

Female Physiological Shame and Menstrual Pad Industry in China

Yujia Yang

International Department, Wuxi No.1 High School, 98, Yunhe East Road, Wuxi, Jiangsu, 214031, China

Corresponding Author: Yujia Yang, Email: Yo05190304@163.com

Abstract

In contemporary society, the term "menstrual poverty" is not a strange word. There are still many females who feel ashamed for entering their menstrual period and avoiding sanitary napkins, believing that menstrual periods and sanitary napkins are topics that cannot be discussed in the public. This dissertation will explain and analyze the development of sanitary napkins, the reasons for the source of female shame, and the problems in the market operation of the sanitary napkins industry one by one, and put forward corresponding solutions. After the study, the dissertation concludes that "menstrual poverty" caused by poor females' lack of economic affordability is no longer the main problem, after ensuring that females can basically use menstrual products, more attention should be paid to their psychological and social experience. This dissertation argues that females' sense of shame stems from deep-rooted cultural prejudices against females. Therefore, education,

government propaganda, and funding have played a great role in getting rid of females' shame about menstruation and reducing social prejudice. In this way, people can truly solve the problem from the root to relieve or even illuminate the social bias against women.

Keywords

Menstruation; Menstrual pads; Shame

Introduction

Since tribal times, a female's menstrual period has been considered ominous because menstrual blood is usually seen as death. As primitive nations often regarded blood as the source of life, they were afraid of the occurrence of bleeding. Menstrual taboo was influenced by the blood taboo; therefore, according to the religious culture, females were isolated in a house that was far away from groups until their blood drained out of their veins. Meanwhile, During the period females were not allowed to touch males because

Citation: Yujia Yang. (2022) Female Physiological Shame and Menstrual Pad Industry in China. The Journal of Young Researchers 4(31): e20220822

Copyright: © 2022 Yujia Yang. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Received on July 20, 2022; Accepted on August 1, 2022; Published on August 22, 2022

people believe they would bring misfortunes to men. Menstrual taboo is a common stage in the development history of human society, which runs throughout human history, it is not only because of the inculcation of religious culture but also because females were bound by these thoughts and were themselves subject to shame. Even in today's China, there are still females who feel ashamed of menstruation. According to the survey (Jiang, 2020), in the village, 10.1% of mid-aged females think menstruation is too private to talk about and even 2.5% of females consider that menstrual blood is a filthy thing. The reason behind these thoughts is the lack of physiological knowledge among women. Therefore, when they choose menstrual pads, they only consider the price regardless of the quality of these pads. This is the reason for most of the menstrual pads they choose are cheap but have quality problems. By reviewing recent literature, this paper reveals the current situation of the menstrual pad industry and women's attitudes towards menstruation and menstrual pads.

By summarizing and exploring this topic, this essay suggests that female shame's essential influence on the menstrual pad industry is significant. People lack knowledge about females' physiological health, especially in developing areas. Females in these areas are less likely to know how to deal with physiological periods. Meanwhile, they cannot obtain high-quality menstrual pads. Therefore, there is an urgent need to guide people's attitudes towards menstruation, menstrual products, and industry. Especially in less developed areas, such as rural countryside, where the females do not know how to better cope with the physiological period. At the same time, some females are unable to afford high-quality menstrual pads, this also has an impact on the market of the menstrual product industry in pursuit of high standards.

In addition, the shame of menstruation comes from the discrimination toward women. Females from the very beginning of religious indoctrination then became a tool of human reproduction. For centuries, in some societies, people do not show respect to females at a basic level. This kind of phenomenon is easily found in females' workplaces, marriages, and family where older generations are less likely to have granddaughters and dote on males in their daily lives. Females are vulnerable to discrimination. In the next few paragraphs of the dissertation, it will be discussed.

A review of relevant literature reveals that many studies focus on shame in females. However, the impacts of these factors on females' shame and their usage of menstrual products are less known. There is research, for example, Koskenniemi (2021) linking these factors with the market and how the females' shame will affect them. Previous studies have also linked females' shame with advertisements in the menstrual product market, analyzed female consumers' psychology, and also given the changes in the number of people who buy the product after being influenced by advertisements. This provides a great reference value for the following analysis and speculation on the market five years later.

This paper will first introduce how females' menstrual period is spent since ancient times, when the sense of shame was born, what the birth of the sense of shame caused, and its impact on social culture and the sanitary napkin industry. Secondly, it will further introduce the development history of sanitary napkins, how it was born, and how to develop step by step the appearance used by women in today's society. Then, the paper will analyze the reasons for female shame and what causes women to have negative psychology toward sanitary napkins. At the same time, this paper will also include a

series of problems existing in the market of sanitary napkins, and how to improve and put forward solutions and suggestions. Finally, according to the proposed scheme, the prejudice and shame of women in society in the future are evaluated and speculated.

