Menstruation in Marketing: Stigma, #femvertising, and Transmedia Messaging

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Menstruation in marketing: stigma, #femvertising, and transmedia messaging

Catherine A. Coleman and Katherine C. Sredl

Citation:

Abstract
This chapter’s inquiry into femvertising explores how #LikeAGirl, a gendered corporate social responsibility (GCSR) campaign, aligns with or undermines feminist goals of collective struggle against oppressive power relations in transmedia contexts. It does so by exploring the ways that gender stigmas are challenged and reproduced in brand-driven femvertising discourses for menstrual products, particularly through Millennial and Gen Z consumer discourses of menstruation using transmedia (i.e., hashtags, visual, text) content. We find that transmedia content – consumer images and replication of CSR hashtags – captures collective struggle related to stigma and the female body, uses humorous and/or transgressive posts as a form of collective de-stigmatization, and calls for collective action for menstrual justice. This chapter concludes by offering directions for further research on moral obligations to consumers in the intersecting theoretical domains of CSR, the marketplace, vulnerability, and feminism.

Keywords
In a 2020 collaboration with Swedish feminine care brand Intimina, the Pantone Color Institute created the custom “Period” red to de-stigmatize and normalize menstruation (Jardine 2020). This campaign is among others in recent years from brands such as Queen V, Lola, Thinx, and Libresse that have been testing the boundaries, amidst broader feminist discourses and social trends such as the #MeToo movement, of long-standing taboos surrounding menstruation. Their strategies address various historically problematic physical, cultural, and embodied representations of menstruation, such as making #BloodNormal (Libresse), imagining what it would be like if men had periods (Thinx’s MENstruation campaign), and telling gripping “Womb Stories” (Libresse). But these efforts remain controversial. For example, Plan International UK’s #periodemoji design, leveraging emoji language to overcome period shame, was rejected until their partnership with NHS Blood and Transplant yielded a blood drop emoji (Plan International UK 2020). A recent “New Way to Period” campaign from Modibodi, a brand that sells leak-proof underwear, was initially removed by Facebook for violating guidelines with “shocking, sensational, disrespectful or excessively violent” content–red period blood (Smiley 2020). Ultimately, in the wake of social media backlash and upon review, Facebook retracted its decision. These examples suggest both the inveterate stigma of menstruation and the shifting discourses in the digital era, in which new avenues for activism have opened conversations and offered opportunities to challenge stigmas.

This chapter arises out of a shared interest between its authors of the ways that gender stigmas are reproduced and challenged in online contexts by brands and consumers. We build on two prior research projects. The first examined ways in which stigmas of feminism have been used to
(de)legitimize feminists and underlying tenets of feminism, drawing from almost 8,000 tweets using Always #likeagirl and the backlash #likeaboy, as well as hashtags reflecting broader cultural conversations about gender (Coleman and Zayer 2015). The second examined lived, embodied experiences of menstruation as visually depicted on Instagram (Sredl and Robertson 2018). Building on these two projects and, as with Maclaran and Kravetz (2018), finding inspiration from recent feminist fourth-wave use of internet as an area for further theorizing, we explore ways by which stigmas are challenged and reproduced in brand-driven femvertising discourses for menstrual products (e.g., Always) and Millennial and Gen Z consumer discourses of menstruation using transmedia (i.e., hashtags, visual, text) content.

Contemporary discourse around stigmatized representations of women’s bodies reflects new interest in feminism among Gen Z and Millennial consumers, producing a form of activism focused on the restructuring of social institutions in ways that support and are supported by neoliberalism (Keller 2019). Questions of agency are highlighted in neoliberal contexts, with (young) women “often presented as autonomous, agentic, and empowered subjects” (Gill and Scharff 2011, p. 9). Indeed, this is how various scholars have interpreted femvertising campaigns including Always #LikeAGirl (e.g., Varghese and Kumar 2020; Windels et al. 2020); thus, we consider Prügl’s (2015) work on governmentality and the neoliberalization of feminism. As advertisers have become more attuned to problematic representations of gender, perhaps due to years of sustained critique (Zayer and Coleman 2015) and likely due to “the social media jury… challenging cultural norms and notions about how we talk about – and to – women” (Zmuda and Diaz 2014), they increasingly have employed empowerment marketing, go-girl marketing, and femvertising (Davidson 2015). Nonetheless, “marketers are being careful not to label themselves or their messages as feminist” (Zmuda and Diaz 2014), highlighting the ongoing
stigmatization and regulation of feminism and feminist goals in the marketplace. Scholars have examined ways in which such stigmatizations, as those surrounding menstruation, reinforce advertisers’ perceptions of women’s vulnerabilities and reiterate discourses about protection of women and women’s bodies (Malefyt and McCabe 2016). These tensions suggest that while scholars have begun to answer calls for further examination of femvertising discourses, the politics of gender, and their implications for gender relations in business and society (Zayer, Coleman, and Orjuela 2018), there is still much to learn.

