Red Resurrection
The Challenges Faced by Scandinavian Vendors when Marketing the Menstrual Cup

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Abstract

It is argued in this thesis that the stigmatization of menstruation and the atypical product features of the menstrual cup constitute a unique marketing challenge for vendors of the menstrual cup. The purpose of this study is therefore to investigate these issues and the ways in which Scandinavian vendors approach them. Further, the possible effects of this approach on the rate of adoption of the menstrual cup are analyzed. In order to do so, interviews with four Scandinavian vendors of the menstrual cup were conducted. The main findings are that the stigmatization of menstruation is the most influential factor in the marketing of the menstrual cup as it hinders the spreading of knowledge about menstruation and the menstrual cup. It is found that the vendors take an educational approach in order to spread information, which in turn enables learning. Information is spread primarily through word-of-mouth.

Keywords: diffusion of innovations, rate of adoption, marketing, menstrual cup, stigmatization, menstruation, information, learning
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1. Introduction

Products which are negatively affected by stigmatization or other undesirable associations can be categorized as *unmentionables*: “products, services, or concepts that […] tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offense, or outrage when mentioned or when openly presented” (Wilson & West, 1981: 92). Products such as condoms, adult diapers, fur coats, psychological counseling, and menstrual products fall into this category (Wilson & West, 1981; Katsanis, 1994). What is difficult when marketing unmentionable products is that “the product itself is the problem” (Katsanis, 1994: 7), as it can result in negative reactions from customers. So much so that “[p]urchases are made only when the need is sufficiently acute to overcome the threshold of embarrassment, disgust, or fear” (Wilson & West, 1981: 92), creating an additional factor for the marketer to deal with. Not only must they address the general tasks associated with marketing, but it is also their job to understand and address the underlying causes of these problems.

In some extreme cases, the dislike customers feel towards a certain product can lead to *negative demand* which is “a state in which all or most of the important segments of the potential market dislike the product and in fact might conceivably pay a price to avoid it” (Kotler, 1973: 43). Not all unmentionable products are affected by negative demand, as the fact remains that many are essential for consumers, such as menstrual products. The desirable outcome for marketers would be to reduce the drama surrounding these products in order to make them more acceptable to consumers (Katsanis, 1994), which should in turn improve the probability of these products being purchased and adopted. It is here that this thesis is founded.

1.1 Problem Formulation

“Medical norms of “good health” in the late nineteenth century excluded women who, by virtue of their cyclicity, were deemed abnormal. Menstruation was a malfunction of the human machine and a sign of chronic illness.” (Park 1996: 152).

The late 1800’s in the Western World was a time of rapid investigation into the human body, its functioning, and hygiene. Particular focus was dedicated to women and their menstruation (Park, 1996), as this monthly bodily function threatened the clean and innocent image that they were
expected to uphold (Malmberg, 1991: 197). This view contrasts with that of earlier years, where menstrual blood was considered “a natural secretion of the body” (Malmberg, 1991: 203), acceptable to the extent that it did not matter if blood appeared on clothes or on the floor. Thus, a change occurred in society’s view on menstruation and with its roots in this change, a “culturally mandated responsibility of all women to conceal evidence of menstruation” (Lee in Roberts & Waters, 2008: 9) arose. Today, social taboos prevent individuals from discussing menstruation openly (Kissling, 1996), to the extent that revealing one’s menstrual status can negatively affect how others perceive menstruators’ competence and likeability, as well as their willingness to even sit close to a menstruating person (Roberts, Goldenberg, Power & Pyszczynski, 2002). This stigmatization has in turn a detrimental effect on how both menstruators and menstrual products are perceived (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013).

In this thesis, it is argued that the stigmatization of menstruation presents marketers of menstrual products with the challenge of marketing an unmentionable product. In terms of product choices, disposable menstrual products such as pads and tampons, that we label conventional (menstrual) products, have dominated the Western market since the middle of the 20th century (Kissling, 2006: 10-11). Despite this, less conventional options, which we label alternative (menstrual) products, have in fact co-existed without ever posing a real threat to conventional products (Stein & Kim, 2009: 104-110). While all menstrual products face stigmatization, alternative products tend to have atypical product features, which add an additional dimension to marketing them over and above the issue of stigmatization. What sets alternative products apart is that they all require a more “hands-on” approach, such as re-use and washing, which makes contact with menstrual blood unavoidable (Kissling, 2006: 96-97). This one feature conflicts with the current customs as it does not prevent the user from coming into contact with their menstrual blood, something which is both encouraged and enabled by conventional products (Koutroulis, 2001: 192) and which can be a barrier for some potential users (Stewart, Powell & Greer, 2009).

We argue that this combination of factors, the stigmatization of menstruation and the atypical features, is specific for alternative products and creates a unique marketing challenge. Within this challenge exists an opportunity to further investigate the ways in which vendors of the menstrual cup address these issues in their marketing. The menstrual cup is an alternative
product that embodies both of these aspects, making it an appropriate medium through which to carry out this investigation. Additionally, it has been adopted by few menstruaters (Stein & Kim, 2009: 104-110), a possible result of some menstruaters being deterred from using it by the specific product features (Stewart et al, 2009).

1.2 Research Questions

1. In what ways is the stigmatization of menstruation apparent when marketing the menstrual cup?
2. Is it apparent, and if so how, that the menstrual cup’s atypical product features are a barrier to potential customers?
3. How have vendors approached these factors when marketing the cup?
4. What are the probable effects of the vendors’ approach on the rate of adoption of the menstrual cup?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the marketing challenge faced by Scandinavian vendors of the menstrual cup: the stigmatization of menstruation and the atypical product features of the menstrual cup. Further, the approach of Scandinavian vendors to this challenge is presented and analyzed in terms of its probable effects on the rate of adoption of the menstrual cup.
2. Theory

This section relies on Rogers’ (2003) *diffusion of innovations*, as the purpose of this study is to analyze factors influencing the rate of adoption of the menstrual cup and how vendors’ marketing efforts may affect this. The relative anonymity of the menstrual cup, compared to conventional products (Stein & Kim, 2009: 104-110), confirms its status as an innovation as it is new to many (Rogers, 2003: 12). Stigmatization is described specifically due to its relevance for studying unmentionables. Learning is implied by Rogers (2003), however additional research indicates the specific importance of this aspect in the rate of adoption of innovations. Learning is therefore presented as an extension of the main theory.

2.1 The Diffusion of Innovations

Innovations are communicated through a social system via diffusion (Rogers, 2003: 5). The diffusion of innovations theory takes into consideration through which channels this occurs (ibid) and also how fast and to which degree an innovation is adopted (Beck, 2006: 23). This theory maps out determining variables and investigates their effect on diffusion, including the rate of adoption of innovations and how various actors can possibly influence this (Rogers, 2003: 5-6). The decision to adopt or reject an innovation is made by individuals based on their personal values (ibid: 26-28). However, the decision making process is also affected by additional factors which can be controlled on different levels by agents acting in businesses’ interest. External factors also influence the decision, such as the social system, yet are difficult to control (ibid: 23-28).

2.2 The Rate of Adoption of Innovations

An important aspect of the diffusion of innovations is time, as this process happens at varying speeds. The rate of adoption is therefore “the relative speed with which an innovation is adopted by members of a social system” (Rogers, 2003: 221). According to Rogers (2003: 222), five types of variables determine the rate of adoption of innovations, of which the following four are relevant to the purpose of this study: 1) the perceived attributes of innovations (relative
advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, observability), 2) the communication channels, 3) the nature of the social system and 4) the extent of change agents’ promotion efforts. These are illustrated in figure 1 below and are the basis for the theoretical aspects of this investigation. The omitted variable, the type of innovation decision, discusses whether the decision to adopt an innovation is made by an individual or for an individual, for example a collective decision made by a government. This variable is not taken into consideration due to the fact that in this study, the adoption is currently the choice of the individual. Below, figure 1 is broken down and explained.

