

“OF COURSE, I CAN GO SWIMMING”: SPORTS IMAGINARIES IN US MENSTRUAL EDUCATION FILMS*

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INTRODUCTION

Is menstruation in sport a taboo subject? In recent years, the obvious fact of its existence in women's sports has received heightened attention in news stories circulating both in conventional media and on social media platforms. Take, for example, Kiran Gandhi, the 26-year-old American woman who ran the London Marathon in 2015 while on her period, without wearing a pad or tampon.¹ The images showing her bloodstained pants after finishing the race went viral, firstly, because they brought something traditionally associated with the private domestic sphere into the public realm (Delaney, Lupton & Toth, 1976), and secondly, because they took place in the traditionally masculinised context of competitive sports, calling into question some of the prejudices that exist around menstruation and physical activity. On the other hand, this unexpected display of menstrual flow in a sporting environment, whe-

re other bodily fluids (sweat, saliva, blood, tears) are commonplace, provoked numerous comments condemning Gandhi as “disgusting” and “unladylike”, thereby exposing the persistence “of a stigma around menstruation of which women all over the world are victims” (Thiébaud, 2018: 110). The bloodstain on Gandhi's sports gear became an image of civil activism that called out this representation of menstrual blood as abject² and tied in with the tradition of what could be described as prosocial visual motifs, referring to “iconographic patterns that protest against injustice and promote social change, eliciting responses understood as other-oriented emotions, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours” (Canet, 2023: 166). Taking a step beyond the protests made by other sportswomen on this issue, such as the calls for the elimination of white sports outfits made at Wimbledon or by the English football team,³ Gandhi's action was an attack on a social taboo and on sporting policies designed mainly by men.

In *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*, Iris Young (2005) reflects on sexual difference in sport, arguing that physical exercise and bodily movement in our sex-gender system have been historically associated with masculinity, while bodies constructed as feminine have occupied a social position of fixity, weakness and immobility of reaction. On this point, Young observes:

For the most part, girls and women are not given the opportunity to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world, nor are they encouraged as much as boys to develop specific bodily skills. Girls' play is often more sedentary and enclosing than the play of boys. In school and after-school activities girls are not encouraged to engage in sport, in the controlled use of their bodies in achieving well-defined goals. Girls, moreover, get little practice at "tinkering" with things and thus at developing spatial skills. Finally, girls are not often asked to perform tasks demanding physical effort and strength, while as the boys grow older they are asked to do so more and more. (2005: 43)

For Young, girls' and women's sporting activities are dictated by the menstrual condition of their reproductive bodies. In contemporary societies, the "good functioning" of the body is based on the implicit male bias in medicine's conception of health. While periods and menstrual flows are viewed as a pathological condition, apparently linear bodies with no cycle of hormonal alterations as noticeable as those of menstruation are established as the norm for social behaviour and, therefore, for sporting behaviour as well. Menstruation and sport are thus linked to science and medicine as a means of controlling the body, because, in accordance with the perspective posited in 1976 by Foucault (2019), the dominance of capitalism in the West gives rise to a series of strategies and mechanisms aimed at keeping individuals' bodies useful and productive. The period, however, stands in opposition to this question of physical productivity, belonging to the private realm of

reproduction. The media impact of the image of Gandhi's bloodstained pants at the end of the London Marathon can thus be understood in terms of a logic of menstrual *decensorship* that exposes the control and oppression of reproductive bodies in sport. In this sense, it is worth asking where, apart from the image of Gandhi, imaginaries that relate menstruation with sport should be located and identified in Western audiovisual culture.

US MENSTRUAL EDUCATION FILMS (1946-1980)

Given the under-representation of menstruation in Western audiovisual culture, it is necessary to turn to film genres that are ostensibly marginal—due mainly to their unusual distribution channels—such as productions made for the purposes of menstrual education. These productions can be traced back to the 1940s, when the International Cellucotton Products Company, a branch of the Kimberly-Clark Corporation, collaborated with Walt Disney Productions to produce *The Story of Menstruation* (1946), for distribution to US schools to be shown in sex education classes.⁴ This first educational cartoon illustrates the operation of the menstrual cycle and informs its adolescent audience about basic menstrual care practices, all with the aim of promoting and marketing Kotex sanitary pads to adolescent girls (Schaefer, 2020). Just over ten minutes in length, the film is an obvious successor to the silent films on sexual hygiene distributed during and after the First World War by US public health services to warn people (specifically, women) about the risks of contracting venereal diseases (Bonah, Cantor & Laukötter, 2018), such as *Personal Hygiene of Young Women* (1924), supervised by the US Public Health Service and produced by Bray Studios. On the other hand, *The Story of Menstruation* also has its roots in the brochures on menstruation created by Kimberly-Clark, after selling its first Kotex sanitary pads in 1921. These brochures, aimed primarily at gir-

