

Menstruation in Stayfree Ads A Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation and menstrual experiences plays a crucial role in women's life. More than just a monthly process, it is a significant event that marks a girls identity into womanhood reinforcing feminine experience. However, Menstruation has often been stigmatized, and marginalized reinforcing taboos. Given the deep-rooted societal stigmas and challenges surrounding menstruation, women during this time needs proper menstrual management. Menstruation and menstrual hygiene and taboos was outlined through different mediums. Ads, in this means plays an important role. Indian television remains a key medium for menstrual product advertisements, with Stayfree being one of the most popular brands. These ads influence perceptions, challenging misogyny and raising awareness about menstruation. The present study, primarily qualitative in nature, adopted Content analysis to analyze the pattern of presentation of menstrual contents in Stayfree Ads and whether these representations reinforce or challenges social perceptions regarding menstruation. The findings revealed key themes of Social taboos and contentment. Stayfree Ads frequently depicts fear, shame, embarrassment, female fragility, concealment, together titled as social taboos and contentment in their Ads. The brand's strategies had reinforced traditional anxieties and societal perceptions indirectly as a strategy to promote their product while on the other hand the brand attempts to break the taboos utilizing emotional appeals, concluding brands dual role in presenting menstruation content to promote the product

Keywords: Advertisement, Content Analysis, Menstruation, Stayfree

INTRODUCTION

Menstruation and menstrual experiences plays a crucial role in women's life. It signifies reproductive health and hormonal balance, typically on a monthly cycle. More than just a monthly biological process, it is a significant event that marks a girls identity into womanhood reinforcing feminine experience. However, Menstruation has often been stigmatized, and marginalized reinforcing taboos. Historically, Many cultures have viewed menstruation as impure, challenging women's daily activities, religious practices and even social interactions. They tended to make the phenomenon appear something dreadful and disgraceful. The stigma and shame generated by stereotypes around menstruation have severe impacts on all aspects of women's and girls' human rights, including their Human rights to equality, health, housing, water, sanitation, education, freedom of religion or belief, safe and healthy working conditions, and to take part in Cultural life and public life without discrimination. (United Nations,2019).

Given the deep-rooted societal stigmas and challenges surrounding menstruation, women during this time needs proper menstrual management. Menstrual hygiene is crucial for both health and dignity, requiring

clean and safe products, regular changes, hand washing and proper material disposal. Women across different cultures used natural or homemade materials to manage their menstrual flow, based on availability and affordability. Due to financial constraints, many girls and women rely on less hygienic alternatives such as rags, old clothes, sarees, cotton, wool, bark, dry leaves, and newspapers. Overtime, these methods evolved into more hygienic and efficient solutions such as disposable pads, tampons, Sanitary napkins and menstrual cups.

Importance of knowledge about menstruation, is worth noting that how people come to know and Learn about menstruation (Fahs & Perianes,2020). Ads, in this means plays an important role. Menstrual product advertisements have historically leaned on misogynistic discourses, framing menstruation as shameful and unmentionable, with vaginas portrayed as sources of filth. Menstrual blood was often depicted as something needing containment, concealment, and sanitization, frequently through euphemistic blue-liquid advertising. Robledo and Chrisler (2011) in the article “Menstrual Mark: defined Menstruation as Social Stigma”. “The word stigma refers to any stain or mark that renders the individual’s body or character defective. This stigma is transmitted through powerful socialization agents in popular culture such as advertisements”. Taboos, shame, Female Fragility, Misconceptions and Menstrual Concealment are also an important concepts of presentation in ads.

Researchers have explored how menstrual product advertising historically contributed to women’s physical inactivity, especially from the early 1900s to the 1960s. These ads perpetuated fragile femininity, presenting menstruation as a pathological condition incompatible with physical activity. By emphasizing the taboo nature of menstruation, these advertisements positioned it as a “problem” to be solved. Although contemporary ads now use product names like Libra, carefree, and Stayfree to promote freedom, they still reframe menstruation as a social problem, focusing on restriction and control. This reinforces social expectations and continues to limit women’s physical activity (Jutel, 2004). Recent research highlights how advertisements often distort the reality of menstruation, reinforcing the idea that periods must be kept hidden. Some Ads propagate misinformation and target a narrow audience, mostly urban women who study or work outside their homes, leaving out men, non-binary menstruators, and discussions on painful menstruation or unavailable products. These ads perpetuate stigma and gender inequality by neglecting the real struggles of menstruators (Ranjan & Ananda, 2022).