![Figure 1: The Variables Determining the Rate of Adoption (Source: Rogers, 2003: 222)](image)

### 2.2.1 Perceived Attributes of Innovations

*Relative advantage* is the utility and costs of a particular innovation compared to that of existing solutions, where the innovation must be seen as superior in order for a relative advantage to exist (Rogers, 2003: 221). If the utility of an innovation is believed to amount to less than that of existing solutions, the innovation will fail to replace the latter (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010). Relevant to note is the positive relationship between a product’s relative advantage and its rate of
adoption (Rogers, 2003: 233), however relative advantage is not always seen as independent of the social context, as Roger’s assumes (Fisher & Price, 1992; MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010). Furthermore and especially in the case of “sensitive technologies” (ibid: 204), the social context, rather than the relative advantage, is what determines the rate of adoption.

*Compatibility*, on the individual level, refers to whether there is exists a correspondence between the perception of an innovation and the current needs, knowledge, and principles of the potential adopter (Rogers, 2003: 240). The more compatible an innovation is with these factors, the more comfortable the individual will feel with it. Once again, there exists a positive relationship (ibid: 249). It is important to note that, “older technologies survive when social orientations towards the newer technology are negative” (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010: 205), implying that the adoption of an innovation depends also on the extent to which a user acts accordingly to established norms. Norms are a reflection of the social system, meaning that compatibility depends on the social system (Fisher & Price, 1992; MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010).

An innovation’s perceived *complexity* is a potential adopters’ perception of how difficult it will be to understand and use it in relation to existing innovations. The relationship between complexity and rate of adoption is negative (Rogers, 2003: 257). Further, if the existing solution is seen as more effective and easier to use than the new innovation, the innovation’s estimated utility alone may not be perceived as superior to the existing solution. In other words, consumers tend to interpret the innovation by comparing it to the effectiveness of the existing solution, although this framework is not always suited for evaluating the innovation’s new features (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010).

*Trialability* involves customers having the opportunity to test an innovation on their own terms before purchase. This enables customers to get an understanding of the innovation and generally positively affects the rate of adoption, demonstrating a positive relationship (Rogers, 2003: 258).

*Observability* describes to what extent the outcome of an innovation is observable by others (Rogers, 2003: 258-259). If others easily observe the results of an innovation, and the innovation’s advantages are easily communicated, uncertainty will be reduced resulting in a
positive effect on the rate of adoption (ibid). This communication takes place within a social context, where information regarding the innovation is exchanged. If a similar context, or a “community of expertise” (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010: 207), has not been formed, this has a negative influence on the rate of adoption.

2.2.2 Communication Channels

Communication channels can be divided into two categories: mass media and interpersonal channels. Mass media channels typically serve as transmitters of information to the masses and can influence consumers with less fixed attitudes, while interpersonal communication is a personal exchange often occurring on, but not restricted to, a face-to-face basis and can influence more fixed attitudes. Further, interpersonal communication is not restricted only to private conversations between two individuals but can also involve group communication (Rogers, 2003: 204-205). The timing of the type of communication channel is important for maximizing likelihood of adoption. Mass media is relatively more important at the initial knowledge stage of an innovation process for so called early adopters, as they tend to be less influenced by peers. Interpersonal channels are relatively more important in the later stages for so called late adopters (ibid: 204-211), as this group is less independent in its decision-making and tends to rely on the opinion of others (Horsky & Simon, 1983).

2.2.3 Nature of the Social System

Defined as “a set of interrelated units” (Rogers, 2003: 23) the social system and the relationship between its inherent actors is a determining factor in the diffusion of innovations. Specifically, it is the structure of this system, including existing norms and the actions of main actors, that are influential factors as these affect how an innovation is received by its members (ibid, 2003: 23-24). For marketers, understanding these relationships is sometimes more vital than the actual product (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010), for example, research has shown that social approval can in some cases influence the behavior of early adopters of innovations (Fisher & Price, 1992). Further, if social orientations towards the innovation are negative, the innovation’s rate of adoption will be negatively affected (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010).
2.2.3.1 Stigmatization and the Marketing of Stigmatized Products

Although numerous factors influence the nature of the social system, this thesis focuses primarily on stigmatization, which is understood as a product of social norms and interactions (Link & Phelan, 2001). A *stigma* is defined as a “mark placed on a person, place, technology, or product associated with a particular attribute that identifies it as different and deviant, flawed and undesirable” (Scholder Ellen & Fitzgerald Bone, 2008: 70). Moreover, each case of stigma is unique; the implications of its presence are not black and white (Scholder Ellen & Fitzgerald Bone, 2008: 77) and it is important that the context is presented when the term is applied (Link & Phelan, 2001). Furthermore, the relationship between a stigma and the act of stigmatization can be seen as a two-way system in which the two factors influence and sustain the other’s existence (Scholder Ellen & Fitzgerald Bone, 2008).

Understanding the application of a stigma on a product is useful from a marketing perspective as it enables marketers to investigate the best way in which to approach a stigma. Identifying key, controllable variables opens the door for marketers to understand and potentially influence the stigmatization of products (ibid). Furthermore, a study on strategies for handling stigmatizing events and counteracting the spreading of stigma included educating, informing, and desensitizing the public, aiming at creating and maintaining trust (Kunreuther & Slovic, 1999). Another study discussed the ways in which a stigma could be changed. It was mentioned that one of the most important approaches is to attempt to change strongly held views and principles maintained by those that stigmatize, as it is here that the stigma is formed (Link & Phelan, 2001). In the extreme case in which products are affected by negative demand, and the marketer considers the negative beliefs of the product to be based on poor information, knowledge communication becomes central (Kotler, 1973).

2.2.4 Main Actors

As defined by Rogers (2003: 26-28, 368), a *change agent* is any individual, usually a professional, who links a resource system to a client system. This individual creates a bridge where there are social and technological gaps, enabling information flow between the different systems. The change agent is an important communicator between businesses and customers, as
their actions and efforts play a defining role in influencing the adopters’ decisions (ibid: 365-401). An additional group of individuals called opinion leaders also influence customers’ decision to adopt or not to adopt an innovation by swaying the attitudes and opinions others have of said innovation (ibid: 26-27; MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010). Depending on their intent and the success of their actions, change agents and also opinion leaders influence the adoption of innovations in a positive or a negative manner (Rogers, 2003: 27).

2.2.5 Extent of Change Agents’ Promotion Efforts

The change agent’s approach when attempting to impact the adoption of an innovation can be more or less successful. Here, four factors are influential: the change agent’s effort in communicating with clients, the empathy of the change agent, having an appropriate client orientation, and the compatibility of how the diffusion is undertaken with client’s needs (ibid: 373-377). Substantial time spent on communicating with clients and the ability of the change agent to “put himself or herself into the role of another person” (ibid: 376) positively affects the rate of adoption of innovations. Further, close relationships with clients and openness towards feedback increase the credibility of the change agent. This, together with the ability to understand and adapt to clients’ needs, nevertheless without ceasing to attempt to form these needs, is argued to affect the rate of adoption in a positive manner (ibid: 373-377).