To achieve our aim, we begin with a brief discussion on stigma and stigmatization of menstruation. Much of the academic, including feminist, literature on menstruation relies on Goffman’s (1963) stigma theory (MacLean, Hearle, and Ruwanpura 2020). In fact, according to Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013), menstruation is stigmatized through all three of Goffman’s (1963) categories: body, character, and identity. Feminist scholars understand menstruation to be a biological event experienced within contexts of sociocultural and political meanings and practices, both personal and collective: it is “complex, subjective, interactive, varied, and politized” (see also Bobel 2010; Johnston-Robledo and Stubbs 2013, p. 1).

Menstruation is a particularly established way by which gendered bodies are ascribed meaning, and protection/hiding is a common theme of coping responses to the stigmas of menstruation, making menstruation discourses an intriguing context. Next, we review scholarship on representations of menstruation in consumer culture, which leads to a discussion of more recent “empowerment” efforts through femvertising and, specifically, Always #LikeAGirl. These concepts frame our ultimate aim of incorporating consumer-generated online techno and visual discourse on periods into the conversations of stigma and gender. Noting prior research on online activism and social movements, we consider the iterative engagement with menstruation between
brands and consumers to understand how stigmas of menstruation and menstruating bodies are reproduced or challenged.

**Stigma and menstruation**

In the decades since Goffman’s (1963) seminal sociological work on stigma, scholars across a range of disciplines from medicine, psychology, health sciences, and, of course, marketing and consumer research have examined and utilized the concept of stigma to understand social interaction and identities. The term stigma is handed down from the Greek practice of burning or cutting physical marks into those deemed tainted or immoral and to be avoided, though, today, stigma is an attribute that yields a discrediting or “spoiled social identity,” and, thus, a matter of social context (Bos et al. 2013; Goffman 1963). Stigma can be overt or subtle, and often relates to power and exploitation, norm enforcement, and disease avoidance (Bos et al. 2013).

Drawing from previous theories, Pryor and Reeder (2011) developed a conceptual model comprising four related manifestations of stigma – self-stigma, stigma by association, structural stigma, and public stigma, the latter of which they argue is the foundation of the other three. Public stigma is defined as “the consensual understanding that a social attribute is devalued,” and structural stigma relates to ideologies and institutions that are “perpetuated by the hegemony and the exercise of social, economic, and political power” (Bos et al. 2013, p. 4). Thus, as Sandikci and Ger (2010) argue, while any difference theoretically could be stigmatized, stigmatization ultimately reflects power and dominant group interests, suggesting that the choice to engage with stigmatized practices demonstrates struggles for power. More recent developments towards identifying social processes that incorporate structural discrimination further open opportunity to examine the influence of power in determining the distribution of stigma and even the moral
processes underlying stigma (Link and Phelan 2001). This is important because menstruation has been found in various ways across cultures to both maintain women’s disempowered social positions and to mark them as less pure, physically and morally – for example, in preventing girls and women from obtaining a full education (Steinfield et al. 2019) or accessing places of worship (MacLean, Hearle, and Ruwanpura 2020), and through shame. The latter is particularly apparent in dominant representations, such as “the curse” of menstruation (Luke 1997) or the double entendre of the menstrual stain—the stain of blood and the stain of character when one fails to contain evidence of menses (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013). These discourses may result in isolation and/or purification practices (e.g., Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013; Steinfield et al. 2019), thereby maintaining control over women’s bodies and leading women to seek various ways to control periods (MacLean, Hearle, and Ruwanpura 2019; Merskin 1999), often turning to market-based solutions. Thus, we turn briefly to literature in consumer research on stigma and stigma management to frame further discussion of menstrual stigma management.

**Stigma management and menstruation**

Extant literature in marketing and consumer research has examined ways in which marketplace stakeholders (re)create or resist stigma within broader sociocultural contexts (Mirabito et al. 2016). Stigmas are not static, but rather relying on cultural institutions that support and enforce stigma, “the rendering of stigma is an active, continually evolving process” (Mirabito et al. 2016, p. 172). As such, importantly, stigmas are subject to management and change. Consumer research on stigma management reveals a variety of contexts of focus on the self or institutions for reform (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Crockett 2017; Sandikci and Ger 2010; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Ustuner and Holt 2007). This scholarship, found primarily in consumer culture and
transformative consumer research literatures, demonstrates ways by which consumers utilize various coping strategies and marketplace resources to accept, negotiate, or challenge stigmas (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Kozinets 2001) through individual and collective identity work (Thompson 2014), for example, by embracing (Sandikci and Ger 2010), reappropriating (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), and/or counternarrating (Crockett 2017) stigmatizing terminology and practices.

Similarly, research on menstrual stigma management demonstrates various ways, often through great effort, by which women the world over have worked to manage menstruation and stigmas associated with it, including through marketplace solutions, such as the use of oral contraceptives to regulate or eliminate periods and menstrual hygiene or sanitary products. Various projects have been dedicated to examining discourses of menstruation in what Kane (1990, p. 82) considered “powerful weapons in an ideological battle for control of women’s sexuality” – advertisements (e.g., Erchull 2013; Mandziuk 2010; Merskin 1999; Park 1996).