Literature Review

The Historical Development of Menstrual Pads

Different from males, females go through their menstrual cycles after puberty. They have been troubled with menstrual pains and staining their pants or skirts with menstrual blood. It has been difficult for them to find sanitary and comfortable materials to make menstrual pads to prevent blood leakage. In ancient times, females tended to use locally sourced materials. Whether it is hay or sponge, it is a good sanitary product. Females in ancient Greece covered sticks with cotton, and in Africa they used softer feathers. Menstruating females did not have to engage in manual work. They rested at home until the end of the painful days.

In the slave society, ancestors gradually developed a sense of shame. As a result, dealing with menstruation became an act of obscurity. At that time, the clothes were only bark and grass leaves, but females were known to use dry hay to absorb blood and clean their bodies with water when the moon came.

With the advent of the feudal era, the historical documents about females and their daily life are very limited so it is very hard to find relevant records. How females of this period handled these issues such as polluting clothes, dysmenorrhea, and bacterial infection, is still being examined by archaeologists who have uncovered evidence of it.

Because of the social divisions of the time, some

females from the lower classes did not even have access to such a sanitary belt. Even if they had one, they do not change it very often. With the progress of paper-making, the value of paper became lower and people finally used papyrus. Compared to sanitary belts, papyrus is cheaper and more convenient. However, because of the hierarchy, premium goods go first to nobility and powerful people. Therefore, even if it was introduced into society, females in ordinary families still did not have the conditions to use it, and only some dainty and wealthy families would have sufficient supplies of it.

As early as the 1970s, there were very good finished menstrual pads in foreign countries. Before the 1980s Chinese women had used so-called “menstrual belts”. It is a sewed small bag filled with grass, wood ash, or paper that women had worn as belts during the period. With the reforming and opening-up policy, many new things were introduced in China including menstrual pads. In 1982, the Chinese government imported the first sanitary napkin production line from Japan.

Tampon factories were not set up until the early 20th century when the country became more open to foreign influence. At the time, however, females were used to the traditional methods, and few accepted tampons. Only some females of the new era with advanced thinking and certain economic foundation will try to use this convenient and quick menstrual product. The occurrence of this phenomenon mainly originates from feudalism and the backwardness of thought. At that time, most females did not have access to higher education, and the issue of physical health was not taken seriously. Therefore, only those females who are in the upper classes and have access to education, most of whom have avant-garde awareness and realize the importance of physiological hygiene, will

choose to buy menstrual products with better quality and hygiene.

The Usage of Menstrual Pads and the Menstrual Pad Industry

After nearly 30 years, the use habit of menstrual pads by Chinese female consumers has been fully formed, and menstrual pads have become an indispensable sanitary product for females' menstrual care. According to the Household Paper Committee of the China Paper Association, at the end of 2016, the market share of menstrual pads has been over 90%, this data is near the sum of the American and Japanese markets. Females between the age of 15-over 50s have the need to use menstrual pads and the population of those females is almost 400 million. In recent years, the range of ages has been extended. Therefore, the market for menstrual pads has huge potential regarding their size.

From 2013 to 2017, the number of enterprises in China's menstrual pad industry had been increasing. In 2016, the number of menstrual pad industries exceeded 1000. During this period, the overall operating income of China's menstrual pad industry had been steadily rising, with little fluctuations in 2016 and 39,510 RMB in 2017. By 2020, the market size of menstrual pads (including panty liners) in China reached 61.10 billion RMB (Luo, 2014).

With the increase in income, people pursue high-quality menstrual pads. The consumption proportion of middle and high-end sanitary napkins represented by safety, hygiene, cleanliness, extremely thin, comfortable, and super absorption continues to rise.

Causes of Shame

According to the data released by the Household Paper Committee of the China Paper Association recently (2022), many women in China now

choose to use menstrual pads during their menstrual period, but they still feel shame about it. For example, in a county in Gansu province, according to the data (Huang, 2020), in general, 89.0% of the respondents considered menstruation to be a "normal physiological phenomenon", 7.4% to be a "troublesome annoyance", and 2.3% to be a "private thing too ashamed to talk about". In terms of age, 92.8% of adolescent girls considered menstruation a "normal phenomenon". For middle-aged women between 35 and 49, 79.3% of them considered menstruation as "normal". Meanwhile, 10.1% of middle-aged women regarded menstruation as too private to talk about. Even 2.5% of conceded menstrual blood was a dirty thing. The figures suggest that the older generation tends to be more conservative and feel shame about menstruation and its related issues.