2.3 Learning

Regardless of the type of innovation, a commonality is that they “require consumer learning, and induce behavior changes” (Urban Weinberg & Hauser, 1996: 47). This factor is not present in figure 2, although the importance of learning in the adoption of innovations is implied in the perceived attributes of innovations. Researchers have also shown that learning is a central factor in the adoption of innovations, as new technology demands a certain level of learning by the user (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010). Learning is also necessary in order to find out about a product’s existence and its benefits (Aggarwal, Cha & Wilemon, 1998). Learning occurs on the individual level, through information obtained from the individual’s environment (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010). Making information about innovations both accessible and easy to understand is crucial to the marketing of innovations, since learning is hindered when information is
unavailable (Aggarwal et al, 1998). When obtaining information, consumers take one of two approaches: consulting available information and learning through trial (ibid).

2.4 Theoretical Summary

An innovation’s rate of adoption is influenced by: the perceived attributes of innovations, communication channels, the nature of the social system, and the extent of change agents’ promotion efforts (Rogers, 2003: 222). Stigmatization is founded within the social system (Link & Phelan, 2001) and is a relevant factor when investigating unmentionables. Additionally, innovations demand learning on the part of the adopter, as they must learn of the product’s existence and also how to use it (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010; Aggarwal et al, 1998).
3. Method

3.1 Qualitative Data Collection

Although researchers have thoroughly investigated menstruation and the marketing of conventional products (see e.g. Erchull, 2011; Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009; Simes & Berg, 2001; Park, 1996), alternative products such as the menstrual cup have rarely been the focus of research. The few existing research articles that do in fact concern the menstrual cup rely heavily on quantitative methods and are generally written from a medical perspective (see e.g. Grose & Grabe, 2014; Howard, Lee Rose, Trouton, Stamm, Marentette, Kirkpatrick, Karalic, Fernandez & Paget, 2011; Stewart et al, 2010). This presents an opening to contribute with a qualitative study on a relatively unknown aspect within an otherwise well-documented field of study: the menstrual cup within a marketing setting. Due to the specific nature of the purpose of this study there is a small risk of repeating previous research. Further, this highlights the need for the collection of primary data, which in turn motivates the choice of data collection through interviews.

3.1.1 Interview Design

Although the purpose of this study was to investigate a specific situation, the marketing challenge, the vendors’ individual approach to this challenge was unknown. This was a complex and nuanced phenomenon to investigate, in which the outcome was yet to be determined. Fixed or closed questions were thus difficult to develop, and also not to our advantage, as they could potentially lead to forced answers and an incomplete picture of reality. It was therefore of great importance that the vendors were able to answer freely and in their own words, in order to present their perception of reality rather than our idea of reality. This additionally provided the vendors with the opportunity to discuss additional issues of interest or relevance that may have been overlooked. This motivates both the choice of a qualitative study and interviews based on a semi-structured interview design (Bryman, 2013: 415; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012: 374-375). A question guide with 18 open-ended questions was thereafter developed.¹ Follow-up questions were also prepared, which served as a backup in case the vendors did not answer a

¹ The complete question guide can be found attached. See Appendix 1, Question Guide.
question to its entirety or went off topic. This type of interview leaves room for flexibility and spontaneity from the interviewers point of view, such as changes in question order and formulation, yet also gives the interviewer the ability to somewhat steer the discussion in line with the purpose of the study (Bryman, 2013: 415).

3.2 Operationalization

In this study, the perceived attributes of innovations represent the atypical product features while the nature of the social system represents the stigmatization of menstruation, together constituting the marketing challenge. The change agents and the extent of change agents’ promotion efforts represents the vendors of the menstrual cup and the ways in which they address these two factors.

The question guide developed for the interviews was designed to reflect the variables affecting the rate of adoption, within which the marketing challenge also exists. The questions were divided into four distinct themes, making up the framework of the guide. These were posed in the following order: general information, the product features of the menstrual cup, the stigmatization of menstruation and menstrual products, and finally the vendors’ marketing approach. The structure permitted a logical order for the discussion, as it was necessary to discuss the marketing challenge before investigating the vendors’ approach to it. The structure was further designed to create a positive atmosphere at the start of the interview before moving on to more sensitive issues, such as stigmatization (Saunders, 2012: 389). The questions were formulated in direct connection to the themes. For example, question number 6, The menstrual cup is different from traditional menstrual products in various ways, tell us about this and what this means for your business operations, was intended to investigate the atypical product features of the menstrual cup (perceived attributes of innovations) and how this was handled by the respondent (change agents’ promotion efforts). The follow up questions, Can you describe the positive and negative features of the menstrual cup and Is this something that you take into consideration when marketing the cup? In which ways?, were designed to help clarify these if required.
The language used in the questions was adapted in order to minimize the risk of antagonizing or confusing the respondents, as some terms applied in this thesis might be unusual in a non-academic context. This was in order to reduce the likelihood that the respondent would not understand, and also to avoid leading them into using a specific word that they may not otherwise have used (bid: 390). For example, when investigating vendors’ perceptions of stigmatization of menstruation, we first used the phrase “difficult to openly discuss” as an alternative to the word stigmatized. We then clarified their answer in a follow-up question by specifically asking whether or not they would consider menstruation to be stigmatized or not.

3.3 Selection of Respondents

The menstrual cup can be purchased through various online retailers, and in some stores such as Apotek Hjärtat. The original intention was to only contact vendors that specifically offer the menstrual cup (or the cup in combination with complementary products such as cleaning gel). This was due to the fact that these vendors were assumed to be more specialized in the marketing of the menstrual cup, thus probably not have a market approach that has been adapted to fit a range of products. However, as the number of vendors that only sell menstrual cups and complementary products on the Scandinavian market are so few, we made the decision to also contact vendors who offer both the cup and other products, such as conventional menstrual products, in order to grant the access needed for this study. It was out of convenience that we contacted Scandinavian vendors (eight in total), which resulted in interviews with four. Coincidentally, those who replied and who were later interviewed specialized in menstrual cups, which was the initial intention. We were aware that four interviews might be considered insufficient, however the number of vendors that were in the position to answer our questions was limited. Therefore, these four essentially represent a large part of the current Scandinavian market for menstrual cups, thus enabling an adequate understanding of this specific market. In relation to our results, this means that they can potentially be generalized to the Scandinavian market as a whole. No preference regarding, for example, size or location within Scandinavia was made between the vendors, as we were purely interested in the ways in which they have addressed the marketing challenge.
The vendors are illustrated in table 1 below, stating the company name and the position of the respondent. Since one vendor preferred to remain anonymous we chose to give this person and the company a fictitious name and will therefore refer to this vendor as Bille Johansson of FlowCup. In the other three cases, we chose to keep the names and company names as we argue that this contributes to the reader’s experience due to the insight it permits into real companies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Lisa Perby</th>
<th>Billie Johansson</th>
<th>Eija Tiittanen</th>
<th>Veronica Zetterlund</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Company Founder</td>
<td>Company Founder</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>Company Co-founder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Name</td>
<td>Menskopp</td>
<td>FlowCup</td>
<td>Lunette</td>
<td>LadyCup</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Respondent Overview*

Lisa Perby, Veronica Zetterlund and Billie Johansson are the founders of their businesses, whilst Eija Tiittanen is a coordinator at Lunette. Three of the interviews were conducted in Swedish, making translation a necessity. Each quote that has been translated by us is followed by the acronym OT, meaning own translation. We are aware of the possible consequences that this translation might have caused, such as misunderstandings and loss of actual meaning, which can decrease the credibility of the translations. However, in an attempt to counteract this, we have recorded the interviews, enabling us to re-listen to the interviews in order to increase the probability that the data obtained is as accurately translated as possible. In addition to this, each respondent has approved the data we used in the study, which further confirms our interpretations of what they discussed during the interviews.