ls and young women, illustrated the operation of the menstrual cycle while presenting the usefulness of these sanitary pads for containing the flow. Menstrual education films thus intertwined the different concerns of their co-producers: the community service objectives of US public health authorities on the one hand, and the commercial interests of companies manufacturing menstrual hygiene products on the other (Vostral, 2011). After the “success” of *The Story of Menstruation*, menstrual education productions continued to be distributed in schools until the 1980s, when sanitary pad companies turned to television as a more effective way of marketing their products to young women.

What makes these productions of interest to this research is the pioneering connection between periods and sport that can be identified in them. This study takes an archaeological perspective involving a thematic and visual analysis of menstrual education films produced between the 1940s and the 1980s in the United States. Specifically, it offers an analysis and comparison of six such films: the aforementioned *The Story of Menstruation* (1946); *Personal Health for Girls* (1952), funded by Coronet Instructional Films; the films *Molly Grows Up* (1953), *It's Wonderful Being a Girl* (1968) and *Naturally A Girl* (1973), all made by Johnson & Johnson; and *The Facts for Girls* (1980), produced by Tomorrow Entertainment, which is the only production in the sample that was broadcast on television. The aim of this analysis is to identify the visual and narrative motifs of menstrual education in relation to sport in this corpus of films, with a view to determining how biomedical discourses have underpinned the relationship between menstruation and sport in Western audiovisual culture. This analysis is based on the study by Bonah, Cantor & Laukötter in *Health Education Films in the Twentieth Century* (2018), which establishes a methodological framework for analysing health education films of this kind.⁵ These authors also stress

the importance of comparing productions to each other: “Serial analysis of many films [...] provides insight into strategies and styles of public health communication and what changes and what does not over time. It is a form of comparative history that is not possible to undertake with only one film” (Bonah, Cantor & Laukötter, 2018: 4). This research is also guided by the theoretical propositions of Iris Young (2005) on the question of how biomedical discourse has conditioned the imaginary constructed around menstruation in Western societies in relation to physical activity and sport.

