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The Liberatory Potential of Menstrual Cups

Charlotte Chui



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Abstract: Dominant menstrual discourse constructs menstrual blood as a stigmatized bodily fluid that evokes disgust. Through the enactment of Foucault's biopower, internalization of this discourse results in a culture of concealment, wherein menstruators' bodies are problematized and require self-monitoring, management, and sanitization through technology such as menstrual products. Through a case study of menstrual cup company DivaCup's marketing and social media posts from menstrual cup users, this research uses the theoretical lens of feminist science and technology studies to examine the sociotechnical system of menstrual cups and the extent to which they can be considered a liberatory technology. This research argues that menstrual cups have the potential to facilitate open discussions that push back against dominant menstrual discourse and the culture of concealment, while also necessitating increased embodiment and body literacy compared to conventional disposable products. However, menstrual cup companies still appeal to and thus perpetuate this repressive culture of concealment, despite framing the neoliberal choice of concealment as empowering.

Keywords: *menstrual cups, feminist science & technology studies*

Introduction

This paper explores the extent to which menstrual cups—a reusable technology inserted into the vagina to collect menstrual blood—can be considered a liberatory feminist technology. Despite being a biological process that roughly half the population undergoes, menstruation has long since been a taboo topic that elicits societal disgust. In the 19th and 20th centuries, myths surrounding the contaminating and polluting effects of menstruation were perpetuated through medical research reporting that menstruating women could putrefy bacon and tarnish silver, and in 1945, isolation of a “menotoxin” from menstruating women was supposedly proven to kill plants (Whelan, 1975). Influences of this sentiment still exist today, presenting in more insidious ways. Feminist menstruation scholars have examined how dominant menstrual discourse culturally constructs ideas of menstrual blood as a pollutant and “matter out of place” that must be contained and managed, as a stigmatized bodily fluid evoking disgust (Wood, 2020; Bobel, 2010; Douglas, 1966; Owen, 2022). This is one manifestation of biopower, theorized by Foucault as a form of social control that is often enacted at the site of the body; biopower is encoded into social norms, then produced and reproduced by the desire to adhere to social norms through self-regulatory and self-disciplinary measures (Foucault, 1984). Applying a feminist lens to Foucault’s biopower, the internalization of dominant menstrual discourse results in a culture of concealment and shame, thus framing menstruators’ bodies as problems that need to be self-monitored, managed, and made less visible through technology such as menstrual products in an attempt to pass as a non-menstruator (Wood, 2020; Bobel, 2010; Grose & Grabe, 2014). Failure to effectively contain and invisibilize menstruation impacts social perceptions of menstruators. For example, when an actor accidentally dropped either a tampon or a hair clip, participants (recruited under the guise of a “group productivity” study) who saw her drop a tampon sat further away from her and viewed her as less competent and likeable, in comparison to participants who saw her drop a hair clip (Roberts et al., 2002). Internalization of these attitudes

extends towards menstruators' self-perception as well. Interviews with post-menarche girls of ages 12 to 15 found that menstruation was viewed as “shameful,” “embarrassing,” “something to be hidden,” and as an illness (Burrows & Johnson, 2005).

Using the theoretical framework of feminist science and technology studies to examine the sociotechnical system of menstrual cups, I analyze social media posts of menstrual cup users' experiences and conduct a case study of menstrual cup company DivaCup's marketing, arguing that menstrual cups have the potential to facilitate open discussions that push back against dominant menstrual discourse and the culture of concealment. I also demonstrate that the menstrual cup's design necessitates a greater level of embodiment from users compared to conventional disposable products, resulting in increased body literacy, knowledge of menstrual health, and confrontation of the accumulation of menstrual blood, which rejects the invisibility and problematization of menstruating bodies. However, this paper reveals that menstrual cup companies still appeal to and thus perpetuate this repressive culture of concealment, despite framing the neoliberal choice of concealment as empowering, and argues for the dismantling of systemic power structures that necessitate the concealment of menstruation in the first place.

