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Abstract

This thesis explores how the menstruating subject is articulated in contemporary consumer culture and through practices of consumption. This results in an alternate reading of the menstruating subject that brings together broader questions related to modernity and history. Consumption in modernity occupies a troubled place for feminist theorists and activists; considering consumption requires the rejection of assumptions about the consumer as a blank slate on which advertisers and marketers write their products. The assumed passivity of the young female consumer is also readily questioned, particularly in relation to sanitary hygiene products. Using the work of Walter Benjamin, particularly his ideas of ‘now-time’, the dialectical image and technological reproducibility, allows for a different type of analysis of the menstruating subject in modernity. Understanding how the past, present and future are constructed in current sanitary hygiene product advertising and branding leads to new ways of accessing the everyday for young women in contemporary Australia. Benjamin’s literary trope of the fragment is also discussed and used in conjunction with the cultural artefacts of everyday objects and commodities. Looking at the visual and digital media of two brands of sanitary hygiene products Moxie and U by Kotex, framed by an autoethnographic approach, I offer a way of considering menstruation and consumption together whilst also suggesting new possibilities for how we frame the everyday for young women in modernity.

**Keywords:** sanitary hygiene products; menstruation; consumption; Walter Benjamin
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## Abbreviations

Sections used from ‘Convolutes’ (Benjamin, 2002):

- H – The Collector
- K – Dream City and Dream House, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung
- N – On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress
Foreword

Feminism is for everyone. It’s not an academic, CV-building thing [for] armchair feminist theorists. (Elena Jeffreys, 28 May 2011, Feminist Futures Conference, Melbourne)

In 2009 I was new to the realm of student activism in Australia after growing up in a middle-class, inner Sydney Anglo-Australian family. I considered myself a knowledgeable feminist in all aspects of my life: I’d sworn off men after a fairly brief relationship with a radical Marxist; I changed my major from History to Gender Studies in the space of a week; I was a regular at Women’s Collective meetings; and I had a lady crush on Judith Butler who I thought spoke the gospel truth.

I was invited to attend the Network of Women Students’ Australia (NOWSA) conference at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane. I arrived with other feminists to discuss topics such as Israel and Palestine, the Northern Territory Intervention, craftivism, trans*1 perspectives and abortion law reform. I went to a workshop entitled ‘Menstrual Education’ hosted by a woman from RMIT who spoke with the peculiar, artificially deep voice many actors seem to use whenever they need ‘to enunciate.’ But this was no ordinary woman and ‘Menstrual Education’ wasn’t your ordinary kind of workshop.

We began by discussing Mother Earth, the rhythm of menstrual cycles and the bonding of sisterhood. Following this, we passed around menstrual products such as colourful, reusable cloth pads and an odd, rubbery funnel that was called a mooncup.

1 ‘Trans*’ is an umbrella term that includes people who identify as transgender, transsexual and sex and/or gender diverse.
During this time, we discussed sanitary hygiene products and why we used particular items. Thinking this was a safe space for us to be honest about our experiences, I confessed that tampons had changed my life and I wish that I had discovered them earlier. Bad move.

I was told, in no uncertain terms, that my love affair with tampons would have to end. Shrill voices told me that tampons were evil things, symptomatic of patriarchy, misogyny and capitalism, created by men in order to kill women and make money. They were also horrifically bad for the environment and didn’t I feel personally responsible for abusing our dear Mother Earth in such a way?

I was left deflated. All my feminist credentials abruptly slashed in a matter of minutes; mooncups and reusable pads were the only way to go if I were to treat my body with respect and reject the ‘vile culture’ of consumerism and materialism forced on me by men. We passed around a mooncup, and touching its thick rubbery surface, I was very confused, wondering what feminism meant for me. Why were my personal choices and what I did with my body so highly scrutinised by my ‘sisters’? In fact whatever happened to the ‘sisterhood’?

Leaving the workshop, I checked my phone to see what time it was and there in my bag, in a clear box, were several brightly wrapped mini tampons. The brand was U by Kotex. I still use them to this day.
Somehow I felt comforted by these small, jewel-coloured objects. It’s important to consider products you buy in terms of the environment and ethical production, but there was something else going on that made me think about consumption and commodities. As someone relatively informed about socialism, production, the working class and Marxist theory, I was wondering why buying tampons was considered almost as bad as admitting to being bourgeois. Why did I have to be paralysed as a consumer and a feminist by a discourse that seemed to be left over from the 1970s?

For me, consumption is a productive, meaningful process. The most banal and everyday objects have always fascinated me and I believe they say much about who we are, what we want, and how we view the world.

These brightly wrapped tampons and pads with funky wrapping don’t make me think, ‘How do I conceal the shameful taboo that society tells me is my menstruation?’ Instead to me they are trendy items – items that are for showing, not hiding. But they also remind me that the colour or type of tampons or pads you use do not define whether you are a feminist.

In re-filling my Moxie tin or grabbing some U by Kotex tampons on my way out to another feminist conference, I wonder ‘What’s the problem? It’s the twenty-first century. Surely we’ve moved on from this.’
Introduction

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them. (Benjamin, 2002:460, N1a,8)

Who is the menstruating subject of contemporary consumer culture? What is her place in modernity? How could she be articulated differently as a consumer? This thesis is concerned with exploring the menstruating subject as she appears in twenty-first century consumer societies in countries such as Australia and the United States. In undertaking such an analysis, I propose possible answers to these questions through an alternate reading of the menstruating subject. Much has been written about menstruation in terms of female embodiment, taboo and etiquette. While acknowledging the importance of these different ways of thinking in assessing the role of menstruation in many women’s lives in modernity, I take an altogether different route. The opening anecdote begs the question of what a new way of rendering the menstruating subject in twenty-first century modernity might look like. This thesis is a starting point for further reflection about the female menstruating subject and her relationship to the everyday of modernity. To explore this relationship, I use the work of Walter Benjamin.

Menstruation occupies a troubled position in any discussion of ‘the female subject’ or ‘woman.’ This partly springs from the dualistic positioning of man as Subject and woman as Other that has structured Western history and philosophy (see Le Doeuff, 1989). Women have been defined in relation to men; their menstruating bodies are
defined on the basis of being Other to male bodies. In Young’s (2005:107) words: ‘The normal body, the default body, the body that every body is assumed to be, is a body not bleeding from the vagina.’ Menstruation troubles the female subject through its uneasy relationship with feminism and feminist theory, as it can exemplify a schism within feminist thought between the celebration of women’s ‘earthly’, glorious bodies and the transcendence of such a body. For some feminists, this is a body weighed down by socialised subjectivities based on binary ‘sex’ or ‘gender.’ Arguments over the role of menstruation in defining women’s lives in modernity reflect broader discussions about how women should be defined as subjects and the centrality of the body to those discussions. I acknowledge those debates and queries are important for feminist theory as I explore other ways of articulating the menstruating subject in modernity. I do so through a discussion of modernity, history and temporality, for menstruation is a key part of how the female subject marks her ‘self-narrative’ (Young, 2005:98). Temporality thus plays a crucial part in defining consumption practices for the menstruating subject.  

Consumption and the development of a distinct ‘consumer culture’ are modern phenomena. The practices, ideas and objects of consumption reflect the fragmentation, hybridization and polyvocality of modernity (Arnould and Thompson, 2005:869). They revolve around the creation, buying and selling of commodities; in competitive capitalism, the commodity is ‘a specific form of the product of human labour’ (Lefebvre, 2003b:32). Studying consumption, its cultural formations and its commodities are significant to exploring how subjects construct new ways of meaning in modernity. Such a study therefore emphasises ‘the productive aspect[s] of

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2 I am aware of Felski’s (2000:16) note about the focus of feminist movements post-1968 on essentialist sex and gender differences; my discussion of temporality occurs in a space outside of notions of ‘gynocentric, recurrent time.’ (Felski, 2000:18)
consumption’ (Arnould and Thompson, 2005:871) rather than focusing solely on Marxist analyses of the modes of production and human alienation from the products of labour.\(^3\) Looking at how the menstruating subject is constructed through cultural texts such as sanitary hygiene product packaging and advertising allows for a different analysis through consumer culture.

Contemplating the everyday provides another way of analysing the relationship between menstruating subject, consumption and modernity. The privileging of the male figure of everyday modernity (be he the figure in the writings of Lefebvre and de Certeau or Baudelaire’s \textit{flâneur}) has meant that studies of the everyday have focused on the public spheres of the street as opposed to places traditionally encompassing the everyday lived experiences of the feminine, such as the private, domestic sphere of the home.\(^4\) The everyday is a place through which women’s relationship to temporality, history and self is clarified, troubled and appropriated. Women, in my reading of the everyday, are menstruating and consuming subjects who participate in a construction of the everyday that sees their temporalities and narratives as central to modernity and its relationship to history.

Walter Benjamin’s work is integral to my analysis of the menstruating subject, for this subject is contingent on the relationship between past, present and future. Benjamin’s focus on time and history is also related to his continuation of Simmel’s ‘sociology of modernity’ (Highmore, 2002:30), reflecting an interest in how we

\(^3\) Such analyses are vital, but I argue that the development of a distinct culture of consumption requires a variety of approaches. Arnould and Thompson (2005:876) point out the usefulness of growing areas such as consumer research, which can create and sustain many different theories and discussions, as does Miller (1995).

\(^4\) For further work on this topic, Wolff’s (1985) article on the ‘invisible flâneuse’ and the possibility of a ‘feminist sociology of modernity’ is a useful starting point. See also Felski (1995).
define modernity and its subjects. For example, studying Benjamin and consumer culture leads to the development of ‘cultural history through the commodity form’ (Arnauld and Thompson, 2005:876). Benjamin’s interest in the cultural artefacts of everyday modernity provides a starting point for reading the menstruating subject in consumer culture. His ideas on reproducibility of visual images and media can also be used to analyse the cultural texts of consumption such as advertising. Consumption is a significant area within contemporary capitalism as its major literary text – advertising – allows consumers to participate in a different configuration of temporality. History and modernity are defined through the objects, commodities, and texts of a culture based on consumption, while offering transformative possibilities to the consumer that crosses temporal boundaries.

