

Menstrual Product Advertising in Social Media: Tensions and Inconsistencies

Alice Roberts

Warwick Medical School

Background: Many who experience menstrual pain globally don't seek healthcare, and when they do there is criticism that medical professionals may normalise symptoms. Additionally, many teenagers who experience menstrual pain don't know about endometriosis. Social media is an increasingly used source of menstrual information for young people. Understanding how menstruation and existing menstrual products are represented in the media is critical to appreciating the context in which young people menstruate and make decisions about how to navigate symptoms such as dysmenorrhoea.

Aim: To explore contemporary menstrual product advertising messages in social media.

Methods: Multi-modal discourse analysis on advertisements from 13 prominent menstrual product companies on Instagram and TikTok over a 1-month period.

Findings: Several key tensions were identified in the advertisements: "breaking taboos" vs. "keeping it hidden"; "it's normal" vs. "it might not be normal"; and "periods are hard" vs. "don't let it stop you. There were some evolutions in messaging compared to previous analyses, including environmental and social justice, more accurate representation of menstrual blood, greater diversity of body size and colours, educational posts, and new forms of judgment (e.g. for using disposable products). Significant omissions still remained.

Conclusions: Mixed messaging remains prevalent and potentially undermines health messages and makes it difficult for young people to know when to seek support for dysmenorrhoea. Healthcare professionals are seeing people exposed to this messaging and are, themselves, exposed. These messages likely permeate decisions about both seeking and navigating health encounters.

