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Period Power: Organizational Stigma, Multimodality, and Social Entrepreneurship in the Menstrual Products Industry

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ABSTRACT In this article, we contribute to the recent direction in the organizational stigma literature that focuses on stigma as providing opportunities for organizations. Drawing on a qualitative abductive study of 90 social enterprises in the menstrual products industry, we extend the literature by showing how the organizational form of social enterprises allows them to put the societal issue of menstruation stigma at the core of their ventures. Specifically, we find that these social enterprises take a disruptive strategy, and we elaborate on the tactics of normalization and moralization on which they draw by highlighting the essential role of multimodality in the process of destigmatizing menstruation. In light of the tabooed nature of menstruation, this multimodal approach is key to challenging existing hidden, taken-for-granted norms around menstruation and supplanting them with alternative ones. Our study has important implications for the literatures on organizational stigma, social enterprises, and multimodality and points to their strong conceptual complementarity for understanding processes of societal change.

Keywords: menstruation, multimodality, organizational stigma, social entrepreneurship, taboo

INTRODUCTION

Every day, more than 300 million women and girls menstruate worldwide. Even though menstruation is a natural physiological process, it is one that is highly stigmatized, resulting in significant negative implications for women around the world. The stigmatization

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processes surrounding menstruation are multifaceted and complex, and they directly and indirectly affect gender inequality, reproductive and general health, access to education, and career opportunities for women worldwide (Grandey et al., 2020; Hennegan et al., 2019; Schoep et al., 2019).^[1]

Despite the deep-seated stigma surrounding menstruation, the global menstrual products industry has recently seen a significant rise in social enterprises which offer products and services through which they are directly addressing the stigma related to periods. While previous research suggests that the potential threat of becoming core stigmatized does not necessarily impede new market entrants and in fact may provide market opportunities (Ruebottom and Toubiana, 2021), what is remarkable in this context is that social enterprises in the menstrual products industry act in ways that seem incongruent with much of the organizational stigma literature. Specifically, these social enterprises do not engage in strategies to cope with the potential negative consequences of operating in a stigmatized industry, as through acts of distancing, hiding, or mimicking, in order to protect their commercial interests (Hampel and Tracey, 2017; Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009; Slade Shantz et al., 2019). Instead, the social enterprises we studied put the menstruation stigma, and the act of addressing it, front and centre in their business models. These enterprises have prototyped, developed, and launched radically innovative products and businesses that *directly* address the stigmatization of menstruation and are experimenting with innovative ways to address issues of shame and taboo in their communications. In doing so, they are breaking the silence on periods, are attempting to loosen the stigmatization surrounding menstruation, and are openly, actively, and disruptively transforming an entire industry (Slade Shantz et al., 2019). On this basis, we ask the following research question: *How do social enterprises in the menstrual products industry use the stigma of menstruation to create the possibility for societal change?*²

We approach this question through an abductive, qualitative study of social enterprises in the menstrual products industry. We collected secondary data on 90 mission-driven social enterprises and conducted 50 in-depth interviews with 45 social entrepreneurs in this industry. An important emerging finding of our study is that the nature of social enterprises, as an organizational form, is crucial to the way in which they manage to confront the organizational and societal stigma surrounding menstruation. Mission-driven social enterprises especially are perfectly positioned to put addressing the menstruation stigma at the core of their businesses, and through their innovative products and services are adept at disrupting the stigmatized menstrual products industry. At the same time, those products and services are used as a symbolic challenge through which the social enterprises disrupt detrimental institutionalized notions around menstruation at the societal level, above and beyond their own organizational boundaries.

A further emergent finding of our study is that in addition to being stigmatized, menstruation is also shrouded in taboo. Taboos are strong cultural norms that are taken for granted and carry behavioural and communicative prohibitions. We found that the taboo instilled in menstruation made it necessary for the social enterprises to use normalizing and moralizing tactics in their disruptive organizational strategy (Slade Shantz et al., 2019) with the aim of opening up the space to make the unspeakable 'speakable' and transform the social and cultural meaning of menstruation in society. Specifically, we found that they do this by taking a *multimodal* approach. Based

on our findings, we develop a theoretical model that captures the way in which the social enterprises draw on multimodality to enact their tactics of normalizing and moralizing to loosen the hold of the menstruation stigma and taboo and create the possibility for societal change.

With our study, we contribute to the literature in three important ways. First, we contribute to the recent stream of research in the organizational stigma literature that focuses on stigma as providing opportunities for organizations (Helms et al., 2019; Helms and Patterson, 2014; Roulet, 2020; Ruebottom and Toubiana, 2021). We extend the literature by showing how the organizational form of social enterprises, and particularly mission-driven social enterprises, allows them to put addressing the societal issue of menstruation stigma at the core of their business model. Specifically, we elaborate on the disruptive and multimodal strategies employed by these social enterprises to normalize and moralize the issue of menstruation stigma and taboo.

Second, we draw attention to the way in which social entrepreneurs creatively use multimodality (combining text, visuals, and digital platforms) to break the restrictive hold of the menstruation taboo and related processes of stigmatization over the industry and over women more generally. We conceptualize these strategies and, in the process, highlight linkages between the nature of the social enterprise, as an organizational form, and their aim of creating the possibility for societal change, on the one hand, and ways of loosening the hold of the menstruation stigma in society on the other.

Third, we extend work on organizational stigma by highlighting the importance of recognizing taboo as a related, yet separate concept from stigma. Doing so is crucial and allows us to expound analytical differences. The invisible and hidden nature of taboo especially impacts how its restrictive hold may be challenged. The acknowledgment of taboo as existing in parallel to stigma and stigmatization in organizational settings, thus, enables us to identify potential alternative strategies that organizational actors may draw on to break such taboos.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Organizational Stigma

Foundational work by Goffman (1963) conceptualized stigma (e.g., physical, tribal, and moral stigmas) as markers for abnormality and social transgression. Connecting the idea of ‘tainted identities’ to group dynamics, he used the concept in particular to examine how individuals and groups become excluded, marginalized, and stigmatized by others in society. Much of the research on organizational stigma draws directly on Goffman’s (1963) work and explores similar stigmatization dynamics at the level of organizations in society. The concept of organizational stigma reflects this focus, being defined as ‘a label that evokes a collective stakeholder group-specific perception that an organization possesses a fundamental, deep-seated flaw, deindividuating and discrediting the organization’ (Devers et al., 2009, p. 157), ultimately rendering it tainted and inferior in a social setting (Pollock et al., 2019).

In recent years, research on organizational stigma has expanded to include stigmatization processes across different settings and levels of analysis, including entire industries (Zhang et al., 2021). At the organizational level, studies have centred on how organizations themselves might manage stigma (Carberry and King, 2012; Helms and Patterson, 2014; Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009), how they distance or separate themselves from the threat of stigmatization (Slade Shantz et al., 2019; Vergne, 2012), and how they initiate possible processes of destigmatization (Hampel and Tracey, 2017). Studies at this organizational level encompass a wide range of different empirical contexts; such as that of mixed martial arts (Helms and Patterson, 2014), men's bathhouses (Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009), travel agencies (Hampel and Tracey, 2017), abortion clinics (Hudson and Wong-Ming Ji, 2001), and gambling and tobacco companies (Galvin et al., 2004). At the industry level, research has followed an alternative, but complementary line of analysis. Here, studies have similarly explored how stigmatization processes affect organizations and what organizations may do in response, but they have done so in the context of a market or industry that is generally evaluated by key stakeholders in strongly negative terms. Research has focused on the weapons industry (Vergne, 2012), the wine industry (Voronov et al., 2013), the medicinal marijuana industry (Lashley and Pollock, 2020), the sex industry (Ruebottom and Toubiana, 2021), and the nuclear power industry (Piazza and Perretti, 2015), detailing the degrees to which stigmatization is an industry-wide phenomenon and the options that this provides to individual organizations to attempt to disassociate themselves from the industry-wide stigma.

Menstruation and the menstrual products industry are in fact core-stigmatized. Core stigma results from a negative evaluation of who an organization is, what it does, and/or whom it serves (Hudson, 2008; Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009). These negative evaluations can be traced back to Goffman's markers of social transgression; core stigmatized organizations are considered 'tainted' because their product, service, or practices or the industry in which they operate are linked to a moral, tribal, and/or physical stigma, such as sex (Ruebottom and Toubiana, 2021), homosexuality (Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009), or abortion (Hudson and Wong-Ming Ji, 2001). In some cases, the reason for stigmatization may be multilayered, such as with menstruation, which carries at the same time a physical (blood and discharge), tribal (marginalized women), and moral (dirty) stigma (Goffman, 1963). For organizations in the menstrual products industry, then, the 'locus' of stigmatization cuts across categories (products, customers, topic). Because of this multilayered complexity, it is especially difficult for an organization to manage or to dissociate itself from the core stigma as it relates to both the core operations and the identity of the organization. In order to cope with this embeddedness, core-stigmatized organizations have been found to draw on a variety of strategies such as using stealth, distancing, normalizing, and reframing in their attempts to manage the otherwise deeply negative impact arising from the stigma (Hampel and Tracey, 2017; Slade Shantz et al., 2019).

Many studies to date outline how organizations, individually and collectively, cope with and potentially thrive *despite* being stigmatized or when operating in a stigmatized setting. The predominant focus, thus, is on different ways of coping and dissociating, on challenging stigmatization, and on potentially initiating destigmatization processes (Helms and Patterson, 2014; Roulet and Pichler, 2020). Recent research, however, has taken a different tack and highlights that stigmatization processes may in some

instances provide organizations with opportunities for innovation and emancipation (Reuber and Morgan-Thomas, 2019; Ruebottom and Toubiana, 2021) and for disrupting markets (Slade Shantz et al., 2019). This emerging view counters the previously commonly held assumption that stigmatization acts as a hindrance and as something that needs to be overcome by an organization in order to safeguard its survival.

Integrating the emerging insights from recent studies, Slade Shantz et al. (2019) helpfully conceptualize the different ways in which organizations may enter stigmatized markets and utilize stigma in their setting to their advantage. The authors theorize different strategies that organizations may draw on when entering a stigmatized market depending on the destigmatization efforts an entering firm is willing to employ and the level of visibility with which the firm is entering the market (Slade Shantz et al., 2019, p. 1267). They then specify the possible pathways when combining the entry strategies of the organizations with the specific stigma-related characteristics of the market itself (Slade Shantz et al., 2019), identifying stealth strategies (low destigmatization, low visibility) (e.g., Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009), leveraging strategies (low destigmatization, high visibility) (e.g., Helms and Patterson, 2014), disruptive strategies (high destigmatization, high visibility) (e.g., Brubaker, 2016), and sleeper strategies (high destigmatization, low visibility) (Slade Shantz et al., 2019, p. 1268). This framework offers a helpful typology for organizational stigma scholars as it provides a clear overview of the heterogeneous strategies organizations may employ when active in stigmatized industries. It also clearly points to the potential of harnessing destigmatization efforts as a business opportunity, rather than reducing stigmatization processes to something that needs to be mitigated.

At the same time, we also believe that this work warrants further examination and extension. Certain strategies and tactics have been much more thoroughly theorized than others, such as the stealth strategy and its related tactics, or the way in which leveraging strategies may draw on exploitation tactics to embrace their stigma. However, other strategies and tactics are conceptually less well developed, such as the disruption strategy and its related normalizing and moralizing tactics. In fact, the framework's conceptualization of particularly how moralizing tactics take shape and how such moralizing may be linked to destigmatization processes more generally remains limited (Brubaker, 2016; Slade Shantz et al., 2019). An important question arising in relation to the framework is whether or not the conceptualized strategies and tactics are primarily relevant for market entry purposes, or whether, potentially, the strategies the organizations employed during market entry may in fact also be seen as more general strategies of dealing with stigmatization. That is, if we see the strategies essentially as dealing with stigmatization, they and their related tactics may indeed also be employed by organizations that are already part of a stigmatized setting. In sum, we believe that a deeper conceptualization and empirical elaboration of the various strategies and tactics that the framework identifies would be insightful.