Using two brands of sanitary hygiene products as case studies, I analyse how the menstruating subject is articulated through consumption in the period we know as ‘modernity.’ In defining modernity, I refer to the period of industrialised capitalism of the twentieth-century and also refer to Benjamin’s theory of modernity as based in commodity culture with its recurring creation of the new (Frisby, 1986:36). I do not agree with Featherstone’s (1991:3) assertion that there has been an emergence of a new social totality or ‘break’ with modernity, culminating in ‘post-modernity.’ Instead I maintain the view of Driscoll (2010) and Felski (1995) that modernity, as a critical attitude towards the present, continues into the twenty-first century, though with changes such as the mass distribution of digital and web-based media.

I use the term ‘sanitary hygiene product’ as it best defines the products I discuss, though I acknowledge the issues that have been raised by feminists with the term
hygiene’ and its relationship to menstrual etiquette and taboo. By ‘menstruating subject’, I refer primarily to the young (under thirty years of age) menstruating women of consumer-capitalist societies in countries such as Australia. As this thesis is framed from an autoethnographic perspective, my personal experiences as an Anglo-Australian, middle-class urban woman shape my analysis.

After Walter Benjamin, this thesis employs the literary trope of the fragment where the overarching narrative is broken into shorter pieces separated by quotations. Temporality is significant to this thesis, since modernity disrupts notions of historical and temporal progress that have culminated in the present. Consumption and menstruation also have a role to play in such disruption. The first fragment encompasses a review of the literature of the everyday, consumer culture and sanitary hygiene products. This fragment is followed by an outline of the research method. In the third fragment, I provide an overview of the main theoretical ideas of Benjamin that I use to analyse the menstruating subject. Fragments four and five present an analysis of two case studies of sanitary hygiene product brands, Moxie and U by Kotex respectively. It is from these examples that I expand my reading of the menstruating subject of consumer culture in modernity.

Moxie and U by Kotex work on seemingly different sides of temporality, but both underscore an experience of modernity where consumers traverse time and space. Moxie re-appropriates an imagined, fantasised past to fit the present of the consumer. U by Kotex defines the subject that has yet to come, suggesting the potential for consumption in the future. Both brands are unique in their emphasis on fashion and

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5 See the sections titled ‘Convolutes’ (Benjamin, 2002).
style for the young menstruating subject in Australia. In analysing that subject, I bring together fragments to form a montage of consumer desire, subjectivity, and modernity. A different project of the present can thus be constructed, which could indicate the unfinished project of modernity where the modern is characterised by conflict concerning the very nature of the present (Benjamin, 2005:2). Consumption has a key stake in that conflict, as it can define what the future holds in store for the menstruating subject.
In researching sanitary hygiene products, I have fulfilled the role of the collector or ‘allegorist’ who maintains an incomplete collection of patchwork pieces (Benjamin, 2002:211, H4a,1). Collecting the literature on women and consumer culture has shaped a scene in which feminism, Marxism, consumption and cultural studies converge. Debates in this scene intersect to produce particular discourses about the participation of women in modern consumer culture. In exploring this scene, I look to ideas of everyday life, but with a different focus. Firstly I investigate the site of the everyday, encompassing authors such as Lefebvre, while noting the troubling figure of the consumer and acknowledging the everyday as a site for ‘expressions of cultural symbolism’ (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995:249). Secondly I expand this site as it relates to women and consumption, and question the assumptions of Marxist and feminist analyses of consumption. Thirdly, my research aims to fill gaps in the literature on sanitary hygiene products, particularly in Australia. In engaging with these ideas, the ‘Cultural Studies turn’ within the discipline of Marketing is briefly explore, which informs an analysis of sanitary hygiene products through the lens of consumption.

**Part One: The everyday**

Everyday life is a major site of analysis in modernity, as suggested by the opening quote and reiterated by Frisby (1986). The everyday particularly appears as a focused place of study for writers such as De Certeau (1988) and Lefebvre (1984). But
literature on the subject of everyday life often seems to bypass women and the everyday, focusing instead on philosophical questions or the male figure of modernity. A notable exception is the work of Rita Felski (1995; 1999; 2000).

Disciplining the everyday feminine has been a central part of feminist studies in the last few decades (see Bartky, 1988; Young, 2005) but much of this work centres on practices and processes of embodiment (movement, diet, clothing) that bring the gendered and sexed body of the feminine into being. This type of work has been significant for the development of feminist studies as a distinct academic and intellectual discipline. Yet there are gaps in the literature that draw together gender, everyday life and consumption. In studies of the everyday there exists an intellectual dismissiveness of the mundane in favour of more rigorous philosophical questioning, which could be symbolic of a wider dismissiveness about the everyday as it relates to ‘mass culture.’ This is why Morris’ work (1988a; 1988b; 1998) is important, for she negotiates such dismissiveness into a more readily accessible study of the everyday.

Avoiding the distinction between ‘high’ cultural work and the more mundane aspects of women’s lives is particularly relevant to feminism. Rather than contributing to or continuing an intellectual hierarchy of areas of study, my research explores new ways of interpreting the everyday, both in terms of subject matter and methodology.

Michael Sheringham (2006:5) points to the significance of the figure of the consumer within studies of the everyday. This is one of the more contested figures of modernity, creating a site of unease and ambivalence for many theorists who approach cultural and economic changes from traditional positions of the ‘Left’, particularly in relation

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6 Studying soap operas, magazines and other aspects of popular mass culture still have an element of seeming ‘inferior’ to studying the ‘great works’ or canon of literature and philosophy; this is an area where cultural studies and some feminist theory are still at odds.
to the everyday.\(^7\) Interpretations of the consumer and their consuming practices are indicated to varying degrees in the work of theorists such as Benjamin, Lefebvre and de Certeau; indicated too is a certain anxiety about the rise of mass consumption and commodities during the twentieth-century, an anxiety influenced by Marx’s ideas of commodity fetishism and false consciousness (Nava, 1992:186). Considering consumption and the everyday together is thus important for thinking through how consuming subjects construct and partake in modernity. In the context of women and consumption, it seems useful to reflect on and draw from Benjamin’s exploration of cultural artefacts and material culture in *The Arcades Project*. Benjamin (2002:7-8) expresses the rise of commodity fetishism and its glorification within nineteenth century Parisienne society and culture. He offers us an exploration of the everyday – one seen through the lens of a culture increasingly focused on commodities and consumption. His discussion of Surrealism in 1929 also elaborates on the possibilities for transforming and penetrating the mysteries of the everyday through the domain of experience (Benjamin, 1978:190). The everyday as a site of study and theorisation has often been awkwardly sandwiched between Surrealism, Situationism and Realism. There is a resulting tension between studying the everyday as representing ‘real’ life and studying it for other conceptions of life beyond that perceived to be ‘real.’

Sheringham (2006:12) considers Lefebvre’s work significant for unravelling this tension because he explores the possibilities of transformation within everyday life, and highlights the ambiguities inherent ‘within the weave of everyday life itself.’

The everyday is a contested site under capitalism marked by the dialectical relationship between work and leisure, and thus imbued with a sense of contradiction

\(^7\) By ‘Left’ I refer to those influenced by or using Marxist approaches.
and unison (Lefebvre, 2002:226). Everyday life in modernity is also intrinsically related to the lived and the historical (Lefebvre, 2003a:85). Lefebvre affirms through his study of the everyday a critique of modernity and its resulting impact on class and human relations. The illusory nature of the everyday, combined with an increased fetishizing of commodities, further indicates our alienation as workers and human beings. Embracing the contradictory nature of the everyday and engaging with Marxist dialectics is one way to comprehend a revolution of relations and everyday existence. Lefebvre (2002:230-231) reaffirms the importance of Marx and Lenin to analysing modern social phenomena such as alienation in both work and leisure spaces and its effects upon the everyday. Approaches such as Lefebvre’s can be problematic, for there seems to be a significant distinction made between production, work and the public sphere (all ‘masculine’ sites of the everyday) and the seductive, implicitly feminised sites of commodities and consumption,. It highlights Felski’s (1995:63) point of the ‘persistently gendered subtext’ that appears in discussions of commodity fetishism and signs of consumption from the Frankfurt School to Baudrillard. This is not my focus, but it is worthwhile to outline the recurring issues related to Marxist analyses of the everyday, as they have created further problems in the present concerning women, consumption and the everyday.

**Part Two: The everyday, consumer culture and feminism**

Researching sanitary hygiene products and alternate representations of the everyday involves an engagement with feminism, feminist theory and consumption. My work is situated in a place that suggests the limitations of particular ideologies that frame some parts of Western feminism. Some feminists, such as those in the ‘Menstrual Education’ workshop, are usually situated within the ideological ‘Left’, and struggle
to engage meaningfully with practices of consumption in their politics. This perhaps illuminates Miller’s (1995:40) point that the trivialisation of consumers and acts of consumption is necessary to maintaining the conventional political power of the two ideological groupings of ‘Left’ and ‘Right.’ Consumption is fundamentally contradictory; consumers can be simultaneously beneficiaries and victims of capitalism as well as everything in between (Miller, 1995:9). Identifying the complexities of consumption is or should be a feminist issue because a failure to do so means that women as consumers will continue to be ‘trivialised at the expense of ‘true’ politics’ (Miller, 1995:38). The difficulty of some feminists in engaging with such analyses of consumption reflects the ‘Marxist hangover’ in feminism that has been apparent since the 1970s. Gortz (cited in Miller, 1995:42) emphasises that consumption provides a more accessible and controlled way to engage with the world, as opposed to the huge systems of production over which we have very little control and are increasingly removed from. Younger feminists such as myself take part in consumption through places such as mass popular culture, which Morris (1988a:8) emphasises is viewed as feminised, or more specifically as ‘bimbo.’ Contemporary literature on mass culture and consumption can be framed from a perspective that claims the feminist movement has strayed from its method of original analysis – namely a feminist method encased within a Marxist framework. Angela McRobbie (2009:3) exemplifies this when she remarks that recent feminist approaches to studying mass culture and media through de Certeau’s idea of using the everyday to subvert capitalism no longer challenge capitalism as socialist-feminism once did. For

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8 This framework necessarily focuses on women’s oppression through consumption as being an extension of the oppression women face under a capitalist hierarchy of modes of production. We need a different way of analysing consumption, as this is one of the key areas in which Marxist thought falls short. Miller (1995:19) remarks: ‘It is not the proletariat today whose transformation of consciousness would liberate the world, but the consumer.’
McRobbie this is one of the defining features of what she calls twenty-first century ‘faux-feminism.’