**Menstruation marketing and femvertising**

As menstruation is invested with historical and cultural stigmatizing myths, it is not surprising that modern advertising reflects myths and taboos associated with women’s bodies, particularly in “feminine hygiene” advertising (Merskin 1999). Scholars have outlined a history of representations relying on stigmas that paradoxically focus on sanitizing and protecting the female body to provide freedom and secrecy, concealment, and discretion to protect the female character (e.g., Erchull 2013; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013; Mandziuk 2010; Merskin 1999; Park 1996). Messages promoting cleanliness and purity coincide with 20th-century modernity projects, in which the social, medical, and commercial intersect. In her examination of
the 1920s Kotex ads, for example, Mandziuk (2010) argues that advertisers were navigating an ideological space between the “hygienic crisis” of menstruation, accompanied by its prohibitive embarrassments, and newfound freedoms of the modern world (see also Erchull 2013; Merskin 1999; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013). Malefyt and McCabe (2016) demonstrate that these conflicts have persisted into the 21st century, as advertisers approach menstruation as something women should hide, a vulnerability, something from which commercial products can protect women. Through content analysis of sanitary product ads and interviews with female informants, the authors argue that brands place and characterize women in dichotomous states of “on or off” their periods and offer agency in a box of tampons, while women understand their menstruation as natural, agentic, and powerful. The authors conclude that as long as advertisers continue to focus on the functional protection aspects of sanitary products, their appeals will always frame periods and, by extension, women’s bodies as problematic; women will continue to embody the paradox of periods as social stigma that they need help hiding with the use of sanitary products, even as they understand their periods as natural embodiments of their womanhood.

For younger generations of consumers, claims of protection and freedom from periods are proving insufficient. Millennial and Gen Z consumers increasingly expect transparency, “healthy and sustainable” products, safe alternatives (Abrams 2015; McNeil 2003), and for brands to enact values. Recently, entrepreneurial brands have promoted alternatives to the disposable pads and tampons long promoted as women’s ticket to freedom. In addition to newer products such as period underwear and liquid-catching disks, consumption of menstruation cups such as DivaCup has also increased. While period product alternatives such as these only make up a fraction of the $19 billion global market for menstruation products (Wertheim 2015), they are contributing, along with birth control that limits or eliminates flow and decreases demand, to declining or
stagnating sales of traditional feminine hygiene products (Gilbert 2016). Additionally, women are starting to “normalize” periods by posting about them on social media and by using period tracker apps (Rabin 2015). To respond to these challenges and with the realization that they were losing relevance, particularly among emergent consumers 16–24 years, Always created the #LikeAGirl campaign to connect with girls and young women on social media and reconnect with them emotionally (Campaign 2015). Thus, a femvertising campaign was born.

**Femvertising context**

Many date the rise of femvertising back to Dove’s 2004 “Campaign for Real Beauty,” which was hailed as a groundbreaking shift in discourses of and about women, calling out the beauty industry of which they are a part for its unrealistic and often harmful representations. But the term “femvertising” wasn’t introduced for another decade, when SheKnows (2014) documented “a shift in marketing where companies realized that women didn’t need to be pandered to or objectified, and ads that inspired women or empowered them were much more likely to create positive buzz around a product.” Dove and other brands that employ femvertising may seek to challenge norms, but they do so within the parameters of commercially viable messages of female empowerment (Lambiase, Bronstein, and Coleman 2017). Even industry trade press, which celebrated the ways in which femvertising was challenging gender norms, at the same time, warned of pinkwashing and noted ways in which advertisers were simultaneously distancing themselves from feminism (Zmuda and Diaz 2014).

Histories of feminism and marketing tell of a sorted and complex relationship, punctuated by “longstanding, and largely irresolvable, arguments about the role of the market in opposing or assisting the feminist cause” (Maclaran 2012, p. 462). Certainly, marketers have long deployed
mixed messages of empowerment and repression to sell, with advertising representations often serving as a site of critique by feminist scholars (Lambiase, Bronstein, and Coleman 2017). Thus, while not an entirely new phenomenon (Maclaran 2012), the rise of “femvertising” in recent years resonates with the tensions of this relationship.

Femvertising is defined by SHE Media as “advertising that employs pro-female talent, messages and imagery to empower women and girls.” Scholars have defined it as “advertising that challenges traditional female advertising stereotypes,” and have distinguished it from prior advertising themes of female liberation for challenging social norms through more explicit acknowledgment that advertising has been at least partially responsible for those stereotypes (Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen 2020, p. 795; see also Eisend 2019). In welcoming this phenomenon in 2014, SheKnows highlighted ten ads that “got femvertising right.” At the top of that list was the Always “Like A Girl” campaign.

Always, the Procter & Gamble-owned feminine product brand launched the “Like A Girl” campaign video on the Always YouTube channel on June 26, 2014. In alignment with much of the historical discourse surrounding menstruation, Always claims a long-standing brand purpose “to empower women and safeguard girls’ confidence.” Building on brand research indicating a strong decline in girls’ confidence as they go through puberty and responding to stagnant sales, the brand determined it time to make their brand purpose explicit (Zmuda and Diaz 2014). A “reading” of the ad suggests the aims of the campaign are to catalyze a social movement “to keep girls’ confidence high during puberty and beyond,” to counteract negative impacts of stereotypes. The brand closes its message by directing viewers to the brand’s social media pages to carry out the call-to-action, which is, “So tell us… what do YOU do #LikeAGirl?” When the Leo Burnett advertising agency placed the commercial on February 1, 2015, during Super Bowl
50, the campaign garnered significant attention from media and consumers alike, which is reflected in ongoing engagement with the hashtag #LikeAGirl.