Indian television remains a key medium for menstrual product advertisements, with Stayfree being one of the most popular brands. These ads influence perceptions, challenging misogyny and raising awareness about menstruation. Beyond promoting products, they use menstrual campaigns and emotionally resonant messages featuring family figures to educate and normalize menstruation in society. Stayfree is a renowned brand of feminine hygiene products, known for its innovative solutions like sanitary and ultra-thin pads. Its advertisements focus on comfort and reliability but lacks inclusivity and deeper narratives around menstruation.

NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE.

Menstruation has long been surrounded by social taboos and cultural stigmas influencing how it is perceived and discussed in society. Advertisements for menstrual hygiene products such as Stayfree plays a crucial role in either challenging or reinforcing this deep-rooted stigmas. It is essential to examine how these advertisements shape public perception impacting women’s self-esteem and contributing to menstrual management. Thus this study adapting content analysis intends to explore how these Ads effectively present social taboos and contentment in their Ad and whether these Ads break these deep-

rooted norms and outdated narratives. It was also aimed to analyse the patterns of presentation of Stayfree Ads. The ability of Medias to influence on societal attitudes towards menstruation, assess whether they contribute to normalizing menstruation as it is or perpetuating secrecy and discomfort. The analysis will shed light on gender representation in advertising, monitoring open discussions and progressive messaging to traditional modesty and euphemisms. The findings of this study will be valuable for marketers on how to develop more inclusive, informative and stigma-free menstrual product promotion. These will help them to bring up with more positive, awareness-driven narratives which would ultimately target to break societal taboos

PROCEDURE

The process of content analysis proceeds with identifying and selecting the materials to be analysed. A total of 10 different Stayfree advertisements were selected from YouTube, specifically from the official Stayfree channels. Stayfree is a most popular consumer brand of menstrual pad in India. The analysis aimed to explore how social taboos and contentment were depicted in the ads and the pattern of presentation of Stayfree Ads over the years. The analysis has began after watching the ads. All the required and relevant contents and details that referred to social taboos and contentment were noted after watching the videos selected. The content was then analysed and a report was made after.

REFLEXIVITY STATEMENT

Qualitative research relies on nuanced judgements that require researcher reflexivity, a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes (Vega et al., 2022). The study aimed to examine the pattern of presentation in Stayfree ads and the portrayal of social taboos and contentment in the Ad. The researcher is a female/ belongs to female gender. The researcher recognised that menstruation is often framed with stigmas and outdated narratives. Being a women, researcher often got influenced by advertisements and adapts menstrual product to manage her menstruation shaped by the interpretation of the Ad content. Thus the study aims to examine the Advertisement to deeply understand how these ads recurrently presenting menstruation and its management. The researcher undertook this study as a partial fulfillment of her requirements for her Master's Degree in psychology. The analysis followed a structured procedure and is guided by experienced faculty

DATA ANALYSIS

The collected Stayfree Ads were analysed to identify the pattern and recurring patterns of presentation in Ads. The researcher first familiarized with the data and then systematically noted the details in the narratives. The details were refined to identify the most relevant patterns in the presentation of Menstruation such as Social taboos; Fear, shame, and embarrassment, female fragility and contentment.

RESULT

Four key themes were extracted with Social taboos being the central theme comprise: 1) Fear, Shame, Embarrassment, 2) female fragility, and 3) Concealment and the other theme 4) contentment. These themes highlights the stigma attached to periods and speaks to the expectations and struggles that women experience in the real world. It was discovered that these ads also promote empowerment and normalising periods as they are, breaking stigma.