Maintaining a rigid defence of a particular type of feminism ironically reflects what feminists originally highlighted – the exclusion of different forms of the political that relate to women. My research, inspired by my experiences with feminism, therefore considers how one could use a politics of the everyday to claim spaces previously overlooked or dismissed by parts of the feminist movement. I agree with Felski’s (1999:20) critique of the idea that ‘Women become the primary emblem of an inauthentic everyday life marked by empty homogeneous time of mass consumption.’

Women experience multi-layered interactions with the market, with brands and products through their consuming practices; studying this interaction and the ways in which products engage young Australian women can lead to fruitful research. I do so to avoid what Nava (1997:36) calls ‘totalising and deterministic schema’ that treats the consumer – particularly the female consumer – as incapable of knowing or resisting advertising and consumption. It also engages in a type of politics that seeks to elude what Morris (1988b:180) refers to as a ‘repertoire of narrow and moralizing attitudes’ so often characterised by ‘radical politics.’

Consumer culture, commodities and processes of consumption are essential sites of study in modernity. In creating and reflecting meaning for consumers, advertising and other artefacts of consumer culture can be useful texts through which to analyse the relationship between consumption and modernity. Moisander and Valtonen (2006)

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9 Ginsburg (1996) exemplifies that schema when she maintains that sanitary hygiene products in material culture encourage women to participate in the male gaze through constantly hiding their menstruation, thus affirming dominant and repressive ideologies about womanhood in our society.
indicate these sites are part of the ‘cultural turn’ in Marketing, which I define as the intersection of Marketing with Cultural Studies.\textsuperscript{10} Arnould and Thompson (2005) signal this turn, as do Firat and Venkatesh (1995) who relate it to a meeting of postmodernism and consumption. Both address a movement in Marketing away from traditions of science, ultimate truth and distinct forms of epistemological knowledge, towards unstable, fragmented categories of the ‘hyperreal’, the aestheticisation of everyday life, post-structural ways of thinking and the consuming of spectacle (Debord, cited in Firat and Venkatesh, 1995:250). Focusing on how narratives, discourses and aesthetics create knowledge is important to cyclical conceptions of history (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995:244). Increasingly there has been recognition of the significance of the female consumer and her potential power, though we have not considered the full impact of the many possibilities of consumption and consumer culture (Nava, 1992:199).

In terms of sociological and anthropological approaches to consumer culture, Nava (1992; 1997; 2005), Miller (1995; 1997; 2010) and Featherstone (1991) analyse consumer culture from a non-Marketing perspective. Morris (1998:67) also focuses on the mundane and everyday sites of consumption for feminist theorisation by looking at the ‘affective’ relationship between spaces of the everyday (in her case, shopping centres) and women. This relationship stands at the centre of my examination of women’s engagement in consumer culture and consumption. I have avoided the repetitive treatise on gender, consumption and capitalism such as that of Luke (1997). Instead I am able to offer an alternate reading of the menstruating

\textsuperscript{10} By comparison, an earlier focus of marketing and consumer research was based more on psychology and the unravelling of consumers’ desires, rather than looking at the cultural rituals, symbolic formations and commodities through which consumer create or change their identities.
subject within consumer culture, while also reflecting on the limits of current feminist movements within ‘Left’ politics.

**Part Three: Sanitary hygiene products**

The literature on sanitary hygiene products mirrors disciplinary developments in feminist theory. Feminist theory has emphasised how various worldly systems (whether they be patriarchal, economic, colonial or heteronormative, and so on) exclude and oppress women, affecting their lived experiences. The topic of menstruation is no exception. The social stigma and taboo of menstruation is frequently the focus in literature on menstruation and sanitary hygiene products (Delaney et al, 1988; Ginsburg, 1996; Kane, 1997; Kissling, 2006; Lymn, 1999; Park, 1996; Treneman, 1988). Scholarship on sanitary hygiene products can be roughly divided into five areas: cultural history of products; economic critiques; medical and scientific writing; environmentalism and eco-feminism; advertising and marketing.

The first four areas make up most of the current literature and are discussed in more detail below. Sanitary hygiene products within an Australian context seldom feature except in writing on tampon safety (including Toxic Shock Syndrome and dioxin hazards), and on the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2000. The introduction of the GST was a key site of organising for feminist and women’s groups in Australia around the economic issues of taxing sanitary hygiene products and the definition of these products as cosmetic items.¹¹

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¹¹ Women, including university students, used various types of activism against the GST on tampons and pads. See the article by Abraham (2000) in a Canadian newspaper about the characters of ‘Tanya Tampon’, where a ‘veteran of the women’s movement’ dressed up as a giant tampon at a protest, and the ‘Menstrual Avengers’, who pelted politicians with tampons. Patrick et al (2000), writing in *Ms*, note that thousands of signatures were collected from women around Australia on this issue. Abraham (2000) indicates that women’s engagement with feminist politics changed during this time, harking back to the ‘feminist uprising’ days of the 1970s.
3a): Cultural history of products

Historical accounts and analyses of women’s experiences with menstruation and sanitary hygiene products throughout the twentieth century include the work of Delaney et al. (1988), Freidenfelds (2009), Kissling (2006) and Vostral (2010). This follows from anthropological work on non-Western societies, with its emphasis on the ritualization of menstrual practices, and mythical and cultural narratives or stories of menstruation in ancient societies. This body of work also includes the history of sanitary hygiene product advertising. This is bound up with cultural history in order to create richer contexts for the presentation of women’s stories of menstruation. Authors such as Brumberg (1997), Freidenfelds (2009) and Nalebuff (2009) use interviews, diaries and anecdotes to represent women’s experiences of menstruation and engage the reader in wider discussions about women’s bodies, culture, memory and history. Freidenfelds (2009) charts twentieth-century practices in America associated with menstruation, hygiene and health, highlighting the intersection of modernity with menstruation. She offers important background reading of the various developments and controversies associated with sanitary hygiene products such as disposable pads and tampons. She also considers the advertising strategies of companies such as Kotex in the pursuit of new customers and new markets (Freidenfelds, 2009:120-123). The image of the ‘modern’ female body, and the products that bring it into being, gradually became a part of public discourse through the advertising sphere, which have allowed for a more public display and acceptance of menstrual products (Freidenfelds, 2009:141). But menstruation continues to hold

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12 See Shuttle and Redgrove (1978), whose book The Wise Wound is the result of second-wave feminist reclaimations of menstruation. Shail and Howie (2005) discuss cultural and social appropriations of menstrual experiences, but specifically from an anthropological approach.

13 No book or article on sanitary hygiene products and the ‘taboo’ around menstruation could be complete without a reference to Douglas (1966), who is frequently referenced for her work on social and cultural taboos relating to the body and its physical boundaries. Also frequently cited is Kristeva’s (1982) work on abjection.
some cultural and social ambivalence today despite advertisements proclaiming otherwise.

3b): Economic critiques of products
Some feminist writing on sanitary hygiene products links them to the economic oppression of women. This argument centres on the idea that women are compelled to participate in a culture of consumerism that is in league with the economic oppression of women under a capitalist free-market system. These analyses (based on a specific interpretation of Marxist theory) imply that for women to reject capitalist and class-based oppression, they must reject consumption. But also implied in these analyses is the assumption that women and youths are particularly vulnerable to advertising and consumerism (Nava, 1992:190). Delaney et al. (1988), Houppert (1999) and Kissling (2006) for example, survey the development of sanitary hygiene products in Europe and North America. All three texts have the phrase ‘the curse’ in their titles and focus on the idea of selling the ‘taboo’ of menstruation to women. Kane (1997) and Treneman (1988) further explore this idea, emphasising the ‘sneaky’ ways in which companies market and advertise sanitary hygiene products to women. Kane (1997:297) takes aim at the ‘pseudo-feminist’ style of such advertising in the United States arguing that it continues (under a careful guise of ‘women’s liberation’) misogynistic cultural representations about women’s bodies and menstruation. Treneman (1988:158-160) discusses the exploitation of women’s liberation by multinational corporations to sell products. She argues that their advertisements have not changed since the 1920s and still contain underlying notions of shame, secrecy and cleanliness associated with menstruation, which remains problematic for women today. Luke (1997) considers that media representations and product advertisements
encourage the discourse that women are inferior, cursed and unclean.\textsuperscript{14} She goes on to suggest that women are captured in this culture of shame, secrecy and embarrassment and thus are compelled to purchase products that claim to ‘address the same perennial “problem” – being female’ (Luke, 1997:29).