Social Enterprise, Disruption, and Organizational Stigma

An interesting observation is that many of the organizations demonstrating that stigma is not merely a restraint to organizations are social enterprises or entrepreneurial in nature. In contrast to incumbents aiming to mitigate the potential negative impact of operating in a

stigmatized setting, these entrepreneurial ventures willingly embrace stigma as an opportunity (Claus and Tracey, 2020; Ruebottom and Toubiana, 2021). We know that social enterprises are particularly apt at developing market-based solutions to societal issues, including stigmatized ones (Batilana and Lee, 2014). Mission-driven social enterprises (Grimes et al., 2019), especially, often have as their mission a goal that surpasses the boundaries of the organization and involves changing and reforming detrimental societal conventions and cultural beliefs, such as gender inequality in India (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Mair et al., 2016) or blood minerals in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Cornelissen et al., 2020).

While not all social enterprises may set out to engender such systemic societal change, their hybrid organizational form allows mission-driven enterprises to successfully disrupt the status quo. By blending social and economic values in creative ways, such mission-driven enterprises have been found to turn customers into activists (Lee et al., 2018) and ideals and values into products (Cornelissen et al., 2020). In this way, they embed the transformation of institutionalized, taken-for-granted norms into their products, services, and operations, where changing societal views is no longer a by-product but core to the strategies of these enterprises.

Social enterprises, through their organizational form, thus challenge existing assumptions related to what ‘doing business is about’. The very nature of the mission-driven social enterprise, then, offers a disruptive template which meshes advocacy and activism on the one hand with financial incentives on the other. In this way, these social enterprises are exceptionally well positioned to creatively draw on the legitimacy they receive from their market-based activities, while at the same time addressing social and environmental needs which market-based capitalism in fact would neglect, such as challenging stigmatization.

To date, however, the body of work on mission-driven social enterprises has not yet explicitly recognized or theorized the ways in which social enterprises may address stigma through their strategies and products, nor has the organizational stigma literature elaborated on the organizational form of the social enterprise as insightful to addressing destigmatization processes. In our study, we aim to address this gap, drawing on empirical data of social enterprises that have made it their mission to change societal norms and challenge the core stigma of menstruation and, while doing so, to disrupt the market in which they are active. For these social enterprises, stigmatization is not something that they distance themselves from but rather is embraced and cast as an entrepreneurial opportunity whereby ‘challenging the stigmatization’ becomes the purpose of the organization. We thus seek to answer the question of *how* social entrepreneurs put the stigmatization associated with menstruation at the centre of their business model to create the possibility for change. We look at the strategies they use to disrupt the industry and explore the creative ways through which they attempt to lessen the hold of the stigmatization.

METHODS

Research Context

While menstruating is in essence a natural, physiological process, it is also one of the most culturally ‘policed’ processes of the human body leading to strong and at times restrictive

conventions with regard to the menstrual cycle. These restrictive conventions and the lack of free conversation about menstruation have consequences for women and girls around the world. In the Global South, large numbers of girls have no access to adequate menstrual health information, affordable menstrual products, or hygienic toilet facilities and running water. In addition, limited availability of menstrual products affects school attendance due to fears of getting stained and ridiculed. In the Global North, too, women and girls are negatively affected. Female prisoners and homeless women, for example, have no or insufficient access to menstrual products, so-called 'period poverty' leads to girls missing school, and stigmatization and physical discomfort significantly contribute to female absenteeism at work (Criado Perez, 2019; Grandey et al., 2020; Plan International, 2018; Schoep et al., 2019).

A changing menstrual products industry: The highly profitable menstrual products industry is largely dominated by a few market leaders, e.g., Procter & Gamble, Kimberly Clark, Essity, Johnson & Johnson, and Unicharm, which enjoy high brand loyalty and popularity. Although some of these incumbent brands have over time incrementally innovated their offer (i.e., overnight pads or applicator-free tampons), the market as a whole has not seen radical innovation in decades (Davidson, 2012). In addition, the advertising of the incumbents in tone and content has tended to focus on comfort and protection against leaks. For instance, rather than depicting the process of menstruation truthfully, ads generally use blue liquid to represent menstrual blood and show worry-free, happy women.

Recently, however, an unprecedented number of social enterprises have entered the menstrual products industry (Figure 1). While their business models and their geographical locations vary, they are all committed to 'breaking the silence' around menstruation. They emphasize honest communication and transparency about their products, and, in contrast to the incumbents, their advertisements and other forms of communication largely stay true to the process of menstruating; for example, by talking openly about vulvas, showing blood and bloody products, and depicting the discomfort many women experience.

Data Collection and Analysis

We started our study because we were intrigued by the observation that a large number of social enterprises in the menstrual products industry have made statements about wanting to 'change the rules of the game' and about putting the promise of 'breaking the silence' around menstruation at the core of their activities. We were interested in the motivations, experiences, and unique challenges of these organizations given the fact that they were active in a stigmatized industry founded on values of discretion and concealment. As such, we designed our study with the aim of gaining an in-depth and nuanced understanding of how this relatively new group of social enterprises managed to transform the broad-based negative responses to menstruation into opportunities for social change.

Capturing a relatively novel phenomenon, our project thus lent itself well to a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin and Strauss, 2007). Our data collection and data analysis process occurred over multiple rounds moving iteratively between emergent insights from the data and from literature that we drew in until theoretical saturation was reached (Locke, 2001). During our process, we followed the 'tabula geminus' approach (Kreiner, 2016; Murphy et al., 2017), and we drew on both in-depth interviews and

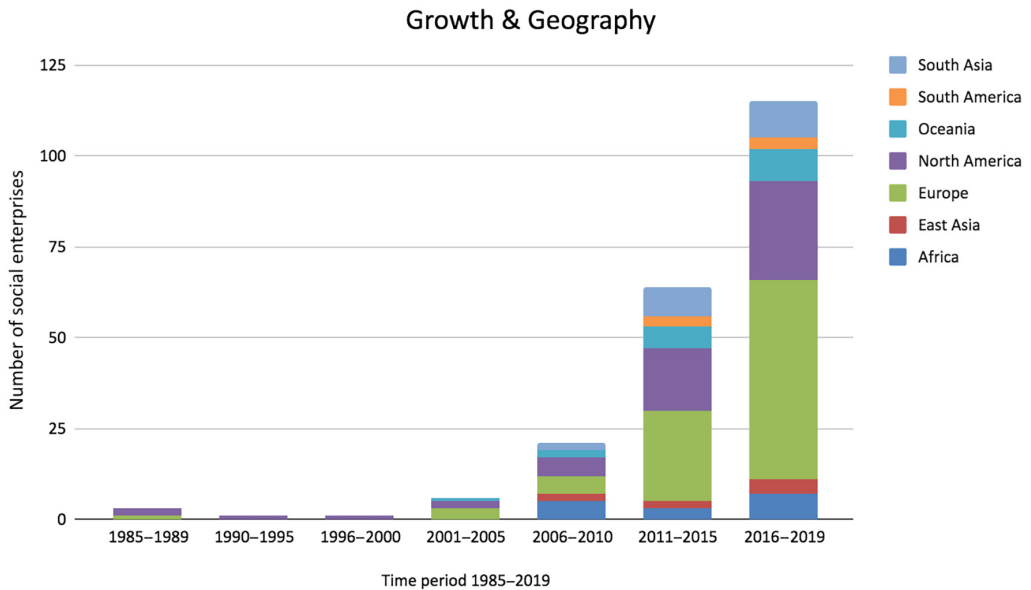


Figure 1. Growth of social enterprises in the menstrual products industry between 1985 and 2019 [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/joms.12974)]

secondary textual and visual data, on the one hand, and looked at relevant literature to explain emerging insights on the other. Below, we first discuss our data sources and then explain how we analysed the data for theory-building purposes.

Data sample. We started by identifying specific criteria for including the social enterprises in our sample. First, the social enterprise had to be legally registered as a business, to avoid overlap with non-profit organizations. Second, it needed to market a menstrual product unlike those offered by mainstream brands, such as, for example, disposable products made of more sustainable ingredients such as organic cotton or natural fibres; or reusable products, such as menstrual cups, reusable pads, and period underwear. Third, the social enterprise needed to clearly be mission-driven and invested in making a positive social impact through awareness raising campaigns, social impact projects, or activism.

Besides these selection criteria, we took further steps to ensure we incorporated different types of social enterprises, varying in age, and operating across different geographical areas. Specifically, we drew on recognized field databases – Menstrual Health Hub Innovation Hive and FemTech Insider – which collect information on innovative initiatives and social enterprises concerning women’s health, and specifically in relation to menstruation. We combined the insights from these databases with information gathered from articles available in mainstream media and popular science books, such as *The Managed Body* (Bobel, 2019) and *Period Power* (Hill, 2019). We then undertook web and social media searches, using search terms such as ‘organic pads and/or tampons’, ‘reusable pads’, and ‘menstrual cups’ and followed suggested links on Facebook and Instagram to similar pages and starting from social enterprises we

had already identified. This was a helpful step, particularly for identifying additional social enterprises in the Global South which generally use Facebook and Instagram instead of a main website. Last, we drew on personal networks to identify active social enterprises in the industry. Throughout this process, we were aware that new and innovative products and services were launched as we were researching the topic, and we continuously added enterprises to our study to capture the ongoing changes in the global industry.

These criteria and steps resulted in a total of 90 social enterprises dispersed across five continents (see Tables I and II). The enterprises offer a range of new menstrual products or services, such as tampons and pads made of organic cotton or alternative materials such as banana leaves; reusable pads; cups; and period underwear, as well as online subscription services to have menstrual products home delivered every month. About 84 per cent of the social enterprises in our sample were founded in 2011 or later.

Data sources. Interviews. In all, we conducted 50 interviews with 45 distinct social enterprises in the menstrual products industry. The majority of the semi-structured interviews were with founders or CEOs, and when this was not the case, we interviewed communications or brand managers. Interestingly, all but five of our interviewees were female. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to just over an hour. The 45 enterprises were dispersed across the globe and included younger and older enterprises, allowing us to explore differences and similarities in these ventures across contexts and over time.

We conducted our interviews between March 2017 and November 2019. In the first round of interviews, in the spring of 2017, we interviewed 13 social enterprises. In the autumn of 2017, we extended our sample to include 15 additional social enterprises. Either we had previously identified these social enterprises as relevant but they had been unavailable, or they demonstrated innovative approaches and marketing strategies, adding to the variety in our sample. In the spring of 2018, and reflecting the ongoing emergence of new ventures, we conducted 17 more interviews with companies

Table I. Data overview: social enterprises sorted by type of product and location

| <i>Product location</i> | <i>Organic cotton tampons/pads</i> | <i>Menstrual cup</i> | <i>Reusable pads</i> | <i>Period underwear</i> | <i>Disposable/reusable disc</i> | <i>Biodegradable pads</i> | |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------|
| Europe | 14 | 11 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 30 |
| North America | 11 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 26 |
| South America | 0 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| East Africa | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Southern Africa | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| South Asia | 2 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 10 |
| East Asia | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Oceania | 3 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 9 |
| <i>Total</i> | | | | | | | 90 |