Internalization of dominant menstrual discourse—which renders menstruation stigmatized, shameful, and taboo—is one way in which Foucault's biopower is enacted. This manifests in self-monitoring and self-management practices that ensure the menstruating body is kept clean and menstruation remains hidden through the use of “feminine hygiene” products¹ (Wood, 2020). However, menstrual product companies frame their technologies as empowering by providing consumers with the products necessary to handle menstruation conveniently and discreetly. Feminist science and technology studies scholar Deborah Johnson questions and defines what exactly it means to be a feminist technology. One definition Johnson suggests is technologies “in which artifacts and social relations will work together to achieve gender equitable arrangements” (Layne et al., 2010). Focusing on artifacts or objects alone neglects that the materiality of an artifact still works within larger sociotechnical systems—mediated by

other factors including an artifact's meaning, its use in context, the built environment, and social relations and practices—and technologies encompass the above, rather than being equated to the artifact itself (Layne et al., 2010). Additionally, a cornerstone of this theoretical framework is the idea that technology and social relations co-constitute each other, and a technology that subverts existing gender inequitable social relations does not necessarily construct a more equitable system on its own. Drawing from this concept, this paper not only analyzes the technology of the menstrual cup but also the sociotechnical system it operates within, including social practices and discourse.

This article highlights the technology of the menstrual cup through a case study of the DivaCup. According to their website, DivaCup is a menstrual care company that was founded in 2003 with the intention of creating more comfortable, sustainable alternatives to traditional menstrual products, such as pads and tampons (Diva International, 2023). As a case study, this paper presents a close analysis of DivaCup's marketing and social media posts. Though there are a multitude of other menstrual cups currently on the market, DivaCup was chosen for this analysis due to the company's active social media presence across platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Although DivaCup was not the first menstrual cup invented, it has become a proprietary eponym that refers to all menstrual cups, similar to Kleenex for tissue or Bandaid for bandages (Diva, 2023e). While DivaCup is not necessarily representative of all menstrual cups, its relative popularity in the menstrual cup space made it an ideal object for analysis.

Menstruation in the Private & Public Spheres

Menstruation is often contained in the private sphere, only threatening to leak into public consciousness and serve as reminders of menstruating bodies when self-management practices fail. For example, in a focus group of British schoolgirls (Burrows & Johnson, 2005), several interviewees discussed wearing certain types of clothing to hide signs of menstruation, such as the sight of blood or pads. One interviewee discussed the caution she takes

to ensure no one sees the wings of her pad when she changes for physical education class (Burrows & Johnson, 2005). This reflects the enactment of Foucault's biopower, in which constant self-monitoring is necessary for effective concealment. Menstrual product companies capitalize upon these fears of menstruation escaping containment by advertising features that assist this process of invisibility, including the "most silent wrapper ever," "compact" and "pocket-sized" tampons, and "100% leak free" features (Tampax, 2015; U By Kotex, 2023). An advertisement by reusable menstrual underwear company Thinx depicted the undesirable features of disposable products, including the experience of hiding menstrual products or walking in a locker room with a visible tampon string (Molland, 2019). The built environment of public bathrooms also facilitates this process, with waste disposal receptacles specifically for menstrual products constructed in each stall (Vostral, 2011). Ideally, all evidence of the use of disposable menstrual products occurs privately, unseen by even other menstruators.

However, in the process of employing a menstrual cup, menstruation—which is normally relegated to the private sphere—is taken into public spaces. Unlike disposable products, reusable products such as cups require sanitization in between uses, with boiling being a common method. For example, DivaCup's website recommends users boil their cup for five to ten minutes at the end of each menstrual cycle (Diva International, 2023). This provides an opportunity for the concept of menstruation to breach containment, actively carried into communal spaces like the kitchen that are often shared with family members, partners, or roommates. This is illustrated in posts from menstrual cup users, who tweet "my male roommate walking into the kitchen as i boil my menstrual cup: whatcha making?? [sic]" and "'Look at us, all cooking!' -me as my dad chops celery, my mom stirs the soup, and I bring a pot to boil for my menstrual cup" (Carleen, 2020; Xandra, 2020). These interactions appear to be an unintended but inevitable experience of using a reusable menstrual product, and the value-neutral, unceremonious regard given to menstruation in a public sphere resists the culture of concealment.