### 3.4 Ethical Issues

The ethical guidelines of this study concern the respondents’ rights to privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw or not answer all questions (Saunders et al, 2012: 226-247). In connection with the initial contact with the respondents, we informed them of the general themes covered by this thesis. Before the interviews were conducted, each respondent received a copy of the interview guide, thus providing them with an opportunity to reflect upon the specific
aspects of the interview that to a certain extent changed in relation to the initial contact,\(^2\) and give their approval (ibid: 226-247; Bryman, 2013: 131). We assumed responsibility towards the respondents’ integrity, including ensuring that the information collected in the interviews would only be used for the purpose of completing this academic work (Bryman, 2013: 132), that the respondents had the right to access to the completed study, and finally that specific details cited within the study were to be approved before use (Saunders et al, 2012: 226-247). These terms were repeated before each interview so as to give each respondent an extra opportunity to agree or disagree to them. Permission to record each interview was also confirmed at this time and a confirmation that only we would have access to the complete recordings was given.

### 3.5 Method Evaluation

We are aware that conducting interviews involves the risk that interviewer affects the answers of the respondent, which may result in an interviewer bias (ibid: 381, 393). In this study, we aimed at maintaining a friendly and interested atmosphere while at the same time remaining neutral in order to reduce the risk of bias. During one of the interviews, the respondent asked for help when giving examples of disadvantages of the menstrual cup. In this case, we kindly reminded her of the importance of not leading the respondent to an answer and instead reformulated the question by asking if she had for example heard about any disadvantages of the cup from the customers.

Our intention was for each interview to be conducted as a video interview via Skype, in order to create a more intimate interview situation where we were also given the possibility to interpret body language and facial expressions (Bryman, 2013: 433; Saunders et al, 2012: 406). However, due to both technical limitations and requests from the respondents, only two of the four interviews were held in the intended manner. The third interview was conducted via telephone, which, due to the lack of video, hindered transmission of visual cues. However, this did not appear to be detrimental, as both the conversation and the information obtained proved to be of similar quality to the Skype interviews. The last interview was conducted via email due to time restrictions on the part of the respondent. This was not optimal since it involved an increased risk

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\(^2\) Initial contact was made very early on in the study not only to establish trust but also to secure access to the preferred respondents. However, the purpose of the thesis changed as the study progressed, resulting in a greater emphasis on the respondents which we were obliged to inform them of.
that the email respondent would not interpret the questions correctly without us being present to explain. Despite this, the email respondent replied in a detailed manner and interpreted the questions in the intended way. We also found this person’s interpretations to be consistent with the other respondents, enabling a comparison of data to be made.

Our respondents were located throughout Scandinavia, making Skype and telephone interviews a better alternative for this study, due to time and budget constraints. We are aware that this communication technology might be lacking somewhat as it might complicate the establishment of trust. Since this is argued to be essential to this type of interview (Saunders et al, 2012: 404), we initiated contact via email with three out of four respondents well before the interviews took place, in an attempt to establish and build trust. Although face-to-face communication is said to have “specific advantages as a technology of communication” (Storper & Venables, 2004: 353), we prioritized access to respondents over being able to interview them in person.
4. The Comeback of the Menstrual Cup

The menstrual cup has made at least 3 attempts at breaking into the market since its introduction in the 1930’s. The success of each attempt has varied, with little success in both the 1930’s and 1950’s, yet substantially more success in the late 1980’s. Throughout this, the cup has continued to be available, albeit in a limited way (Stein & Kim, 2009: 105-110). A recent American study stated that “[g]iven the potential health and economic benefits of using alternative products, it remains unclear why the menstrual cup is not more widely used” (Grose & Grabe, 2014: 678). In the Scandinavian context however, both the cup and menstruation have recently received new attention from the media. In October 2014, Swedish national television broadcast a show where the presenter called the fall of 2014 “the fall of menstruation” (Lundström, 2014). Just three days later, Swedish national radio broadcast a program focusing on the menstrual cup, describing what they labeled a “comeback” (Dahlström, 2014).

The cup itself is worn internally and is generally made of medical grade silicone in the shape of a bell. An example of the cup is shown in picture 1 below. It works by collecting the flow, rather than absorbing it, like tampons, and is used by folding, inserting, and allowing it to unfold. The cup should be emptied as needed, but can be worn for up to 12 hours. Since the cup is reusable it requires regular washing during menstruation and sterilization after the last use during a menstrual cycle (Menskopp.se, 2014). The benefits of the cup include that it is less expensive (Howard et al, 2011), it produces little waste, emptying is required less frequently than changing conventional products, it lasts for up to 10 years (Wadman, 2008), and it can remove the need for carrying supplies (Stewart et al, 2009). The disadvantages include messiness, using ones hands when handling the cup, washing it between uses, having trouble inserting the cup, and the fear of a foreign body inside the vagina (ibid).

Finally, previous findings put forward that there exists a learning curve when starting to use the menstrual cup, as a change in the user’s behavior is necessary. This is said to be due to the menstrual cup being used in a different way than conventional products (Stewart, Greer &

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3 The menstrual cup is not strictly made from medical grade silicon. For example, it is also made from TPE (thermoplastic elastomer) (MeLuna, 2014) or synthetic rubber (Mattsson, 2009). The material can vary in hardness and thickness.
Powell, 2010). In line with this, research on the adoption of the menstrual cup in Nepal shows that this affects the learning in terms of usage (Oster & Thornton, 2012). In an American context, research has found that young menstruaters, as a result of the stigmatization discussed above, find it difficult to learn about menstruation face-to-face (Polak, 2006). However, “online space helps establish a shared base of knowledge” (ibid: 201) and a forum where menstruaters answer each other’s questions and share their experiences in a frank and honest manner.

*Picture 1: The Lunette Menstrual Cup, model 1 and 2 (with permission from Eija Tiittanen)*
5. Interview Results

In this section the data collected from the four interviews will be summarized and presented in a way that reflects research questions 1, 2 and 3.

5.1 The Stigmatization of Menstruation

When describing the Swedish context, it was clear that the vendors have the impression that menstruation has been turned into something dirty that should be hidden (Perby, 2014) and that it is not a subject that women speak openly about amongst themselves or even with their friends (Tiittanen, 2014). Two of the vendors expressed feelings of surprise and shock at the current context, such as how people can still get embarrassed when the topic of menstruation is brought up (Johansson, 2014), or when purchasing menstrual products (Zetterlund, 2014). Tiittanen stated: “it’s just unbelievable that it’s 2014 and women are still bleeding blue liquid” (Tiittanen, 2014). In relation to this, another vendor stated that since menstruation is viewed as disgusting, everything connected to menstruation, such as menstrual products, is automatically seen as disgusting too (Perby, 2014). However, all of the vendors said that they believed things to be better today than what they used to be, and some said that this increasingly open discussion about menstruation is in large part due to social media and the Internet (Tiittanen, 2014; Zetterlund, 2014). One expressed the belief that the drama surrounding menstruation in general will decrease with time, and that social medias will play an important role in this, as it is here that information can really be spread (Zetterlund, 2014). Furthermore, they believe that “Many young women claim their right to bleed and to choose their own menstrual protection” (OT, Zetterlund, 2014).

5.2 The Product Features of the Menstrual Cup

5.2.1 Recognition and General Perceptions of the Menstrual Cup

Zetterlund (2014) stated that there are still many who have never even heard of the menstrual cup while Tiittanen (2014) described a general lack of knowledge in many countries of female

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4 The vendor was referring to an ad that she saw on TV earlier this year in which a blue liquid was used to represent menstrual blood in a television advertisement for pads.
anatomy and menstruation. The vendors believe that this is due in large part to people’s general reluctance to discuss menstruation openly but also to the lack of information presented and made easily available, for example in schools. Furthermore, many do not understand what the menstrual cup is when it is mentioned, for example “What is it called? Cup? What kind of cup? What am I supposed to drink out of it?” (OT, Perby, 2014). Another vendor believes that the dominance of conventional products makes it even harder for the menstrual cup to gain ground (Zetterlund, 2014). Lunette (2014), which is a Finnish company, described their entrance on the Swedish market as slow compared to that in Finland, and that this was due to a lack of availability of the menstrual cup. The vendor stated that only when Apotek Hjärtat purchased their Lunette cup, did the interest for their product start to grow (Tiittanen, 2014). Each of the vendors mentioned that they have observed an increased interest in the menstrual cup in recent years.