Social media has been touted as a democratizing force (Kozinets 2001); stigmatization involves power and (dis)empowerment (Sandikci and Ger 2010). Social media may offer a platform for women to challenge the ideologies of advertising, its normative view of women as vulnerable, and the context in which advertising exists: the neoliberal marketplace in which young women are the ideal, self-transforming consumers (Sredl 2018). As young women seek self-definition through participating in social media, they may be opposing who or what is normalized through gendered representations and discourses in ads (Murray 2015). As Keller (2019) notes, recent years have been marked by an increased interest among feminist scholars and the public in the ways that women and girls use social media for feminist activism, including using hashtags and crowdsourced content. For example, Xiong, Cho, and Boatright (2019) demonstrate the interaction between mobilizing forces such as social movement organizations and online spread of the #MeToo movement, a form of hashtag activism. Thus, Always #LikeAGirl is particularly intriguing because femvertising, which is driven by commercial organizations with a platform, is positioned as empowering; but periods have long been stigmatized. We draw from brand- and consumer-generated content on Instagram surrounding the “femvertising” campaign #LikeAGirl and period-related hashtags (e.g., #period, #menstruationmatters, #periodmemes) to understand how stigmas about women’s bodies and lives, specifically menstruation, are challenged and reproduced through brand- and consumer-generated hashtag and visual online content.

Sites of analysis
While the “Like A Girl” campaign’s YouTube debut may make YouTube seem like an ideal site for data collection, the platform is more inclined toward entertainment than toward engagement around topics of menstrual stigma (Arthurs et al. 2018; Lobato 2016). The Always #likeagirl hashtag is a call-to-action for women and girls to share their experiences on Instagram and other social media sites that function on a hashtag economy.

**Hashtags and Instagram**

Hashtags are a form of user-generated content (UGC), a “cultural genre” (Daer et al. 2014; Drenten and Gurrieri 2018, p. 52), and a means of categorizing and searching content, as well as organizing community on the internet. Hashtags include a phrase that categorizes posts, such as #period, and provide a metacomment about the post, such as #periodpain. While both Twitter and Instagram utilize hashtags and much of Always’ early focus for #likeagirl was on Twitter, social media scholars note that hashtags are both functionally different by design across these platforms and that users employ them to different ends: “on Twitter they serve mainly to aggregate conversations; on Instagram they specify the content of pictures as well as connect to ad hoc communities” (Caliandro and Graham 2020, p. 2). Thus, we focused on Instagram as our site of analysis for two reasons. First, social media scholars recently have argued that Instagram’s visual focus opens new ways of “exploring sociocultural processes… through the eyes of social actors, to glimpse into their everyday micro-rituals and private moments” (Caliandro and Graham 2020, p. 2) and call for a native focus on Instagram. Second, as we discuss in the next paragraph, posting on Instagram about one’s menstruation might be part of menstruation for Millennial and Gen Z women.
Research on consumer practices around menstruation suggests that most users who post about menstruation are Millennials and Gen Z (Rosenberg 2018). Second, with 1 billion monthly active users, and making up 70% of the 75.2 billion likes, reactions, shares, and comments on brand-owned content on social media in 2020, Instagram is particularly popular among teenagers, young Millennials, and Gen Z adults (18–34 years old) (AudienceProject; Cooper 2020). Thus, we conceptualize the data we collected to represent voices of these generations. Historically, the visual focus of menstrual product advertising yielded various inorganic and euphemistic visual metaphors for menstruation and bodies controlled by institutional forces; the visual focus of Instagram allows Gen Z and Millennial consumers and brands to iteratively re-image menstruation and stigma. In this way, we answer calls to move beyond discussions of representation and textual analysis (Gill and Scharff 2011; Mitchell 2013) toward the discursive contributions of transmedia UGC in navigating stigma and (em)power(ment).

Instagram, started in October 2010, supports images, video (under 15 seconds), and text, in the forms of captions and hashtags. Instagram’s algorithm creates an interdependence between users, algorithms, and the platform that structure user behavior such that consumers may use popular hashtags to gain visibility and followers (Cotter 2018). Prior feminist media studies scholarship demonstrates, “Femvertising themes are accentuated by social media and online conversation, especially the hashtag” (Rodrigues 2016 as cited by Varghese and Kumar 2020, p. 6).

**Method of analysis**

We reviewed hashtags from 2017 to 2020 and captured Instagram data (captions, comments, images, likes) on menstruation-related hashtags and on #LikeAGirl. We captured data for 96 hours surrounding both November 28, 2017, and September 23, 2018 (192 hours total), and on
all brand posts on the @always_brand account as of December 28, 2020 (454 total posts). We focused analysis on hashtag data collected prior to late 2018, when algorithmic changes created accessibility changes, decreasing the value of hashtags and prioritizing “top posts” selected by the algorithm (Morales n.d.).