In comparison, other cup users appear to deal with the

experience of taking menstruation into a public space more begrudgingly, perhaps revealing some feelings of shame or embarrassment and reflecting the internalization of dominant menstrual discourse. For example, one menstrual cup user tweets, “My mom caught me while I was about to boil my menstrual cup and asked me what I was making 😊” (Honey, 2020). The word choice of “caught” shows that this reminder of or exposure to menstruation in a public space was accidental. The smiley face emoji indicates that this menstrual cup user intended to keep this occurrence hidden but is moving past it regardless. Additionally, the word “caught” implies this user was interrupted in the middle of a taboo or illicit act, further demonstrating the influence of dominant menstrual discourse. Though menstruation crossing the boundary into public spheres is more reluctant in these scenarios, this still has the effect of pushing back against the culture of concealment, regardless of the user’s intention to do so. For example, another Twitter user shares, “had to boil my menstrual cup in front of my dad. for the third time. [sic]” (Jenn, 2022). The use of the word “had” indicates that this exposure was perhaps unwilling or undesired but not to the extent that this user tried to avoid it entirely. This demonstrates how repeated occurrences may also normalize menstruation, gradually wearing down an instinctive desire to keep menstruation shrouded. One menstrual cup user shares: “my mom won’t let me boil my menstrual cup while my dad’s home so i’m gonna go boil my menstrual cup while my dad’s home [sic]” (gabe itch 🍉, 2020). In this scenario, exposure to menstruation occurs for those who are normally kept unaware of menstrual practices, such as this user’s father, thus upending what appears to be the social norm in this family and further demonstrating how this can be actively used as a site of resistance to the invisibility of menstruation.

These interactions and reactions to menstruation in a public space differ depending on the context, including the menstrual cup user’s attitudes, social practices, and norms regarding menstruation, in addition to that of their families, roommates, or partners. Tweets from some menstrual cup users discuss waiting until family members and roommates have left or are asleep to boil their cups, revealing feelings of shame around menstruation

and demonstrating the influence of the culture of concealment (Scouza, 2019; Claire, 2020; Ellie, 2020). It should be noted that in several of these scenarios, cup users are also hiding their cup sanitization practices from female family members or roommates who likely also menstruate, not just from non-menstruators, emphasizing the persistence and ubiquity of internalized dominant menstrual discourse. Perhaps paradoxically, the potential for menstrual cups to facilitate open discussions reveals how deeply the social attitudes of shame and menstrual concealment are entrenched, turning a site of potential for liberatory resistance into a site for Foucauldian self-regulatory monitoring and menstrual invisibility instead. These experiences reflect a core idea from feminist science and technology studies, where technology will not automatically reform or reconstitute existing systems, as gender and technology co-constitute each other. The liberatory potential of technology such as menstrual cups will differ depending on its employment in different contexts, and its use still occurs within—and is thus limited by—the fabric of larger social practices and attitudes.

DivaCup uses experiences from menstrual cup users as a marketing tactic, resharing similar posts on social media. For example, DivaCup shares a screenshot of a Tweet reading, “living with your partner is just hearing someone else say the words Hey so i put your diva cup away [sic],” with DivaCup’s Instagram caption reading “if that’s not love I don’t know what is” (Diva, 2022d). In another instance, DivaCup reposts their own tweet, reading: “he’s a 4 but he boils your divacup for you [sic],” then writes in the Instagram caption: “he’s a 10” (Diva, 2022c). This references the “He’s a 10 but / She’s a 10 but” TikTok trend, where one person assigns an initial score from 0 to 10 and a hypothetical trait that could raise or lower someone’s rating, then the other person assigns a new score based on the given trait (Hamilton, 2022). These two posts demonstrate an emerging pattern where DivaCup normalizes a partner’s participation (however minimal) in menstrual care, going beyond merely being in the presence of a communal living space while a user sanitizes their cup. As menstrual cups often necessitate being taken into communal spaces which results in increased exposure, DivaCup’s