This is only a survey in a small county, but in such a developing country as China, presumably in other poor areas, there are more people with negative attitudes towards menstruation and shame on female bodies, for example, how menstruation comes and how to maintain females' hygiene. Even in the developed parts of the country, these feelings of shame are still common. For example, in our daily life, girls are less likely to mention those words, such as menstrual pads and menstruation when males appear in the same place. When they are uncomfortable during the period, they often pretend they are suffering from a stomachache. When changing menstrual pads, girls unconsciously slip them into their pockets quickly, not wanting anyone to notice pads even if they are of the same gender. Although everyone knows menstruation is a normal physical thing, people tend to feel too shameful to talk about it.

Why the level of medical care has greatly

improved and more people have paid abounding attention to their health in China, but the awareness of female health has not? That is because the males who dominate society do not mention how females handle their menstruation, therefore, they do not bother. (Li, 2006) If a man in ancient times had stood up for females' menstruation grievances, he would have been publicly condemned as a pervert. As for the way to deal with menstruation, it is also passed down from mother to daughter. Women are more conservative, so mothers do not go into detail when passing on this knowledge to their daughters. So, for thousands of years, no one thought of a "menstruation revolution" to improve females' hygiene.

It may be hard to believe, but menstrual pads were invented by an American man. He was a good man who loved his wife very much. Every month, he found that his wife was particularly uncomfortable in those days, and it was very complicated to deal with the monthly affairs. In order to solve his wife's problem, he specially carried out relevant research, and combined cotton fibre and paper pulp, to make the first ever sanitary napkin. His wife found it very convenient and comfortable. As early as the 1970s, the menstrual pad has been popular in the western world. However, before the 1980s, Chinese females even had never heard about it.

In fact, by comparison, it is not difficult to find that most countries regard these words such as menstruation and menstrual pads, as normal phenomena, while Chinese females are more subject to feudal ideas and their thoughts are conservative, so they still feel ashamed of these words instead.

Business Models of Design of Women Menstrual Pad Market

The world's first menstrual pad was produced by

CALRCOR company which is in America in 1921. Since then, some improvements have been made. In the 1970s, they designed menstrual pads that were widely accepted by females. The suggestive model of females' menstrual pads began to appear.

The development of menstrual pads in China can be traced back to the introduction of the first production chain in 1980. Since 1985, the number of menstrual pads purchased in China has increased substantially. By the end of 2007, (Luo, 2014), there were about 644 menstrual pad manufacturers in China. Among them, the sales volume of the top 10 manufacturers accounted for about 30% of the total domestic sales.

In the domestic market, menstrual pad producers need to retain old customers and attract new customers to expand their market share for further development. The sanitary napkins with new designs can fill the needs of the target groups.

Designing a new target market for sanitary pads is a good idea today. There is some menstruation target market with new designs and reasons. The first point is to do a good job of first gear products which are sold to females in developed cities to remain in the demand of urban women. With the development of the Chinese economy, the per capita disposable income of Chinese citizens will continue to increase. Citizens will have more money to buy high-end products in the future. Therefore, doing well in high-end goods will be profitable in the future. The second new design goal is to do a good job of second gear products which are sold to females in villages to tap the needs of rural females. At present, the target population of menstrual pads in China is 15-49 years old women. According to the data from the National Bureau of Statistics released in 2011, the proportion of females in

cities who use menstrual pads is 75%, while in rural areas is only 38%. To develop a new market, menstrual pad enterprises will attack the existing secondary market and seize the rural demand vacancy under the condition of guaranteeing the quality, so as to expand sales.

Numbers of menstrual Chinese companies use advertising to promote their brands. The particular reason for the circumstance is that many girls do not feel uncomfortable about watching the advertisement for menstrual pads, so the business uses this characteristic and spends plenty of money to invite more stars to shoot the advertisement for menstrual pads. Therefore, the more certain exposure and popularity of its brand the more industries it can gain.

