

COMMERCIAL DETERMINANTS OF MENSTRUAL HEALTH: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Achieving sustainable and optimum menstrual health is a global issue. There are innumerable drivers that dictate the course of menstrual health across the globe. Nevertheless, emphasizing the social and structural determinants of menstrual health is insufficient. With increasing intrusion and penetration of the private sector/corporate power influencing the lifestyle choices of individuals with aggressive marketing, instilling stigma under the name of promoting health and hygiene, exercising free will with no global protocols/standards for the manufacturing of safe menstrual products; there exists a dire need to address the commercial determinants of menstrual health. Commercial determinants of health are central to understanding how the corporate giants/business powers and organizations exercise and exert control that alters the consumer's environment, making it conducive enough to drive their profit motives, but need not necessarily direct the population towards healthy life choices. According to Fuchs's definition, these powers exist in three forms; instrumental, structural, and discursive power. The paper is an attempt to address commercial determinants impacting menstrual health by applying Fuchs' concept for commercial determinants of health.

Keywords: menstrual health, instrumental power, consumer behaviour

Introduction

10% of the global population is experiencing menstruation at any given time (Barrington et al., 2021). Literature defines menstrual health as a state of complete physical, menstrual and social well-being and not just merely the absence of the disease or infirmity in relation to the menstrual cycle (UNICEF., 2017; Hennegan et al., Maulingin-Gumbaketi et al., 2022). Optimum menstrual health is primary to an equal, dignified, and healthy life for those who menstruate. Though indispensable for a healthy population globally, it has been under wraps due to the societal stigma associated with it. This is of aggravating proportions in low and middle-income countries (LMIC) (Hennegan et al., 2019; *Menstrual Health Is a Public Health and Human Rights Issue - The Lancet Public Health*, 2022; Sommer et al., 2016a).

There are several determinants that drive the course of menstrual health in any country, these driving forces have enabled the shaping of the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. These include poverty, education, (Water Sanitation and Hygiene) WaSH

facilities, health, and gender equality, thus effectively targeting the social and structural determinants of health (*Menstrual Health Is a Public Health and Human Rights Issue - The Lancet Public Health*, n.d.; *Policy Reforms For Dignity, Equality, and Menstrual Health*, 2022; Morowatisharifabad et al., 2018). Efforts are undertaken at the national level by rolling out interventions surrounding WASH and provisioning the adolescent population with subsidized rates of menstrual pads through the Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) scheme and exemption of taxes from menstrual products (*Menstrual Hygiene Scheme (MHS): National Health Mission*).

However, with increasing globalization and privatization, an important determinant that goes unnoticed is the commercial determinant (Lacy-Vawdon et al., 2022). With increasing intrusion and penetration of the private sector/corporate power influencing the lifestyle choices of individuals with aggressive marketing, instilling stigma under the name of promoting health and hygiene, exercising free will with no global protocols/standards for the manufacturing of safe menstrual products; there exists a dire need to address the commercial determinants of menstrual health.

Commercial determinants of health are central to understanding how the corporate giants/business powers and organizations exercise and exert control that alters the consumer's environment making it conducive enough to drive their profit motives but need not necessarily direct the population towards healthy life choices (Kickbusch et al., 2016). The concept of commercial determinants is rather nuanced. However, the definition most pertinent to the CDoH is by using Fuch's definition of three forms of corporate power that exist and alters the consumer environment; influencing the consumer's lifestyle.

Fuchs' three forms of power include (i) instrumental power (ii) structural and (iii) discursive power (Fuchs, 2005; Kickbusch et al., 2016). These powers exist in the diaspora of the health environment, acting for or against it. Figure 1 explains Fuch's existence of corporate power and its inadvertent influence on consumers' health. Though used extensively for non-communicable diseases. The menstrual product though being an essential good is commodified and commercialized by various corporate giants in presence of these powers. This paper thus aims to understand these powers individually as well as intertwined with each other and their impact on menstrual health outcomes.