posts treat menstrual cup sanitization as a routine task that could be shared, similar to other household tasks like doing laundry or the dishes. These posts further regard a partner who will do so as more attractive or desirable, perhaps encouraging their users to seek this out in their own lives or relationships.

Increased Embodiment & Body Literacy

Menstrual studies scholar Lara Owen discusses how menstruators' self-regulation reenacts the culture of concealment at the site of their own bodies. One manifestation is by “not thinking about menstruation any more than they absolutely have to; by not looking at or becoming knowledgeable about their own menstrual blood; by hiding all evidence of menstruation including products or pain” (Owen, 2022, p. 1097). Avoidance of the confrontation of menstrual blood is produced and reproduced through historic trends in menstrual product advertising, which uses sanitized imagery. For example, to demonstrate the absorbency of pads or tampons, blue liquid is often used to mimic blood, which is an advertising practice that began in the 1990s (Thorpe, 2017). Chosen to evoke a sense of “cleanliness” with similar imagery to clinical and inorganic cleaning products like soap or bleach, the blue liquid used in “feminine hygiene” marketing illuminates the cultural repulsion towards menstrual blood, functioning as another way to make menstruation less visible (Thorpe, 2017). In 2011, menstrual pad brand Always ran the “first feminine hygiene ad to show blood,” using a stylized drawing of a white pad that featured a singular dot of blood in the center (Stampler, 2011). In 2020, U by Kotex launched a pad advertisement campaign using red liquid instead of blue liquid, which was deemed a “bold move” that warranted headlines (Patel, 2020). These historic trends reflect the social construction of blood as stigmatized and too distasteful or dirty for public sight.

Though traditional menstrual product companies have started to use blood-like liquids, companies like DivaCup regularly defy these traditional advertising tactics by using fake blood in their advertisements, despite their posts being flagged and removed² for “violent and graphic” content that violates Instagram’s

community guidelines (Diva, 2022b). This is one instance of DivaCup's attempt to reject sanitized imagery of menstrual blood as well as how its liberatory potential is constrained by the systems it works within. As Instagram uses a combination of automated technology, user reports, and a review team to remove posts, DivaCup's censored posts are the manifestation of a cultural sanitization carried out by both technological and social processes. Going beyond viewing these depictions of menstrual blood in menstrual cup advertisements, cup users' confrontation with the accumulation of their own blood is an everyday reality of using menstrual cups. This contrasts menstrual products like disposable tampons and pads, as well as reusable cloth pads, sponges, and undergarments, that absorb rather than collect blood; this confrontation of collected blood pushes back against only engaging in bloodwork when subjecting the body to self-monitoring to carry out containment against the threatening leakiness of blood, or when viewing sanitized "blue liquid" depictions of menstruation. On TikTok, DivaCup shows followers how to use the milliliter markings on the side of each menstrual cup to learn more about their menstrual health, including tracking the volume of blood shed daily, as well as how different colors of blood can indicate timing in a menstrual cycle or estrogen levels (Diva Cup, 2023d; Diva Cup, 2022). DivaCup actively encourages users to examine and engage with this accumulation of blood, as a method to increase understanding of their menstrual cycle.