Once the menstrual cup has been introduced to people, reactions vary. Three of the vendors gave examples of negative reactions from people such as “ew, I want to vomit, I want to puke” (OT, Perby, 2014), and similar comments reflecting disgust and hatred (Zetterlund, 2014). Tiittanen (2014) mentioned that many react with disgust towards the product, or that the product feels unclean to them. She added however that such reactions often gradually change as information and explanation are passed on to customers. Feedback is not only negative, however. Each of the vendors has experienced positive feedback from users, for example “we get a lot of feedback from women that say that the cup has changed their lives” (Tiittanen, 2014). In line with this, Johansson (2014) spoke of some customers as being completely dedicated to the menstrual cup.

5.2.2 The Vendors’ Perceptions of the Menstrual Cup’s Product Features

The vendors all mentioned the various economic, environmental, and health related benefits of the menstrual cup, in particular in comparison to conventional products. The downsides of the cup could include a learning curve, difficulty in choosing the correct size, a high initial cost, messiness, and the fact that the menstrual cup needs to be sterilized (boiled) after each menstrual cycle. Perby (2014) claimed that most menstruaters can use the cup, although medical
conditions\textsuperscript{5} prevent some from being able to use it. Finally, the same vendor pointed out that she was unable to affect the advantages and disadvantages of the cup and that she did not believed that there were any actual disadvantages, at least not in comparison to tampons.

The positive experiences of using the menstrual cup are also the reason why the vendors first started, and joined in the case of Tiittanen, their businesses. Perby (2014) was at first hesitant in trying the cup out of disgust but was so pleased with the results that she wished to spread the word of this product that had, somewhat unexpectedly, turned out to be better than conventional products. Zetterlund (2014) had been unsatisfied while using conventional products and expressed anger and frustration at the lack of information about alternative products. Johansson (2014) was not only a satisfied cup user but also strives after conducting ethical business, meaning only offering products which reflect personal morals.

5.3 The Vendors’ Approach

5.3.1 Vendor Ideology

The general role of the vendors can be described, as Zetterlund (2014) succinctly put it: “we as retailers are just as much informants and counselors [as we are vendors]” (OT, ibid). Perby (2014) takes on a somewhat supervisory role, often partaking in Internet discussions in order to guarantee that incorrect information is not spread and also to correct any possible misconceptions people may have of the product. Zetterlund (2014) stated further that if they had the time, LadyCup would travel around the country informing people of the menstrual cup for free, regardless of the brand. Currently, any profit made by LadyCup goes straight back into the business. Perby (2014) said that although she does not believe that selling menstrual cups is something that one gets rich from, there are other motivating factors such as health and environmental benefits.

Furthermore, Perby (2014) mentioned striving after lifting menstrual taboos, while Lunette is “just trying to ignore all the taboos and just trying to stomp on them and make them go away”

\textsuperscript{5} Prolapse and vulvo vestibulit were examples of conditions that can hinder certain women from using the menstrual cup (Menskopp, 2014).
(Tiittanen, 2014). That said it was important to not do this in an offensive or distasteful way (Tiittanen, 2014; Perby, 2014). Tiittanen (2014) stated that it is important for them that customers feel free to approach them and not be afraid or intimidated, as sometimes people wrongly perceive them as a cult dedicated to the menstrual cup. Although Lunette identify themselves as feminists, they are not “on the barricades” (ibid) and their primary goal is to create a positive feeling about menstruation. Perby (2014) expressed similar goals of wanting to make menstruation an acceptable conversation topic without turning it into something vulgar.

Each of the vendors’ approach was distinguished by a general wish to not force themselves or the product onto customers. Although they all wished to spread information and reach out to as many customers as possible, they prioritized respecting customer attitudes over completing a sale, particularly in the cases where people for various reasons expressed negative feelings towards the product. Johansson (2014) takes a passive approach and as a rule allows customers establish contact, while Zetterlund (2014) try to be somewhat neutral in order to not leave anyone out. Tiittanen (2014) said that they never stress a customer’s decision to adopt the cup, or turn it into a guilt trip, despite having had some customers wait for years before buying the cup and then regretting that it took them so long. Instead, they choose to be very honest and informative of both the positives and negatives of the cup so that customers can make an informed decision. Perby (2014) followed a similar approach of not forcing herself onto customers and focuses instead on informing people. Additionally, a positive, problem-solving approach has been taken in relation to how customers can handle various issues they might have with the product. For example, some dislike the idea of having to boil the cup after use, and then cook food in the same pot. Perby (2014) then suggests purchasing a small pot specifically for doing just this.

5.3.2 Limited Knowledge

In relation to the limited knowledge of the menstrual cup and menstruation, the vendors expressed the importance of spreading information in an attempt to increase people’s knowledge. Perby (2014) spoke of this as a challenge, since getting people to understand what the cup is and how it works is essential to the success of this product. Furthermore, as Johansson put it: “It is more knowledge intensive with the menstrual cup [compared to conventional products]” (OT,
Johansson, 2014) which emphasizes the need for information. Johansson (2014) believed that this is due to the learning curve of the menstrual cup, a phenomenon also observed by Tiittanen (2014). Lunette tries to be as supportive as possible during this initial period of use, however they do not hide the fact that it takes time and effort to learn to use the cup, as well as courage “to face the blood” (ibid). Each of the vendors stated that they prioritize answering all customer questions, both in person and via email and telephone, on their business webpages, or on social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

Perby (2014) believes that the negativity and taboos surrounding menstruation are founded at an early age, when children also are relatively more easily influenced than at older ages. She further claims that this is a result of poor information. As a reaction to this, the vendor has started collaborating with RFSU (The Swedish Association for Sexuality Education), as she affirms that they also believe that “it [menstruation] is enfolded in taboos, but we must try to break them” (OT, Perby, 2014). Although Johansson (2014) was unsure of the general attitudes among younger menstruaters, the vendor still believed that actions should be taken to create positive vibes around menstruation at an early age. In line with this, Perby (2014) expressed concern that young menstruaters are often only presented with conventional products, resulting in them being unaware that alternative products exist. She has also taken the initiative to speak to midwives about discussing the various alternatives with their clients. Johansson (2014) has sent examples of menstrual cups to midwives but felt that they would like to do much more, for example have meetings for young girls in school in order to spread information, which due to lack of resources is not currently viable. Lunette (2014) has put together an information leaflet for aimed at school pupils with the intention of spreading information about menstruation in a positive manner.

Another way several of the vendors spread information about the menstrual cup is by attending fairs, such as Health, Fitness, and Eco fairs, and presenting the product there. This allows for face-to-face interaction with customers where people can ask questions and for the opportunity to see and touch the product (Tiittanen, 2014; Perby 2014), something which one of the vendors described as an effective way of both spreading information and selling cups (ibid). Other ways of providing customers with the chance to touch and feel the product include providing retailers with sample cups for display, sending sample cups together with press releases to for example
bloggers (Tiittanen, 2014), performing home visits, attending markets and events for bloggers (Zetterlund, 2014). Even though all of the vendors recognized the limited possibilities to touch and feel the menstrual cup as a potential problem, only one was skeptical to whether this possibility actually aided customers in their decision since “one does not know what size one is ‘down there’” (OT, Johansson, 2014).