Table II. Overview of social enterprises

| <i>Company</i> | <i>Founding year</i> | <i>Country</i> | <i>Product(s) marketed</i> | <i>Company</i> | <i>Founding year</i> | <i>Country</i> | <i>Product(s) marketed</i> |
|---------------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Glad Rags | 1993 | USA | Reusable Pads, Cup | 46. RubyLove | 2014 | USA | Underwear, Activewear |
| 2. Aisle | 2000 | Canada | Reusable Pads, Underwear, Cup | 47. Saathi Pads | 2015 | India | Biodegradable/Compostable Pads |
| 3. Diva Cup | 2002 | Canada | Cup | 48. Saukhyam | 2015 | India | Reusable Pads |
| 4. Juju Cup | 2009 | Australia | Cup, Reusable Pads, Underwear | 49. StoneSoup Wings | 2015 | India | Cup, Organic Pads, Reusable Pads |
| 5. Lily Cup | 2009 | Sweden | Cup | 50. TOTM | 2015 | UK | Organic Tampons/Pads, Cup |
| 6. AfriPads | 2010 | Uganda | Reusable Pads | 51. FLUX | 2016 | UK | Underwear |
| 7. EcoFemme | 2011 | India | Reusable Pads | 52. Flo | 2016 | UK | Organic Tampons/Pads |
| 8. Lunette | 2005 | Finland | Cup | 53. The Female Company | 2016 | Germany | Organic Tampons/Pads, Cup |
| 9. Ruby Cup | 2011 | Spain | Cup | 54. Hello Cup | 2017 | New Zealand | Cup |
| 10. ModiBodi | 2012 | Australia | Underwear | 55. NannoCare | 2017 | USA | Organic Tampons/Pads |
| 11. OrganiCup | 2012 | Denmark | Cup | 56. Rael | 2017 | USA | Organic Tampons/Pads |
| 12. THINX | 2013 | USA | Underwear, Activewear | 57. SochGreen | 2017 | India | Cup, Reusable Pads, Underwear |
| 13. Be Girl | 2014 | USA | Underwear; Cup, Reusable Pads | 58. Gracepads | 2017 | Malawi | Reusable Pads |
| 14. BON | 2014 | New Zealand | Organic Tampons and Pads | 59. Aakar Innovations | 2017 | India | Biodegradable/Compostable Pads |
| 15. Hygiene and You | 2014 | India | Cup, Reusable Pads, Underwear | 60. ooiia (former Ooshi) | 2017 | Germany | Underwear |

(Continues)

Table II. (Continued)

| <i>Company</i> | <i>Founding year</i> | <i>Country</i> | <i>Product(s) marketed</i> | <i>Company</i> | <i>Founding year</i> | <i>Country</i> | <i>Product(s) marketed</i> |
|------------------------|----------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| 16. LENA Cup | 2014 | USA | Cup | 61. Kora Mikino | 2018 | Germany | Underwear |
| 17. SubzPads | 2014 | South Africa | Reusable Pads, Cup | 62. Ohne | 2018 | UK | Organic Tampons/Pads |
| 18. Tsuno | 2014 | Australia | Organic Tampons/Pads | 63. Callaly | 2018 | UK | Organic Tampons/Pads, Tampliner |
| 19. YONI | 2014 | Netherlands | Organic Tampons/Pads, Cup | 64. MYLILY | 2018 | Germany | Organic Tampons/Pads, Cups, Underwear |
| 20. CORA | 2015 | USA | Organic Tampons/Pads, Cup, Underwear | 65. AWWA | 2018 | New Zealand | Underwear, Swimwear |
| 21. Kali Boxes | 2015 | USA | Organic Tampons/Pads | 66. Freda | 2018 | UK | Organic Tampons/Pads |
| 22. Organic Initiative | 2015 | New Zealand | Organic Tampons/Pads, Cup | 67. Nixit | 2018 | USA | Reusable Disc |
| 23. Supreme Pads | 2015 | Malawi | Reusable Pads | 68. Daye | 2019 | UK | Organic Tampons/Pads |
| 24. The FLEX | 2015 | USA | Disposable Disc, Cup | 69. Organic Mondays | 2019 | Switzerland | Organic Tampons/Pads |
| 25. Aunt Flow | 2016 | USA | Organic Tampons/Pads | 70. Ancercup | 2019 | USA | Cup |
| 26. Cocoro | 2016 | Spain | Underwear | 71. Einhorn | 2019 | Germany | Organic Tampons/Pads, Cup |
| 27. easy. | 2016 | Canada | Organic Tampons/Pads | 72. Boonhd | 2017 | India | Cup |
| 28. Knix | 2017 | Canada | Underwear | 73. EcoSmart | 2016 | Uganda | Biodegradable/Compostable Pads |
| 29. WUKA underwear | 2017 | United Kingdom | Underwear | 74. LUÜNA Naturals | 2017 | Hong Kong | Organic Tampons/Pads, Cup |

(Continues)

Table II. (Continued)

| <i>Company</i> | <i>Founding year</i> | <i>Country</i> | <i>Product(s) marketed</i> | <i>Company</i> | <i>Founding year</i> | <i>Country</i> | <i>Product(s) marketed</i> |
|-------------------|----------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|
| 30. Saalt Cup | 2018 | USA | Cup, Underwear | 75. & SISTERS | 2016 | UK | Organic Tampons/Pads, Cup |
| 31. Natracare | 1989 | USA | Organic Tampons/Pads | 76. CYCLO Cup | 2019 | Spain | Cup, Reusable Pads, Underwear |
| 32. MoonCup | 2002 | United Kingdom | Cup | 77. Talula | 2016 | UK | Cup |
| 33. Sckoon | 2003 | USA | Cup | 78. FLOVE | 2018 | Norway | Cup |
| 34. Yuuki | 2007 | Czech Republic | Cup | 79. Wā Collective | 2018 | New Zealand | Cup |
| 35. mPower | 2008 | South Africa | Cup | 80. HeyDay | 2018 | India | Organic Tampons/Pads |
| 36. TOM Organic | 2009 | Australia | Organic Tampons/Pads, Cup, Underwear | 81. Azah | 2017 | India | Organic Tampons/Pads |
| 37. MeLuna | 2009 | Germany | Cup | 82. Cycle | 2018 | Netherlands | Cup |
| 38. This is L. | 2009 | USA | Organic Tampons/Pads | 83. Magga Cup | 2020 | Argentina | Cup |
| 39. Organyc | 2012 | Italy | Organic Tampons/Pads | 84. Korui | 2013 | Brazil | Reusable Pads, Cup, Underwear |
| 40. DearKate | 2012 | USA | Underwear | 85. Asana Cup | 2013 | Argentina | Cup |
| 41. Sustain | 2013 | USA | Organic Tampons/Pads, Cup, Underwear | 86. Somos Martina | 2019 | Colombia | Underwear |
| 42. peesafe | 2013 | India | Biodegradable/Compostable Pads | 87. hannahpad | 2019 | South Korea | Reusable Pads |
| 43. LOLA | 2014 | USA | Organic Tampons/Pads, Cup | 88. LoveLuna | 2005 | New Zealand | Underwear |
| 44. The Honey Pot | 2014 | USA | Biodegradable/Compostable Pads, Cup | 89. EnRoush | 2018 | Switzerland | Organic Tampons/Pads |
| 45. MiaLuna | 2014 | Chile | Cup | 90. NaturCup | 2018 | Spain | Cup |

that offered innovative products or services, companies located in geographic locations previously not covered, or companies founded in the previous 12 months. At the end of the third round, we felt as though we had reached the point of saturation, noticing that we had included the most common types of social enterprises and that we could recognize clear patterns in the data. In the autumn of 2019, we conducted follow-up interviews with five social enterprises representative of the larger sample in terms of size and geographical location, to ensure we had indeed reached saturation in our data.

Secondary data. Given the rapid and ongoing growth of social enterprises in the menstrual products industry, we realized the importance of combining our interview data with secondary data from a larger overall data set. Such a combined approach allowed us to complement the in-depth interview data with communication and visual data from a larger number of social enterprises. It also allowed us to include data from newly launched social enterprises beyond the ones that we had interviewed. The secondary data that we collected consists of company reports and website and social media content. This data enabled us to zoom in on the way in which the social enterprises made the stigma and, as emerged, the taboo the core of their business. Importantly, it also allowed us to identify the various tactics the social enterprises employed with the aim of creating societal change.

Visual data. During the analysis of our interviews and of our website data, we noticed that the social entrepreneurs often referred to the importance of the visual element of their brand in the pursuit of their company's mission. As we know that 'one of the primary reasons for combining words with images is to increase the emotional impact of the resulting message' (Lefsrud et al., 2016, p. 225), we decided it was important to treat the visual data as a separate and unique type of secondary data. Not only did the visuals support textual messages; we also observed that images, photos, and cartoons were often used in a stand-alone fashion (i.e., without accompanying text) in the disruptive tactics of the social enterprises. We felt it was essential to recognize both the aesthetic power and the symbolic role of such visual data. In fact, the visuals on their own oftentimes constituted an evocative taboo-breaking activity, simply by appearing on websites or by being posted on social media. Table III shows our data sources in detail.

Data analysis. Given the grounded and iterative nature of our research approach, the data collection and the data analysis process were closely connected. As we gathered new insights from interviews or secondary data, we incorporated these insights into the process both in terms of emergent themes and in terms of adding further observations on emerging developments. This meant we extended our interview guide with new questions to address our emergent findings and returned to a number of interviewees (five in total) to ask follow-up questions. It also meant that emerging patterns from the secondary data allowed us to better understand some of the themes raised in the interviews, and vice versa.

To prepare for the data analysis process, we transcribed each interview immediately after having conducted it and combined these transcripts with the corpus we built from

Table III. Overview of data sources

| <i>Primary data sources</i> | | |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| | <i>Description</i> | <i>Amount</i> |
| <i>Total interviews (45)</i> | | |
| First round (39) | Co-founder (29) COO (2) Communication Manager (6) General Manager (2) | 195 single-spaced pages of transcripts |
| Follow-up (6) | Co-Founder (5) COO (1) | 30 single-spaced pages of transcripts |
| | | <i>Use in analysis</i> Provided insights into the entrepreneurs' journeys and experiences of entering and staying in a stigmatized industry and trying to destigmatize menstruation |
| <i>Secondary data sources</i> | | |
| | <i>Description</i> | <i>Amount</i> |
| Company websites | 88 websites | 265 pages of archival data (clean text of each website, i.e., landing page, About and FAQ page) |
| Blog posts | 160 blog posts | More than 200 pages of archival data |
| Social media pages | 87 Instagram profiles <i>Instagram visuals</i> <i>Instagram captions</i> | More than 400 visuals (on average 5 per enterprise) More than 250 captions |
| | | <i>Use in analysis</i> Provided insights into the textual, visual, and digital strategies of the social ventures Provided insights into how different social entrepreneurs use different rhetorical strategies to approach menstruation Provided insights into the different visual strategies of the social enterprises Provided insights into how the social enterprises use text and visuals together |

the secondary data and the visual data. In addition to our interview transcripts, our final textual corpus consisted of texts from company documents, texts from company websites, and texts from social media accounts. Importantly, we analysed interviews, secondary data, and visual data in a parallel fashion, allowing us to collate emerging patterns and readjust our coding accordingly.

To ensure trustworthiness of our data analysis process, each member of the author team had a particular role during our coding either as coder or as referee. This allowed us to draw on the 'independence' of each author (Kreiner, 2016, p. 355) and contributed to the overall strength of our coding process. For instance, when our coding process generated discussions in the author team, the author who had not been involved in the direct analysis would function as a referee until all agreed with the final coding (Murphy et al., 2017).

Given the rapid changes in the menstrual products industry, the twin slate, or '*tabula geminus*', approach (Kreiner, 2016) proved insightful for the development of our study. Through the process of going back and forth, i.e., the cyclical nature of the abductive process, we were able to build a theoretical conceptualization of the processes described by the participants in our study to deal with the negative deep-seated feelings about menstruation, while being mindful of existing theoretical constructs and explanations.

Early on in our analysis we saw that an important strategy to challenge the menstruation stigma was to zoom in on the *normalness* and the *humanness* of this biological process. As such, in an earlier stage of our analysis we defined this as '*normalizing through recognition*'. For us, this normalizing strategy was about creating a human feel to the brand, about honesty, and about creating a community feel. In addition, in this stage of our abductive process we observed a strong ambition from our interviewees to change the world. Initially, we conceptualized this as '*envisioning an alternative future*'. However, as we compared our empirical data with existing concepts from the organizational stigma literature, prior work offered the overall tactics of normalizing and moralizing (Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009; Slade Shantz et al., 2019) as fruitful 'sensitizing concepts' (Charmaz, 2006; Kreiner, 2016). As such, we felt that drawing on the overarching tactics of normalizing and moralizing would analytically strengthen our argument. Doing this reflected emergent findings that showed the social enterprises on the one hand emphasizing 'normalness' and periods as a 'human process', and as something that needed to be redefined to achieve a more 'socially equitable and just world' on the other. In taking this approach, we were able to explore *how* the social enterprises in our study use normalizing and moralizing, and in that way extend theory on these processes as well as emergent findings in relation to both tactics. Figure 2 shows the coding tree of these tactics, and Table IV contains exemplary quotes for each secondary code.