This type of approach grounded in a combination of feminist and Marxist politics is problematic. Interpretations of Marxist theory in these texts tend to be highly generalised to overlook changing historical and cultural circumstances. Moreover, many Marxist theorists of consumer culture tend to talk about modes of production but leave out modes of consumption (Nava, 1997:43). These accounts tend to encompass a simplistic, repetitive focus on the seductiveness of capitalism and the manipulative nature of consumption (Nava, 1992:188). Focusing on consumption and consumer culture as social and anthropological phenomena is perhaps one way to avoid reducing consumption to simplistic interpretations of capitalism.\textsuperscript{15} The economic critiques outlined earlier leave many questions unanswered and contribute to a cyclical sense of women as an overwhelming oppressed and subordinate class, an approach that can be disempowering and alienating for readers. As Jameson (1984:57) has remarked, a powerful vision of a total system (in this case, of class and economic-based oppression of women in consumer culture) can be paralysing for both reader and author, and also paralyses the ‘critical capacity’ of the author’s work. Approaches to sanitary hygiene products and menstruation that rely solely on Marxist critiques of production can be laden with ‘moralistic disapproval’ that is not necessarily always fruitful or conducive to researching consumption (Nava, 1997:46).

\textsuperscript{14} The author is writing in Social Alternatives, a peer-reviewed quarterly journal of the Australian ‘New Left’, which has a particular focus on Marxism and socialism in relation to Australian activism.

\textsuperscript{15} Miller’s (1995; 1997) work is but one example of how a different type of socio-cultural analysis can be achieved.
Researching this material has assisted me in identifying what I don’t want to say about consuming sanitary hygiene products, and the kinds of spaces in which I could situate my work. These spaces have much to say about capitalism and the kind of postmodern, consumer-based society we are currently engaging with, but in a far more nuanced, complex and profound way than some of the literature outlined here.

3c): Medical and scientific literature

The third area of sanitary hygiene product literature is heavily focused on the medical and scientific effects of product use, most notably in regards to the use of tampons and associated problems such as Toxic Shock Syndrome and dioxin levels in products. From the early 1980s tampons became the focus of safety debates in legal, academic and social spheres (see Houppert, 1999; Kissling, 2006). The chemicals allegedly used by sanitary hygiene companies (such as bleach, chlorine and dioxin) have become a focal point for anti-consumption and ‘alternative menstruation’ activists (Bobel, 2006:333). Medical and scientific literature intersects with parts of contemporary feminist and environmental movements, who all challenge companies, advertisers and the women who participate in buying these products. Houppert (1999:11-36) also outlines the dangers and secrets of the sanitary hygiene industry reflecting a general mistrust and cynicism towards corporations and big multinationals that is perhaps indicative of the type of Marxist hangover described earlier.

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16 Lynn’s 1999 Honours thesis ‘The Ideal Menstruating Girl’ was helpful to read for my research, as its approach was well thought-out yet focused on what I specifically wanted to avoid: analysing in a Foucauldian framework how sanitary hygiene product companies created the medicalization of young women’s bodies and its corresponding discourse of concealment and taboo.
3d): Environmentalism and eco-feminism

The fourth area concerns environmentalism and the rejection of particular forms of (disposable) sanitary hygiene products on the grounds of environmental sustainability and using ‘natural’ products. Noticeably this ties in with grassroots movements in eco-feminism, particularly across university campuses as Kissling (2006:81-101) and Bobel (2006) outline. In Australia, alternative forms of sanitary hygiene products, such as mooncups and reusable cloth pads, have become an intrinsic part of eco-feminist collectives and subcultures. Additionally there is a rejection of the naming of products as ‘feminine hygiene.’ Bobel (2006:334) defines menstrual product activism in North America as a result of the merging of punk subculture with third wave feminism. At my own university and other universities in Australia, there has been an overlap between different student collectives, leading to an activist intersection of feminism, body politics, environmentalism and anti-consumption.17 The potential environmental hazards of many types of sanitary hygiene products are fertile ground for feminists and writers, particularly regarding the dangers of dioxins in tampons and the un-reusability of these products. Vostral (2010:143-147) acknowledges the role eco-feminist movements have to play in sanitary hygiene product development and discusses technological developments of tampons, using the brand Natracare as an example. Bobel (2006) suggests (perhaps without meaning to), that menstrual product activism has become a cool cultural phenomenon, following wider consumer trends in environmentally friendly, ‘natural’ and ethical consumption. But a moralising sensibility can underpin the development and promotion behind ‘natural’ products.

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17 One particularly interesting site is the University of Newcastle, which is known (despite Voluntary Student Unionism) for its strong environment and women’s collectives. The student activists involved in these collectives encompass a unique style of eco-feminist activism involving radical feminism, new menstrual product alternatives, environmental issues and anti-consumption movements. For a different focus, see the work of Cunningham (2011), a ‘menstrual educator’, student and feminist activist based at RMIT.
Coward (1989:17) points out that the term ‘natural’ has become a selling point for consumers, it is positioned as more virtuous and wholesome than the average product.

3e): Advertising and marketing of products

Literature about the advertising and marketing of sanitary hygiene products that is free of an implied, moralising critique of consumer culture is rather thin on the ground, particularly in an Australian context. Herein lies a significant gap in the relevant feminist scholarly literature. By contrast, the literature of advertising, consumer research and marketing journals, as well as media reports, provide a rich overview of the sanitary hygiene product market and the complexity of consumer participation. Kaye (2001), writing in the American visual and graphic design culture magazine Print, provides a fascinating insight into the nostalgic representations of sanitary hygiene products through advertising and the changing modes of interaction between companies and consumers.\(^{18}\) Kaye (2001:65) acknowledges (through her interviews with advertising executives) the powerful role of affect, humour and style in sanitary hygiene product advertising. Humour in particular is a vehicle for advertisers who reject the idea of ‘menstruation as taboo’, as seen in the 2008 Australian advertisements for U by Kotex starring a woman and her ‘beaver’ (Newman, 2009). Others point to the introduction of ‘designer’ sanitary hygiene products by brands like U by Kotex, suggesting that this space of the everyday can be re-fashioned for a different type of consumer engagement (Neff, 2011). These intellectual and professional spaces devoted to advertising, marketing and popular culture prove highly useful for my research. It is also essential for the observation and

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\(^{18}\) Print’s (2011) ‘About us’ website page says that the magazine ‘explores why our world looks the way it looks, and why the way it looks matters.’
analysis of popular media (such as television advertisements and product websites) in the twenty-first century.

It is clear that there are many pieces still to be collected in regards to women and consumer culture, or more specifically in analysing the relationship between women and commodities. This has become particularly clear when looking at the literature on sanitary hygiene products, which is heavily focused on how such products reflect and create social and cultural discourses about menstruation in modernity, or new ways of interpretation of products from an eco-feminist perspective. My aim is to carve out an altogether different section of research, based on how sanitary hygiene products evoke, through consumption and the everyday, the menstruating woman in modernity. In studying these products, I look to Fiske’s (1989:23) approach of analysing culture: ‘Culture is a living, active process: it can be developed only from within, it cannot be imposed from without or above.’
In the previous fragment, I outlined the areas of literature that had influenced my interest and engagement with sanitary hygiene products, consumer culture and the everyday. The points outlined in that fragment provide a scene for my thesis and inform my choice of textual analysis influenced by social semiotics as an appropriate method. In this section, I provide an overview of the method and methodology behind my analysis of Moxie and U by Kotex in Australia. Encasing this method is the frame of an autoethnographic approach, which locates my thesis from a personal perspective.

**Autoethnography**

The starting point for this study is very much anecdotal, personal, and what Gregg (2004:363-364) refers to as the ‘mundane.’ In constructing the mundane voice of my thesis, I am aware that autoethnographic approaches provide useful ways to study cultural phenomena and the ways in which meanings change from consumer to consumer. Using my personal position allows me to investigate my culture in a self-reflexive way to make clear the cultural meanings and practices of discourse that are usually invisible. The position of the autoethnographer also appears to draw attention to positions and assumptions often made invisible in the academic discipline itself (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006:64). This is clear through my own research, where a particular interest in consumption as a young woman in Australia led me to exploring the topic of sanitary hygiene products within feminist and consumer culture literature. I also want to point to Morris’ (1988a:10) work, in which she maintains that writers
and theorists can use their speaking voice and ‘story-telling strategies’ to reflect or challenge the way the world is presented to us. I can, as Gregg (2004:365) outlines, use my speaking position in a more productive way despite its limitations, as such limitations can provide exactly the kind of potential for self-reflexivity to engage a wider audience. Autoethnography is thus embedded in both the methodology and in the literary structure of this text. It allows for ‘I’, the researcher and author, to situate myself in the world of everyday cultural phenomena that are sanitary hygiene products.

Autoethnography allows for a distinctive focus on what would be viewed as mundane details and sites of the everyday, such as how supermarkets, chemists and other stores like Priceline configure sanitary products within the geography of the store. I briefly looked at public spaces to get a sense of how the phenomena of sanitary product marketing is produced in specific settings in order to reflect on the creation of an everyday through consumer culture. Using autoethnography has therefore made me think more deeply about the relationship and negotiation between ‘big’ politics (such as women’s liberation, feminism, anti-consumption) and the everyday, which is reflected in my opening anecdote. Goffman (1986:15) comments that anecdotes are used ‘as clarifying depictions, as frame fantasies which manage, through the hundred liberties taken by their tellers, to celebrate our beliefs about the workings of the world.’ He sums up well the importance of anecdotes to a discussion of the mundane and the everyday in Cultural Studies that Gregg (2004:379) continues. Morris (1988a:2) similarly writes of anecdotes functioning not as personal expression but as examples of ‘a model of the way the world can be said to be working.’ Such
approaches are reflected in my thesis through locating my own speaking position, the subject matter and the selected method for this research.