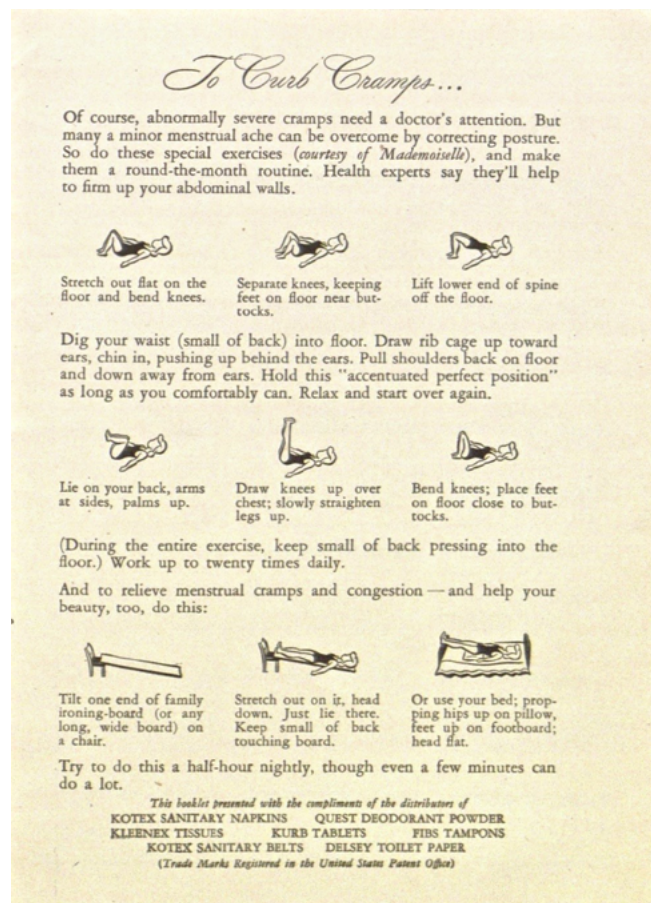
PHYSICAL EXERCISE AS MENSTRUAL CARE

According to Vostral (2011), all menstrual education films follow the same narrative pattern. On the one hand, films produced by public health authorities stress bodily care, a healthy diet and the importance of bathing. On the other, films made by menstrual product manufacturers emphasise these same points but also highlight the importance of controlling menstruation with sanitary pads. The narrative always revolves around an adolescent girl who has not yet had—or has only just had—her first period, and who is being offered advice or warnings about proper menstrual care. On the visual level, these productions also have a similar aesthetic, recognisable for the use of anatomical diagrams that illustrate the ovaries, uterus and vagina, which serve to explain the menstrual cycle to the protagonist, and thus to the audience as well. Anatomical diagrams are common in these health education productions (Bonah, Cantor & Laukötter, 2018), although it is curious to note that in none of these images is there ever any trace of the red colour of menstrual blood (Sánchez-Manzano, 2021). As part of the narrative revolving around bodily care and the aesthetic of anatomical descriptions, all of the films in the corpus depict different sports and physical activities engaged in by the girls appearing on screen.

In *The Story of Menstruation*, the film's narrator explains that "exercise is good for you during menstruation," while the protagonist is shown on a bicycle, on horseback, and dancing. The brochure "Very Personally Yours" that was distributed with the film also introduces the point that taking good care of your body during menstruation involves being physically active. In particular, one page of the brochure presents recommendations of abdominal exercises to reduce menstrual pain (Image 1). It is worth highlighting the fact that although this first film recommends physical exercise, it advises girls against swimming or immersing themselves in water due to the changes in body temperature that this could provoke, which many medical experts of the time supposedly considered potentially harmful for menstrual health (Heinrich & Batchelor, 2004). This point is stressed in a scene of *The Story of Menstruation* where the narrator recommends bathing during your period, but with caution to avoid catching cold. Similarly, the British educational film *Growing Girls* (1949) produced by the Film Producers Guild and the National Committee for Visual Aids in Education, stresses that swimming during your period is not beneficial to your health. This film lists a series of physical activities that can be engaged in during menstruation ("You can dance, you can cycle as usual [...], you can play hockey or any other game, provided you feel like it"), and then concludes by showing the protagonist dressed in a bathing suit jumping into the water for a swim, while the narrator clarifies that she is now "at the end of the period". On this question, the film *Molly Grows Up* creates an interesting dialectic, beginning with a scene where Molly is talking on the phone to a friend who is trying to persuade her to go swimming. Her mother tells her that it would be better for her to stay home, because "it's not a good idea [to swim in] the first two or three days of your period." In response to her mother's advice, Molly tells her friend: "Of course I can't go swimming; you know I've got the curse."⁶ In contrast to this

scene, at the end of the film Molly appears dressed in a bathing suit, swimming in the pool with her friends, just after a scene in which her teacher goes over a list with the students of physical activities that they can engage in during their periods: they can swim (but only after the first few days), dance, skate, ride on horseback and play "fast games". The films *It's Wonderful Being a Girl*, *Naturally a Girl* and *The Facts for Girls* all feature similar scenes: in a classroom, one of a group of adolescent girls asks her teacher if it is all right to play sports during menstruation, to which the teacher replies that it is, and that it is not merely all right but recommended. In *It's Wonderful Being a Girl*, the teacher even encourages the protagonist to

Image 1. Sequence of still frames from the film *Naturally a Girl* (1973), showing the tampon as a menstrual hygiene technology that can be helpful for engaging in sports like swimming



go skating with her classmates, while in *The Facts for Girls*, the film's presenter tells a group of girls that they should engage in athletics while on their period. All of these films include scenes showing girls riding bicycles, skating, dancing, swimming or playing other sports. And in *Personal Health for Girls*, the protagonist is shown playing volleyball, while in a voice-over she tells the audience that they should get some kind of physical exercise every day: "Exercise keeps my muscles from getting flabby," she explains.