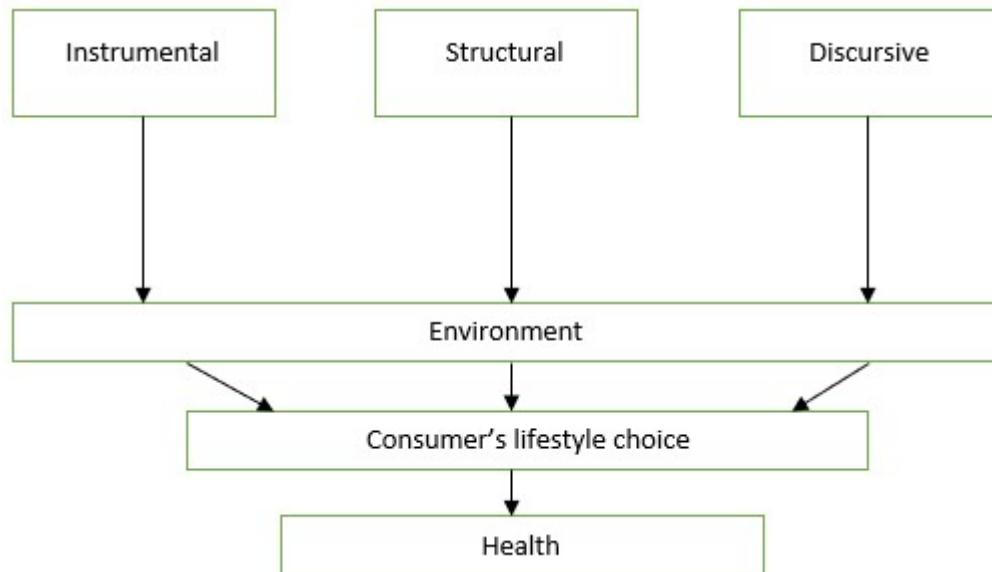


Figure1: Fuchs’s three forms of power

Instrumental power: The instrumental power of corporates can be determined by their ability to potentially influence a political or policy output/decision. This is achieved through lobbying, campaigns, or party finances (Fuchs, 2005). For instance, a business may increase the scope of its recently released contraceptives by utilizing the political issue of menstrual suppression. Though the ways of consumer exploitation might vary in today’s time, the agenda-setting among some corporate giants still persists.

Structural power: It is regarded as the actual input that goes into the process of seizing decision-making power. This involves monetary investments, the development of the PPP model, and running the economics of the product (Fuchs, 2005). For example, by levying taxation and leading to the commodification of the essential good.

Discursive power: It is considered to be the most powerful power of all three. It is regarded as the power to influence the population based on the existing socio-cultural context (Fuchs, 2005). This includes marketing, advertorials, social media campaigns, etc.

Research Methodology

Identification of the articles was done by conducting literature searches in the database of PubMed, Web of Science and Google Scholar using a broad set of keywords such as “menstruation”, “menstrual health” “commercial determinants”, “private factors”, “supply chain”, “manufacturing”, “taxation”, “advertisement”, “marketing”, “lobbying”, “policymaking” and were combined through Boolean operators “AND”, “OR”. In the first step of article procurement, 457 of them were identified. The search was not limited by the year of publication. Full-text articles published in the English language from peer-reviewed journals adhering to the context and theme of the paper were included. A total of 40 articles fitting the

context of menstrual health influenced by the corporate power stated by Fuchs were included after excluding 16 articles after reading the abstract, findings, and discussion. A flowchart of the methodology of systematic review is presented in Figure 2.