For the analysis of our visual data, we followed Jancsary et al.'s (2018) methodological approach. Specifically, we described the content of each image, coded the primary emotion invoked in the audience by the visual, and identified its 'meta-function' in terms of describing a state of affairs or relating itself to a distinct social group. We were particularly interested in the overall performative impact of the visual data in underscoring the general tactics and messages of the social enterprises in disrupting the stigma and taboo around menstruation.

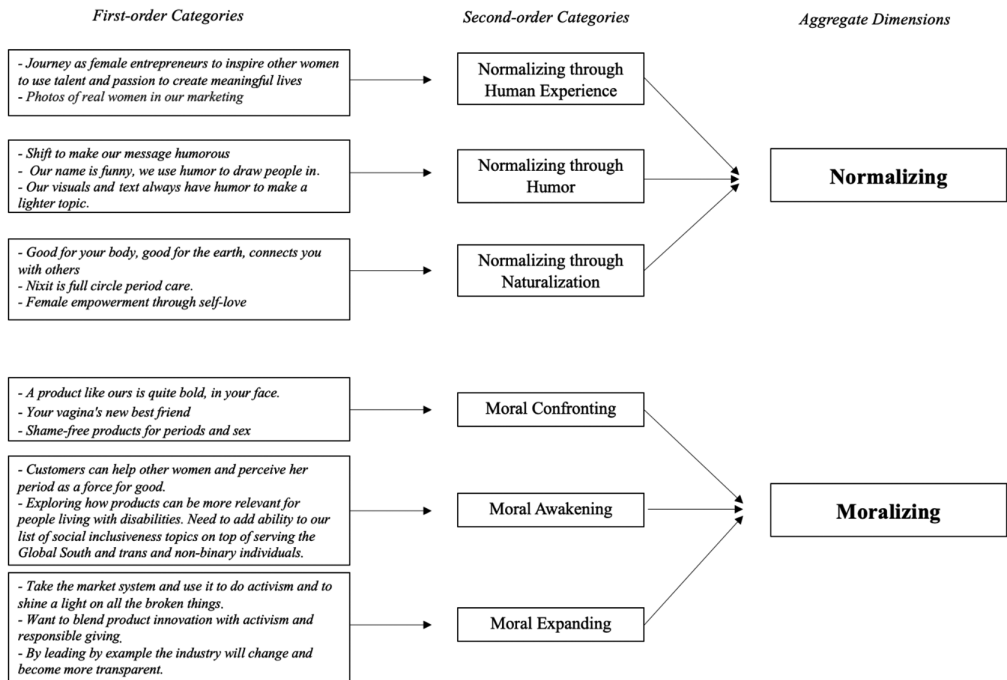


Figure 2. Coding tree

Table V illustrates how we conducted our analysis. Besides providing direct insights, our visual analysis also complemented our analysis of the interviews. We thus analysed the images both by themselves and in conjunction with the other data sources (Jancsary et al., 2018; Meyer et al., 2013), which led us to realize that these visuals proved indispensable as they enabled the social entrepreneurs to make the ‘unspeakable’ speakable and turn the ‘invisible’ into something visible. By their very nature, the visuals allowed the social entrepreneurs to go beyond words and open up space for transforming the meaning of menstruation.

Findings

At the start of our data collection and analysis, we were broadly interested in the way in which social enterprises address stigmatization related to menstruation and create an opening for societal change. Yet the closer we looked, the more we realized that what we observed were dynamics that contrasted with existing work on organizational stigma. No social enterprise from our sample had entered the menstrual product space through stealth strategies, for example, by hiding its products or services or by distancing itself from its primary customer base (Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009; Slade Shantz et al., 2019). Nor did those already active in the industry try to mitigate the menstruation stigma. Given that the locus of the stigma is on both the product (tampons, pads, or cups) and the user (menstruating women) equally, prior theorizing would suggest that new market entrants and established ventures would very likely try to stay below the radar. What we saw across our data instead were enterprises that

Table IV. Representative quotes for second-order codes and aggregate dimensions

NORMALIZING

Reproductive care for women, by women. [LOLA] (*website*) Normalizing through Human Experience

For 15 years, I silently suffered from persistent yeast infections, never realizing they may have been related to my tampon use. The reality is many of the physical discomforts we associate with our period come from products that fall short of our health and hygiene needs. [FLEX]

We are trying very hard to promote that through our Facebook page, people can identify [with the brand] and say ‘I’m a BON woman’ by using the product and associate with us and be the change. [BON]

Backpack essentials: tampons, cbd oil, a manifesto to take down the patriarchy. [ohne] (*Instagram caption*) Normalizing through Humour

Girls who only have their periods for 3 days, how does it feel to be God’s favorite? [The Honey Pot] (*Instagram caption*)

I think the way we approach the topic with our visuals and what we write has always a bit of humor, which makes the topic lighter. [YONI]

Our tampons bring all the babes to the yard! [Flo]

Nixit is full circle period care [nixit] (*Instagram bio*) Normalizing through Naturalization

From my experience most of the women I know [are] doing a million things, work, the kids, their friends, taking care of the family, so I was trying to think of how I would sell this idea of why would your product come to your door, why would that be easier, and I was thinking you know ‘you do enough, you’re already doing enough and dealing with everything, just take this part of your life and make it simple, make it easy’. [easy.]

Love your body. Change your world. [Organic Initiative] (*website*)

MORALIZING

Think with your vagina. We believe you should only put good stuff in yourself. No chemicals, no harmful products [sustain] (*website*) Moral Confronting

WUKA (company name) acronym for #WakeUpKickAss

Be a #TabooBreaker! [CYCLO]

We believe it’s time that all women lived totally, unapologetically free. Moral Awakening

Free from judgment. Free from self-doubt. And free to be yourself. [Knix] (*website*)

In June of 2020, we took a step back to consider how better to dedicate ourselves to being actively antiracist. Part of this evolution is a new commitment to donate 6.6M goods across the United States by 2022 with 75% going to BIPOC communities. [CORA] (*website*)

Part of our mission at Daye is to give women and people with periods the tools they need to understand their bodies and be their own health advocates. [Daye] (*Instagram caption*)

(Continues)

Table IV. (Continued)

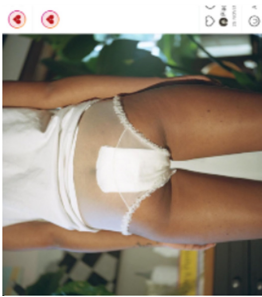
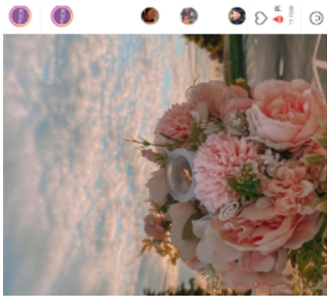
| | |
|--|------------------------|
| We have to lobby more. In Kenya, we are – with others – working together with the Ministry of Health and Education to improve the Menstrual Hygiene Management curricula in schools. [RubyCup] | <i>Moral Expanding</i> |
| We were just sitting in this country watching it get filthier and drowning in more and more garbage, that's what motivated us to use reusable ourselves and to consider how we can make this product more available because nobody else was doing it. [EcoFemme] | |
| From the very beginning we wanted to use everything of very high quality [materials] and we wanted to manufacture everything in Finland because [by doing this] we can guarantee high quality and also give jobs for people in Finland [...] It's so normal for us, not everything is just about the money and making profits. [Lunette] | |
| We aim to raise standards of sanitary dignity, reduce waste and promote gender equality. [mPower] | |
| Fair production. Vegan certified by Peta. [KoraMikino] (<i>Instagram bio</i>) | |

were loud and bright in their marketing and advertisement; i.e., with high visibility and high destigmatization efforts (Slade Shantz et al., 2019, p. 1269). The social enterprises in our sample were taking on a *disruptive* strategy, openly challenging the menstruation stigma. Their main focus also did not seem to be on commercial success per se, but rather on addressing menstruation stigma and taboo within a highly stigmatized industry.

A second important insight came from the observation that social entrepreneurs often mentioned or wrote about being silenced or dismissed; on social media, when pitching for funding, and when trying to get their products on retail shelves. We realized that menstruation is to a large extent an ‘unspeakable’, or tabooed, phenomenon, which impacted the way organizational stigmatization processes play out in this setting. We regularly heard variations of statements such as ‘[Menstruation] is a taboo subject and nobody wants to talk about it’ (Hygiene and you); ‘To break a taboo it takes a whole change in culture and the way that you perceive things’ (YONI); and ‘Menstrual taboos express themselves in so many different ways, from hiding the product if you’re going to the bathroom to this notion of concealment as an imperative that nobody should know or there should be no visible evidence that you’re menstruating ... It’s extremely pervasive’ (aisle). Our interviewees kept reiterating that providing services or affordable, high-quality products was not sufficient to break through that silence. Instead, they underscored the need for a completely new narrative that would turn the unspeakable into something that can be spoken about and transform the unthinkable and hidden into something society can address explicitly and collectively.



To work towards this transformation, then, the social enterprises in our study took on an open and explicitly disruptive approach. That is, the disruption itself seemed to be the main aim for the social entrepreneurs, which they considered a necessary condition for the social change they envisioned. In order to achieve this, they used their ventures as vehicles for disruption. In fact, the *organizational form* is what enabled them to collapse within their business models innovative products or services based on market principles, on the one hand, and a new social imaginary geared towards social change on the other. Our data

Table V. Coding of visual data [Colour table can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

| <i>Image</i> | <i>Content</i> | <i>Emotion</i> | <i>Virtue/value</i> | <i>Meta function</i> |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| <p>1. Instagram post The Female Company @thefemalecompany</p>  | <p>A back of a black woman, wearing almost transparent underwear and a highly visible pad. The picture presents eye-catching high contrast between the model's skin and the white of the pad.</p> | <p>Confidence, power, freedom from shame</p> | <p>Diversity, liberation, (hints at) sexual freedom</p> | <p>Ideational meta-function, the world as object: this picture tells the story of a person who is not hiding and is standing in their power. Focus is on the pad. Intimate, up-close angle. The ideal (imaginative) role of the picture is to depict a world in which women can proudly show off their menstrual product of choice.</p> |
| <p>2. Instagram post Diva Cup @thedivacup</p>  | <p>A bouquet of pastel-coloured flowers which includes a menstrual cup. In the background a matching sunset sky; the location is a road next to a nature spot.</p> | <p>Calm, harmony, elegance</p> | <p>Connection with nature, stress-free life</p> | <p>Ideational meta-function, the world as object: this picture conveys the message that a menstrual product (cup) can be as pleasant and elegant as flowers. The object does not pop out immediately and blends in with the flowers. The ideal (imaginative) function of this picture is to position the menstrual cup as a welcome gift.</p> |

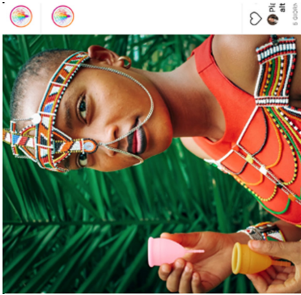
(Continues)