These menstrual education films introduce sport and physical exercise as positive actions for taking good care of the body during menstruation, an idea that is already identifiable in the sexual hygiene productions made earlier in the 20th century. These include the silent film *Personal Hygiene of Young Women*, already mentioned above, which describes physical exercise as the most effective way of protecting the body against menstrual and sexual pains, and for preventing venereal diseases. One of the film's inter-titles reads: "Menstruation is a perfectly normal occurrence and not an illness. In case of pain or discomfort a physician should be consulted. Light exercise should be taken; also daily baths, but *not* with cold water." In the corpus of films analysed here, playing sports is also presented as a way of taking good care of your body. This would appear to contradict Young's theory (2005) about the "implicit male bias" in the Western conception of health and sport. In this sense, these films represent the introduction of a new imaginary in Western audiovisual culture that associates femininity (represented by the menstrual bodies of the protagonists) with physical exercise and bodily movement. However, in these menstrual education films the association between sport and menstruation is still founded on an assumption of "good ladylike behaviour" on the part of their adolescent characters. According to Ghanoui (2020: 933), these films enact a "menstrual performance"⁷ in their narratives by presenting their

protagonists' menarche (the first period) as an embodiment of female roles and behaviours. As Tarzibachi (2017a) suggests, by becoming a menstruating body in adolescence girls begin a process of gender socialisation whereby, paradoxically, menstrual bleeding must be addressed privately and discreetly, while at the same time "becoming a woman" should be publicly proclaimed. This idea is made obvious in the titles of the films *It's Wonderful Being a Girl* and *Naturally a Girl*, which replace the noun "menstruation" with the verb "being" or the adverb "naturally", in a linguistic shift that reveals the performative function of the period as a gender generator. The scenes in these menstrual education films that focus on physical exercise and sport thus conform to a logic of instruction about these "new" menstrual bodies. The instruction is personified in the figure of the mentor who advises the girls about which activities they should and should not engage in when they are on their period. This is an idea that evolved over the years and was represented in various characters (chiefly in the narrator, the mother, and the teacher), but always playing the same role of instructing young girls in how to "become" women. The authority figure is common in educational films on any aspect of personal health (in other types of educational films, it is often represented by a doctor), as it is one of the most widely used narrative devices for legitimising a health education film (Bonah, Cantor & Laukötter, 2018).

In the corpus studied here, the sports that appear most frequently are cycling, dancing and swimming. All of these are individual sports that came to be imbued with this "feminine" view of physical activity that always places the focus on the benefits they offer for women's physical and menstrual health. In their book on women and sport, Clemente and Silva (2022) link the question of health to a whole feminine tradition of understanding physical exercise in terms of its benefits for bodily care rather than in the competitive terms identifiable in the male sporting tradition.

This distinction is even clearer in these menstrual education films when compared to other health education films: specifically, the sexual education films aimed at adolescent boys, which focus on issues related to men's sexual health rather than on women's reproductive health (Ghanoui, 2020). Examples of this can be found in *Social-Sex Attitudes in Adolescence* (1953), which forms part of the Adolescent Development series produced by Crawley Films, and *As Boys Grow* (1957), made by Medical Arts Productions. In both films, adolescent boys are shown in sporting environments: in numerous scenes they are wearing sports uniforms or holding basketballs or baseballs, even when they are not actually playing any of these sports. We also see them socialising with each other by playing contact or competitive sports. *As Boys Grow* includes a particularly noteworthy scene in which a group of boys ask questions of their coach, who shows them an anatomical diagram with the shape of the ovaries, the uterus and the vagina to illustrate the menstrual process—a key feature of menstrual education productions, although here it appears only as a visual motif of the “tactical talk”. In this film, the classroom is replaced with the locker room, while the authority figure is changed from a narrator/mother/teacher to a coach. This change places us inside a male imaginary that revolves around the trainer, a very common image in contemporary sports culture. In contrast, menstrual education films for adolescents do not place the focus on gender socialisation by means of sports imagery, but instead use such imagery to explain the codes of good gender behaviour. One scene in *Personal Health for Girls* illustrates this perfectly when the protagonist is shown playing volleyball with a group of girls and two boys walk past the court, look at the girls and wave to them. While the boys pass by, the protagonist's voice-over narration continues to extol the virtues of playing sports everyday: “I meet a lot of new boys that way, because everyone my age is interested in sports.” This reflects how good

female behaviour includes caring for the body, and in doing so, obtaining approval from the male gaze. The scene culminates with a close-up of the protagonist smiling because exercise “makes [her] feel good”.