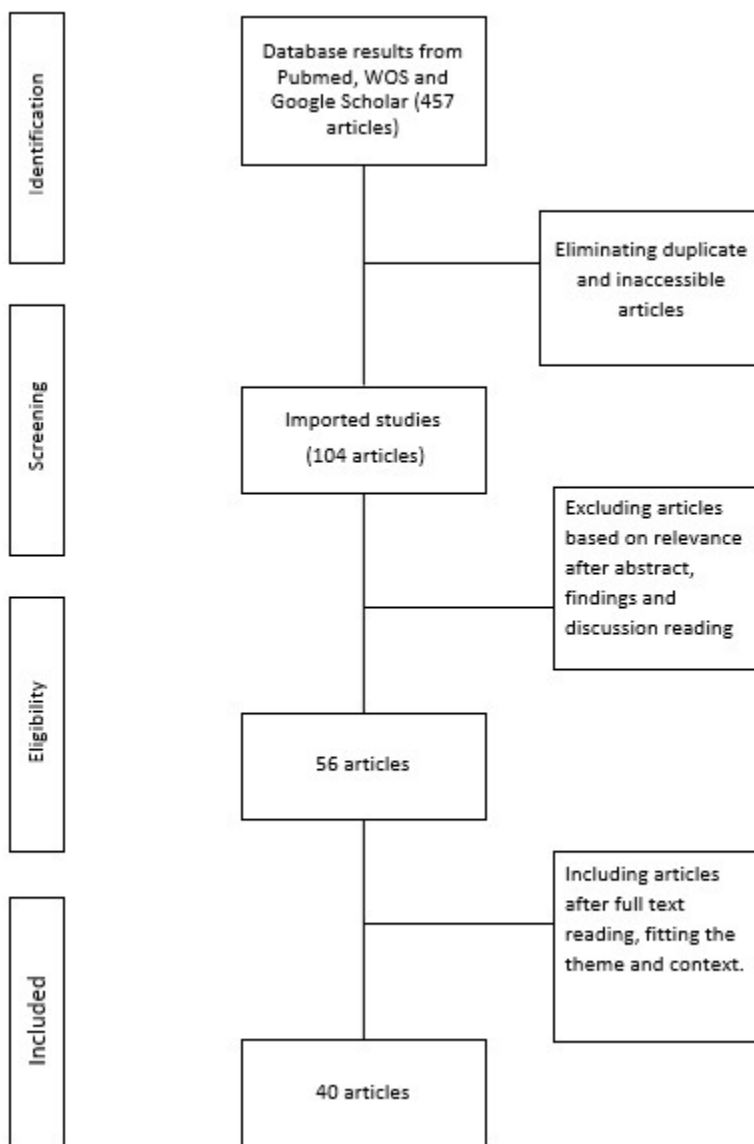


Figure 2: Flow chart of the methodology of systematic review.

Results

Finally, a total of 40 articles were included. Meta-analysis of the findings suggests a combination of Fuchs’ power to drive a sustainable effort toward holistic, equal, and dignified menstrual health. The results from the meta-analysis suggest that there are three powers that exist individually and have an impact on menstrual health. However, it is observed that when this power overlaps, it has varied outcomes. Figure 3 illustrates the findings of the review.