For #LikeAGirl, we entered the term in the Instagram search bar, and then screenshot Instagram-generated results that show the top and recent posts. We then opened the top and recent posts and the images, captions, and comments. Next, we reviewed all posts from the @always_brand account (they did not appear in the top and recent #LikeAGirl results). We determined period-related hashtags by first searching 27 US English terms for menstruation. We screenshot the top and recent report to archive that information. For the 10 posts under the most recent and popular hashtags, we used screenshots to record captions, images, top comments, and likes. Not all posts for each hashtag relate to periods or gender, as #LikeAGirl is often used to access the algorithm and get likes, but the majority do.

To begin analysis, we found a place of distance from the data and our assumptions by reading posts with questions of what “surprised, intrigued, and disturbed us” about the data to guide the distancing process (Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein 1997). We discussed our reactions and noted them. Next, we followed an iterative process of reading posts to look for patterns and meanings, and to develop themes within hashtags (Thompson 1997). Then, we compared themes between groups. Finally, we sought areas for theory development by comparing themes with relevant scholarly literature on stigma, gender representation, femvertising, and (fourth-wave) feminism. We then returned to our notes about what “surprised, intrigued, and disturbed us,” and explored how our theoretical insights answered our reactions.

Analysis
We identify three ways that content negotiates feminist goals of collective struggle against oppressive power relations (Prügl 2015) and reproduces and/or challenges stigma. Drawing from Pryor and Reeder’s (2011) taxonomy of stigma, we find that transmedia content (1) signals public and self-stigma through images and hashtags to other users who may engage in similar individual work surrounding empowerment, (2) reappropriates stigmatized bodies with tactics such as humorous and/or transgressive posts of menstruation and menstrual stigma, which we argue may include forms of de-stigmatization by association, and (3) engages with structural stigma by using hashtags and images that signal women’s health issues related to reproduction and menstruation. Through each of these themes, we consider brand and consumer content as reproducing and/or challenging stigma and examine iteration as consumers and brand (re)generate content.

**Signal public and self-stigma**

Data show that most #LikeAGirl posts are user-generated, as opposed to brand-generated, content. Content often relates to empowerment through sports, including by professional, able-bodied female athletes (not sponsored content), and especially through traditionally male-dominated sports. This sport orientation aligns with the commercial framing of the original #likeagirl ad, which focuses on physical abilities such as throwing, running, and fighting. The hashtag also includes reflection about female empowerment in general (see Table 8.1).

In Post 1 (see Table 8.1), Top #LikeAGirl posts [date September 23, 2018] notably, of the nine top and recent posts, four are about the body – weightlifting (2), gymnastics (1), exercise or weight loss (1) – two are about inspiration, one is about women doing something in a traditionally male domain (the band), and one is about girls.
For example, Post 2a and 2b (See Table 8.1) is a post and caption showing a professional mountain bike athlete talking about individual athletic success in a male-dominated sport, as in Post 1. In the caption, the author reflects on her journey of individual physical and emotional strength. We suggest that, in many ways, the brand-introduced hashtag captures or at least rides a feminist movement online related to women’s rights to excel in sports and to have individual agency as expressed through self-improvement and achieving goals. We base our suggestion on the majority of posts with this message.

The text image in Post 3 (see Table 8.1), an @always_brand #LikeAGirl post, signals recovering from shame. As a whole, the text seeks to engage the brand in a movement to create new understandings of tenacity and will as valued female attributes. By signaling shame (failed test, something devalued) and re-framing it as success (Keep Going), Always challenges and reappropriates public and self-stigma (Pryor and Reeder 2011; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). Through “Tell us about a time,” users and brand engage #likeagirl content, images, and captions in a movement to reform social and individual understandings about shame and women’s bodies that underlie and prevent women’s access to public spaces where society recognizes personal success and power, such as sports and school.

In spite of always_brand #LikeAGirl posts challenging stigma around the female body, they are silent on the topic of menstruation. Likewise, #LikeAGirl brand and consumer-generated content situates feminism amidst neoliberal individualism and its gendered subjectivity of individual body and self-work required to succeed in market institutions (Windels et al. 2020). A criticism of this campaign might be that by not talking about menstruation and by focusing on girls who are premenstrual, it enabled user discourse on Instagram to remain silent on that, too. In fact,
very few #LikeAGirl posts also mention menstruation in images or captions. Thus, the hashtag, while reappropriating the stigma of a woman’s body in a male dominated space, avoids engagement with the moral processes that ascribe taboo meanings of uncleanliness to the stigmatized body.

**Reappropriate stigmatized bodies**

While the #LikeAGirl content reappropriates the stigma of a woman’s body in a male-dominated space, yet neglects menstruation, #periodproblems and #period posts images and captions address menstruation directly (see Table 8.1. Posts 4 and 5). Accounts in #period and #periodproblems use humor as a strategy (Pryor and Reeder 2011; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013) to reappropriate transmedia discourse about protection by challenging menstruation as unclean and women’s bodies as devalued. Humor works as a vehicle for managing the fear of uncleanliness. As we see in the top post on #period (Post 4), leaks are a topic of humor instead of fear. The bottom right post in Post 5 (see Table 8.1) humorously discusses management of menstruation-induced hormonal mood swings. Post 6 (see Table 8.1) offers an unapologetic image of blood that Always does not mention. These visual depictions of pain and of blood offer reflections of embodied experiences of menstruation which, through the visual, are a strategy for challenging bloodless, inorganic (i.e., blue liquid) representations of menstruation in ads (Malefyt and McCabe 2016).