**Textual analysis**

Textual analysis of advertising, product packaging and brand websites are key methods for both literary criticism and Marketing due to their visual nature. Firat and Ventakesh (1995) emphasise the importance of the visual in representing and reflecting cultural practices. Moisander and Valtonen (2006:25) discuss the influence of Cultural Studies on Marketing, as it has encouraged the use of different types of methods and texts to understand the relationship between wider cultural discourses and everyday practices that are located within certain settings. Moisander and Valtonen (2006:32) explain further that:

In cultural approaches to marketplace phenomena, the analytical focus is particularly on meaning-making, on the ways in which meanings are created, made use of, contested and changed in the markets and how these meanings […] guide and constrain action both in the marketplace and in society more generally.

Textual analysis allows the author and researcher to show how particular interpretations of the texts are formed, and under what conditions they come into being. In looking at discursive practices that form meaning in consumer culture, I also emphasise the significance of advertisers and companies using particular ‘signs’ to create meaning. This is a textual approach that is influenced by the area of ‘social semiotics’, which could be said to have begun with Roland Barthes ([1957] 2009) and followed through by linguists such as Theo van Leeuwen (2005). Social semiotics can
be defined as the analysis of linguistic signifiers, which have signifying potential rather than specific meanings (van Leeuwen, 2005:5). Meaning is thus fragmentary, unstable and frequently changing, depending on the types of signs used, in what context they appear, and to whom they appear and make meaning for. A social semiotic approach is useful for analysing advertisements, for identifying the meaning potential of certain signs and how they are framed in visual images readily consumed and interpreted by many different consumers.

Sites of the everyday provide particular reference points for the performance and negotiation of self and others within the social order, according to Goffman (1959:252-253). For something that is so entrenched in the mundane, it is apparent that practices such as selling and advertising sanitary hygiene products are, in some way, lifting the process out of that categorisation of the mundane. The scaffolds and framing (Goffman, 1959: 1986) of products by brands such as Moxie and U by Kotex create a specific aesthetic and textual quality that encourages a different consumer interaction with their respective products and brands, despite these products being part of the mundane, the unremarkable, and the ordinary in many women’s lives. The advertisement and packaging of the product is therefore essential to the selling of a different vision of the everyday for the menstruating subject within consumer culture.

This research employs an autoethnographic approach and close textual analysis of the selected cultural texts of two leading sanitary product brands, Moxie and U by Kotex. The primary sources considered include the brands’ Internet websites, advertisements (in visual and digital media), products and packaging. The texts are situated within the context of contemporary Australian society, and their target audiences are young
women in their twenties and teens respectively. This allows an exploration of the effects of cultural references such as (but not limited to) particular words, phrases, images, colours and patterns. Close qualitative textual analysis placed within an autoethnographic framework allows me to use my personal experience to engage in wider debates about how we negotiate the relationship between menstruation and consumption within a commodity-obsessed culture.
When Don Draper speaks those lines to the Kodak marketing team in the hit American television series *Mad Men*, he emphasises that advertising is about the new and the nostalgic – a nostalgic sense that can take one back in time, beyond memory, through the unique and powerful texts of consumer culture. Advertising in the twenty-first century plays on these two core themes: of innovation and excitement, the ‘always new’ (Benjamin, 1994:235) of the present, while also retaining that sense of loss and nostalgia about the past. The ambivalence towards consumer culture and commodities seems to be a characteristic of not only modernity, but of knowing modernity as somehow distinct and separate to the historical past. It is this ambivalence that Walter Benjamin has about commodity culture: he sees the destruction and ruin of commodity culture, yet also sees it as the ‘phantasmagoria’ of modernity, representing a dreamlike future of revolutionary possibilities and change (Tiedemann, 2002:938). Habermas (1983:3,6) explains of Benjamin’s idea that the present is a moment of revelation, and modernity a response to the perceived past of those who have gone before. The texts of consumer culture such as advertising, product packaging and brand websites are part of an everyday modernity in the twenty-first century that allow for a different way of conceptualising temporality and history. This conceptualisation is inherently ambivalent and reflects Benjamin’s own hesitancy about modernity, commodities and consumer culture.

In applying particular themes of Benjamin’s work, I use four of his key ideas to explore the intersection between menstruation, consumption and modernity. Firstly, I argue that
his idea of the past as ‘incomplete’ and the term Jetztzeit, or ‘time filled by the presence of the now’ (1968a:261), relate more broadly to temporality, history and their relationship with modernity. Advertising is a way through which consumers can have access to a form of ‘now-time’ and redefine their place in the everyday present of modernity. Secondly, the ‘dialectical image’ of Benjamin refers to the ‘productive object of now-time’ (Osborne, 1994:87). The dialectical image is one that paradoxically contains the nature of both past and present, of completion and incompletion; its law also involves ‘dialectics at a standstill’ and the dream image of commodity culture (Benjamin, 2002:10). Thirdly, his interest in cultural artefacts allowed Benjamin to reveal or awaken the social and historical processes of past and present times (Jennings, 1987:18,25). Finally I draw on his notion of technological reproducibility in order to outline the ‘tremendous shattering of tradition’ (Benjamin, 1968b:221) that could be said to have occurred through the proliferation of texts such as digital media and reinterpretations of television advertisements on YouTube in the twenty-first century.

‘Now-time’

Discussions of temporality, of past, present and future possibilities, are significant to what I have termed modernity. The term ‘modern’ has appeared in regards to consciousness about relationships between past (antiquity) and present (modernity) (Habermas, 1983:4). Time and modernity are thus constructed in terms of responding to the perceived spaces of the past. In the twenty-first century, the apparent limits of temporality can be overcome for brief moments when consumers are able to partake in a re-imagining of a past time and arrange new possibilities for the present. Historical memory is ‘replaced by the heroic affinity of the present with the extremes of history’ (Habermas, 1983:5). Reconstructing

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19 Benjamin’s ongoing interest in and influence by Surrealism is apparent throughout his work. Note the beginning of Convolute N the quote from Marx: ‘The reform of consciousness consists solely in…the awakening of the world from its dream about itself.’ (Benjamin, 2002:456)
and imagining the past generates a sense of history, but history in relation to us in the present; conceiving history in this way links to ideas of progress that have dominated Western thought since the Enlightenment. It is the way through which we can define ourselves as specifically modern and separate to previous epochs. Benjamin is critical of this perception of history as being naturally progressive or bringing humanity to an ideal state of progress (Benjamin, 2005:1). He instead focuses on an alternate understanding of history and the relationship between diverse temporalities. I argue that advertising allows for consumers to have the opportunity of revelation, where ‘splinters of a messianic presence are enmeshed’ (Habermas, 1983:6). I turn now to Benjamin’s idea of Jetztzeit as a starting point for further elaboration of my analysis of Moxie and U by Kotex.

Benjamin (1968a) outlines the complex relationship between present and past as it is understood in twentieth-century modernity. He writes of how the past is articulated historically based on memory, empathy and ideas of redemption. Benjamin (1968a:254) writes, ‘Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply.’ History is about Jetztzeit, which is not empty or homogenous time, but filled with the present as recognition of the past (Benjamin, 1968a:261). ‘Messianic time’ refers to the future possibility of redemption and happiness through a saviour (Benjamin, 1968a:254). Rather than continuing ideas of progress in a Marxist sense, Benjamin is more concerned with the need to activate the ‘veiled redemptory potentials’ of history related to ‘time of the now’ (Wolin, 1994:xxii).

Underlying Benjamin’s works on history is an emphasis on realising the possibilities of the (incomplete) past with a suggestion to engage more fully with the present. Hamacher (2005:38-39) discusses the possibility of happiness that has now passed where ‘History is
only possible because of the possibilities that were missed.’ In this sense, our weak messianic power provides the opportunity to transform these missed possibilities into fulfilled ones (Hamacher, 2005:42). Advertising has a part in subject-creation and offers the possibility of transformation. The temporal landscape of advertising in the here and now suggests the possibility of an alternate future through the interplay of past and present, and through an immediate consuming subject. How we conceptualise the past and future has an impact in terms of consumption – of who buys what, where and when. Consumer culture thus has a stake in defining alternate concepts of history and modernity, as well as creating potential for future consumption.

**The Dialectical Image**

To understand Benjamin’s idea of the dialectical image it is essential to consider his work on Surrealism and his personal interest in the movement itself. Surrealism’s emphasis on radically revealing and seeing the world anew, of grasping the true potential of ‘la vie réellè’ (Sheringham, 2006:68) largely interested Benjamin. The idea of revelation and awakening is a feature of both Surrealism and Benjamin’s work on time and history. It suggests the need for a revolutionary consciousness-raising to awaken the masses to their full ‘Messianic’ potential. This would occur through the transformation of cultural commodities into dialectical images, which would then blow apart bourgeois ideas of historical progress (Buck-Morss, 1981:55). ‘Now-time’ uses the dialectical image as a way to disrupt the narrative of progress. It references the subject as a whole, yet involves a kind of explosion upon impact between present and past, new and old, modern and pre-modern. The dialectical image represents the Baudelairean notion of modernity as ‘a new modality of historical time’ (Osborne, 1994:95). The dialectical image is thus one in which the missed possibilities of the past are ‘rescued and redeemed, drawn together in new ‘constellations’ […] with the present’ (Buck-Morss, 1981:57). The dialectical image
appears as a way through which we might analyse our relationship to consumption and advertising – and what this says about modernity.

Cultural artefacts

I explained previously how advertising represents a key literary text of consumer culture. In addition to advertising, brand names, products and product websites are the kind of cultural objects that reveal aspects of mass consumer capitalism in the twentieth century and beyond. Jennings (1987) notes the importance for Benjamin of reading cultural objects as texts, for concentrating on cultural objects and artefacts allowed him to better reveal the ‘historical and societal processes’ of past and present times. Indeed it suggests an altogether different type of ‘historical materialism’ – a history based on objects of material culture rather than a history of significant figures, social movements and dates that coalesce to produce ‘progress’ in the future.