Table V. (Continued)

| Image | Content | Emotion | Virtue/value | Meta-function |
|--|--|--|---|---|
| <p>3. Instagram post Love Luna @ lovecluna. australia</p> |  <p>A cartoon portrays Elsa, the protagonist of the popular 2013 movie <i>Frozen</i>, surrounded by bloody pads, tampons, and cups. Her iconic 'Let it go' catchphrase is turned into 'Let it flow'. Her usual blue dress is turned to blood-red.</p> | <p>Humour; irony</p> | <p>Questioning bigotry, alignment with pop culture</p> | <p>Ideational meta-function, the world as object: the purpose of the picture is to make the viewer smile. Weak contact, personal.</p> |
| <p>4. Instagram post Somos Martina @ somosmartina</p> |  <p>A black woman and an albino woman stand with their backs to each other, wearing nothing but a pair of black (period) underwear. The woman on the left is gazing right at the viewer, while the woman on the right is looking at a spot out of the frame. The contrast between the models' skin and hair colour catches the eye.</p> | <p>Vulnerability, intimacy, connection</p> | <p>Inclusivity, body positivity, diverse representation</p> | <p>Interpersonal meta-function: the picture establishes a direct relationship with the audience by engaging the viewer's gaze through the model on the left. The picture mixes an unfiltered depiction of reality, with an ideal/imaginative representation of a world in which people who menstruate do not have to hide or cover.</p> |

(Continues)

Table V. (Continued)

| <i>Image</i> | <i>Content</i> | <i>Emotion</i> | <i>Virtue/value</i> | <i>Meta-function</i> |
|---|---|--|---|--|
| <p>5. Instagram post Lunette @lunettecup</p>  | <p>A black woman in traditional African dress and adornments is pictured up close, standing in front of a plant, holding two colourful menstrual cups in her hands. The red, pink, and green colours are bright and warm.</p> | <p>Power, fearlessness, independence</p> | <p>Decolonial values, cultural appreciation instead of cultural appropriation</p> | <p>Interpersonal meta function: the picture establishes a direct relationship with the audience, by engaging the viewer's gaze through the piercing gaze of the model. The picture establishes a strong, intimate contact. The picture reimagines how women in the Global South are depicted, without infusing Western values.</p> |
| <p>6. Instagram post Modibodi @modibodi</p>  | <p>A woman with Asian traits stands in the middle of a nature spot, holding some flowers and wearing a green blouse and teal (period) underwear. The predominant colour is green, matching the nature setting.</p> | <p>Ethereal, harmony, softness</p> | <p>Environmentalism, connection with the Earth, humanity</p> | <p>Interpersonal meta-function: the picture establishes an indirect relationship with the audience. The model is photographed at a distance, but the picture still manages to establish an intimate contact through the model's soft look. The picture seems like an invitation to follow the model into nature.</p> |



details the two main disruptive strategies through which our social enterprises worked towards the destigmatization and detabooing of menstruation, namely strategies based on appeals around menstruation being normal, on the one hand, and in need of moral redefining on the other (Slade Shantz et al., 2019). While these normalizing and moralizing strategies are reminiscent of previous work, our study shows that *the way in which* the social enterprises use these strategies is tuned to the complex, unspeakable, and multilayered nature of the issue of menstruation. For instance, the tactics were *multimodal* in form rather than one-dimensional and drew on textual, visual, and digital modes simultaneously to counter taken-for-granted ways of hiding and dismissing people, products, and actions associated with menstruation. They also built on multiple layers of symbolism to challenge processes of organizational stigmatization and to break the taboo around menstruation. Table VI shows in more detail how companies rely on the interplay between different modalities to break the taboo.

Normalizing. Normalizing turned out to be an important overarching strategy for the social enterprises in the menstrual products industry to disrupt the status quo. Throughout our sample, the social entrepreneurs emphasize that normalizing the conversation around menstruation is key to their mission and an important focus in the everyday activities of their venture: ‘[In my messaging] I focus a lot on the fact that there’s nothing wrong with menstruation, it’s in fact a sign you’re healthy’ (Hygiene and You). They enact such normalization both by casting menstruation as a normal physiological process and by reassuring women that they are not alone in their menstrual experience, a tactic which relies heavily on the brand visuals: ‘In our advertising we really illustrate how young people feel when they get their period, that is stressful and everyone can remember that too, it really resonates [...]’ (Knixteen). The normalization of menstruation, of menstruating women, and of menstrual products is central in texts and visuals and is highlighted on social media and other digital channels, i.e., through the hashtag #honestperiods (LÜUNA).

Our interviewees are explicit about wanting to do more than talk about menstruation. They are adamant that the experiences of and products related to menstruation need to be recognized as normal, both for each individual woman and in society at large: ‘I would love for us to continue to connect with younger people and help them have better periods, both in the Global North and in the Global South. We want to be part of this dialogue and show that periods are cool if you choose to accept them as such’ (LENA). To achieve this, the entrepreneurs make challenging current implicit practices, associations, and stigmatization with regard to menstruation core to their venture. They normalize by emphasizing the menstrual experience as a thoroughly human experience, by using humour to question accepted ideas of ‘normal’, and by underlining the menstrual experience as a naturalized process.

Normalizing through human experience. Many of the negative connotations associated with menstruation cultivate a deep disconnect from one’s body and from the human experience of having a menstrual cycle. The social entrepreneurs make a conscious effort to rehumanize this physiological and psychological experience, exposing their

Table VI. Use of multimodality and its meta-communicative functions [Colour table can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

| Company | Rhetorical strategy | Visual strategy | Digital strategy | Meta-communicative function |
|--------------------|--|---|--|--|
| AWWA (New Zealand) | <p>The future of period care is here 🇳🇵</p> <p>Māori owned 🇳🇵 B Corp + Climate Positive 🌱</p> <p>Unpacking stigma & reconnection 3XS – 6XL</p> <p>(Instagram bio)</p> <p>Decolonizing periods with indigenous care</p> <p>(Website copy)</p> |  | <p>Through a strong presence on TikTok (30K followers), AWWA uses the most popular trends on the app to make fun of and dispel myths about menstruation.</p> | <p>Countering the omitted major premise (through <i>Humour</i>)</p> |
| Korui (Brazil) | <p>goodbye leaks! Free your menstrual cycles with healthy, sustainable and vegan solutions ✨</p> <p>(Instagram bio)</p> <p>Revolutionize your menstrual cycle! (Website header)</p> |  | <p>Through to-the-point Instagram carousels and the company blog, which is all about ‘health, self-knowledge and freedom’, Korui exposes stereotypes and harmful stories about menstruation.</p> | <p>Countering the omitted major premise (through <i>Confronting</i>)</p> |

(Continues)

Table VI. (Continued)

| <i>Company</i> | <i>Rhetorical strategy</i> | <i>Visual strategy</i> | <i>Digital strategy</i> | <i>Meta-communicative function</i> |
|------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Ecofemme (India) | <p>We make organic washable cloth pads & baby nappies. We provide free menstrual education to girls in India. (Instagram bio) Join the cloth pad revolution! (Website header)</p> |  | <p>Through the company blog, YouTube videos, and newsletter, EcoFemme nurtures and educates its audience, making sustainability and Planet Earth the core of the new conversation about menstruation.</p> | <p>Supplanting a new explicit major premise (through <i>Naturalization</i>)</p> |
| Lola (USA) | <p>💙 We make period, feminine care & sexual wellness products 🌻 Clean & natural ingredients you can trust (Instagram bio) Clean ingredients. Gynaecologists approved. Made by women, for all. (Website header)</p> |  | <p>Through an online community platform, Lola spotlights the individual (but shared) menstrual and reproductive health experiences of different customers and creates connection between them and the founders.</p> | <p>Supplanting a new explicit major premise (through <i>Human experience</i>)</p> |

own faces and recognizing the human behind the bleeder. For example, HoneyPot's homepage includes the picture of founder Bea Dixon and the text *'Our Mission is Personal. I suffered from bacterial vaginosis for months. An ancestor gave me the ingredients to heal myself in a dream. I created the formula for an effective, clean feminine wash. It worked! We launched The Honey Pot Company in 2014. The rest is history ...'* (The Honey Pot). Other social enterprises, such as YONI, similarly share stories of health issues related to menstruation and vaginal health. Modibodi's founder, Kristy Chong, got the inspiration for her period- and pee-proof underwear as a result of post-childbirth bladder leakage issues. Modibodi now uses the tagline *'solve a personal challenge with innovation'* and sells a full line of products addressing women's and men's intimate needs at every stage of life.

Female founders are in fact often the main spokesperson of the brand. In public interviews, they recount the story of why they decided to start their own venture, make themselves accessible and human, and, by extension, normalize the menstrual experience for others. Putting a human face on the enterprise is also meant to close the gap between the manufacturers of menstrual products and those who use them on a monthly basis: *'Whoever will visit our website will be able to see a person that reminds them of themselves'* (AnonyCup). The Honey Pot suggests the company is about *'menstrual care brought to life by Black humans with vaginas'*, emphasizing that their products are *'made by humans with vaginas for humans with vaginas. Because it takes one to know one'*. LOLA, similarly, emphasizes: *'We've got you covered with trusted period products. Created by women, for women'*. Almost every social enterprise in our sample has an extensive 'experience/story' section on their website in which users detail their menstrual experiences and their views on the product. These human/woman stories are complemented with images and photos showing founders and founder teams (see [Image 1](#)) and customers or beneficiaries.

Normalizing through humour. Interestingly, an important tactic to emphasize the normalness of menstruation is the explicit use of humour, particularly irony and hyperbole. Most

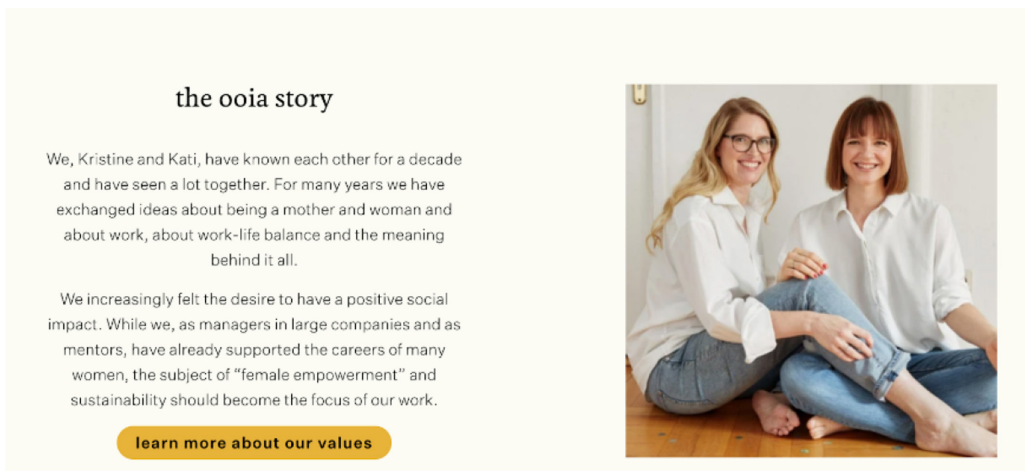


Image 1. Website, ooia.de [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

interviewees explicitly mentioned humour as an important tactic and showed awareness of its strategic power: *'We're really shifting to making [our message] also a bit humorous. It's very important to be chemical-free but at the same time, it's still just a tampon you know?'* (Kali Boxes). Another interviewee states: *'Even our name is funny, and customers can laugh a bit, we really used that humor to draw people in'* (Aunt Flow). Through humour, and especially irony, the assumption of what is normal is easily challenged or reversed, for example through the use of contrasting categories and counterfactuals. Humour often features through a combination of textual and visual communication, i.e., a funny line with an explicit or cartoon image. Digital communication and advertisement channels, such as social media accounts, in turn, allow the social enterprises to reach a large audience with their humour. Memes and cartoons, in particular, are often used to depict menstruation in a funny light.

The combination of multimodal messaging, i.e., interweaving text with imagery, and across digital channels proves indispensable in bringing out the disruptive strength of using humour. Jokes, memes (Image 2), and pop-culture references (Image 3, which uses the viral picture of Bernie Sanders from Biden's 2021 presidential inauguration photo-shopped sitting on a Diva Cup) are extremely popular tools on social media for the social enterprises. On the one hand, they get a good response in the form of comments, likes, and reshares, thereby reaching bigger audiences, giving their brands larger exposure and strengthening their popularity. On the other hand, the digital channels allow the social enterprises to be more agile and walk the fine line between humour and provocation to highlight implicit assumptions about what is normal, but perhaps should not be, such as hiding one's menstruation.