**Engage with structural stigma**

In Post 7 (see Table 8.1), pain depicted visually through medicine is a shared experience with the audience and point of reflection. Our interpretation of the image and caption is that they engage
with women’s health issues related to reproduction and menstruation at the level of structure. The caption describes a woman’s struggle with hormonal and/or barrier contraception (IUD), removing the device, and type 1 diabetes; the image and text convey a large quantity of medicine needed to manage menstruation after removal of the IUD. The reflection includes discussion of support from partners, such as the partner who brought in the medicine. Marketplace actors are implied for the unjust consequences of their actions on women’s health. In this case, the injustice is the pain during extended menstruation after IUD removal.

In Post 8 (see Table 8.1), the text in the image and the caption @endotalk tells a similar association between women’s health and marketplace actors involved in providing care. The image and the caption call the viewer’s attention to endometriosis, a difficult to diagnose disease. Many observers have noted that young women’s – most cases present in teenage years – pain in menstruation is often not approached as a diagnosable problem by many gynecologists. Instead, medical professionals may see the pain as a patient’s failure to manage menstruation according to social and moral norms of being “solely and invisibly responsible for their menstruation” (Johnson 2019, p. 1). We suggest that this post frames endometriosis as an intersectional (age and gender) site of menstrual injustice.

Based on our findings about period-related hashtags that engage with structural stigma, we suggest that women trying to manage their menstrual flow, including pain and pregnancy or no pregnancy, when they meet the marketplace, may experience menstrual injustice: “the oppression of menstruators, women, girls, transgender men and boys, and nonbinary persons, simply because they menstruate” (Johnson 2019, p. 1; Johnston, Lobreto, and Christler 2013) that creates marketplace vulnerabilities, as women are temporarily vulnerable when they face a
marketplace that seems to stigmatize them for the very need that drives them to the market (Baker et al. 2005).

**Comparing #LikeAGirl and user-generated content**

The #likeagirl call-to-action uses the conventions of online social movement (e.g., Xiong, Cho, and Boatright 2019) and, as of the end of 2020, more than 1.7 million posts (1,712,793 as of 12.30.2020) have taken up that charge. Analysis of the original commercial suggests that the brand does challenge stigmas of girls’ – and by extension women’s, as girls grow up – bodies and their capabilities. This is, indeed, an important message regarding girls’ and women’s capabilities and esteem. While we recognize that no one ad or campaign can combat all oppressive stereotypes, we are particularly interested in what is markedly absent or hidden. The brand is a menstrual hygiene brand; while the brand markings may alert consumers to this, the campaign resolves any discomfort before it arises by silencing menstruation. In fact, the campaign is created on the belief that content that makes periods explicit will not go viral: “‘Nobody will ever share anything that has the Always logo on it.’ Who would want to be associated with periods?” (Campaign 2015). In this way, the commercial perpetuates the notion that menstruation is something to be hidden.

#likeagirl, as used over time by Always and by consumers, focuses on girls’ and women’s empowerment through physical abilities (e.g., running, fighting). Therefore, it is not surprising that the hashtag picked up momentum among users in posts about sports. In its role as cultural producer of meaning, #likeagirl messages offer a shared voice online, through a hashtag language, to challenge stigmas about bodies and highlight a particular point of social change. Some critics of femvertising argue that it focuses on individual change and overlooks feminist
calls for a movement of equity and institutional change (Varghese and Kumar 2020). While stereotypes solidify meaning as they move reflexively through social institutions such as advertising and in individual lives (Zayer and Coleman 2015), many posts find the answer in “confidence culture” (Windels et al. 2020). That is, the messages call for individual activism, and self-work around the issue of confidence and stigmatized bodies. In this way, we suggest the campaign and engagement surrounding it as representing the marketplace maturity of the Fourth Wave of feminism and similar liberal and neoliberal feminist perspectives, with their focus on self-responsibility. Yet, the use of social media engagement with branded messaging, such as #likeagirl, within the Fourth Wave of feminism may also be viewed as a form of activism; for example, women (including anyone identifying as menstruating) come together collectively and share individual experience. Through their numbers, Gen Z and young Millennial women may find agency and the power to bring about a change: in attitudes about women and stigmas about their bodies.

As #likeagirl gained traction in the Instagram algorithm, users began hashtagging it for content seemingly unrelated to the original campaign. For example, our data included men posting images of themselves with #likeagirl and #likeforlike. The goal of using the hashtag this way may be to increase reach and followers as the hashtag gained views. always_brand posted its first #EndPeriodPoverty Instagram image and caption on August 7, 2018. We suggest that the brand may have been reacting to users posting unrelated content and a potential loss of control of their campaign. Perhaps the brand was also taking an offensive position in light of the mounting successes of feminist political action to end period poverty by making period products free or at least tax-free. In Scotland, for example, Labour MSP Monica Lennon initiated an effort to make period products free in 2016 and succeeded to do so in 2020 with the Period Products (Free
Provision) (Scotland) Bill (Diamond 2020). Another motivation for Always to use the word period in its corporate social responsibility hashtag and campaign might be to connect with the ideas of other online Fourth Wave feminist movements that used social media to reclaim meanings of the female body as natural, such as the #freethenipple campaign (Matich, Ashman, and Parsons 2019; Stevens and Houston 2016), as opposed to framed by the male gaze. #EndPeriodPoverty introduced fresh ideas to Always’ corporate social responsibility campaign and maintains or gains interest among consumers (Varghese and Kumar 2020). While change to generate interest is not unusual, we think that #EndPeriodPoverty may have also provided Always with intersectionality that is missing in #LikeAGirl and is valued by Gen Z and Millennial consumers (Rosenberg 2018).