5.3.3 Spreading the Word

Each of the vendors expressed the importance of dialogue both in the form of word-of-mouth (WOM), for example between users of the cup and non-users, or dialogue between themselves and customers. Several reasons as to why this is important were mentioned. As discussed above, all of the vendors communicate with their customers in order to answer questions and give advice before, during, and after the purchase. Perby (2014) gave an example comparing giving lectures and attending fairs. After the lectures, she believed that not a single cup had been purchased, while many cups were sold at the fair. She thought that being able to personally get answers to their questions was essential to customers and that the lecture was not an appropriate forum for asking questions: “since it is a bit taboo [menstruation and the menstrual cup], it’s not as if one stands up in front of 300 people and asks a question” (OT, Perby, 2014).

According to the vendors, the dialogue between customers is a highly effective form of marketing. A third party has nothing to gain by spreading the word about the menstrual cup and can be seen as impartial while many can regard a vendor as partial and not entirely reliable as they have something to gain from the exchange of information (Perby, 2014). According to Zetterlund (2014), WOM is slow but the most effective form of marketing. Johansson (2014) believes that the majority of menstrual cups are sold through WOM, indicating the importance of this type of dialogue. The vendor expressed the belief that because the menstrual cup is so different from conventional products that people tend to initially be skeptical and need to hear about it several times, often from someone who is already a user. Perby (2014) stated: “the more people who use the cup, the more that talk about it, the more who know about it. It becomes a very positive circle” (OT, ibid). The vendors agreed that many most likely want to hear about the product from someone who has experience of it. Furthermore, Tiittanen (2014) expressed Lunette’s encouragement for this dialogue, particularly for those who talk openly about
menstruation as they are helping to break the taboos surrounding it. Johansson (2014) expressed surprise at how some customers were so open and frank about their menstruation, considering that it is generally not easy to talk openly about it.
6. Analysis

To facilitate the reading of the analysis, the structure mirrors the structure of the interview results presented above, with the addition of question 4. We identified the stigmatization of menstruation to be the most influential factor in the interview results, therefore its impact is visible throughout the analysis.

6.1 The Stigmatization of Menstruation

1. In what ways is the stigmatization of menstruation apparent when marketing the menstrual cup?

The results of the interviews show that many find it difficult to discuss menstruation and menstrual products openly, for example stating that they feel sick when the subject is brought up. In line with previous findings this puts all menstrual products into the unmentionables category, including the menstrual cup, as these products can cause negative reactions when spoken of openly (Wilson & West, 1981; Katsanis, 1994). It is possible that this can in some cases lead to negative demand. Here, it can be argued that the menstrual cup is to some degree affected by negative demand as many essentially “pay a price to avoid it” (Kotler, 1973: 43) by paying more for disposable conventional products, whether they are aware of it or not. A connection between the stigmatization of menstruation and the general distaste described by the vendors can be made, suggesting that it in fact is the stigmatization which leads to both the unmentionable nature of menstrual products and their possible affliction of negative demand. Research on stigmatized products describes the relationship between a stigma and the stigmatization as a self-sustaining system in which the two factors are not only dependent upon each other’s existence but that they also maintain each other’s existence (Scholder Ellen & Fitzgerald Bone, 2008). In the case of the menstrual cup, the vendors’ observation of people’s unwillingness to discuss menstruation and their negative reactions to it confirm the existence of a stigma. The stigma’s existence in turn stigmatizes menstruation and menstrual products, thus creating the aforementioned self-sustaining system.
Research mentions that learning is important with innovations as it enables learning of a product’s existence and also of its benefits (Aggarwal et al, 1998). The unwillingness to discuss menstruation can therefore have additional implications, as it can hinder people from hearing about the existence and benefits of the menstrual cup. If this were now the case with the menstrual cup, it would thus be difficult for menstruaters to weigh up the positives and negatives of the cup to determine whether the product in fact has a relative advantage. An additional implication of the lack of discussion is that it will decrease the observability of the innovation’s results. The communication of an innovation’s results reduces people’s uncertainty for the product (Rogers, 2003: 258-259). In the case of the menstrual cup the results are not visible to the naked eye, meaning that the level of observability is mainly dependent on communication, which in turn is obstructed by people’s unwillingness to discuss the subject.

The results from the interviews suggest that certain aspects of the menstrual cup are experienced by some as incompatible with the current norms, such as facing one’s body and menstrual blood. The fact that many view the cup as very different from conventional products signifies that in line with previous findings, customers tend to compare innovations to existing solutions (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010), which in this study are conventional products such as tampons and pads. In this case, it reduces its compatibility, which refers to an innovation’s consistency with existing social practices and orientations (Rogers, 2003: 240), and might prevent the cup from being accepted by many. This affirms previous findings suggesting that existing solutions will persist whenever “social orientations towards the newer technology are negative” (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010: 205). Further, this comparison might have the effect of increasing the relative advantage of conventional products, as they may appear to be more suited to people’s general attitudes towards menstruation on the whole, as using them for example often implies less contact with menstrual blood (Stewart et al, 2009). This comparison can go both ways, however, depending on a person’s attitude. If, for example, a person’s attitude towards menstruation is negative, product features such as coming into contact with and getting to know one’s own body may be considered to be negative. On the contrary, such product features may be seen to be positive by a person who has a positive attitude towards menstruation. The connection between these two variables, compatibility and relative advantage, has been previously empirically observed (Rogers, 2003: 249).
6.2 The Products Features of the Menstrual Cup

2. Is it apparent, and if so how, that the menstrual cup’s atypical product features are a barrier to potential customers?

As is the case with all innovations, the user must first learn how to use it (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010), implying that all products have varying levels of complexity. Therefore, regardless of the stigmatization of menstruation, the menstrual cup will have a certain level of complexity, which in turn can create a barrier for potential adopters. In relation to this, the vendors mentioned that there is a learning curve attached to the cup. Three of the vendors stated that this could be a hinder for some people, primarily as some may for example purchase the product and give up quickly due to initial difficulties. The cup’s complexity is worsened by the fact that it is not possible to ‘try before you buy’, as it clearly poses a sanitary risk. This implies that potential adopters are not provided the opportunity to understand the innovation’s functionality on their own terms (Rogers, 2003: 258) or to learn about it through trial (Aggarwal et al, 1998), but are forced to purchase the product in order to do so. However, the effect of this is not necessarily solved even after purchase, as there exists a learning curve. Furthermore, the menstrual cup is ‘invisible’ in use and, due to the fact that it is a reusable personal hygiene product, some might not want to see or touch it once it has been used as it can be deemed as unclean or disgusting. This reduces the physical observability of the innovation’s results, which further underlines the importance of communicating the cup’s results.

As mentioned above, consumers tend to evaluate innovations by comparing them to existing solutions. Regarding the use of an innovation, potential adopters base their expectations for the innovation on their understanding of how the existing solution works and also the utility they currently receive from the existing solution. Therefore, the utility an innovation has to offer may not be sufficient for a potential adopter to perceive the innovation as superior (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010). For example, Perby mentioned reduced waste as an advantage of the cup, as it is re-used rather than thrown away like conventional products. Here, a comparison between the cup and conventional products would unequivocally confirm the environmental benefits of the cup. However, Perby also mentioned that some customers have experienced difficulties in choosing the right size. In particular, since menstrual cups are bigger than unused tampons, some
might perceive them as too big to fit. According to MacVaugh & Schiavone (2010), this interpretation would be based on the use of the existing solution (tampons), without taking into account the new feature of the cup, which is that it collects the menstrual blood instead of absorbing it, and as a result is bigger. Such comparison may contribute to the innovation failing to replace the existing solution, despite research stating that it appears illogical that the cup is not widely used given its economic and health benefits (Grose & Grabe, 2014).