Image 2. Instagram post, @periodaisle [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]



Image 3. Instagram post, @divacup [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/joms.12974)]

Through irony and hyperbole, humour can address intimate aspects of having a period by turning assumptions of embarrassment and social restrictions on their head. The humorous content, then, replaces the traditional seriousness and secrecy with knowing smiles of recognition and suggests that every woman faces potentially awkward period-related situations. In doing so, the social enterprises stress that it is not necessary to hide such experiences, portraying them instead as normal occurrences for all women.

Normalizing through naturalization. The third way in which the social enterprises strategically use normalization is through naturalization. Through naturalization, menstruation is understood as a common physical occurrence and stressed as something that is natural and cyclical. The naturalization in a sense is both literal, normal as a part of nature (cf. [Image 4](#), which alludes to a vulva using an oyster), as well as analogous, in the sense that it is aimed to embed the way in which menstruation is understood in the routines of body care and a larger natural life cycle:

‘We started using more language like “caring for your cycle” and self-care. [Other brands use the term] feminine hygiene care but we really felt like speaking more about care for the body and the whole self’. (Diva Cup)

Other social enterprises also highlight the importance of self-care: *‘female empowerment through self-love’* (EnRoush); *‘your period has never felt so good’* (tsuno); *‘Bring Wellness Full Cycle’* (Kali Boxes); and *‘full circle period care’* (nixit). The social enterprises also share an ambition



Image 4. Instagram post, @enroush [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

to make the monthly occurrence of menstruation easier, and more natural, for women. For example, a number of enterprises with subscription boxes for organic cotton tampons and pads include chocolate or beauty product samples in their offer, encouraging women to pamper themselves during menstruation and throughout the cycle: *‘The fact that our packaging comes with a fair trade chocolate bar and a little quote does make it into something that when you see your easy period box you’re excited, which is a total spin on what you usually feel when you get your period, “aargh, here it is, again”. It’s a way to make it into somewhat of a positive experience’* (easy).

Reimagining menstruation as a moment for self-care and for slowing down is furthermore brought to life through images on websites and social media which feature women taking baths, resting, or applying skin care products, and by showing menstrual products next to luxurious beauty products and towels (Image 5).

Achieving a sense of normalness through naturalization, in fact, extends beyond relaxing and slowing down. Rather, menstruation is linked to a larger life cycle and presented as an opportunity to make mindful choices for the planet too. *‘Take care of the planet, take care of yourself’* (Asana Cup), *‘Save the planet and take care of your vagina’* (FLOVE), and *‘Your body and the planet will thank you’* (Magga Cup) are some examples of how self-care is framed as intertwined with a wider respect for nature and the need for environmental protection. Interestingly, social enterprises in the Global South particularly highlighted commitment to environmental sustainability, reducing waste, and caring for nature, which is linked to the negative impact of growing amounts of unmanaged waste on their lands.

Overall, the tactic of normalizing, in the case of our social enterprises, is not about hiding or staying undetected; rather, it is about bringing the stigma and taboo of



Image 5. Website homepage, kaliboxes.com [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/joms.12974)]

menstruation out into the open and making it ‘speakeable’ and approachable. The social enterprises position the experience of menstruation as something that is normal, rather than tainted, explicitly at the core of the businesses. Normalizing, then, becomes about challenging and disrupting the stigma through the multilayered and multimodal approach that the social enterprises take.

Moralizing. The second overarching strategy through which social entrepreneurs make an effort at destigmatizing menstruation is by appealing to larger values and virtues, which we see as a *moralizing strategy*. Through their moralizing, the social enterprises tap into both aspirational and normative ambitions; they transcend their own organization and connect their mission to values and virtues outside of the organizational boundary. Often our interviewees mentioned their moral aspiration very explicitly: ‘[A] *social enterprise in a way is a subversive thing because you take the [...] market system and you say “okay, I’m working within your system and I’m using it to do activism and to shine a light on all the broken things that all the politicians can’t agree on”*’ (BeGirl); and ‘*We don’t just sell; we want to transform lives. We want to transform the way women are living their menstruation [...]. Having a goal higher than just selling a product is really important*’ (CYCLO). In doing so, the social entrepreneurs infuse their messaging and activities with contemporary and intersectional values and cast their actions as part of a collective movement towards social change.

All social enterprises in our study regard themselves as being part of a bigger movement that fights for gender equity and social justice. In fact, the very reason why most of the enterprises exist lies in the aspiration to address a systemic problem. Positioning themselves as activists is reflected in organizational mission and purpose statements that focus on achieving a social change that supersedes the need for their own economic survival: ‘*Designing a world where every bathroom outside the home offers free menstrual products. Toilet paper is offered for free, why aren’t tampons and pads?*’ (Aunt Flow). MoonCup, in turn, promises to work ‘*For you. For our world. For our future*’. Importantly, though, we saw that the social

enterprises tended to make use of different moralizing tactics, which we define as moral confronting, moral awakening, and moral expanding.

Moral confronting. The first moralizing tactic that emerged from our data is moral confronting. This tactic is about provocation and confrontation, but in such a way that it is tied to questions about the underlying morality of implicit and taken-for-granted assumptions around menstruation. Taglines like ‘*Chemicals are not for pussies*’ (YONI), ‘*Think with your vagina*’ (Sustain), and ‘*let’s change the rules/periods*’ [#CambiosLasReglas] (Cocoro) are meant to elicit a reaction in the viewer, making them aware of their own deep-seated beliefs about menstruation. YONI’s about page states:

‘We don’t beat around the bush. We say it like it is. Periods are a reality for half of the world’s population. But somehow, they still make for an uncomfortable chat. We want to start a proper conversation about menstruation so that women and people everywhere feel just fine when it comes to talking periods.’

In both texts and imagery used, Yoni sets out to provoke a reaction from its public, ‘*not just to shock people but to bring about positive change*’ (YONI). Many of the social enterprises in our study used double entendres, explicit word choice and aesthetics to address the silence around menstruation. This tactic aspires to confront audiences with their visceral reaction to any explicit mention of vaginas, blood (Image 6), and discharge, to uncover internalized misogyny and other moral judgments that ultimately constitute the tabooing and stigmatization of menstruation. As with normalizing, the social enterprises take a clear multimodal approach in their moralizing tactics, too. In the above example, for instance, the word *bush* is accompanied by an artistic image of pubic hair, commonly referred to as a ‘bush’, but reimagined as flowers (Image 7).

The social entrepreneurs expose silent norms at the heart of societal attitudes towards menstruation – vulvas and vaginas being unmentionable, menstrual blood being disgusting – and use them as provocation. Websites and products commonly refer to vaginas: ‘*Your vagina’s new best friend*’ (Lunette) and ‘*Think with your vagina. We believe you should only put good stuff in yourself*’ (Sustain), driving to the core of the issue. Their explicit approach strikes at the core of the taboo, through daring texts and visuals, with an aim to expose the deep-seated discomfort that society feels towards all matters to do with menstruation. In this sense, they zoom in on the *morality* of the multilayered, implicit societal associations and question the truth of those values.

Social entrepreneurs working in the Global South enact moral confrontation too, though in a slightly different way. The provocation here stems from emphasizing women and girls as independent and powerful and as taking charge of their own period, in taglines such as ‘*Period protection on YOUR terms*’ (BeGirl) and ‘*Don’t dread the red!*’ (SaathiPads), paired with an image of toilet paper stained with blood, ‘*Think outside the pad!*’ (StoneSoup) and ‘*Join the revolution!*’ (EcoFemme). By building on images and narratives of powerful, independent individuals who can choose to use a product like a menstrual cup, for example, they are provocative all the same and again oppose taken-for-granted moral values around gender relations and gender equity (see image 5 in Table V).



Image 6. Instagram post, @flex [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Image 7. Website, Yoni.care [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Such more indirect provocation relates to questioning the depiction of girls and women as fragile and in need of help and donations, as well as expectations around their virginity: ‘*In the Global South*] no one uses tampons because people worry that a girl may stop being a virgin. [We must repeatedly stress that] putting a menstrual cup in your vagina may stretch your hymen and that virginity is a social construct. [...] There is a lot of stigma surrounding not having an intact hymen’ (RubyCup, Kenya office).

Moral awakening Part of the moralizing tactics is connected to awakening people's consciousness about their own privilege and their position in patriarchal structures. Through their ventures, many social entrepreneurs have found a way to connect their customers in the Global North with communities they serve in the Global South. For example, in relation to the company's giveback program, CORA's founder says: '*You help a woman realize that this experience [of menstruation] that she perceives as overwhelmingly negative is actually an opportunity to give back and to help another girl*'. Other enterprises take a similar position, such as Ruby Cup: '*This cup is life-changing because it provides you with a worry-free period and you're sharing the same luxury with someone else*' and Aunt Flow: '*People helping people. Period.*'. Thus, the social enterprises help women connect both with themselves and with other women: '*We really want to center our market message around sisterhood, around sharing*' (Saalt).

A core element of the moral awakening tactic is the social entrepreneurs' realization of their own biases and commitment to overcome them: '*In the UK, [when asked about the menstruation taboo] people are like: "don't be silly, that just happens in Africa". Actually, when you start digging down and finding out, it's more subtle, [for example] people think you cannot swim on your period at all and all the things about menstrual blood being dirty, people still do believe that in the UK*' (No More Taboo). The moral awakening, then, is both inward and outward in focus: it pushes for audiences, customers, and the entire industry to become aware of morally problematic structures, but it also challenges the social enterprises themselves to evolve. With a number of social enterprises, we observed changes in their marketing and branding that reflected that not all women menstruate (some due to hormonal contraception, others for specific health issues) and that not all people who menstruate identify as women (as is the case for transgender men and non-binary people). This recognition is reflected in inclusive language, taglines, and imagery such as '*healthier periods for people + planet*' (FLEX); '*Para mujeres y personas menstruantes*' (Somos Martina); and '*period products for every body*' (Aisle). Social enterprises like Aisle go beyond language, having added gender-neutral product options to their range, such as neutral-coloured brief-boxes that do not come across as overly feminine and are an attractive choice for people across the gender identity spectrum.

The moral awakening tactic is expressed multimodally too, through inclusive sizing and model options and through tailoring products and services to people with diverse bodies and physical characteristics, including people with disabilities. FLEX, a North American venture, acquired a menstrual cup designed specifically for people struggling with mobility issues. Such a sense of inclusivity is also achieved by featuring models who are diverse across age, ethnicity, body type, and gender identity in the product advertisements (see [Image 8](#)).

With the clear and explicit emphasis on the heterogeneity of their customer base and of people with periods in general, the social enterprises are making a moral claim. They push against invisible boundaries and question their legitimacy. By doing so multimodally, they visually contrast existing norms and values where, more often than not, such heterogeneity is left out. As a result, more people openly identify with their brands and find options that suit their (often forgotten or dismissed) needs.

Moral expanding The third tactic that the social enterprises used as part of their moralizing strategy is what we define as moral expanding. This tactic connects the venture to

Image 8. Website homepage, periodaisle.com [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/joms.12974)]

an aspirational point in the future, thereby transcending the boundary of the social enterprise itself. We see this as a form of moral expansion as it concerns the expansion of the entrepreneurs' moral efforts beyond the organizational level to permeate the society. Specifically, the social enterprises replace a narrow focus on the menstrual products category with a broader outlook in which they take on new (hidden) challenges. Many ventures have started adding pregnancy, post-partum, and bladder leakage products to their offerings. By including other topics beyond menstruation that are also highly stigmatized and tabooed (cf. sexual wellness and pleasure, menopause, or overlooked topics such as menstrual pain and menstrual disorders), they transcend their original niche and build on their previous advocacy efforts to expand their values into the wider society.