In contrast to the #likeagirl brand and user focus on girl empowerment and fighting stereotypes of girls’ bodies, UGC around period hashtags such as #periodsbelike re-materializes menstruation with images of blood and brings to the forefront the shame associated with menstruation. This content signals the morality of a system that seems to judge women as having a broken character if their bodies and menstruation are anything other than private and controlled. Institutionalized menstrual injustice in the healthcare system’s approach to women who want to experience agency through their menstruation, either through disease management or reproductive management, seems to leave them stigmatized. We suggest that period-related hashtags challenge the balance of power in the context of healthcare and women’s health.

In summary, our analysis suggests that hashtags and visuals on Instagram in the context of a feminine hygiene marketing campaign challenge public and self-stigma through empowerment themes, while UGC surrounding non-branded period-related hashtags challenge stigma through association by reappropriating stigma through humor and transgression and challenge structural
stigma through awareness in the context of women’s health (Pryor and Reeder 2011). Through our analysis, we “embrace partial explanations and unresolved contradictions, looking for more horizontal connections” (Maclaran and Kravetz 2018, p. 71), which helps us to identify modest contributions from our data and, importantly, identifies areas that warrant further research to understand intersections of feminism and marketing. We seek more questions than answers, and it is to these that we turn next.

**Answers and questions**

In this research, we address iterative engagement with menstruation between brands and consumers on Instagram to understand how stigmas of menstruation and menstruating bodies are reproduced or challenged on this social medium. We demonstrate that reappropriation of stigmatized bodies extends from body size to menstruation (Scaraboto and Fisher 2013). Likewise, we argue that @always_brand captures or rides a feminist sports movement in Instagram. Based on our analysis, we suggest that further research is needed on the intersection of menstrual justice and consumer vulnerability (Baker et al. 2006; Johnson 2019; Johnston, Lobreto and Chrisler 2013).

Several themes that emerge from our analysis are notable for future research. We identify the ways that hashtags, captions, and visuals signal shared goals among users as they challenge public and self-stigma in the context of women’s bodies as less than and therefore excluded from spaces where groups who are not stigmatized by gender (men) are allowed, such as individual sports. We think these posts, like the use of visuals of blood when consumers reappropriate stigmatized bodies, suggest that further research is warranted about the ways in which stigmas can be challenged via visuals on social media. We suggest further research on the ways that
algorithms and visuals embolden participants in online feminist movements in general, picking up some hashtags and not others. The common thread of sports in the posts suggests avenues of exploration in the domain of consumer culture theory on transmedia, and the meaning of gendered sports in the marketplace might illuminate understandings of gender and the marketplace.

We further demonstrate that visual depictions of pain and blood are a powerful strategy for destigmatizing menstruation, perhaps because visuals discuss menstruation in ways that feminine hygiene brands do not. Social media may offer a transmedia context for revisiting the work of Malefyt and McCabe (2016) on the ways that women discuss and visually represent their experiences of menstruation in comparison with brand representations of their product’s benefits.

Another avenue for discussing insights and further inquiry comes in comparing the first findings section – #LikeAGirl, Signal Public and Self-stigma – with the third – Engage with Structural Stigma and menstruation-related hashtags. In both sets of findings, consumers and Always frame the object of agency as the body and the self. While #LikeAGirl posts seem to imply “the sky’s the limit” for female weightlifters and those who practice manifestation, our analysis suggests that agency is perhaps more complicated and often limited when it is socially situated in other institutional structures, such as the medical establishment, which are similarly invested with stigmatized meanings. A criticism of femvertising is that it echoes neoliberal ideology by focusing on the individual over structural change (Prügl 2015). Comparing transmedia gendered corporate social responsibility content with consumer-generated content on gendered themes might reveal similar patterns.

While not developed in this chapter, we found that niche brands tend to have the same tone as #period posts, which may provide an avenue for further research with a focus on the managerial
implications of gendered segmenting, stigma, and niche positioning strategies. Some niche brands, we think, may communicate their position through framing mainstream brands as stigmatized and themselves as challenging stigma.

Our last comment on further avenues of research looks at #EndPeriodPoverty and #periodpain. Always starts its corporate social responsibility campaign with #LikeAGirl and moves to #EndPeriodPoverty, a nod to menstrual justice. The new hashtag openly uses the word period, and we suggest that move addresses stigma. Likewise, Always explains #EndPeriodPoverty in post captions as a financial and sociocultural problem of not having enough money for the required products and as shame at asking for help. This framing shifts the focus of the problem from Always to consumers. Yet we argue that menstrual justice comes from both de-stigmatizing menstruation and removing consumer vulnerabilities such as price. In neoliberal style, #EndPeriodPoverty individualizes the problem and looks to corporate social responsibility for a solution to a problem it helped create. In contrast, as we see with #periodpain, when engaging with structural stigma, consumers ask other consumers to come together to challenge structures that create vulnerability and menstrual injustice. While not fully developed in this chapter, we find this new hashtag and the issue of moral obligations to consumers (to access products and to equitable healthcare) to be an interesting context for further research on the relationship between corporate social responsibility, the marketplace, vulnerability, and feminism.