Problems Existing in the Operation of the Menstrual Pad Industry

Since the 21st century, with the rapid development of the Chinese economy, the price level has increased sharply. Meanwhile, menstrual pads have been more expensive due to the high production costs. It is noticeable that during these years the price of menstrual pads in other countries has decreased steadily. It is noticeable that during these years the price of menstrual pads in other countries has decreased steadily. As a result, so-called "bulk sanitary pads" have appeared on many shopping websites, costing only 20 RMB for 100. The quality of them is not good. Buyers know this, but many females have no choice but to buy these cheap bulk menstrual pads and use them, due to poverty. In a Chinese store, a five-piece packet of menstrual pads is about 15 RMB, while, in other countries such as the UK, the price of menstrual pads is only around 4 to 5 pounds considering the exchange pads in the UK are more expensive. Menstrual pads are a daily necessity like rice, oil, and salt, but the price of menstrual pads in China

is far more than it should be.

By common sense, a higher price means higher quality, more importantly, these expensive pads have numerous issues in terms of quality. The first is its quality problem. Some manufacturers in China have very sophisticated packaging and advertising, making it easy for customers to be attracted to its adding value. However, its quality problem cannot be a small issue, many brands of menstrual pads are very sultry. In the summer, females easily feel uncomfortable. From the appearance of the menstrual pads themselves, it can be seen that it is filled with very thick fibre, but actually, this fibre does not play a particularly important role in absorbing blood, in return for the feeling of discomfort. When the menstrual blood is airtight, it is easy to cause bacterial breeding, infection, and the probability of causing gynaecological diseases greatly increases. However, it is not difficult to find that many foreign menstrual pads have achieved the effect of being light and breathable at a low price. There will be air holes on a pad which is used to give females cool feelings so that users will not feel too much burden and discomfort. Moreover, its blood absorption is not affected.

The second issue is the problem of design. The viscosity of the menstrual pad is poor, and a little exercise, may cause the sticky place of the underwear and fell off, finally making menstrual blood contaminate the pants.

The third issue is its outer packing drawing too much attention. Many females are too sensitive to go to the bathroom with a menstrual pad in hand, and they are too shy to let others know they are on their period. As a manufacturer and designers, they should take females' concerns into account and change the design of their packaging.

The last issue is advertising and endorsements. In recent years, the content of menstrual pad advertisements in China has been exploiting females. The period had nothing to do with the good things that were presented in advertising. Advertisements have lost their educational significance. They have failed to tell females what to do with menstruation, how to take better care of themselves during this period, and how to make menstruation no longer a shameful discourse so that females are no longer ashamed of it. Instead, businesses exaggerate females' sexuality, and many ads are confusing. Some manufacturers prefer to emphasize the private part of women in their advertisements, which makes many people feel uncomfortable, and more people are misled by these advertisements and the misposition of menstrual products.

Discussion and Solutions

In order to solve the problem discussed above, there are some possible solutions.

First, family education should be an effective way to help young women to better understand their bodies and not feel ashamed about them. When the girl comes to her period for the first time, she will feel strange and worried. Parents should take this opportunity to tell the girl that this is a very normal thing and not feel afraid and shame. Besides, some basic physiological knowledge is taught to children, including how to use sanitary napkins correctly. However, the knowledge of how to use it correctly is not sufficient. More importantly, parents should tell children how to take appropriate protective measures and take good care of themselves during their periods, such as reducing exercise, keeping warm and changing pads frequently. Parents should help their children to have positive attitudes towards these physical phenomena and take good care of girls in order to reduce the sense of shame about menstruation.

Meanwhile, at school teachers should not ignore the importance of sex education. In many cases, shame towards menstruation is due to the lack of sex education in school, where girls go through puberty, and boys laugh at girls having menstruation around them for lack of knowledge about females' menstruation. This not only destroys the harmonious environment that schools should have but also casts a shadow on girls who suffer from prejudice. Therefore, schools need to pay attention to students' physical and mental health and offer sex knowledge during classes. This kind of physiological lesson should be provided not only to girls but also to boys so that the prejudice will be gradually reduced and the shame will be gradually removed.

In contemporary society, the issues of discrimination against females, such as workplace discrimination and son preference, have come to the public's attention, and more and more people begin to advocate for females' rights. Discrimination and prejudice have been reduced significantly.

The menstrual pad market is also slowly improving. There are sanitary towel brands, such as Libresse, that combine advertising with reality. It is easy for women to feel ashamed of taking out menstrual pads in the public. However, this advertisement does not implicitly express but takes the workplace as the background. Women do not hide from menstruation anymore, and men also start to get used to it without prejudice, giving women enough understanding and showing respect. This advertisement provides a very good start that female physiological product producers should take female points of view to understand users' needs for providing more suitable products. In this way, advertisement becomes an effective way to deliver more positivity.