<p>Fear, Shame and Embarrassment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of leakage and stain visibility in public spaces. • Women Restricting from daily activities • Girls avoiding breaks, embarrassed relying on traditional method • Brand promoting its product features - durability, absorption and odour-control as solutions 	<p>Female Fragility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portrayed menstruation as a limiting factor • Depicts women as vulnerable or in need of rest during periods • Brand collaborated with celebrity figures to challenge menstrual stigma • Emphasize 12-hour protection to ensure confidence and continuity in daily life • Aiming to empower women, Ad may still subtly reinforce notions of female
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<p>Concealment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Ads avoided explicit mention of periods, use vague statements and indirect messaging • Fear of stains and reinforcing the need to hide the process • Blue gel representation • Shift from blue gel to red gel, normalising menstruation and breaking taboos • Gradual transition fostering open discussions 	<p>Contentment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addresses leaks, irritation and taboos as Strategy to promote the product and its features- rash-free, comfort, and night-time protection • young girls and professionals breaking taboos symbolizing empowerment • Transition from traditional menstrual management method to Stayfree products • Stigma-free and empowering conversations in Ads promoting freedom
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DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to explore Content Analysis, a research method and to analyze the presentation pattern and the presentation of social Taboos and contentment in Stayfree ADs, a major consumer brand of Menstrual pad in India. Stayfree is a feminine care brand with pads that deliver the protection to feel confident every day. Since launching the first beltless pad in 1974, the brand has been creating products that provide better performance with the goal of providing comfortable, and dry protection.

Most of the ads are constructed ideally to the principle of Observational learning. Influenced from these ads, targeted audience tends to model and imitate the features produced in Ads. Through analysis, it can be interpret as that, Stayfree Ads also revolve around the idea of Modelling. They influence their consumers through visually appealing ads promoting women to change their habits and brought them the option of feeling comfortable during their period.

Stayfree’s advertisements have evolved over time as a key method of product promotion. The analysis revealed that in Stayfree’s earliest ads, the content was presented in dark visual backgrounds, such as black, which were not particularly appealing or attractive. These ads primarily focused on delivering product features, such as Stayfree napkins better absorption, being rash-free and offering better

performance. Over time, Stayfree transitioned to visually appealing backgrounds and incorporated cartoon illustrations to highlight the product's qualities. Initially, these features were conveyed through voiceovers, but as the ads evolved, they shifted to a more realistic and engaging approach. Stayfree began featuring models and celebrities in their ads, with dialogues delivered by the models or characters themselves, reflecting natural conversations people might have during menstruation. These conversations were often portrayed through relationships, such as mother-daughter, friends, or colleagues, which indicates Stayfree's emphasizing on relationships and connections to attract its audience. To make ads more attractive and relatable, Stayfree used well-known figures like P.V. Sindhu, a gold medalist at the Rio Olympics, and Kiara Advani, a popular Bollywood actress, in recent campaigns. This strategic collaboration will help to attract their targeted audience and builds trust and credibility for the product. Stayfree's ads emphasize that the product is backed by research and based on its findings, often noting this in the fine print at the bottom of the ad. One of their ads even mentioned that the product is accredited by UNICEF, a strategy aimed at boosting consumer trust. The inclusion of research years in the ads further reassures consumers of the product's quality and relevance. The brand had mentioned its product quality and features in all of its Ads. Stayfree's products are designed to offer superior comfort and performance. Key features highlighted in their ads include better absorption, rash-free protection, 12-hour protection, night guard protection, odour control, and leak prevention. The pads are also marketed as offering long-lasting durability, with some ads specifically emphasizing their ability to provide protection during night-time or for extended hours. The products are backed by research, ensuring reliability, and are accredited by organizations like UNICEF to boost consumer trust.

The major differences identified through analyzing these ads include the presentation of the product packaging. Stayfree consistently introduces its latest products by prominently displaying the napkin packets in each segment of the ad, ensuring they are memorable to the audience. It was observed that the packaging is often designed with blue color gradients, which are visually appealing and make the product more attractive to viewers. According to color psychology, blue represents trust, peace, loyalty, and competence, which may explain why Stayfree frequently uses this color in its packaging. Stayfree also pays special attention to including the price tag on its packaging. The price of each product is often prominently displayed on the top of the packet, making it easily noticeable to consumers. Additionally, images of celebrities like P.V. Sindhu and Kiara Advani are occasionally featured on the packaging to make it more eye-catching and appealing. Product features were also highlighted on the packets to emphasize their quality and benefits.