Because of the cultural silence and concealment of menstruation, the few representations of menstruation—such as menstruation causing pathological health conditions like iron deficiency, or physical pains and mood changes associated with menstruation resulting in the idea of menstruation as an illness—persist in the public consciousness with little critical interrogation, regardless of their accuracy (Clancy, 2023; Burrows & Johnson, 2005). With dominant menstrual discourse constructing these representations of menstruation, rather than menstruators' situated knowledge of their own bodily processes, this dually "establishes women as diseased and unable to know their own bodies" (Wood, 2020, p. 320). Providing a rich site of resistance to this, the design of the menstrual cup fosters increased body literacy and embodiment in

its usage. As menstrual cups are inserted into the vagina and are often purchased to be reused for up to 10 years, aspects such as cup size and shape differ more widely than disposable products, often requiring more personalized consideration when choosing and using a menstrual cup. Though this paper focuses on the DivaCup, it is common for menstrual cup companies to provide different features, depending on the user's body. For example, menstrual health advocacy group Put A Cup In It provides resources to assist potential menstrual cup users. They offer a chart that compares the length, diameter, capacity, stem length and type, and firmness of various cups, as well as a quiz that recommends specific brands, depending on users' answers to questions regarding age, pregnancy and childbirth history, and cervix positioning (Put A Cup In It LLC, 2023). In particular, DivaCup advertises three "model sizes perfectly fit for your body's needs," alongside an explanation of how light or heavy menstrual flow, as well as vaginal canal size, can determine which model to use (Diva, 2023b). This pushes back against the invisibility and problematization of female bodies, encouraging menstrual cup users to become more comfortable with and knowledgeable about their bodies while choosing which cup brand or model to purchase.

In addition to the process of selecting a cup, usage and insertion also provides opportunities for increased embodiment. One case study examining new menstrual cup users found that becoming proficient at menstrual cup use took roughly three cycles, describing this familiarization as "a bit of a process" (Owen, 2022, p. 1100). Troubleshooting potential errors and working through this learning curve results in rich sites for intervention. In an Instagram reel, DivaCup's consumer experience specialist walks through several reasons why users may be experiencing leakage, including wrong cup size, improper insertion affecting the cup's ability to seal to the vaginal wall or the cup's ability to open fully in the user post-insertion, placement of the cup too high or low, or strength of the user's pelvic floor muscles (Diva, 2023d). Determining which of these reasons may be the cause requires users to explore their own bodies. For example, if improper insertion is a problem, users may turn to DivaCup's

TikToks and Instagram videos that demonstrate various ways to fold the cup like the U fold or push down fold, advise users to relax their pelvic floor muscles before insertion, or suggest trimming the stem of the cup for those with low cervixes (Diva Cup, 2023a; Diva Cup, 2023c; Diva, 2023a; Diva Cup, 2023b). Experimentation with their bodies is needed for users to find ways to address the issue, in the context of how their bodies respond to this technology, as well as understand how their bodily processes work, such as engaging the pelvic muscles. This is exemplified in DivaCup's repost of a user's Tweet reading, "The DivaCup has me a little too familiar with myself," with DivaCup captioning their post "is there such a thing as too familiar? 🤔" (Diva, 2022a). Though the original tweet demonstrates the user's increased familiarity with their own body, as facilitated through the use of the DivaCup, they also express some level of discomfort in doing so. DivaCup's caption interrogates this discomfort while encouraging users to engage with their own bodies. Increased embodiment and body literacy necessary in the process of choosing, using, and troubleshooting menstrual cups oppose self-internalization of concealment, as well as the view of the self as a subjugated body project in need of monitoring and sanitation.

Limited Liberatory Potential

Despite the potential for menstrual cups to act as a feminist liberatory technology, cups disrupt but do not singlehandedly reform dominant menstrual discourse. At its core, menstrual cups are still a technology used to manage menstruation. For example, DivaCup advertises a "leak-free period with up to 12 hours of continuous protection" (Diva, 2023c). With a longer wear time of 12 hours, menstrual cups reduce potential sites of vulnerability where indicators of menstruation may be exposed, such as by not needing to carry menstrual products to the restroom or change menstrual products as often. For a menstruator who has internalized dominant menstrual discourse, this feature of menstrual cups still appeals to the fear of menstruation escaping containment, as it can be employed as a form of technology that