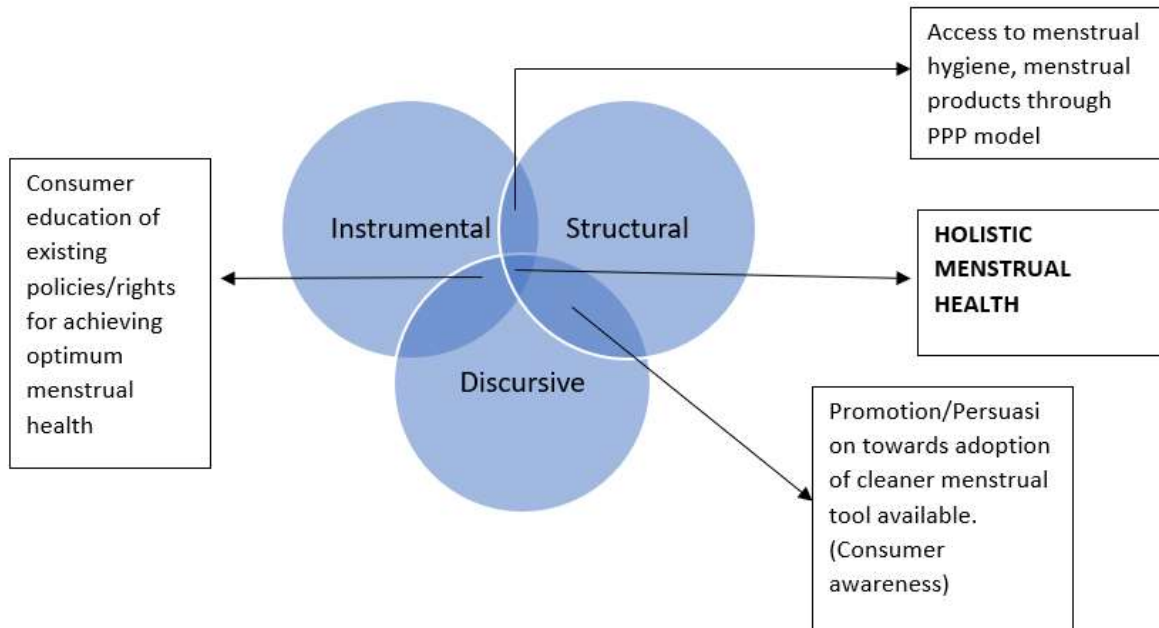


Figure 3: Modified framework

The instrumental power described in the articles concludes with an urgent need for policy revision and decreasing government dependency on private giants to fulfill their policy objectives pertaining to menstruation. It also emphasized the regulation of informal privatization that occurred in various arenas, which leads to a hindrance in achieving optimum menstrual health. The structural power emphasized increasing PPP collaboration to expand the supply chain of private companies to meet the menstrual needs of people on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. Discursive power has shifted the way the world looks at menstruation, and this is coupled with menstrual activism, shifted the worldview towards women’s bodies and menstruation, paving the way to move towards gender-equal, dignified, and sustainable ways to manage menstruation.

The meta-analysis of the findings from the paper with overlapping powers, however, posed findings that could potentially steer positive outcomes when implemented in real-life situations. Overlapping of instrumental and structural power, addresses the issue of menstruation through a policy and private investment angle, working towards alleviating period poverty and working in strategic collaborations to bolster the affordability, accessibility, availability, and quality of the menstrual products utilized by women. Overlapping of instrumental and discursive power accelerates consumer awareness and consumer education of the existing policies and rights whilst persuading/influencing the population to move towards safe, sustainable, equal, and dignified menstrual health. Structural and discursive power bring about the promotion of menstrual health by adopting alternative, affordable, and sustainable menstrual tools. When all three powers align in the public interest, it poses to be a potential tool to bolster and achieve holistic menstrual health.

Discussion

Instrumental Power:

Instrumental power deals with political and policy influence; this also includes lobbying. The result of the analysis of the articles with influencing instrumental power shows that government regulations are crucial to regulating the manufacturing and supply of menstrual products and that the government is heavily dependent on private partnerships for the successful landing and functioning of the Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) schemes (*Policy Reforms For Dignity, Equality, and Menstrual Health*, 2022; Smith et al., 2020; Swani, 2020).

Annie Smith puts forth a way to cease the perception created by the corporate giants of the sanitary napkin as equivalent to hygiene by considering the menstrual need in the population and concluding that menstrual pads alone do not need to be held a sole predictor of met menstrual needs (Smith et al., 2020). Increased usage of the term "menstruation" in official papers may start to mainstream the topic, which may eventually have an impact on societal norms (Sommer et al., 2017). This could further open the door for a more honest discussion on the problems and solutions associated with MHM. Claire Failkov and Marni Sommer emphasize a revision of the education policy making it more inclusive of discussions on issues pertaining to menstrual health in a gender-neutral manner (Sommer et al., 2020; Fialkov et al., 2021).

In general, gender and education plans and strategies did not specifically address MHM, even when they made a connection between the need for latrines for girls and their access to school. All of the policies under evaluation paid little attention to the other gender-responsive MHM measures, such as training instructors to be sensitive or providing information (Fialkov et al., 2021). These omissions may result from the policies' development timing, the continued taboo against discussing menstruation, or even a lack of attention being paid to this problem due to doubts about the efficacy of MHM programs in schools (Sommer et al., 2020). Mahon and Fernandes make a point, stating that the mere rolling of the schemes is futile if they fail to reach the consumers. Therefore, it is essential to take into account the end-user's needs (in this case, menstruating women) and work with the private sector to expand the supply chain, and manufacturing quality to meet the needs of the population rather than subjecting the population to unwilling choices to satisfy the corporate agenda (Mahon & Fernandes, 2010).