6.3 The Vendors’ Approach and the Possible Effect on the Rate of Adoption

3. How have vendors approached these factors when marketing the cup?

4. What are the possible effects of the vendors’ approach on the rate of adoption of the menstrual cup?

6.3.1 A Friendly Ideology

A common ideological approach among the vendors is to create a positive and welcoming atmosphere for customers. Each also expressed a strong conviction to not force themself or the product onto customers and to not push anyone to discuss menstruation or the product. This approach accommodates people’s varying attitudes towards menstruation and the menstrual cup, indicating empathy from the vendors towards both customers and non-customers. This is an example of change agent’s empathizing with potential adopters and adapting to their various needs, which is said to positively influence the rate of adoption (Rogers, 2003: 373-377). The results from the interviews also show that the vendors’ ambition to create a friendly ambience helps to build trust between themselves and potential adopters. An indication of their success in this is for example customers’ willingness to share their private information with the vendors. Within this relationship, customer feedback is also encouraged, which can increase a change agent’s credibility (ibid). Both factors are important for change agents to be successful as they positively influence the rate of adoption (ibid). Another criterion for successful change agents is that in order to increase the rate of adoption change agents should adapt to customers’ needs while simultaneously shaping them (ibid). However, while the vendors’ positive yet rather passive approach shows an adaption to customers needs, it will not actively shape them.
Although the vendors are business people, Zetterlund stated that they are first and foremost informants. This was strengthened by the fact that educating and informing people was a common topic brought up in each of the interviews, which is an additional vendor ideology. In the times when the vendors discuss the menstrual cup, they tend to take an honest and straightforward approach in order to create positive vibes around menstruation, or at the very least attempt to normalize the subject by decreasing the drama surrounding it. This mentality is further shown in the interview results when for example Tiittanen and Perby both mentioned wanting to remove the taboos surrounding menstruation. Desensitizing the public is one of the ways in which a stigma can be handled in an attempt to reduce the spreading of a stigma (Kunreuther & Slovic, 1999). Furthermore, the acknowledgement of Perby and Zetterlund that they are aware that this is not currently a lucrative business shows that the vendors have more than just a commercial ambition.

6.3.2 Information is Key

The ideologies presented above form the vendors activities, in particular the conviction to inform and educate. This conviction to educate is not restricted to information about menstruation and the menstrual cup, however, as for example Lunette’s information leaflet shows. The leaflet was designed for school pupils and aimed at not only creating positive feelings around menstruation but also at discussing the topic of “becoming a woman” (Tiittanen, 2014). Educating and spreading information therefore makes up a significant part of each of the vendors’ approach when marketing the menstrual cup. A successful change agent, who positively affects the rate of adoption of innovations, spends significant time communicating with clients (Rogers, 2003: 373-374). In this case, the vendors provide information on their websites and make themselves available for any questions or encouragement to any and all who have bought the cup before, during, and after purchase. They also spread information by attending fairs and lectures and making home visits, in order to take time to speak one-on-one with people. This provides the opportunity for customers to touch and feel the product, which is also a way of testing it, and should have a positive effect on the rate of adoption (Rogers, 2003: 258).

The vendors’ all speak of the importance of informing midwives and school nurses about the menstrual cup and describe initiating contact with them. For example, Perby mentions that young
menstruaters should get information about the cup as a part of their sexual education, indicating the importance of school nurses. These influential actors can be understood as what Rogers (2003: 26-27) label opinion leaders, or even non-commercial change agents. A virtual example of this is bloggers, to which Lunette sends menstrual cups for online reviews. According to Rogers (2003: 26-27), the opinion leader sways customer’s opinions about innovations in the desired direction. In this case, our interview results show that they also create awareness of the menstrual cup, which is important as many still have not heard of it. Additionally, the vendors encourage third party discussion, which enables potential users to obtain information from other people in addition to the vendors, and also increases the exposure of the menstrual cup. This should increase the cup’s observability and reduce the level of uncertainty, as information about the product is communicated. The perceived complexity may also be somewhat reduced as a result of this, both of which should positively affect the rate of adoption (ibid: 258-259).

Individuals learn through obtaining information from their surroundings. Learning is therefore assisted when information is spread and made readily available (MacVaug & Schiavone, 2010). Furthermore, as previous research findings state, actors should focus on educating and informing the public when handling a stigma (Kunreuther & Slovic, 1999). The possible effect of the vendors’ educational and informative approach on stigmatization can be illustrated by an observation from the interviews. Here, Tiittanen described how the employee’s at Lunette have experienced a change in negative customer reactions after information about the menstrual cup it and how to use was exchanged.

6.3.4 The Flow of Information

According to diffusion theory, early adopters are more influenced by mass media, while interpersonal communication is more appropriate for late adopters (Rogers, 2003: 204-211). Despite there being a general wish to be able to market to the masses, at this point in time it is not a possibility for any of the vendors due to budget constraints. As a result, the vendors rely heavily on WOM, which is a form of interpersonal communication. An ideal opportunity to market a product and influence customers arises here, as customers with fixed attitudes can be influenced through interpersonal communication (ibid: 204-205). However, the vendors’ passive
approach may lead to them not fully utilizing this type of communication. Furthermore, adoption is said to be maximized when mass media is used prior to interpersonal communication (ibid: 206). Thus, the essential lack of mass media should slow down the rate of adoption of the menstrual cup.

That said, the vendors expressed their experience of the effectiveness of WOM and other forms of interpersonal communication. Here, the Internet and social media play an important role as mediums that enable the flow of information from vendors to customers and between customers and potential customers, which in turn permit learning. American research has shown that online forums constitute a space where young menstruaters can, unlike in face-to-face conversations, talk openly about menstruation and learn from each other’s experiences (Polak, 2006). For example, one vendor mentioned that many menstruaters need to hear about the cup on several occasions and preferably from someone that has used it and in whom they trust. This indicates that a peer effect may exist in the adoption of the menstrual cup in Scandinavian, similar to that of the findings from the Nepalese context (Oster & Thornton, 2012). Peers facilitate learning as a third party that has tried the menstrual cup can explain its functioning to others. The vendors all refer to what is understood to be an active online discussion on menstruation and the menstrual cup, suggesting the existence of a similar phenomenon in Scandinavia. This could be understood as a “community of expertise” (MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010: 207), and also a form of interpersonal communication, both of which can possibly influence the rate of adoption (ibid; Rogers, 2003: 204-211).

Although the American research states that younger menstruaters may have difficulty discussing menstruation face-to-face, Perby had for example experienced face-to-face communication to be very effective when selling menstrual cups. This does not mean that some forms of interpersonal communication are more effective than others, but rather that potential adopters react differently to different forms. The vendors utilize several forms of interpersonal communication, which can be seen as an adaption to potential adopters different needs and also as a way of showing empathy towards them, and should have a positive effect on the rate of adoption (ibid, 375-377). In addition to their own webpages, the vendors are active on social media such as Facebook, where they encourage the discussion on menstruation and the menstrual cup. As noted by for
example Zetterlund and Perby, however, there are also downsides of the impact of the Internet and social media. These include the transmission of negative attitudes, and the communication of misleading and sometimes faulty information. While insisting on everyone’s right to like or dislike the menstrual cup, Perby takes actions to correct the false information. As for the negative WOM, none of the vendors report any actions targeted directly at carriers of such attitudes, but rather a wish to broadly represent positive ideas of menstruation.
7. Conclusion

7.1 Reflection of the Marketing Challenge

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the marketing challenge faced by Scandinavian vendors of the menstrual cup: the stigmatization of menstruation and the atypical product features of the menstrual cup. Further, the approach of Scandinavian vendors to this challenge is presented and analyzed in terms of its probable effects on the rate of adoption of the menstrual cup.