Benjamin’s works such as The Arcades Project provide part of the foundation for what would later become ‘Cultural Studies’ where the texts of everyday life and mass culture (rather than ‘theory’) become central to shedding light on particular social and cultural phenomena. Cultural objects and artefacts of the everyday provide, in Benjamin’s words, ‘commentary to a reality’ (cited in Jennings, 1987:40). But Benjamin’s aim was to break apart the cultural object, to ‘destroy that aspect of it which is tainted with the sign of the fetishized commodity’ (Jennings, 1987:39). My aim is not necessarily contrary, but perhaps less nihilistic. I instead analyse my selected texts to exemplify some of Benjamin’s thoughts on the creation of history, temporality and the importance of the dialectical image for objects that are gendered, such as sanitary hygiene products.

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20 Jennings (1987:33) indicates Benjamin’s difference to the rest of the Frankfurt School on this point, as Benjamin focused on literary criticism of material images and cultural objects rather than theory.
Reproducibility

Benjamin proposed that technological change could bring about a revolution of the arts. A shattering of tradition has occurred with the ability for viewers and listeners to respond to art and cultural texts in their own unique situations, which then re-appropriates and interprets the artistic object in an altogether different and new way (Benjamin, 1968b:220-221). This notion of reproducibility in film and photography is particularly important for focusing on the mundane aspects of our lives and analysing the hidden side of everyday objects (Benjamin, 1968b:236). Benjamin is pointing to the radical new possibilities for representing and interpreting the subject through new visual mediums. I take his ideas about reproducibility and relate them to the more expanded forms of mass media that have appeared in recent times such as television advertising, YouTube videos and channels, and internet websites. Below Benjamin’s essay exists an undercurrent: that ‘art’ is now politicised for particular purposes in order to critique and revolutionise the assumptions through which we view the world. This is not necessarily antithetical to how advertisers use film, television and digital media today. In looking at how sanitary hygiene product brands speak to young women in Australia, it is worthwhile to consider how their mode of addressing consumers has radically changed on account of new forms of digital media such as YouTube channels.

Benjamin is fundamentally interested in creating a new type of history, a history far more ambivalent about the major threads of modernity such as consumption. He states, ‘The materialist presentation of history leads the past to bring the present into a critical state’ (Benjamin, 2002:471). Benjamin rejects aspects of Marxist historical materialism in which human history is conceived of in economic and class terms that ultimately lead us to ‘progress.’ Instead Benjamin seeks to shatter that dream, a phantasmagorical state based on the false idea of history as progress, in order to move towards a shifting
temporal landscape of messianic moments. My task, as a collector of fragments and materials, is to apply his thinking to commodity culture and consumption in relation to sanitary hygiene products. Doing so enables me to analyse how particular brands have emerged from a dream of disguising menstruation towards a more revolutionary way of presenting the everyday for the young menstruating subject in contemporary Australia.
Fragment 4: The Romantic Past

*Temporality is at the heart of fashion’s unstable – yet strangely permanent – present, which is linked existentially both to the past, which it incorporates, and to the future which it anticipates.*

(Sheringham, 2006:181)

The sanitary hygiene product brand Moxie transforms the possibilities of the past to make menstruation products fashionable, stylish and a part of the everyday commodity culture for young menstruating women in Australia. Moxie’s site of the everyday extends beyond the present, projecting back and forward into the past and future. Moxie offers a new product and consumer aesthetic defined through nostalgic sense of an imagined, romanticised past. Simultaneously the brand sets out to take those past possibilities and reconfigure it for the new, particularly in terms of how women use sanitary hygiene products to participate in consumer culture. Moxie represents sass, style, glamour and ‘classic femininity’ (Tovia, 2006). But Moxie also points to the construction of an everyday configured and lead by women who are confident, assertive and very much modern. Moxie and the brand’s company Millie & More suggest a complex positioning of women-as-consumers and in the case of Mia Klitsas, the Moxie founder and CEO, women as business owners and company directors. This reflects the possibility that the women of modernity can be agents of change, difference and disruption. In exploring how Moxie presents the possibility of an alternate everyday for the menstruating subject in contemporary Australia, I use Benjamin’s concepts of ‘now-time’, nostalgia and the creation of history through cultural artefacts and commodities.

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21 Moxie’s target market is young women aged 18-30 years old (Moxie, 2011b).
The ‘now-time’ of Moxie

Earlier I proposed Benjamin’s concept of ‘now-time’ as a means to construct a new sense of temporality and history. Moxie the brand is filled by what Benjamin’s (1968a:261) refers to as ‘presence of the now.’ This ‘now-time’ bases itself in the present, but reflects and interprets the past while concurrently suggesting the possibility of new interpretations. This culminates in the suggestion of a different future for the Moxie consumer – a future in which the menstruating subject is no longer resigned to the perceived hellish timespace of menstruation. Instead she can have a ‘beautiful day in hell,’ as says the by-line of the Moxie Twitter account (2011c). The ‘now-time’ of Moxie presents ongoing possibilities of aesthetic and cultural change (rather than Benjamin’s revolutionary change) in the way women consume sanitary hygiene products in Australia. But Moxie could also be considered revolutionary, for the Moxie tins have begun a new trend for sanitary hygiene product packaging both in Australia and abroad. Moxie uses the possibilities of the past to reveal the world of menstruation as a sophisticated, stylish present; this is apparent through their rhetorical question of ‘Who said periods should be dull, un-pretty or unfashionable?’ (Moxie, 2011a). This present is not static but offers ever-changing possibilities of transforming women’s engagement with menstruation. Moxie represents the construction of an everyday configured by the woman of modernity, as well as offering Benjamin’s sense of historical and temporal redemption. A kind of redemptive power is articulated for the menstruating subject (the female consumer) and young female business owners like Klitsas through an active rearrangement of the present.

22 According to Neff (2011), leading fashion stylist Patricia Field (of Sex and the City fame) has designed tampon and pad tins for U by Kotex as part of a ‘Ban the Bland’ campaign. Canning (2010:68) also notes the rising trend of ‘fashion tins’ as a new form of marketing, particularly when it comes to shelf recognition of products.
Benjamin’s ‘now-time’ and his own ambivalent nostalgia about nineteenth century commodity culture in Paris provide a unique site from which to analyse Moxie the brand. Moxie employs a ‘retro’ aesthetic to engage the menstruating subject with a space that represents a nostalgic idealisation of the past, whilst projecting something ‘modern’ for her future as a consumer. Guffy (2006) notes that retro involves an appropriation of the past as a way to move forward. This is an alternate way of assessing ‘now-time’ in the Moxie brand: an invocation of what is to come as well as what has passed, where the consumer can acknowledge her relationship with that past. In this way, the retro is a conversation with Modernity, trying to discern Modernity’s boundaries and possible end (Guffy, 2006:14). The Parisienne arcades of Benjamin’s writing represents another way of doing history, through a nostalgic turn to the retro, or the reconstituted ‘trash’ of commodity culture. Guffy (2006:25) remarks that ‘[Retro…] evokes a memory of days that are not quite so distant, embodied in forms that are antiquated yet vaguely familiar.’ Moxie thus expresses a number of ideas. Firstly, retro is used to engage the consumer in a presumed cultural space of the late nineteen thirties and forties. Secondly, retro offers a way of engaging the menstruating subject with questions about modernity and history. Thirdly, the return to the retro is suggestive of Benjamin’s own nostalgia about the past and his project of creating history.

Retro branding is a marketing technique that involves the revival of older brands and products from an earlier period of history but which are updated to include modern technological advances or changes (Brown et al, 2003:20). Moxie, whilst not a revived brand from yesteryear, instead uses an aesthetic of the retro to define their line of products. Take for example the brand name itself. Miller (2006) explains that Moxie means, in 1930s Hollywood speak, ‘a woman with style and sass.’ The brand name, as part of the retro aesthetic, evokes consumers’ imagined memories of a more stylish or
glamorous past period while engaging it with the ideal modern woman who is confident and sassy. Underlying this idea of retro, which is culturally-constructed as well as being culturally-reflective, is a consumer narrative that conjures and uses an imagined past as an alternative to the mainstream offerings of sanitary hygiene products. While Moxie is set in the past, it engages itself as a company and brand with the modern present through an extensive website, social media sites (such as Facebook and Twitter) and a young female CEO. Through Moxie, a state is created that exists outside of the everyday and the ordinary. In another sense, Moxie also allows for an escape from the everyday routines of menstruation where customers can construct their utopia (Brown et al, 2003:27). For Moxie, it is a utopia where women can have ‘style, comfort and […] all things feminine – whatever the time of the month’ (Moxie, 2011a).

Moxie references a particular imagined historical period and place of the nineteen thirties and forties cosmopolitan Europe; in Benjamin’s terms this could refer to the utopia of the glamorous cosmopolitan and flâneuse, who shops in arcades and has a boudoir in her Paris apartment. Nava (2002:85) remarks that cosmopolitan style through commercial culture represents a place of alterity for the imagination of the consumer, which can transcend barriers of class. Looking at the current website design of Moxie, it is clear that the sophisticated cosmopolitan Parisienne woman is the idealised figure for the female consumer, regardless of her personal background. The female figure of the Moxie homepage (see Figure A) gazes into the mirror at her dressing table as she applies her

23 Klitsas was twenty-three when she started the brand with a business partner (Tovia, 2006). Having a female CEO is still a significant issue in Australia for both large-scale and smaller companies, as only 3% of CEOs in Australian companies are women (EOWA, 2010:6).
24 The class-based aspects of women’s involvement in consumer culture have not been the focus of this thesis, but it is interesting to note that sanitary hygiene products are necessarily cheap, readily available and affordable to most groups of women in Australia, on account of their frequency of use and popularity as items to deal with menstruation.
lipstick, with a background in the distance reminiscent of Eugene Atget’s photographs of Paris streets and buildings.