PHYSICAL EXERCISE AS MENSTRUAL LIBERATION

Perhaps the clearest point made to the audience in these menstrual education productions is that the period is something “positive” and that engaging in physical activities and sports is beneficial for the health of menstruating bodies. This is reinforced in all the films analysed with images showing “happy” girls exercising while on their first period. Particularly notable in this respect is a scene in the bowling alley in *It's Wonderful Being a Girl*, when the protagonist, Libby, tells her friend that she has had her first period and the narrator remarks: “To her, any sport was a challenge.” We then see Libby running, jumping and smiling while she plays a round of bowling. However, it is important to recognise that in these films the apparent “menstrual liberation” offered by sport is dependent on the use of technologies that can contain and conceal the bleeding. According to Vostral (2011), both the educational films produced by US public health authorities and those made by sanitary pad manufacturers introduce menstrual management technologies in their narratives as the method of dealing with menstruation. In *Molly Grows Up*, the teacher explains to her students: “When you do [start menstruating] you will want to use a sanitary napkin to absorb the flow.” And she adds: “Some girls prefer to use tampons,” while she shows her students how to use these products. First, she explains how they work using her hands, and then she uses an anatomical diagram on the blackboard. A similar scene is featured in *The Facts for Girls*, when the teacher explains to her students how to use menstrual care products. In *The Story of Menstruation*,

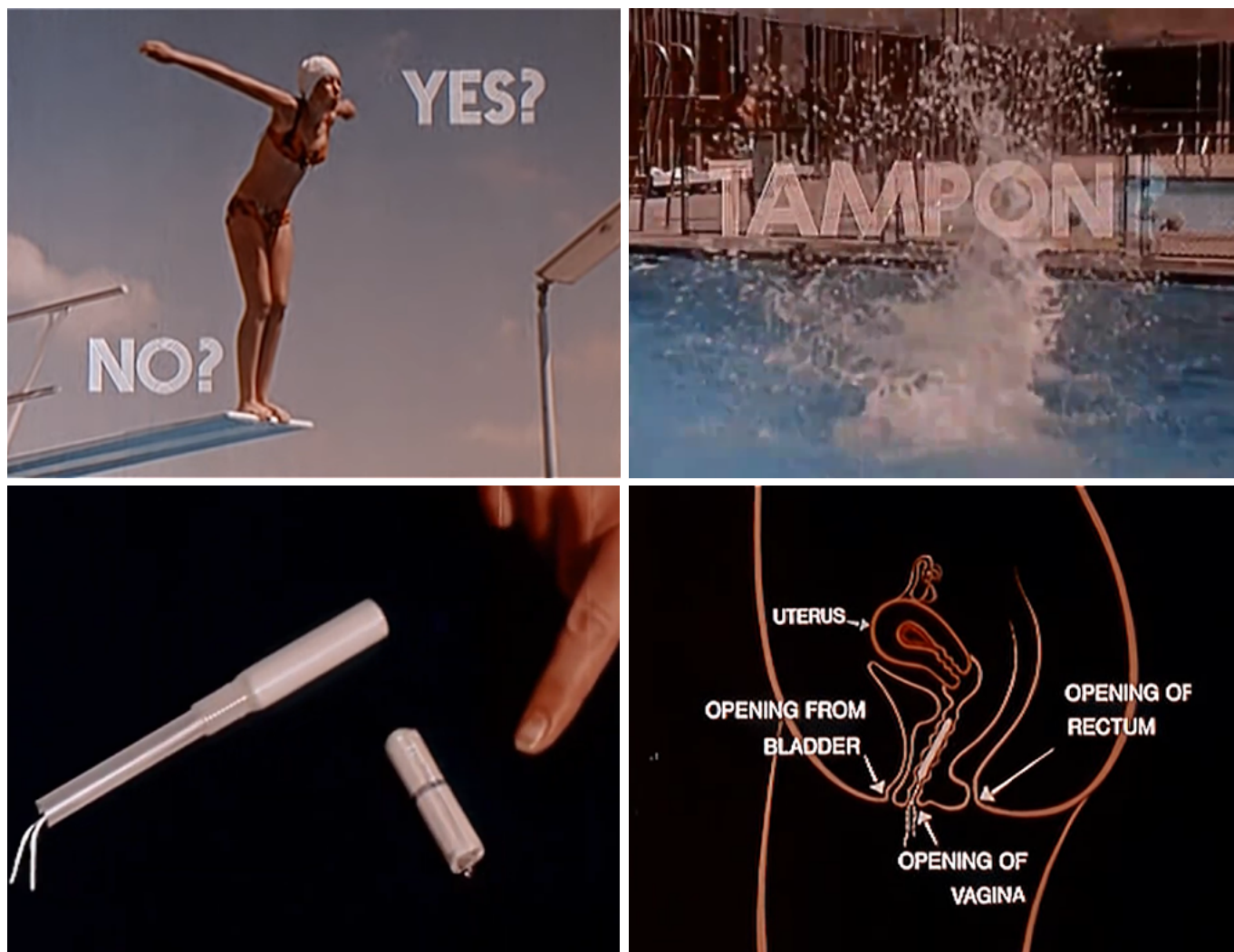
Personal Health for Girls and *Naturally a Girl*, it is the narrator who explains the benefits of using sanitary pads during menstruation, in similar terms. On the other hand, in *It's Wonderful Being a Girl*, the protagonist's mother gives her a box of pads and shows her how to use them, before she has her first period.