One significant change in Stayfree ads is the shift from using blue gel or liquid to depict absorption, which appeared artificial and reinforced societal discomfort around menstruation, to using red gel, symbolizing menstrual blood more realistically. This change marks a step toward authenticity, breaking taboos and normalizing periods as a natural bodily process. By openly addressing menstruation, Stayfree challenges outdated notions and fosters greater awareness and acceptance. This evolution not only validates women's experiences but also aligns with global trends promoting transparency and authenticity, making their ads more relatable, empowering, and impactful for audiences.

Taboos, lack of information, and limited access to sanitary napkins continue to restrict women's lives in many places. Through its initiatives and advertisements, Stayfree aims to address these issues by promoting comfort and freedom during menstruation. An analysis of these ads reveals a consistent pattern of addressing social taboos, both directly and indirectly, through themes such as fear, shame, embarrassment, female fragility, concealment, and contentment.

Fear, shame and embarrassment

By Analysis it was found that Stayfree ads recurrently present fear, shame and embarrassment in their ads. Fear is often linked to anxiety that women experience regarding leakage and stains. The Ad analysed shown women's concerns of getting stains on their back on public, Which them feel shame and embarrassed. This insecurities will make women conscious about menstruation. It was portrayed in ads that women themselves stop from performing certain activities due to the fear of stains being noticed during their periods. This was portrayed in different ads of Stayfree directly or indirectly. In the Stayfree Dry Max All Night ad, fear is depicted through visuals of leakage concerns during night-time, a relatable issue for many women. The Stayfree Secure "Don't Miss School Due to Periods" ad highlights a schoolgirl's difficulties during periods. Her hesitancy to answer questions in class or using toilet in break time due to feelings of embarrassment resonates with teenage girls concerns on periods. Embarrassment is often portrayed as a barrier to confidence, which Stayfree seeks to address through its products. Getting period stain on back, and walking in public make women tensed and anxious about letting others knowing them on periods and others seeing this stain make them feel shame and embarrassed. The brand not only just focus on the fear of stains but also about the odour issues due to these stains. This factors recurrently addressed in Stayfree ad is presented in a way to promote their product and its concerned qualities. It showcases the product's long-lasting durability, better absorption and odour control or free feature. Relying on a better absorption quality product will make women feel confident to walk freely on public during menstruation.

Female fragility

In Stayfree advertisements, the concept of female fragility is subtly explored, often depicted through the emotional and physical challenges women face during menstruation. Menstruation limits women's physical activity by reinforcing fragile femininity, portraying it as pathological, and emphasizing its taboo nature. This portrayal reflects societal views that posits women as vulnerable or delicate during their periods. Through various ads, Stayfree as first ever brand that concerned to Women's menstruation, breaks this stigmatizing and taboo nature of periods by subtly addressing their product collaborating with P.V Sindhu, an Olympic gold medalist. This can be highlighted as the brand's sense of strength and purpose that collaborating with a sports endeavor to exhibit their content and to increase their product demand.

For instance, in the ad titled, Stayfree Secure XL, featuring a young woman at a football trial, fragility is portrayed through the anxiety of the mother, who worries about daughters physical exertion during a football selection. This portrayal taps into the broader societal stereotype that menstruation can make women weak or incapable, especially in high-pressure or physically demanding situations. The same was also addressed in another ad named Stayfree Extra Large ad featuring journalists. It showcases the theme through a collegial interaction. The characters delivered the theme in a way one caring the other saying "you are on periods, take rest and leave everything to me" leaving a note that your body needs rest as it is bleeding and you will feel tired.

Stayfree Extra Large with PV Sindhu – "Don't Let Periods Pause Your Dreams of Progress" and Stayfree Secure XL – "Din Tumhare Saath Chalega" the two ads featuring P.V Sindhu, a Badminton pro in the former and Kiara Advani, an Indian Actress in latter ad of the brand, also subtly challenged the theme of female fragility. Stayfree even gave special attention to its ad title, to make it more eye catching to audience about collaboration with these celebrities. In the ad, Sindhu's participation in intense training and Advani's busy professional life as a baker in character are depicted with ease, conveying the message that menstruation should not limit a woman's ability to excel in her chosen field. The ad portrays these

women confidently going about their professional and athletic lives despite menstruating, challenging the traditional notion of female fragility during periods.