*Figure A – Homepage (Moxie, 2011a)*

But Moxie is able to combine this image of the glamorous female with something decidedly unglamorous for many women – menstruation. These two elements converge in a space that can be seen as a new field of representation for the menstruating subject. The figure of Moxie is the modern *flâneuse* present in Benjamin’s arcades of bourgeois commodity; she is herself the symbol of commodity culture, who also represents the ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ of the everyday for women (Nava, 2002:89). She partakes in commodity culture to symbolise her modernity, rather than her ruin, and in doing so she transforms her experience of menstruation.
**Historical nostalgia**

What is nostalgia good for, then? For one thing, it runs search-and-rescue missions against the disposability of consumer capitalism [...] it’s a reminder that it matters not only that an idea or an image was created, but when – that things speak most fully in chorus and counterpoint to other events and concepts of the same era. (Wilson, 2011)

Part of Moxie’s attractiveness as a product is its use of historical nostalgia. In discussing ideas around nostalgia, advertising and consumer culture, I use Barbara Stern’s (1992:13) definition of historical nostalgia: the desire to return to a time that was seen as somehow superior to the present. Historical nostalgia is unique on three counts. Firstly, it is located in a space outside of the temporal configuration and realisation of the audience – in other words, before they were born. The appeal to the consumer is thus based on an idealised, romanticised past, as Moxie exemplifies with its reference to the nineteen thirties and forties feminine. Buying products imbued with a sense of historical nostalgia allows consumers an association with a particular period in history (Stern, 1992:15). Secondly, historical nostalgia is associated with the possibility of transforming everyday consumption reality and the transcending of temporality. The third significant aspect of historical nostalgia is in regards to its romantic narrative and emphasis on imagination through empathy. Here consumption occurs through recreating or imagining a previous ‘golden age’ (Stern, 1992:16), which links with consumer emotion. Essentially, historical nostalgia is based on a fiction – one that allows an association with the past in a modern, sophisticated and seductive way. Stern (1992:12) associates the dominance of nostalgia with the ‘fin de siècle’ effect, the ‘end of a century’, where nostalgia provides for escapism to the past. The culmination of a distinct temporal period (like a century) or a ‘time of crisis’ encourages a cultural return to the apparent glory of a romanticised, idealised past. I believe this is indicated in *The Arcades Project*, where an exiled
Benjamin in pre-World War II Europe expressed a yearning for nineteenth-century Paris, despite all of its conspicuous consumption. The aesthetics of the nineteen thirties and forties style is indicative of a broader ‘fin de siècle’ move in advertising and popular culture towards the end of the twentieth century and into the new millennium.25

Benjamin himself had a strange kind of nostalgia for both history and present. He mentions history as a ‘a process of empathy whose origin is in the indolence of the heart, acedia, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly’ (Benjamin, 1968a:256). His nostalgia for the past appears through his pursuit of the arcades as places to reference the history and the present of consumer culture and commodities. For Benjamin the ruin of commodity culture holds revolutionary potential albeit compromised by the ruins of bourgeois culture. But Benjamin also laments the ‘golden age’ of late nineteenth century Paris. He sets about through the arcades to recreate, in nostalgic fashion, the history of those times and spaces, as well as a new form of historical memory through commodities and artefacts. Nostalgia is therefore an essential process in defining our place within the present, but as referential to the past – an imagined past. It is also significant in defining who we are in relation to others. Nostalgia and ‘now-time’ are thus interwoven to create a relationship with the past while also dealing with what occurs in the present, which for women who use Moxie is menstruation.

25 Wilson (2011) discusses and untangles the complexities associated with nostalgic and retro movements, which in his piece refers to nostalgia about 1990s popular culture in the first decade of the twenty-first century.
The cultural artefacts of Moxie

Another way to read Moxie’s interpretation of the menstruating and consuming female subject is in relation to the idea of the ‘cultural artefact.’ Here I refer to the importance of cultural artefacts and material objects in creating ideas of temporality and history. Moxie references cultural artefacts such as Alberto Vargas’ pin-up girls and retro design (candy-coloured stripes and black bows). In doing so Moxie creates a cultural object of the brand and most importantly, the packaging, which results in a repeated, reproduced object of the past framed in the present. The Varga girl of the forties could be viewed as a subversive icon who referenced ideas of the ‘fashionable feminist’ – transgressive yet popular (Buszek, 2006:23-24). Moxie uses a re-imagined drawing of a Varga girl on their website (Figure B) and Twitter account (Figure C).

Figure B – ‘Email us’ (Moxie, 2011a)
This image is reminiscent of the sophisticated sensuality of the Varga pin-up girls, in particular his drawings of the nineteen forties, notably linking it through colour and theme to the overarching brand identity of Moxie.\textsuperscript{26} The use of a specific past and style suggests the possibility of retro aestheticism without the retro values, ideologies or narratives that saw the menstruating woman as ‘cursed’ or unfit. Moxie exemplifies what Freidenfelds (2009:7) calls the potentially liberating experiences of modern menstrual management, which she views as a key aspect of the creation of modernity. Moxie products, packaging and branding are based around Hollywood movies of the forties, a time that Klitsas believes celebrated femininity (Moxie, 2011b). Klitsas further notes the re-introduction of ‘classic femininity to the world, a femininity that is timeless, just like in the old movies.’ Basing the branding around the idea of ‘retro’ packaging (the tins) and ‘retro’ design is significant for this notion of timeless femininity, which occurs within a culture primed to constantly thirst new and original commodities (see Figure D).

\textsuperscript{26} See Austin (2006), especially the chapter titled ‘The 1940s and the Varga Girl.’
The retro packaging and branding of Moxie underline the continuation of the cultural artefact in creating a relationship with different temporalities.

The idea that menstruation can somehow be stylish and aesthetically pleasing to the modern woman is a unique phenomenon. Advertisers have spent decades attempting to sell the latest sanitary hygiene product to women in terms of cleanliness, hygiene and discretion (see Freidenfelds, 2009; Ginsburg, 1996; Houppert, 1999; Kissling, 2006). By contrast, Moxie’s brand and packaging interprets the meeting between consumption and menstruation in innovative terms. The tins are a ‘fashion accessory’, which also try to ‘break out of the commodity mode and bring some class [to] feminine protection products’ (Canning, 2010:68). The reusability of the Moxie tin means that the Moxie idea extends beyond any ‘use-by date’, a particularly significant development within current discourses of responsible consumption and environmental sustainability.27 The general aesthetic of the tin could refer to selling a particular space in history as a cultural artefact

27 The Moxie tins are recyclable and the tampon packaging is biodegradable (Design Victoria, 2008).
an artefact that represents both the ruin of bourgeois commodity culture, as well as a celebration of it. It offers an example of how brands become cultural objects in their own right. Importantly, the tin is considered timeless and will not date quickly, according to Klitsas (Design Victoria, 2008). In such a way, the Moxie tins suggest that women can achieve the glamour of that time and place without the brutal historicity of it, such as the days of rags, sponges and other menstrual items now considered ‘pre-modern.’ This leads to the question of whether the creation of sanitary hygiene products as fashionable commodities is part and parcel of how we ultimately determine the process and future of women’s modernity.

Moxie encompasses different expressions of cultural artefacts for young women in Australia in the early twenty-first century; these artefacts appear in sites of the female everyday, such as handbags and women’s magazines. The theme behind Moxie, of referencing the past in creating a new future, suggests a potent place for women as consumers in modernity. Moxie specifically rejects the patronising way in which women had previously been sold tampons and pads with advertisements showing women rock-climbing or bushwalking (Miller, 2006). Klitsas’ main aim has been to bring ‘style and fashion to a really unfashionable product – the humble tampon’ (Tovia, 2006). I would further add that the creation of Moxie underscores the possibility of transforming the everyday for the female consumer and re-visiting the imagined, fashionable past without a return to the pre-modern cultural meanings of menstruation. Moxie suggests that the menstruating subject can engage with the missed possibilities of the past in a way that relates to her own existence in the present. Retro aesthetics and nostalgic undertones

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28 Klitsas notes that she wanted to create a product that ‘could fit into the modern woman’s world as well as her handbag’ (Moxie, 2011b). Most of Moxie’s advertising centres on small adverts in the pages of women’s magazines in Australia (see the ‘Media Room Gallery’, Moxie, 2011a).
provide a possible answer to ‘who will control the historical past as it lives on in the memory of humanity’ (Wolin, 1994:50). Furthermore:

For Benjamin, the philosophy of history becomes *Heilgeschichte*, the history of salvation, and the task of the critic – or later, that of the historical materialist – is that of rescuing the few unique visions of transcendence that grace the continuum of history, the now-times (*Jetztzeiten*), from the fate of oblivion which incessantly threatens to consume them. (Wolin, 1994:48)

Moxie, in making sanitary hygiene products a fashionable commodity of modernity, engages with the task of rescuing women from a fate of unfashionable and ‘pre-modern’ products. Using ideas of the retro, the nostalgic and their corresponding cultural artefacts, Moxie allows for a different vision of temporal transcendence where female consumers are brought into a past space, configured in their everyday present, but ever projecting into the future.
U by Kotex is the re-imagined youth-oriented version of the well-known American brand Kotex. In targeting a younger generation of menstruating girls and young women, U by Kotex exemplifies some of Benjamin’s key ideas. The menstruating subject of U by Kotex appears as a ‘dialectical image’, bringing together fragmentary and sometimes opposing ideas about girlhood, female adolescence and consumption. U by Kotex also references an interior temporality of the female consumer; it is on this basis that I offer an analysis of the menstruating subject’s own ‘now-time.’ The infamous ‘Beaver’ advertisement (U by Kotex, 2008) in Australia suggests Benjamin’s idea of shattering tradition through reproducibility, which has led me to a different way of analysing the brand’s advertising. The brand differs to Moxie on account of its audience; it targets a younger female market for sanitary hygiene products.\(^{29}\) Furthermore, U by Kotex offers an opportunity to analyse the intersection of young girls and consumption. McRobbie and Garber (2000:16) note that girls’ subcultures and patterns of consumption invoke private spaces of the home and bedroom rather than male-defined public spaces. U by Kotex disrupts this at times with some of its adverts, bringing together young female identities, menstruation and consumption in a complex space that is both public and private.