Presenting technologies that place the focus on bodily health is common in health education films like these (Bonah, Cantor & Laukötter, 2018), although in the case of menstrual education films, such presentations necessarily involve suitable instructions about the body, offered once again by the mentor figure. Although these films challenge the biased use of the male as the standard for good health (Young, 2005) by making menstruating bodies the focus of bodily care, the way they naturalise menstrual management technologies on screen continues to reduce menstruating bodies to a biomedical issue. In medicine, menstruation has historically been understood as a "condition" with "symptoms" that requires "treatment". As Mandziuk suggests, "[m]edical theories of the body as an economic system or a factory led to a metaphoric understanding of menstruation as an indication of 'the diseased factory' or 'the machine in disrepair'" (2010: 44). In such cases, menstrual management technologies are presented in these films as the solution to the "problem", providing a false assurance of control over the body thanks to the "clean" sensation resulting from neutralising the menstrual flow and concealing it from the public, especially in the context of playing sports. In contrast to the image of Gandhi's bloodstained pants after running in the London Marathon in 2015, these menstrual education films show no trace of blood. Instead, physical exercise serves as a means of demonstrating the effectiveness of menstrual care products in containing the flow. At the end of *It's Wonderful Being a Girl*, the protagonist asks her teacher whether she can play any sport while menstruating. The teacher replies: "The pad absorbs the

menstrual fluid completely; you have nothing to worry about." In *Naturally a Girl*, the students ask the question: "What happens to the menstrual flow when it leaves the body?" To answer this question, the benefits of sanitary pads are shown on screen while the voice-over explains how to put one on correctly to obtain best results in terms of absorption. Later, the question of swimming during menstruation is raised, with a girl in a bathing suit shown about to jump off a diving board. The image freezes and the captions "YES?" and "NO?" appear on screen. (Image 2). Then the voice-over provides the answer: "You can go swimming during menstruation if you wear a tampon." The image begins moving again and the girl jumps into the water. Then the caption "TAMPON?" appears (Image 3), while a young girl's voice exclaims the word. The narrator then details the advantages of using this menstrual management technology (Image 4), while an image of a tampon is shown being inserted in one of the usual anatomical diagrams (Image 5).

However, the focus in these scenes seems to be more related to hygiene than to health. As Vostral (2008) suggests, the use of these technologies designed to conceal the menstrual flow conveys an understanding of them as gender control technologies, as they are associated with the production and consumption of a "feminine ideal" that involves maintaining a clean, stain-free body. At the same time, in these films the concealment of bleeding by means of such products is associated with the theories about hygiene and cleanliness identified by Kane (1990), citing Douglas (2007), in

THESE MENSTRUAL EDUCATION FILMS SHOW NO TRACE OF BLOOD. INSTEAD, PHYSICAL EXERCISE SERVES AS A MEANS OF DEMONSTRATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MENSTRUAL CARE PRODUCTS IN CONTAINING THE FLOW



From left to right and from top to bottom. Images 2, 3, 4, 5. Sequence of still frames from the film *Naturally a Girl* (1973), showing the tampon as a menstrual hygiene technology that can be helpful for engaging in sports like swimming

the first advertisements for menstrual care products based on the concept of *freshness*: “‘Freshness’ is the way the subject/consumer (coded more often than not as female) attains/maintains a position in the social order, whether by satisfying her family or the standards of female attractiveness. The very existence of a special category, feminine hygiene, indicates that female bodies require specific cleansing rituals” (Kane, 1990: 85). Although these educational films are not technically advertisements, the close relationship that menstrual care product companies had with them cannot be overlooked, as their role in the produc-

tion of these films is key to understanding how these menstrual “cleansing rituals” are articulated in the films’ narratives.