Wali and others point out that despite sustained efforts with the WASH policies to curb the issue of menstrual health, the problem still persists. This was due to the existing power dynamics and informal privatization, for instance, individualization of community taps. While the NGO and other private sectors accountable for provisioning the services were reluctant to pay attention due to existing casteism (Wali et al., 2020). Swami and Sommer highlight the debate on the menstrual leave policy and the attitude towards it. They also mention the role private engagements can play in increasing the labor participation of women in the workforce, increasing productivity, and decreasing period poverty (Sommer et al., 2016; Swani, 2020).

Greed provides a fresh perspective on considering the women's bodily functions during the process of urban planning and policymaking to ensure sustainable cities (SDG 11) (Greed, 2016). Clear protocols for treating menstrual waste must be adopted, uniform across the globe to prevent exploitation of the environment as well as the maintaining privacy and comfort of the menstruators (Elledge et al., 2018).

Structural power:

Goyal portrays the issue of MHM and corporate power in managing the menstrual needs of the destitute. It was observed that when it comes to their gender-specific requirements, over half of the Indian women are mostly ignored (Goyal, 2016). Women have menstruation on average for 2100 days of their lives, yet discussions on the availability and cost of menstrual products are nearly non-existent. This limit women's mobility and influences the growth of teenage girls (Ballard et al., 2021; Goyal, 2016). We have big brands like Stayfree and Whisper from Johnson & Johnson and P&G that fail to connect with consumers at the bottom of the pyramid. None of the 187 general and supply stores in 62 villages stock or sell sanitary napkins (Goyal, 2016).

It presents an opportunity for Public-Private Partnerships at the village level to optimize and provide access to sustainable menstrual needs: Organizations like Azadi Group or Jayshree Industry of Mahalaxmi Self Help Groups SHGs of private industries such as Mahalaxmi may work with programs like National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) to offer job opportunities at the village level, and this might help raise awareness at the local level. If a tiny creative move like the PPP model (Tiruvidthai Akshaya SHG) can result in so many beneficial advances in the market for menstrual hygiene products, then at the macro level they may overcome impediments such as accessibility, purchase price, and lack of disposal mechanisms, etc. All these issues can be solved only when menstrual products are considered essential goods rather than a commodity (Ballard et al., 2021).

Discursive power:

Analysis of the articles through a discursive angle shows that papers in the early 2000s portrayed a negative impact of the advertisements and campaigns. This was the most powerful tool used by politicians and marketers to promote their agenda at the cost of the ill health of the population (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2020). The influence of advertising is powerful and omnipresent and has been putting gender at the center of marketing and consumer research (Malefyt & McCabe, 2016). It also served as a major tool to provide information, instill stigma, and subject women to self-objectification. For instance, women were distributed with booklets which served as an ice-breaker for the "menstrual talk" for many American mothers with their daughters. These booklets, along with providing information, did not fail to subtly objectify feminine bodies, resulting in an unhealthy outlook on menstruation (Malefyt & McCabe, 2016).

Hinging to this aversion of women to menstruation, companies, through advertisements, openly promoted menstrual suppression as a positive by-product of taking birth control in order to

escalate the product scale in the market (Erchull, 2013; Hasson, n.d.; Kissling, 2013; McMillan & Jenkins, 2016; Spadaro et al., 2018). However, with increasing menstrual activism these advertising firms are cautious while making headlines and catchy phrases to avoid being targeted (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). Koskenniemi analyzed the recent sites that sell/advertise menstrual products and found that these sites addressed period positivity, sold alternative products, and urged providing access to education to enhance women's health and sustainability (Koskenniemi, 2021). Discursive power, though has helped women move toward a hygienic and civilized way of managing menstruation, has left an imprint on synonymizing menstrual hygiene and menstrual health with menstrual pads (Mahajan, 2019).