Stayfree ads position the brand as a tool empowering women to overcome menstruation-related limitations, promoting 12-hour protection to help them confidently engage in daily life. Rather than focusing on weakness, the ad highlights the strength in solidarity and the importance of reliable menstrual products in ensuring that menstruation does not disrupt women's professional lives breaking the stereotypes and Taboos associated. By showcasing menstruation as a shared, natural experience, the ads highlight strength in solidarity and emphasize reliable products that allow women to maintain their professional lives. However, the frequent focus on fragility might unintentionally reinforce the idea that women are inherently weaker during menstruation, even though the intention is to provide solutions. It's important that these portrayals avoid reinforcing the stereotype of menstruation defining a woman's vulnerability.

Concealment

Concealment refers to the deliberate effort to hide something to avoid attention or judgment. In the context of menstruation, it involves behaviors aimed at ensuring menstrual processes, products, or signs remain unnoticed, driven by societal stigma or personal discomfort. Historically, cultural and religious beliefs portrayed menstruation as shameful or impure, compelling women to conceal their cycles. Stayfree ads often leverage this theme of concealment to promote their products, showcasing scenarios where women strive to hide evidence of menstruation—be it stains, odour, or acknowledgment of the cycle—reflecting societal pressures while subtly addressing these challenges through their product solutions.

It was found that Stayfree in its earliest ads focused on promoting napkins rather than directly addressing menstruation. In the Stayfree Dry Max All Night ad, aired 10 years ago, With a plot of friends traveling by train discuss the fear of stains at night without explicitly mentioning the term menstruation, highlighting the concealed way periods are addressed. In the Stayfree Advanced ad from 12 years ago used vague statements like “If something irritates you, only you can change it, also avoids explicit mention of periods, reflecting societal taboos around openly discussing periods. This veiled communication in Stayfree ads mirrored the societal taboo of openly discussing menstruation.

The Stayfree Secure “Don't Miss School Due to Periods” ad, aired in 2018, highlights a schoolgirl's anxiety about using cloth during menstruation. The ad shows her avoiding breaks and refraining from using the bathroom to prevent being noticed, reflecting how societal stigma leads women to adopt concealing behaviors at the cost of their comfort. It also depicts in the ad that the character hides the cloth she intends to use as protection, suggesting her embarrassment over relying on traditional methods. This can be interpreted as that the girl feel embarrassed about other knowing that she still been using a traditional method of using cloth during menstruation. Here the ad portrays in a way to hide the traditional methods and to hide the stains of menstruation instead of normalizing it.

One of the most striking elements in Stayfree's early advertising strategy was the use of blue gel to demonstrate the absorption capabilities of its sanitary napkins, aligning with societal discomfort around openly discussing menstruation. This choice of brand reinforced the theme of concealment, avoiding direct representation of menstrual blood to maintain “acceptable” public viewing. By using a neutral, artificial color, these ads perpetuated the stigma and taboo surrounding menstruation, distancing it from its biological reality and reinforcing shame and the need to disguise menstrual blood.

However, Stayfree recently shifted the approach of using blue gel to red Gel, resembling menstrual blood, in its ads. This marks brands significant departure from concealed representation, moving towards

authenticity and normalizing menstruation in mainstream media. The red gel reflects Stayfree's efforts to break taboos, encourage open conversations about periods, and address the limitations of earlier strategies. While the blue gel symbolizes past societal constraints, the red gel demonstrates the brand's commitment to aligning with changing perceptions and fostering empowerment.

Contentment

Contentment is a state of happiness and satisfaction, marked by comfort and peace. In the context of menstruation, it refers to feeling secure and at ease despite the challenges associated with periods. It arises from factors like physical comfort, emotional reassurance, product reliability, and the ability to maintain normalcy and freedom in daily life.

Contentment in Stayfree ads is presented through themes of physical comfort, emotional reassurance, and the normalization of menstruation. These ads address practical concerns like leaks and irritation challenging societal taboos, creating a sense of ease and confidence in women during their periods. The brand strikingly exhibited the theme of Concealment even lining to its earliest ad, to showcase their product quality and its benefits to its consumers.