According to Mandziuk (2010), these stories about hygiene and menstruation are based on combining modern advertising strategies with the social and economic circumstances of industrialisation and the consumer society. It is no mere coincidence that these films appeared in the years after the Second World War, when, on the one hand, public health became a key political and social concern,⁹ and, on the other, the hegemony of the capitalist economic model was consolida-

ted. Health education films were produced with the intention of correcting or reinforcing beliefs and practices in the area of personal health and were designed to serve specific instrumental purposes (Bonah, Cantor & Laukötter, 2018). The productions analysed here, which cover a period of 40 years, clearly engage in a complex discourse on health that reflects a range of political and economic efforts to control reproductive bodies in the second half of the 20th century in the United States. For example, the menstrual education films of the 1940s and 1950s tend to depict sport in domestic terms, as a way of caring for the body and preparing it for motherhood. However, this narrative around health begins to change in the films made in the 1960s, when sport, in addition to being a way of keeping the body in shape, becomes a form of physical “liberation”, thanks to the development of menstrual products that allow women to lead a “normal life” even when they are on their period. A scene in *Naturally a Girl* provides an example of this evolution: just after the narrator has explained the correct way of using a tampon, a girl asks: “Does everyone know when you’re menstruating?” The narrator replies: “No, if you don’t tell, there’s no way anyone can know.” This is immediately followed by a sequence of images presenting different women engaging in various everyday physical activities, such as walking, working in different jobs, driving or playing sports like tennis. This 1973 film reflects a paradigm shift in the understanding of menstruation and sport: women’s bodies are no longer depicted as domestic objects, but instead are recognised as economic capital in a system of physical productivity. The biomedical discourse thus ultimately becomes intertwined with the needs of capitalism, giving rise to a need among its adolescent audience to consume pads and tampons. As Tarzibachi (2017b) suggests, the menstrual management industry has leveraged the biomedical institution to construct the image we have today of menstruation in our consumer society:

It is important to contextualise a key process that occurred relatively quickly over the course of the 20th century. A new practice of disciplining the body of biological women was established and consolidated, at different times and to varying degrees between countries and within each country, thanks to the global spread of the disposable pad and tampon production industry. This new practice for controlling menstruating bodies was lauded as the modern way of menstruating. And the shame associated with menstruation seemed to disappear as this process became consolidated, when in reality what happened was that it remained active and productive in the shadows. (2017b: 36-37)

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the aesthetic and narrative codes of health education films in the early 20th century explored by Bonah, Cantor & Laukötter (2018), these menstrual education productions pioneered the association of menstruation with sport in Western audiovisual culture. Physical activity is depicted in these films to provide visual examples of the potential benefits of menstrual care products, which would be consolidated in the US market between the 1940s and the 1980s. Produced by public health authorities and by the companies that manufactured these products, these films construct a whole discourse around menstrual health and hygiene that involves proper care of the body through physical activity and playing sports. Underpinned by biomedical discourse, sport in these films becomes an advertising strategy for selling pads and tampons to adolescent girls of the era by generating a need for these products. From a gender perspective, sport is constructed in feminine terms, effectively demystifying the taboos against physical activity and movement during menstruation (Young, 2005) as a result of its integration into the capitalist system of production and productivity for the purpose of promoting menstrual care products.

Due to their nature as public health productions, these menstrual education films follow a logic of instruction imposed on menstrual bodies. On the one hand, the representation of menstruation and sport is positioned at an intersection between medicine, capitalism and patriarchy in all the productions analysed. On the other, educating the menstrual body is depicted as the responsibility of public institutions through the recurring depiction of the classroom and the figure of the mentor—represented in the character of the narrator, mother or teacher—who instructs the girls in good female (and therefore menstrual) behaviour. At the same time, the fact that these menstrual education films were produced after the Second World War in the United States—in the period beginning with the development of the consumer society and ending with the victory of neoliberalism under the Reagan administration—explains why their themes and narratives serve to convey a discourse of control over women's bodies, which would be appropriated and redefined by the menstrual care product manufacturers that produced them. These films thus turned menstruation into a technical process while naturalising the use of menstrual care products (Vostral, 2011). In this sense, these films can be understood as direct precursors to contemporary advertising for menstrual care products, playing an influential role in the consolidation of the femcare industry in Western societies. This advertising continues to perpetuate the same imagery used in these menstrual education films: women doing acrobatics, dancing and striking impossible poses, representing physical exercise and movement as a “liberation” or even as “empowerment” for the menstrual body.