Meanwhile, menstrual pads can be seen on TV not only in advertisements but also in TV series. In previous TV series, menstrual pads were covered with mosaics or black plastic bags. But in the current TV series, we can easily perceive that such objects also appear in the drama, which will no longer be expressed in a hidden way, but like normal objects, appear in the public view. Many viewers have praised the subtle transformation of the TV series, which is not something to be sniffed at. It is just the situation that women are facing at a special time, and there is no need to hide or obscure it indirectly. On social media, there are more bloggers' videos about menstruation, due to so many followers they have, more people are not ashamed of menstruation.

Second, an open attitude in society is important for women to feel comfortable and confident and have a better life. The government should do more to support women and introduce more favourable policies for women. For example, the price of sanitary napkins in China is not low. The government can lower the tax rate on menstrual products and provide relevant subsidies to sanitary napkins producers directly or indirectly. As a result, women can buy menstrual pads of high quality and at a lower price.

Third, NGOs should get involved. The NGO Camp is actively involved in females' health protection, mostly through advocacy and education. More people understand this knowledge, less gender antagonism, less prejudice, and more understanding and tolerance.

For instance, Unicef, the United Nations Children's Fund which is a major driving force in promoting a world of children's rights, in this fund, it has a special branch called Guarding menstrual health kits for girls. Through donations from the public, 10 sets of washable

reusable sanitary pads and 20 bars of soap are sent to girls whose families are too poor to afford such products, protecting the dignity and menstrual health of every girl. Eliminate menstrual poverty, reduce stigma and empower women more positively.

When there are special situations, such as disasters and epidemics, Unicef and many manufacturers begin to donate menstrual pads to the affected areas to help women get through this time. Before many donated materials were mainly food, drinking water, and daily necessities, but now there are also menstrual pads. Before even menstrual pads were necessary, few people would donate, but now there are more materials for women, including sanitary napkins. This shows the public considers the importance of females' physical health seriously and people start to spend more time and money helping women.

Conclusion

This paper investigates the development and usage of menstrual pads in China. Male-dominated social structure and conservative cultures are the main reasons causing the sense of shame towards menstruation and menstrual pads among women and ignorance of women's health in society.

Furthermore, this study focuses on the menstrual pad industry discussing the existing problems. It proposed three possible solutions to improve women's health and life quality. First, girls who are in puberty should be paid more attention to in family and school health education. Second, the government reduces the price and use of sanitary pads to make it easier for women to afford them and to reduce the unfair treatment in society. Third, the attention of public welfare and foundations can also make society pay more attention to females' physical and mental health.

It's hard to change ideas that have been fixed for a long time, but a little progress can bring a lot of change, and more tolerance, harmony and equality are just around the corner.

Conflicts of Interests: the author has claimed that no conflict of interest exists.

References

1. Jiang, X. (2020). Report on women's menstrual knowledge and use of sanitary products in poor areas -- based on a survey in Zhangxian and Xihe counties of Gansu Province. *Collection of Women's Studies*, 6, 68-73.
2. Johnston-Robledo, I., & Chrisler, J. (2001). The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma. *Sex Roles*, 68(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-0052-z>.
3. Kama, A. & Barak-Brandes, S. (2013). Taming the shame: Policing excretions and body fluids in advertisements for hygiene products. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16(5), 582-597. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549413491719>.
4. Koskenniemi, A. (2021). Say no to shame, waste, inequality—and leaks! Menstrual activism in the market for alternative period products. *Feminist Media Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1948885>.
5. Li, J. (2006). Women, filth, and Symbolism: The Taboo of menstruation from the Perspective of Religious Anthropology. *Finance & Trade Economics*, 3, 152-159.
6. Mowat, H., Dobson, A. S., McDonald, K., Fisher, J., & Kirkman, M. (2020). “For myself and others like me”: women’s contributions to vulva-positive social media. *Feminist Media Studies*, 20(1), 35-52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1546209>.
7. Pan, H. Xia, X., & Yu, M. (2008) Government intervention, political connection and local SOE merge. *Economic Studies* 4(1), 41-52.
8. Sitar, P. (2018). Female trouble: menstrual hygiene, shame and socialism. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(7), 771-787. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1304860>.
9. Wei L. (2014). Business model design of women’s sanitary napkin market. *Chizi*, 4, 411-412.
10. Zhu, X. (2011). From taboo to Liberation -- The change of female consciousness and the development of sanitary napkin advertisement. *Art & Design*, 3, 127-128. <https://doi.org/10.16272/j.cnki.cn11-1392/j.2011.03.043>.