The moral expanding tactic of the social enterprises tends to coincide with an entrepreneurial-activist stance. They are vocal on different issues connected to menstrual health and openly support bills, protests, and actions to make a change: *'We need to keep pushing because there is only so much we can do by getting attention through a social media post. I think more petitions, and just action as opposed to discussion is important'* (BON). For years, attention from media has for the most part focused on the accessibility of menstrual products for women and girls in the Global South. However, the social entrepreneurs go beyond simply advocating for the distribution of free products. Instead, they take issue with topics such as the dismissal of menstrual pain and censorship of menstrual health content online and beyond. Berlin-based The Female Company, for instance, took part in protests against tampons being taxed at 19 per cent as they are categorized as non-necessity products. In their protest, they released a provoking 'tampon book' (i.e., a book filled with tampons), as books are traditionally taxed at the much lower rate of 7 per cent, and named it 'The first packaging that fights patriarchy'.

The social entrepreneurs further expand their moral position beyond menstrual health alone by connecting to social movements that fight for larger issues such as gender equity and social justice (Image 9). In 2019, following restrictive legislation around abortion, the founders of CORA, sustain, and THINX cosigned an open letter published in the *New*

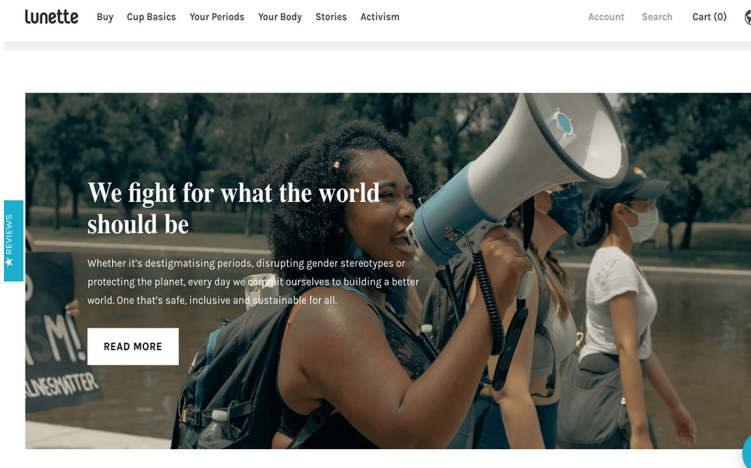


Image 9. Website, lunette.com/pages/activism [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

York Times on reproductive freedom: ‘We took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times*. [...] We are trying to put our weight behind things that we care about, things that we think are important, where we feel like we can make a difference’ (CORA).

In summary, the strategy of moralizing allows the social enterprises to challenge core stigmatization processes by zooming in on the moral aspects of the issue. As such, the emphasis lies on the deeply rooted values surrounding menstruation and the menstruation industry which implicitly and explicitly proscribe behaviour and social interaction around the stigma. Taking on these morally charged taken-for-granted understandings is imperative in order to set in motion a potential destigmatization process. The moralizing strategy, then, on the one hand challenges what is morally taken for granted. On the other hand, it presents a reimagined, virtuous alternative that not only is disruptive to the current status quo but also in fact supplants it with an alternative moral order. As with the normalizing strategy, the way in which the social enterprises do this is crucial; their moral challenge works precisely because it is multimodal in nature. The combined impact of text and visuals, and their online, social media activities, means they can be morally confrontational, reflective, and expansive.

Organizational Stigma, Multimodality, and Social Enterprises: Creating the Possibility for Destigmatization

The stigmatized setting. Organizations in the menstrual products industry face a ‘triple whammy’ in terms of the organizational stigmatization processes they encounter. Menstruation as a physiological process is tabooed and silenced, menstruating women are being shamed and marginalized, and menstrual products are marred with the same negative associations. The ‘locus’ of the stigmatization, thus, is not simply in one place but permeates boundaries and cuts across categories (products, customers, topics). In Goffman’s (1963) words, menstruation carries at the same time a physical (blood and discharge), tribal (marginalized women), and moral (dirty) stigma. Organizations in this industry, thus, run a high risk of becoming core stigmatized, i.e., being punished for the products, customers, and processes that are core to

their business. Based on existing insights from the organizational stigma literature (Helms and Patterson, 2014; Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009; Slade Shantz et al., 2019), then, one would expect organizations in this industry to attempt to minimize the likely negative social judgments based on the characteristics of menstruation.

The findings from our study of social entrepreneurs in the menstrual products industry, however, point to a different dynamic. The social enterprises do not focus on managing or mitigating the potential negative impact of menstruation, but rather, turn the organizational and societal stigmatization risk into a business opportunity. As such, our findings present important new insights that extend and deepen theory on organizational stigma and, importantly, of the processes by which organizations may set in motion destigmatization.

Mission-driven social enterprises as disruptors. A key finding from our study is the fact that *organizational form* matters when we look at how organizations engage in the process of destigmatization. All of the organizations in our study were mission-driven social enterprises, which enabled them to address the issue of menstruation head-on. The organizational purpose of social enterprises is dual. They have a mission to create a positive social and/or environmental impact while also being financially viable (Battilana and Lee, 2014). Mission-driven social enterprises, specifically, set out to turn a societal issue into a business. The fact that menstruation is a stigmatized and tabooed topic which is detrimental to a large part of our global female society is exactly what attracted the social enterprises to the issue. For all the social enterprises in our study, whether they had just entered the market or had been around for several years, this social issue was the starting point, putting how to address this problem at the core of their business model. The organizational form, then, proved instrumental in *how* they were able to engender destigmatization. On the one hand, they anchored their business on providing the general public with high quality, sustainable menstrual products or services that help general audiences get familiar with the topic. On the other hand, however, they also used that product or service to challenge and reframe the existing institutionalized symbolism and behaviour around menstruation both in the industry and in society, and in doing so set in motion a profound cultural change.

Unspeakability of the issue and the use of multimodality. Our study illustrates how organizational form shapes organizational strategies in a stigmatized setting. At the same time, our study demonstrates that the particularities of the stigmatized setting itself affect how organizations may leverage certain destigmatization strategies. The fact that mission-driven social enterprises have decided to target the menstrual products industry means that they are active in a stigmatized industry and have to deal with an issue that is both stigmatized and tabooed. This latter issue is of particular relevance; the nature of taboo means that society has imposed stringent behavioural and communicative norms which determine what can and cannot be said, thought, or done in relation to the taboo subject. These behavioural and communicative norms, in turn, result in the taboo topic becoming (and remaining) unspeakable and invisible, which means that addressing the menstruation taboo needs to be done in indirect and non-conventional ways in order to circumvent the strict taken-for-granted societal rules. That is, the

social enterprises need to come up with alternative strategies to open the possibility for conversation, to be heard and to create the change they are after.

This unspeakability, then, resulted in the social enterprises taking a *multimodal* approach to their strategic activities. That is, they combined textual, visual, and digital modes to evade the societal norms surrounding menstruation and make the issue visible and approachable. The multimodality, in fact, proved essential, as it allowed the social enterprises to activate different registers (Jancsary et al., 2018), above and beyond language alone, thereby breaking through the strictly imposed prohibitive and prescriptive barriers that keep a tabooed issue hidden. Multimodality was used by virtually all the enterprises across our sample, pointing to the universal need to find a way to discuss tabooed topics beyond language. They all consistently combined text (e.g., humorous, provocative, caring, or informative language) with visuals (pictures, photos, drawings, cartoons, memes), which they then disseminated through their digital channels. Images are used to invoke an immediate and emotional response which is much harder to achieve via text. As images can ‘speak’ without words, they are essential in circumventing communicative prohibitions. Instead, the images are used to *show* normalness as well as a morally reimagined better world. Text is used to inverse and challenge taken-for-granted understandings and categories and to redefine and reimagine the world order. The disruption created through such reframing activities (Slade Shantz et al., 2019), then, is constituted in more than text alone. The various ways in which texts and visuals are presented simultaneously, thus, is an essential way to normalize or moralize experiences around menstruation which, in turn, allows processes of destigmatization.

While the combined use of text, images, and digital presence allowed the social enterprises to challenge the status quo in a multilayered way, different multimodal combinations did so in different ways. On the one hand, we observed constellations of images and text which seemed to be geared towards laying bare the hidden, taken-for-granted prohibitive norms around menstruation. Drawing on work on rhetoric and linguistics (Corbett and Connors, 1999; Meyer et al., 2013), we may understand the function of this particular multimodal strategy as *countering the ‘implied but omitted major premises’* instilled in deeply taken-for-granted, or enthymematic (Corbett and Connors, 1999, p. 53–55), norms around menstruation. In other words, these particular multimodal constellations, through linguistic styles such as metaphor, counterfactuals, and irony, appear to work by breaking at the same time the unspeakable nature of menstruation and the resulting implicit restrictive ‘normal’. Metaphorical and counterfactual imaginaries of a ‘new normal’ then instantaneously delegitimize what was previously considered acceptable and supplant this with potential and relatable alternatives. It is the immediate rhetorical inversion of ‘what may be true’ which provides the opportunity for this multimodal combination to create space for destigmatization.

On the other hand, we saw constellations of images and text which seemed to serve as ways to reimagine what a world looks like in which the restrictive norms around menstruation are no longer valid. These constellations in turn provided the *content details* of the imagined alternative reality that may be achieved. Here, too, we may draw on rhetoric and linguistics to understand the function of this multimodal strategy as working at the level of the *communicative signifiers* to provide content to the proposed alternative imaginary as described above. In other words, in these multimodal constellations, different linguistic tropes, such as metonymy and synecdoche, enabled the social enterprises to in

fact show what a 'new normal' could look like explicitly. This multimodal function thus is not concerned with making something implicit explicit, but rather with making the inversion 'stick', by providing convincing details and nuances.

It is important to note that the use of these different constellations of images and text should not be understood sequentially, but rather were used in a parallel and/or cyclical fashion. Given the core stigmatized setting, implicit assumptions need to be continuously challenged in order for the imagined details of the alternative 'normal' to become and remain relevant. The inverse is also true: the detailed imagination of how the 'new normal' may work provides a positive feedback loop for the multimodal constellation challenging the implicit and unspeakable premises underlying the menstruation stigma and taboo.

The strategic use of social media, lastly, allowed social entrepreneurs to spread their multimodally framed messages and reach a relatively large audience quickly. That is, the digital communication channels provided a direct link with the outside world and allowed the social enterprises to garner support as well as awareness for their cause. The digital mode, thus, is used not as a disintermediation strategy (Slade Shantz et al., 2019), but rather as a way to directly address the menstruation stigma. Taking advantage of the nature of online platforms, the social enterprises had their content reposted, amplified, and on occasion go viral. These platforms also enabled the social enterprises to provide online communities with safe spaces to get the information about menstrual and reproductive health, connect with others, and share experiences in a way that does not happen in person because of the stigma and taboo of menstruation. The enterprises even use the rules and affordances of their digital platforms to challenge societal norms. On the one hand, they tried to push the boundaries by posting provocative images; yet, if they were censored or challenged, they used this censorship to, in turn, question what is normal and what is not, for instance by drawing attention to the sexualization of female nipples versus those on male bodies.

Ultimately, the aim of the social enterprises in our study is to break the taboo of menstruation with their businesses and to set in motion processes of destigmatization both at an industry and at a societal level. As such, they transcend the traditional organizational aim of financial survival. Because of this, the social enterprises are open and disruptive in their activities and strategic choices. They do so in two main ways, namely through normalizing and moralizing tactics. With the multimodal approach and the disruptive focus, then, the normalizing and moralizing strategies are not about avoiding notice, blending in, or accepting the status quo. Instead, the tactics are used together to underscore the pervasiveness of the problem, to connect audiences and society at large with the issue, and to impose an alternative, socially just imaginary that supplants the current taken-for-granted notion of menstruation as dirty, shameful, and untouchable. In doing so, they create the possibility to initiate a process of destigmatization (see [Figure 3](#)).