Ads like Stayfree Advanced – No Rashes and Stayfree Advanced – Better Absorption emphasize features such as superior absorption and rash-free comfort. These qualities are demonstrated through scientific validations and visual demonstrations, creating trust and reassuring viewers that their needs will be met effectively. In the All Night Sleep Free ad, concerns about night-time leakage are addressed through the introduction of pads with “five-night guard protections.” The ad reassures women of uninterrupted sleep by symbolizing peace and comfort fostering contentment by alleviating common fears of Period stains. The Secure XL – Football Selection ad presenting a teenage girl overcoming fears of leaks during her trials by using Stayfree pads, symbolizing empowerment and confidence. Her statement, “I won't miss any opportunities,” highlights the emotional and physical freedom the product provides, allowing her to focus on her goals.

In the Don't Miss School Due to Periods, the ad showcases shift from traditional method of using cloth to the trending way of managing period with a reliable and trustworthy product of Stayfree pads marks a pivotal moment of contentment. The girl overcomes discomfort and embarrassment, regaining confidence symbolizing freedom and empowerment to continue her education and daily life uninterrupted. This transformation illustrates how access to reliable menstrual products can empower young girls to continue their education and daily lives without interruption. The ad Don't Let Wetness Get in the Way portrays two female journalists in a relatable conversation, reassuring about managing menstruation confidently using Stayfree Napkins. This everyday interaction normalizes periods and conveys contentment by showing that women can go about their professional lives without disruption.

Featuring celebrity figures like P.V. Sindhu in Dreams Won't Wait for Periods and Kiara Advani in Din Tumhare Saath Chalega, the ads connect the themes of ambition and resilience with menstruation. These endorsements build trust, inspiring women to view periods as manageable, not limiting. Statements such as dreams won't wait for periods,” promoting the message that menstruation should not hinder women's achievements. Recent ads have transitioned from blue to red liquid in absorption demonstrations, offering a more realistic portrayal of menstruation. This change can reduce stigma and makes viewers feel understood, fostering emotional contentment by aligning with real-life experiences. Contentment exhibited in the Ads analysed contributed to Freedom, confidence, inspiration and Empowerment to audience.

On the whole, by analyzing the Stayfree ads, it was found that, the brand continuously depicted Fear,

shame embarrassment and, female fragility in their ad reinforcing social taboos. The brand also highlighted the theme of contentment that is contradictory to social taboos. The identified factors of fear, shame and embarrassment were presented in an emotionally appealing manner. While female fragility is depicted through the emotional and physical challenges women face during menstruation, often portraying them as vulnerable. Concealment is shown through the efforts to hide menstrual signs, reflecting societal stigma while promoting products that offer comfort and confidence. However the brand considerably focus on Marketing their signature product as a solution to these stigmatizing taboos, Normalizing Menstruation and its related aspects. Contentment which is depicted conversely to Social taboos markedly exhibited the comfort, confidence, and freedom women experience when using their products, allowing them to continue daily activities without disruption. As the ad were ideally constructed to the principle of Observational learning, it would strike the targeted audience to deliberately model the scenarios presented promoting the product demand

Strength and Limitations

The study aimed to shed insights on how menstrual contents was portrayed in Stayfree Ads. The paper will highlight how language, imagery and visual narratives were presented in Ads shaping societal perceptions on menstrual management and how these representations influenced the targeted audience on menstrual management was also revealed. It will challenge the marketers to change their pattern of presentation of their Ad, adopting new and creative promotion strategies. The study is intensely limited by the subjectivity inherent in Content analysis, as interpretation was purely based on the researchers experience and perspective. The study is also restricted to the media sources and the materials selected, which may not fully explain the diverse representations of menstrual contents. Future research can expand their work by incorporating different brand presentation on the topic in various media.

Conclusion

Stayfree's advertisements effectively address social taboos surrounding menstruation by incorporating themes such as fear, shame, fragility, concealment, and contentment. The ads have evolved over time, using observational learning to influence their audience through relatable portrayals, emotional connections, and product demonstrations. By addressing these taboos and emphasizing product features like comfort, reliability, and empowerment, Stayfree has strengthened its brand image and contributed to normalizing menstruation in mainstream media in a dual way.

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