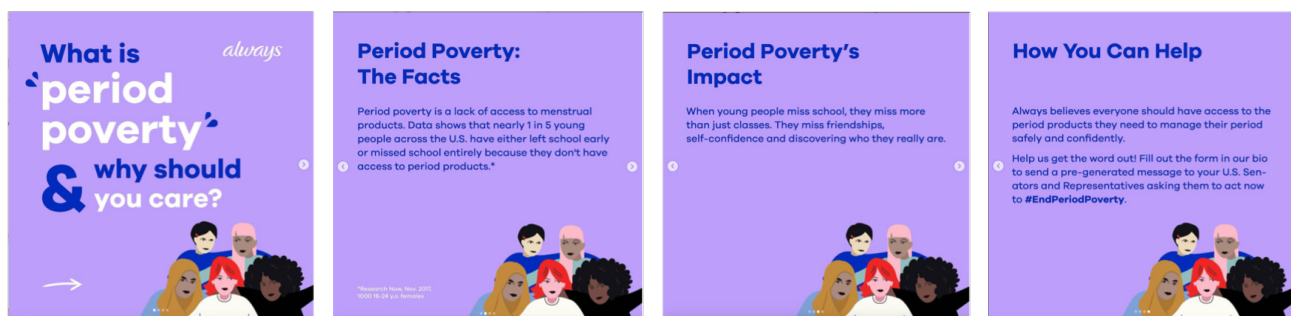


Figure 5: Always Instagram Post 2/16/22

As discovered by previous research on menstrual advertising (Lui, et al. 2021), text in menstrual ads often portrays themes of secrecy, shame, and purity. As an example, an advertisement by Kotex in 2013 included the copy: “Don’t worry. Even your biggest crush won’t know you’re on your period. Unless you tell him.” It is unlikely that similar language would be by one of the five brands today. However, through unclear language and a lack of direct speech on female reproductive organs and “gross” period details, the social media advertisements in this current sample do continue to emphasize secrecy and shame. At the same time, the brands exhibit an increasing social consciousness and expanding representation of menstrual experiences outside the cisgender, white female narrative and lens of heterosexuality.

Racial, Gender, Body-Type Inclusivity



Figure 6: DivaCup Instagram Post 3/16/22

Of the 150 social media posts analyzed for this study, 79 of them featured images of people (including artists’ renditions). More than half – approximately 53% - included some form of a menstruating person. For purposes of this study, people were defined for this data collection as any person depicted enough in the image to differentiate race and gender presentation. Out of the 79 posts featuring images of people, 58 of those period advertisements did not solely depict white-cisgender-presenting women (39% of total posts and 73% of posts depicting people). Only one post clearly depicted a non-female-presenting person while actively menstruating (Figure 6). It is important to note that none of the previous literature focused on gender inclusivity or experiences of menstruation outside the gender binary. Discussions of gender identity and the binary itself have only begun to gain social acceptability recently.

Menstrual Externalities

Figure 6 is the only post to clearly showcase a non-female-presenting menstruator. This image also depicts female-presenting menstruators of multiple races and body types. This image was analyzed further because of its clear statement of inclusivity and realism. Figure 6 not only shows multiple people on their periods, but it also shows what many might consider the hidden, secret, or even shameful reality of periods. All the people depicted are using a form of heating pad, are in comfortable loungewear, and are surrounded by what could be classified as a mess. Down to the details of the mismatched socks, piles of food, blankets, messy hair, and no pants, this image very clearly is meant to portray what is the reality of periods for many people. This less-polished narrative presents a more relatable portrayal of how many people experience menstruation. While it is expected that menstruation does not hinder any part of a person’s life and often accepted reality that life must go on, many experience difficulty and hindrance due to menstruation. This is seldomly discussed in society, because patriarchy decenters the non-cisgender male experience and devalues those outside its identity, especially when displaying perceived weakness.

Not only is Figure 6 more gender, race, and body-type inclusive than most images analyzed for this research, this post by DivaCup also works to break down the clean, polished ideal that menstruators feel the need to portray while on their periods. It is important to talk about how period stigma leads menstruators to hide the messy and unhinged aspects of periods, so they do not forfeit their perceived femininity based on what society (through period advertisements) tells them is “feminine.” Period advertisements such as Figure 6 suggest a push against gender stereotypes and reject the female beauty standard. As Lui et al. found in their study, advertisements that used “excessively feminine” images and text failed to empower women and instead brought upon feelings of shame and insecurity.

The use of male-presenting figures in period advertisements has also shifted in the last eight years. Compared to a Kotex advertisement from 2014 where men were “hailed” for buying period products for the women in their lives, current social media posts are focused more on including men as menstruators. The advertisement from 2014 helps to include non-menstruators in the menstruating experience and advertisements like this work to normalize period products in households and having open conversations about periods regardless of gender identity.

V. Conclusion

The findings from this analysis of period advertisements suggests a shift away from the themes of menstrual advertisements of the 1990s and early 2000s. Themes of shame and a false idea of femininity can still be found in modern period ads, but a more progressive tone has begun to take over the social space of menstruating.

This research specifically has a few limitations. First, the sample is by no means exhaustive, nor does it reflect the entirety of period advertising on social media. Another limitation of note is that a considerable amount of the literature used for this study focuses on cisgender women and does little to dissect racial impacts or differences. This of course does not capture the expansive and diverse set of people who experience menstruation. This data and subsequent analysis do take gender and racial identities into consideration but menstrual product advertising, as shown in these findings, is not frequent enough or fully representative.

This research suggests that social media may have helped to create a space for period progressivism. Further research is necessary to determine more conclusive results about the association between period advertising and period stigmatization. Subsequent research on the subject could be conducted to measure the role social media has played in expanding and progressing advertising in the menstrual product industry

This article tracked the usage of color, text, and constructed personhood from limiting and stigmatizing usage to more expansive and inclusive construction. There is more representation and portrayal of reality necessary - and at a higher frequency - in menstrual product advertising to undo stigma and explore the inclusive menstrual experience. By portraying people of all identities, using clear imagery of the female reproductive system, showcasing pads, tampons, and menstrual cups, and using colors that aren't generally socially seen as “feminine,” period advertisements are beginning to break down period stigma instead of actively contributing to it.

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