DISCUSSION

Although menstruation is a natural physiological process, it is one that is steeped in social behavioural norms and judgments. It carries with it hidden implications of impurity and abjection (Douglas, 1966; Kristeva, 1982) rendering it tabooed and

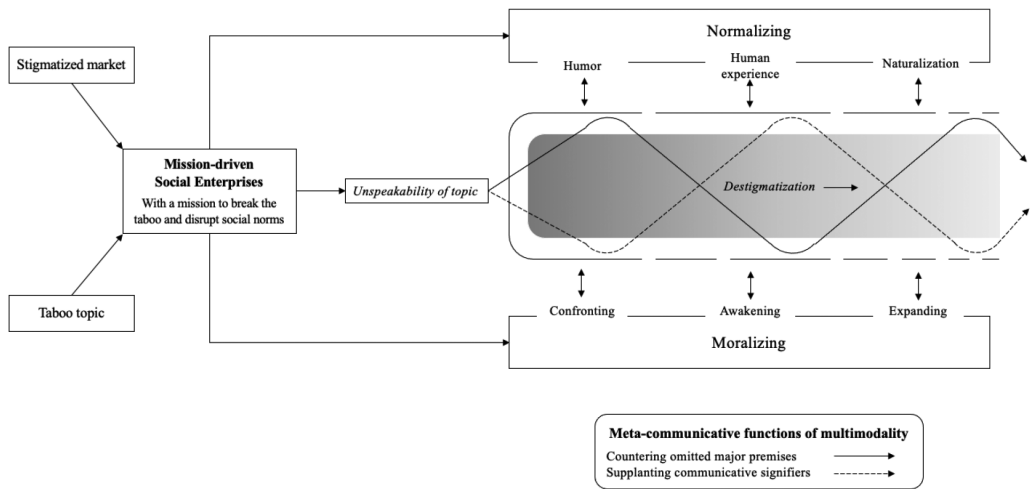


Figure 3. A grounded theoretical model of social entrepreneurship and multimodality towards destigmatization

stigmatized. These tabooing and stigmatization processes are multilayered and complex and have numerous direct and indirect adverse consequences for women worldwide. Organizations in the menstrual products industry traditionally have tried to work around those negative judgments to minimize the risk of becoming core stigmatized (Hudson, 2008).

We studied the emergence of a new class of social enterprises in the menstrual products industry. Rather than distancing themselves from the potential negative impact, these social enterprises embrace menstruation as a stigmatized and tabooed topic and make this fact core to their ventures. To gain deeper understanding of how they manage to do so, we asked: *How do social enterprises in the menstrual products industry use the stigma of menstruation to create the possibility for societal change?* Using in-depth qualitative data, we identify a distinct set of strategies that these mission-driven social enterprises use to break the taboo of menstruation and to set in motion processes of destigmatization at the level of their industry and at the level of society. Importantly, our insights add further depth and nuance to previous work on disruption through strategies of moralizing and normalizing (Ruebottom and Toubiana, 2021; Slade Shantz et al., 2019). Our findings, however, do not simply deepen and further qualify past theorizing but also allow us to elaborate theory on how these enterprises do this in a multimodal way and in ways that put stigma and taboo at the core of their business models. With these emerging insights and theory building, our study has a number of implications for research on organizational stigmatization and on social mission-driven organizations such as social enterprises.

Implications for the Organizational Stigma Literature

Our first implication builds on the finding that organizational form matters for the way in which organizations can deal with stigmatization threats. Much of the existing organizational stigma literature takes the organizational form as a given, and instead

zooms in on how these organizations cope with or minimize negative social judgments as a consequence of the stigmatization source. With few exceptions (cf. Ruebottom and Toubiana, 2021), the form of organization that attempts to deal with stigmatization processes remains undertheorized.

Our study shows that mission-driven social enterprises, as a *form* of organization, are particularly adept at harnessing a disruptive approach to organizational and societal stigmatized issues. Mission-driven social enterprises set out to right a societal wrong, and they use market-based activities to do so. As such, they have a particular ability to identify a social issue and find ways to build successful business models that are geared towards addressing that social issue. In the case of our study, the social enterprises take the social problem of menstruation as a tabooed and stigmatized issue and turn this into businesses. By challenging the menstrual products industry both by developing innovative menstrual products or services and by using those products or services as symbols (Cornelissen et al., 2020), they challenge the industry as well as society as a whole with the aim of lessening the hold of the stigmatization. As such, they also show that disruptive strategies may be used to challenge stigma above and beyond market entry situations (Slade Shantz et al., 2019).

Future research may benefit from our findings by exploring more explicitly how and in what way different organizational forms may deal with being stigmatized. Here, it may be insightful to compare for-profit companies, non-profit organizations, and social enterprises, for example, to understand how organizational structures may impact the ability to deal with or transform the threat of stigmatization. In addition, it may be insightful to compare not only between these different forms but also between variations within each form. For instance, it may be that some social enterprises, such as mission-driven social enterprises, are better positioned to take on stigmatized issues and transform them into businesses than other kinds of social enterprises. Gaining a deeper understanding of these differences will enable us to better conceptualize the relationship between organizational stigmatization processes and organizational form.

An important related finding is that the mission-driven social enterprises in our study, because of their very nature, are able to take a disruptive approach in their engagement with the menstruation stigma contrasting with prior work. As their primary organizational aim is not financial survival, they are able to openly challenge societal norms through the strategies of normalizing and moralizing (Slade Shantz et al., 2019), which they link to multimodal tactics (Jancsary et al., 2018; Meyer et al., 2018). As such, in addition to the strategic potential organizational form may offer organizations to challenge stigmatization, our study deepens theorizing on the way in which organizations may fruitfully challenge stigmatized issues above and beyond (re)framing strategies that are based on text. Our study suggests that multimodal tactics may hold different meta-functions which are essential in challenging stigma and taboo. Certain multimodal approaches centre on making deep-seated assumptions explicit and challenging them, while others focus on grounding alternative imaginaries with details of a new normal. Future research would benefit from continuing this direction, to further explore the way in which different multimodal functions provide particular affordances to organizations that operate in stigmatized industries.

Our study's second implication for the organizational stigma literature revolves around the recognition that taboo and stigma are conceptually different. Our study showed that the entrepreneurs point to two fundamental issues to do with menstruation; stigmatization *and* taboo. And, while they acknowledge both as playing a role, at the same time, it is clear that they do not consider the two to be the same. Especially, the prohibitive and hidden nature of taboo complicates potential avenues for addressing the taboo itself and its negative consequences.

In line with our findings, we believe that future research might fruitfully focus on disentangling the two concepts and their interrelationship further. For example, building on recent stigma research on sex workers (Ruebottom and Toubiana, 2021) or men's bathhouses (Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009), additional studies may look at the way taboos around sex work, female pleasure, and homosexuality, for instance, simultaneously shape and are shaped by stigmatization processes. In taking this direction, future research may draw more strongly on the sociological and anthropological literature on taboo (e.g., Douglas, 1966; Frazer, 1993 [1922]; Steiner, 1956) to differentiate tabooing from stigmatization and elaborate empirically how the two are connected in different organizational contexts.

A systematic inclusion of taboo in organizational research has benefits beyond stigma research too; taboos have been routinely marked as central to organizational life (Hoon and Jacobs, 2014; Martin, 1990), but, perhaps because of their hidden and restrictive nature, have been hardly the subject of research. Hence, conceptualizing more generally the role of taboos and identifying their negative consequences for organizations seems a worthwhile endeavour for further research. It would allow us to explore the symbolic and social processes by which certain organizational topics are made unspeakable and kept invisible in organizational settings, for instance in relation to death or dying or sex and sexualization (Douglas, 1966; Frazer, 1993 [1922]), and how such hidden but powerfully restrictive topics may impact an organization and its organizational members.

Implications for the Literature on Social Enterprise and Social Change

Our study has additional implications for research on social enterprise and social change. First of all, our study demonstrates how the social enterprises in our sample used their specific organizational form to fight for social change by putting the stigmatization and tabooing of menstruation at the centre of their business models. To date, most studies focusing on social enterprises that aim to change deep-rooted communal values have highlighted indirect strategies of social change. For example, studies have focused on female empowerment through the creation of jobs (Chatterjee et al., 2021) and by gradually convincing influential members of the community to speak out on behalf of a given cause (Mair et al., 2016). Our study, in comparison, focuses on how a social enterprise may tackle stigmatization processes head-on and make these core to their business model and organizational form. In this way, these enterprises can be seen to blend 'activist' values of actively campaigning on menstruation with a social enterprise model of creating change through the market with their products and services. Future research may draw on these findings and study more systematically the broad presence and boundary

conditions of this type of mission-driven social enterprise across the Global North and South. For example, research may identify in what cultural settings this form is more likely to be present and whether there are, for example, differences in its presence and viability across different geographical settings.

Our article makes a further contribution to work on social enterprise and multimodality. Specifically, we heed recent calls to better understand ‘how visuals work together with other cultural elements in multimodal communication’ (Barberá-Tomás et al., 2019, p. 1810) in the context of social enterprise and social change (Meyer et al., 2018). While the interplay between textual discourse and visual images has long been recognized (Meyer et al., 2018), the dearth of multimodal research in the context of social enterprise is particularly noteworthy. Barberá-Tomás et al. (2019) have recently argued, however, that multimodal strategies are particularly prominent in social enterprise settings as a way of enrolling others in pursuit of a social mission through evocative and resonant ‘symbolic-emotional’ imagery.

Our study adds to the limited work on how social enterprises strategically mesh visual content with their textual discourse and use digital channels to amplify their message. Our study demonstrates that social enterprises use such strategies not only to capture the attention of audiences and gain support for the social change they envision but also to provide a holistically reframed alternative image that supplants previous imagery. Multimodal strategies thus play a key role in transforming the menstruation taboo from something invisible and unmentionable into something that can be noticed and discussed. Visuals, distinct from text, allowed the entrepreneurs in our sample to enlist different ‘registers’ (Jancsary et al., 2018) or ‘affordances’ (Meyer et al., 2018) as a way of circumventing institutionalized rules of speech. Through their imaginary mode, we found that visuals conjured immediately and instantaneously alternative understandings of menstruation without being held back by silence, as generally would have been the case if these social entrepreneurs relied on speech alone.

Building on our study, and consistent with calls for more multimodal research in social entrepreneurship (Barberá-Tomás et al., 2019), we believe that future research may explore in more depth how across different contexts and in what different ways social entrepreneurs combine textual discourse with visual images and symbols. Research may, for example, focus on the use of visual strategies across different issue ‘domains’ and identify whether there is a greater reliance on visuals in contexts that are marked by contestation and stigmatization. Studies may also elaborate the effectiveness of visual strategies towards customers, beneficiaries, and other stakeholders of the social enterprise, identifying whether a greater variety of stakeholders requires tuning and adaptation in visual strategies as well.

CONCLUSION

Menstruation is a natural physiological process and a sign of health in the female population of reproductive age. In most societies, however, menstruation has come to be associated with uncleanliness which, literally and figuratively, needs to be hidden away. Menstruation has in many ways become invisible and unmentionable, which has led to the fact that menstruating women around the world are subject to stigmatization, ridicule, and marginalization. In our article, we study the efforts of a group of mostly female social entrepreneurs who through their enterprises have started to challenge the rigid cultural norms and conventions surrounding the menstruation stigma and taboo.

We elaborate the strategies that they use to turn menstruation into an organizational opportunity and theorize about the ways in which these strategies may create the possibility for social change. Ultimately, we show that in doing so they create the preconditions to set in motion a process of destigmatization. We hope our study inspires future research to identify ways in which social enterprises may help address stigmas and taboos in ways that foster genuine progressive change.

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NOTE

- [1] As authors, we recognize that not all women menstruate and not all people who menstruate identify as women. However, for the clarity of our argument, in this article we use the terms *girls*, *women*, and *people with periods* interchangeably. We acknowledge that doing so may create the illusion of oversimplified categories and may inadvertently lead to people’s lived experiences not being fully captured.

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