renders menstruation less visible. For example, using a menstrual cup to remove the perceived shame of walking to the bathroom with a tampon tucked up a jacket sleeve means this shame still exists. In other words, merely making it easier for menstruators to pass as non-menstruators through technological fixes—including menstrual cups—to avoid menstrual stigmatization does not rework the larger power systems that result in the perceived need for concealment in the first place, as the sociotechnical system that menstrual cups operate within includes its social practices and discourse. Additionally, nuances around the need for concealment should be addressed rather than solely viewing concealment as a manifestation of shame. For example, for some menstruating transgender men, the availability of discreet menstrual products such as cups may provide increased safety and decrease transphobic targeting. While this certainly does not detract from the call for inclusive reform to work towards collective liberation and dismantling of dominant menstrual discourse, this illustrates concealment as a method to navigate the everyday realities for some menstruators and to negotiate living in transphobic and gender inequitable social systems.

The sociotechnical system of menstrual cups provides a critical site of intervention to resist dominant menstrual discourse, which constructs menstruation as distasteful and polluting, resulting in a culture of menstrual stigmatization and concealment. Internalization of this discourse turns menstruators into body projects kept subjugated and under self-surveillance, where menstruation is a threat to be sanitized, managed, and made less visible through menstrual products, lest it leak out of containment. This problematization of menstruation results in menstrual silence and disembodiment, rendering menstruators' bodies unknowable to themselves, outside of a site to enact Foucaultian monitoring. Menstrual cups disrupt these processes, by facilitating exposure to menstruation in public spaces through sanitization methods and resisting the culture of concealment. Additionally, the process of choosing and using menstrual cups offers opportunities to foster increased embodiment and body literacy. However, this liberatory potential is constrained by the sociotechnical systems that menstrual cups operate within,

revealed by how cups are still a way to manage menstruation that appeals to cultural desires to keep menstruation hidden. While menstrual cups are still a promising site of resistance to work from, this must work in conjunction with the reform of broader social systems that perpetuate the need for concealment. Targeted action is not limited to the technology of menstrual cups but must also be extended towards the sociotechnical system that menstrual cups operate within. For example, menstrual product companies may incorporate realistic depictions of menstruation in their advertisements instead of using sanitized “blue liquid” imagery, social media platforms may modify their content review policies to prevent censoring depictions of menstruation, or individuals may openly discuss menstruation as a value-neutral fact of everyday life rather than a bodily process that must be actively hidden. The subtle workings of biopower are enacted through the internalization of dominant menstrual discourse, such that individuals voluntarily engage in concealment and self-monitoring out of a desire to adhere to social norms, which then produces and reproduces sentiments of menstrual disgust or shame. As such, identification of internalized menstrual stigma and its subsequent deconstruction is crucial. While menstruating individuals navigate the embodied experience of menstruation, fostering these open discussions surrounding menstruation is necessary to confront and denaturalize these desires to keep menstruation hidden, ultimately to interrogate and dismantle menstrual stigma.

Endnotes

1. Many feminist menstruation scholars have critiqued the term “feminine hygiene,” which reflects dominant menstrual discourse that constructs menstruation as dirty, shameful, and a process that needs to be managed, sanitized, and treated. As feminist science and technology studies scholar and anthropologist Dr. Kate Clancy questions, “Why do we seek hygiene for menses?” (2023, p. 124). In fact, DivaCup also espouses this terminology switch on their social media pages (Diva, 2021). For these reasons, this paper uses the terminology menstrual products, menstrual health products, or

menstrual care, instead of “feminine hygiene” or related terms, such as “sanitary towels” or “sanitary protection.”

2. This paper originally included additional examples of DivaCup using red liquid in their posts. When collecting social media posts and links, I noted when platforms marked posts as sensitive or included content warnings that had to be acknowledged before I could view the post, but in the process of writing this paper, several of these posts had already been taken down by TikTok or Instagram.

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