Babbar and others highlight treating menstrual products as essential goods rather than commodifying it. (Babbar et al., 2022). Though some countries have lifted the taxation on menstrual products, countries like the US still treat tampons and other sanitary products as "luxury goods", catapulting period poverty. Strategic collaboration with private institutions and through their corporate citizenship could prove to be a game changer for tackling period poverty (Kambala et al., 2020).

With the coupling of discursive and instrumental powers, consumer awareness and consumer education can be strengthened by disseminating knowledge about the existing policies, rights, protocols, and standards to manage menstruation. Bart and others mention regulating the allergenic fragrances in the menstrual that companies use in order to make their product feel "odour-free" or "fresh" through stringent protocols and ensuring consumer transparency by mentioning it in the product labeling and ensuring product safety (Desmedt et al., 2020; Nonfoux et al., 2018). Speaking of safety, in this overtly digitalized world with around 100 million women relying on menstruation tracking apps for managing their monthly cycle, data privacy is a serious issue.

Being a part of a booming technology expected to be a 50-billion-dollar market by 2025, it is highly subjected to surveillance capitalism to form a basis of marketing for corporate giants. The lack of readability of the app's terms and conditions puts the consumer's decision to share intimate information "at their (your) own risk" (Fowler et al., 2020). Thus, these apps are likely to do more harm than good.

Bhagwat and Jijina put forth a near-to-perfect example (through project Sakhi) of bringing together all three powers existing to strengthen the menstrual health of women in Indian villages. Menstrual pads, low-cost incinerators to dispose of menstrual waste, and making a living by producing and selling low-cost sanitary napkins all help women stop wearing mud-covered leaves and sitting on mud-filled earthen pots for the duration of their periods, thereby eradicating period poverty and its stigma (Bhagwat & Jijina, 2020).

There has been a lot of efforts undertaken towards promoting awareness and adoption of

hygienic habits through the use of menstrual pads across the globe (Mahajan, 2019). With a menstrual pad being the face of menstrual hygiene, the repercussions following it are often camouflaged by the success of product promotion. One such by-product is the waste generated by menstrual products. Females using pads are increasing progressively. The current waste load is 12 billion pads per year in India. Further, a single commercial disposable pad takes 500-800 years to decay, which worsens the problem of MHM (Muralidharan, 2018). This increasing pile of non-biodegradable waste combined with inadequate waste collection and disposal facilities creates a perfect scenario for various kinds of health risks and environmental pollution. Thus, menstrual waste management becomes an urgent matter. This poor management of menstrual pad disposal stems from the fact that there is no one decided protocol to dispose of the menstrual pad, lack of privacy to manage the menstrual pads, and unavailability of a disposal mechanism to manage the menstrual products (Elledge et al., 2018). There is an urgent need for managing these issues. Companies can work towards utilizing eco-friendly materials for manufacturing menstrual products to ensure a sustainable environment. An extended scope of research exists involving private partnerships through their corporate citizenship to bolster menstrual health management across the globe.

Conclusion

The commercial determinant of health is a nuanced concept and literature generally associates it with its significant influence on non-communicable diseases. However, the paper reiterates through this literature, the presence of these powers and their potential to influence menstrual health. The three power variables of the commercial determinants have their exclusive impact on the behavior of adolescent girls. The instrumental power can help in normalizing the concept of menstrual product usage and related behavior.

There are multiple anecdotes and gimmicks produced by marketing players which are trying to bring the topic to normalized light. Discussion on the tax benefits on menstrual products and the coverage and accessibility given to all the female citizens of the country will help in enhancing the structural variable. Government opening up on many tabooed topics like discussing the inclusion of the LGBTQ community, sensitivity towards differently-abled people, and also creating awareness on the topic like MHM at various levels can be a significant power in terms of discursive power.

A preconceived notion exists that portrays these powers to create a negative impact on health, however, when utilized mindfully and with requisite governance, they can pave the way towards approaching health issues holistically and enabling a sustainable future. For achieving holistic development in healthcare, it is essential that these powers unite, keeping aside their 'profit motive' and working in their capacity to bring positive change in the population.

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