As a final thought of the chapter, we reflect on the initial phases of the project, how it evolved, and where we hope it develops. When we started this project, we expected we would criticize #LikeAGirl as another form of the neoliberal marketplace using women for its own needs through empowerment ideologies while telling them it is invested in women’s causes. However, as we analyzed the data, especially UGC, women’s empowerment via sports emerged as a
potentially desirable outcome for women and for the brand. In future research, we hope to explore #LikeAGirl as a means of shedding light on gendered hashtag communities on Instagram and embodied power in the form of sport. In the case of period-related hashtags, we were delighted from the beginning to see representations of our lived experiences and feminist views. We were intrigued by the ways in which technology, especially algorithms, visuals, and hashtags, frames fourth-wave feminism and how many Gen Z and Millennial women perform feminism on Instagram. Having viewed many #period posts, we consider future research avenues that explore posting on social media as part of the ritual of menstruation. We remain curious about the relationship between social media, feminist goals of collective social movement, and challenging oppressive structures in a neoliberal state full of tropes about entrepreneurism, individual achievement, and manifesting goals (Prügl 2015).

**Table 8.1 Sample Instagram Post Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instagram Post Content</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>September 23, 2018</td>
<td>Top and recent #likeagirl posts</td>
<td>Top posts reflecting focus on body (4), inspiration (2), and girls (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a</td>
<td>September 19, 2018</td>
<td>Athletic journeys of individual physical and</td>
<td>Image: photograph by photographer Mauricio Ramos of woman in bike helmet and gear for Revista Bike MX in Mexico City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b</td>
<td>September 19, 2018</td>
<td>Athletic journeys of individual physical and emotional strength</td>
<td>Copy accompanying post image 2a: “Hoy, desde que me desperté hasta ahorititita, ha sido uno de esos días increíbles llenos de buenas noticias y nuevas oportunidades. Por días como hoy se que voy por el camino indicado tomando decisiones difíciles pero acertadas. Cada día me convenzo más de que lo correcto es seguir a tu propio corazón y hacer lo que te apasiona! Me encantaría poderles pasar literalmente este sentimiento de certeza que tengo para que se dieran cuenta de que si creen en ustedes mismos -todo va a estar bien- pero como es imposible transferirles el sentimiento solo van a tener que confiar en mi cuando les digo que… VAN A ESTAR BIEN, confíen en ustedes, en sus talentos y en sus pasiones y trabajen duro. Todo va a salir bien!” [algo cursi, se los advertí] Accompanied by a photograph by photographer Mauricio Ramos for a BMX Bike company, Revista Bike MX, in Mexico City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>User</td>
<td>Content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 3 | November 28, 2017 | always_branded post using #likeagirl to reframe failure as tenacity | Image: blue background  
Copy: Failure can be part of success. Learn and try again with a new plan. Tell us about a time when you failed a test. How did you keep going #LikeAGirl? KEEP GOING #LikeAGirl Always |
| 4 | September 23, 2018 | Top user-generated posts using #period and #periodproblems reappropriate stigma using visuals and hashtags | Posts use humor in videos and images to discuss period leaks and period symptoms  
Ex. video: “of my crisp white bermuda shorts” and “me on my period” |
<p>| 5 | September 23, 2018 | Top user-generated posts using hashtags | Posts reappropriate stigma using visuals and hashtags. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>User-generated post</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 23, 2018</td>
<td>#period and #periodproblems reappropriate stigma using visuals and hashtags</td>
<td>Examples: “every girl has felt this at least once. She got her first period and thought she was going to die,” with image of girl sitting on floor; three posts include “me on my period,” with humorous pictures of various period-related faces and gestures; two posts speak of crying or lashing out right before period in humorous reference to hormones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image: toilet bowl with menstrual blood and toilet paper</td>
<td>Caption copy: I’m a woman now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post 7</td>
<td>September 19, 2018</td>
<td>Metonymy for pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image: computer keyboard covered with individual packets labeled Aspirin, Aleve, and Bayer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caption copy: “I’m exhausted and on day TEN of my first period since IUD removal (you’re welcome). I forgot I used the past of my purse Ibuprofen and was dying at work – until the Dinosaur left work to bring me this glorious stockpile.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post 8</th>
<th>September 18, 2018</th>
<th>Women challenge structural stigma in visual and text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Video by EndoTalk, an RMIT media student collective focused on conversations about endometriosis. Various people holding sign reading, “what is endometriosis?” while answering the question</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caption copy: “What is endometriosis? We asked around campus at RMIT. Under-researched and under-discussed. Let’s talk about it!”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**References**


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[https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517737222](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517737222)


[https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146705280622](https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146705280622).


Margaret C. Campbell, Jeff Inman, and Rik Pieters, 28–31. Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research.