It is clear that the representation of the menstrual body in sport needs to be contextualised in broader theoretical, political and iconographic debates over how the menstrual body is rendered visible or invisible in the public sphere. However, by identifying these films as pioneers in the au-

THESE FILMS CONSTRUCT A WHOLE DISCOURSE AROUND MENSTRUAL HEALTH AND HYGIENE THAT INVOLVES PROPER CARE OF THE BODY THROUGH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND PLAYING SPORTS

diovisual representation of an imaginary that associates menstruation with sporting activity, this study, based on visual archaeology, paves the way for a new understanding of the history of bodily fluids in depictions of sport. An interesting politico-visual arc thus emerges between the discourse on health and hygiene in the physical activity portrayed in *The Story of Menstruation* in 1946 and the menstrual stain on Kiran Gandhi's pants during the London Marathon in 2015, we find an interesting politico-visual arc.

NOTES

- * This study was funded by the European Union-Next-GenerationEU, Ministry of Universities and Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, through a call for submissions by Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona).
- 1. Kiran Gandhi's personal experience is detailed in the article “Going with the Flow” (2015).
- 2. As Kristeva (1982) suggests, menstrual fluid has been understood as a threat which, by transgressing the limits of the body itself, is coded as abject, as a dirty, disgusting and contaminating liquid. According to Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, “[m]enstrual rituals and hygiene practices imply that, like other bodily fluids, menstrual blood is considered an abomination. Some have argued that menstrual blood is viewed as more disgusting or aversive than other bodily fluids such as breastmilk and semen” (2020: 182).
- 3. See the news story on #AddressTheDressCode in Mouro (2022).
- 4. In fact, as Schaefer (2020) points out, the film was distributed together with an educational package to be shown in class, which included a menstrual chart, a

guide, and a brochure titled “Very Personally Yours” that illustrated issues related to menstruation and menstrual care.

5. It is worth noting that although it focuses mainly on films made in industry, Elsaesser’s *Archives and Archaeologies: The Place of Non-fiction Film in Contemporary Media* (2009) also outlines a methodology for the analysis of films of this kind, based on three criteria: 1) who commissioned the film; 2) what it was made for; and 3) what it was used for or the audience it targeted. Nevertheless, the methodological approach for this article is based on the theoretical framework proposed by Bonah, Cantor and Laukötter (2018), whose study focuses specifically on educational films dealing with health issues.
6. The term “curse” was used popularly in the mid-20th century to refer to menstruation, and it can be heard in several of the menstrual education films analysed here.
7. For Ghanoui (2020), “menstrual performance” is based on Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity (1999) but applied to the menstrual body.
8. The World Health Organisation (WHO) was created in 1948, resulting in the establishment of new global policies related to the body focusing on disease control and the promotion of health and social welfare.

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“OF COURSE, I CAN GO SWIMMING”: SPORTS IMAGINARIES IN US MENSTRUAL EDUCATION FILMS

Abstract

Menstrual education films made in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s played a pioneering role in the creation of an imaginary that related menstruation and sports in the audiovisual medium. This article offers a thematic and visual analysis of seven of these educational films to explore how biomedical discourses have underpinned the relationship between menstruation and sport in Western audiovisual culture. The findings suggest that these productions contributed to the establishment of a narrative that helped introduce a female perspective on physical exercise, while at the same time naturalising the use of menstrual hygiene technologies in sport.

Key words

Menstrual education films; Sport; Physical activity; Health; Hygiene; Menstruation.

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«OF COURSE, I CAN GO SWIMMING». IMAGINARIOS DEPORTIVOS EN LAS PELÍCULAS DE EDUCACIÓN MENSTRUAL ESTADOUNIDENSES

Resumen

Las películas de educación menstrual que se desarrollan entre los años cuarenta y cincuenta en Estados Unidos intervienen en la creación de un imaginario que relaciona de manera pionera la menstruación y el deporte en el medio audiovisual. Este artículo parte del análisis temático y visual de siete de estas películas educativas con el objetivo de comprobar cómo los discursos biomédicos han acompañado la relación entre menstruación y deporte en nuestra cultura audiovisual occidental. Finalmente, se concluye que estas producciones contribuyen a la constitución de un relato que si bien, por un lado, favorece la incursión de una mirada femenina sobre el ejercicio físico, por otro lado, naturalizan el uso de tecnologías de control menstrual dentro del deporte.

Palabras clave

Películas de educación menstrual; Deporte; Ejercicio físico; Salud; Higiene; Menstruación.

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