The results of this study point to the conclusion that the marketing challenge faced by Scandinavian vendors of the menstrual cup is in fact not a two-part issue, as originally assumed, but rather a cause-and-effect relationship, in which the stigmatization of menstruation negatively affects the menstrual cup. Although previous research has pointed to atypical product features of the menstrual cup being a barrier for some customers, the results of this thesis heavily imply that stigmatization is the root of the problem. This in turn means that the atypical product features are not a separate problem; rather, they can be seen to be negative as they are associated with menstruation, which is stigmatized. Therefore, it is likely that if menstruation were not stigmatized menstruators would be less reluctant to, in the words of Tiittanen (2014), “face the blood”, and more willing to adopt the menstrual cup. In short, the rate of adoption of the menstrual cup would improve if menstruation were less stigmatized or not stigmatized at all. It should however be noted that barriers for the menstrual cup in the form of the lack of trialability, minimal observability when in use, and the perceived complexity still exist regardless of stigmatization. It is also likely that the cup’s atypical product features are seen to be different as they are compared with existing solutions, however this is the case with most innovations. These factors have a negative effect on the rate of adoption of the menstrual cup, as they are essentially independent of stigmatization.

The approach taken by each of the vendors is rooted in an ideology to educate, inform, and not be forceful towards potential customers. They are also driven by the wish to change society’s view on menstruation. This ideology is visible in their marketing, which is first and foremost centered on spreading information and educating people about menstruation and the menstrual cup. As the vendors do not currently have the ability to use mass media channels, they focus on
spreading information by making it available to people and by initiating and encouraging interpersonal communication, particularly via WOM. The Internet and social medias such as Facebook are important mediums for this, as are interactions between the vendors and potential customers at for example fairs. Opinion leaders for example school nurses also contribute to the spreading of information.

The general ideological approach based upon educating and spreading information should have a positive effect on the rate of adoption of the menstrual cup, as it is a stigmatized innovation. The marketing approach of the vendors to spread information and initiate discussion about menstruation and the menstrual cup enables learning. This is important for recognition of the menstrual cup, for learning how to use it, and for dealing with the stigmatization of menstruation. The effects of the vendors’ approach may however be slowed down as a result of the communication channels available to the vendors, which are currently restricted to interpersonal communication channel. Furthermore, the passive nature of their approach may not actively shape customer needs and may mean that the benefits of interpersonal communication channels are not fully realized. It should also not be forgotten that the stigmatization of menstruation is a culturally mandated phenomenon that has developed and spread through society over many years. Therefore, while the efforts of the vendors should increase the rate of adoption of the menstrual cup, the resurrection lies also in the hands of society as a whole.

7.2 Implications of the Study

A limitation is that, due to the lack of existing research on the subject, much of the research on which this study is based upon was produced in and concerns North America. This is worthwhile to note as it may imply a reduced possibility to generalize these previous results to other settings, in addition to the lack of academic diversity pertaining to research design and interpretations of research results. In connection with this, we are aware that since this study focuses on the Scandinavian context, and not the North American, this might lead to difficulties when applying this literature within the Scandinavian context. This is for example due to the various social and cultural differences between regions. However, it is also here that our study contributes with a different geographic perspective.
Learning is important for all innovations, as people must first learn of the innovation’s existence and later how to use it. Learning is additionally important for stigmatized products, as it is a way of dealing with and reducing the spread of a stigma. Therefore, addressing and understanding a stigma could be seen as a recommendation for marketers dealing with stigmatized innovations. Based on the results of this study, it would further be recommended that this should be included in the marketing of stigmatized innovations, as stigmatization appears to constitute such a significant hinder for the rate of adoption.

A theoretical implication of the study is that it was deemed beneficial to modify the framework of rate of adoptions in order to enable a study of innovations that are affected by stigmatization to be conducted. This was due to the assumption that stigmatization as an influential factor in this case was too important not to take into consideration. Therefore, it would be interesting and relevant if the diffusion of innovations theory were developed to include stigmatized innovations.

7.3 Further Studies

Although the generalizability of this study is limited to one unmentionable product, the results can still be useful in studying other products in the same category, of which many exist. Since it can be argued that the unmentionable nature of these products is often a result of stigmatization, this implies further possibilities of investigating the marketing of them. An example could be what role learning plays in the marketing of unmentionables. This thesis might also provide a starting point for assessing which approach to take when communicating with customers about such products. Additionally, it is possible that what has been found as positively influencing the rate of adoption of the menstrual cup might also concern other unmentionables that have been adopted by few.

An interesting observation made by the vendors is the increase in the interest for the menstrual cup they have noticed in recent years. In connection to this, they also mentioned observing that the stigmatization of menstruation appeared to be decreasing. It would therefore be interesting to
redo this study at a later date and investigate the relationship between these two factors. Is the increase in interest for menstrual cups a result of a general decrease in the stigmatization of menstruation, or has the increase in menstrual cups and perhaps even the vendors approach led to a decrease in the stigmatization of menstruation?
References


Appendix 1: Question Guide

1. What is your position at this business and how is it that you decided to work at Lunette?

2. Can you tell us why the menstrual cup is the main product that this business sells?

3. Do you know how many menstrual cups the business has sold so far?

4. How do you experience the interest for the menstrual cup today compared to when the business first started? Feel free to elaborate!

5. Can you tell us about the role your business plays in increasing the amount of knowledge about the menstrual cup?

6. The menstrual cup is different from traditional menstrual products in various ways, tell us about this and what this means for your business operations.
   
   Follow up:
   
   What are the positives and negatives (of the cup)?
   Which you have heard from your customers?
   Is this something that you take into consideration when marketing the cup? In which ways?

7. Your customers do not have the opportunity to touch, feel or test the product, due to the fact that your business operates online. How do you handle this?
   
   Follow up:
   
   Through for example marketing?

8. Now we are going to change direction a little bit: American research suggests that it is difficult to openly discuss menstruation. Can you tell us your thoughts about this?

9. How would you describe the situation in Sweden and/or Scandinavia today?
   
   Follow up:
   
   When you mention XXX and XXX it sounds as if menstruation could be seen as stigmatized. Is this something you would agree on or not agree on?
Can you explain/develop your thoughts?

10. Research has even shown that this (the difficulty in openly discussing menstruation) spills over and affects menstrual products. Is this something you can relate to?

Follow up:
What does this mean for you business?
Does this influence your marketing?

11. Can you tell us more about your businesses marketing?

Follow up:
Strategic/tactical level?
Through which channels?
Which customer segment(s)?
Which channels are the most important for your business and why?

12. Are there any marketing channels that your business does not use but that you would like to advertise through?

Follow up:
Why would you like to have been able to use these?
What stops you from using these as you may have liked?

13. Describe the dialogue with your customers! How do you get to know them and find out what they think?

Follow up:
What are usually people’s views/attitudes towards menstruation and the menstrual cup?
How do you handle positive versus negative views/attitudes?

14. What role do you think the dialogue between users of the menstrual cup and non-users play? Does your business in any way encourage or make this dialogue easier in any way? Or the opposite?

15. Which wants and needs have you identified that your customers have?

Follow up:
Can you tell us how you utilize this?
What do you do exactly?

16. Do you believe that your business, through for example marketing or other, can influence the current views and attitudes about menstruation? Is this something that your business strives after?

17. Is there anything else that you would like to add or think that we should know?

18. Do you have any questions for us?