\(^{29}\) U by Kotex’s core market is young girls to women in their early twenties. While companies are circumspect about their aimed audience or market, U by Kotex (2011a) seems to be aiming for the tween and teenage market or new menstruators on account of their website, which has sections such as ‘Puberty’ and ‘For Teachers’. Moxie by contrast, is aimed at an audience of young women who already have access to discourses of knowledge about menstruation and the body.
Along with other brands such as Libra, U by Kotex is aimed at the new generation of menstruating subjects, ‘tweens’ and teenagers. Much has been written in medical journals about the apparent decrease in age of menstruation in the Western world throughout the past couple of decades (see Anderson and Must, 2005). A lowering age of menarche and a larger proportion of young girls menstruating suggests a potential shift in the way Western societies define childhood and adolescence. This shift in modernity challenges the definitive constructs of the female child, as opposed to the teenage girl or even the young woman. The relationship between childhood, adolescence and adulthood for girls is as volatile and blurred as ever, indicating the fluidity of constructed social categories such as childhood, upon which twentieth-century modernity has based itself. The category of the tween is therefore troubling for two reasons. Firstly, it seeks to break down those borders between childhood and adolescence whilst simultaneously re-creating and re-appropriating them in order to create a new consumer market. Secondly, the ambivalence of the tween is apparent: Cook and Kaiser (2003:205) note that the tween girl of consumer culture and social discourse exists in an unstable space ‘where ambiguities of social identity invite, even tolerate, polysemous and polyvalent renderings of who “she” is.’

U by Kotex’s appeal to a broad range of ages, from tweens to twenty-something women, suggests that its marketing strategies and representations of the menstruating subject must be diverse enough to encompass such a large range of age groups and everyday experiences. The brand is unique in specifically marketing products to tweens (Newman, 2011); a new range is directed towards young menstruating girls as young as eight years.

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30 ‘Tweens’ can be defined as seven to fourteen year olds, or what used to be termed ‘pre-teen’ or ‘subteen’ (Cook and Kaiser, 2004:204). They also note that the word ‘tween’ first appeared in 1987 in a marketing magazine, hence the association with consumer culture as the basis of defining the ‘tween’ identity (Cook and Kaiser, 2004:217).
The direct marketing towards children or pre-teenagers is nothing new, but as Cook and Kaiser (2003:223) indicate the tween age group has become a key site in which to understand and analyse femininity, as well as to exemplify the supposed evils of a consumer marketplace said to rob young girls of their childhood. The young female consumer is thus implicitly linked to wider cultural discourses about women, advertising and consumption, as will be suggested in my later discussion of U by Kotex’s ‘Beaver’ advertisements in Australia. Advertising is a major site where these social discourses materialise and converge.

U by Kotex encompasses a way of life for menstruating girls that involves seeing menstruation and the female body as part of the everyday – an everyday structured around their mantra ‘Why U is worth switching to’ (U by Kotex, 2011a). The mantra follows with four key points: ‘Hassle-free periods; ‘total protection’; ‘always innovating’; ‘a brand that’s not bland.’ While it may support the discourses that Driscoll (2002:94-96) suggests as configuring and normalising particular representations of girlhood, U by Kotex also configures an alternate idea of everyday consumer discourse in which these young girls participate – hence the catchphrase ‘A brand that’s not bland.’ As with Moxie, U by Kotex suggests that menstruation can intersect with the consumption of stylish, innovative and visible products.

Looking at U by Kotex and its products in such a way suggests the hybridity of ‘third-wave feminism’ outlined by Driscoll (2002:134-138). This generation of feminists has linked with youth cultures to focus on the girl as a more empowering source of identity than previously understood by older feminists. Debates around sanitary hygiene products and consumption are reflective not only of a Marxist hangover in feminism but are also

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31 As seen on a page on the Kotex website (2011) and an article on Jezebel.com (Hartmann, 2011).
reflective of inter-generational conflicts between different feminists and feminisms about girls, youth culture and women’s participation in new economic and consumer spheres. Driscoll (2002:138) says, ‘The construction of girlhood as a problem, and the dismissal of girls and their interests as trivial, belong to each of these critical models – in which girls will always be not yet Subjects and not yet women.’ Viewing and analysing U by Kotex as a productive place of meaning for young girls-as-consumers disrupts assumed feminist discourses that positions the adult feminist as an all-knowing subject who can teach younger feminists about the how female bodies are surveyed and managed in the mass consumer markets of twenty-first century capitalism.

The dialectical image of U by Kotex

Negotiating the space between childhood and adulthood is, as outlined, problematic in relation to women and girls. U by Kotex shows us the ‘shock’ of the dialectical image, as the brand brings together fragmentary and opposing ideas about girlhood, female adolescence and consumption which converge in a constellation of the present for the tween consumer. The U by Kotex girl, as envisaged by the ‘mother company’ Kotex (part of Kimberly-Clark Worldwide Inc.), is herself a dialectical image. The tween age group represents a particular discourse about young girls, childhood and how such groups figure in consumption. For example, young people are often portrayed as indiscriminate, mindless, gullible and easily corruptible by advertisers (Nava, 1992:172-3). Felski (2000:103) also notes that the female consumer is portrayed as the symbol of the seductive ruin of modern capitalism. These assumptions intersect in a dialectical image of the young U by Kotex consumer, suggesting the awakening and revelation of the girl-

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32 This became clear in reading authors such as Brumberg (1997), who is an American baby boomer feminist and historian. She outlines how girls’ bodies have become medicalised and part of a hygiene obsession in twentieth-century America, leading to girls becoming insecure about their bodies. This has appeared with an increasing emphasis on buying products as a way to ‘solve’ menstruation.
subject as a different type of consumer for the twenty-first century. Such a subject is thus ‘enfranchised in the new democracy of the market place’ (Nava, 1992:198).

The U by Kotex dialectical image allows us to consider the young menstruating subject in modernity as one who needs to be awakened to the potentials of her consumer self, which for young girls is couched in terms of liberation and freedom from old-fashioned approaches to menstruation and sanitary hygiene products. For example, the ‘Mural’ advertisement (U by Kotex, 2011d) shows a group of young women in funky, bright clothing spray-painting over a street mural of an old sanitary hygiene product advertisement with the words ‘Take a stand against bland’ (Figure E). The use of graffiti in U by Kotex advertisements and marketing suggests a subversive take on older forms of advertising to change the cultural discourses around menstruation. Young girls and women can actively play a part in destroying and rebuilding the world anew. Benjamin’s dialectical image emphasises the destruction of a history of progress to reveal a radically different way of engaging with the present, or illuminating the ‘revolutionary possibility of the present’ (Buck-Morss, 1981:57).
U by Kotex implies that their products of modernity allow girls and young women to move beyond the restrictive discourses of the pasts and become a part of a hip, youthful and sassy future of menstruation and sanitary hygiene products. The dialectical image represents Gilroy’s (cited in Felski, 2000:68) ideas about black hip-hop: that you can use the politics of the oppressors to subvert meaning and create new forms of cultural practices and understanding for those made silent. The young menstruating girl is an example of those who are usually silent, particularly since menstruation in Australian discourse has traditionally been unseen and unheard.33 U by Kotex suggests menstruation

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33 The young girl has also been, up until now, silent in sanitary hygiene product advertising, as usually twenty-something women are portrayed. See the satirical American advertisement ‘So Obnoxious’ (U by Kotex, 2010b), where a young woman says ‘Hi, I’m a believably attractive eighteen to twenty-four year old.’
is fundamental to the creation of the young female subject of consumption and that this is a possible site of awakening in modernity.

U by Kotex’s dialectical image thus presents a discourse framed more in terms of fashion, modernity and popular culture than the ‘daggy’ attitudes of previous advertising by older brands. Earlier sanitary hygiene advertisements, liked the one covered up in the ‘Mural’ advertisement, seem dated with their cringe-worthy euphemisms, dancing women in white dresses or white leotards, and the emphasis on ‘liberation.’ U by Kotex attempts to use a different tone to previous advertising; their focus is rather to bring together menstruation and modernity, for being a ‘U by Kotex girl’ is to be definitively modern. U by Kotex uses indie rock music, bright colours, an emphasis on designs and pattern (see U by Kotex, 2011c) and the exhortation of the ‘U’ – which for a generation of savvy technology-driven young girls is text-speak for ‘you.’ The ‘you’ is at the forefront in deciding what kind of menstruating subject to be, hence the brand’s wordplay tagline of ‘We know you – and U know what works.’ The consumer is the centre of attention and actively invited to engage with the world of advertising. In another commercial, images of women dressed as a 1950s housewife, a 1960s mod and a 1970s hippy are coloured brightly, spliced and edited quickly, indicating movement away from the ‘paranoia of leakage’ that plagued menstruating women in the past (U by Kotex, 2011b). But the modern woman portrayed in this advertisement, despite being a young working woman, still has those fears of leakage – which is why she needs U by Kotex tampons as her ‘last line of defence.’ She can therefore avoid any more ‘disappearing acts’ and participate fully in society without the old-fashioned fears of menstruation’s tell-tale signs.

U by Kotex uses humour to distance itself from older brands; two examples are the American advertisements ‘Reality Check’ (U by Kotex, 2010a), with over 1.3 million
views on YouTube, and ‘So Obnoxious’ (U by Kotex, 2010b). Both of these advertisements contrast themselves to traditional sanitary hygiene advertisements. They use irony and satire to poke fun at older advertisements, as evidenced in the satirical line ‘Buy the same tampons I use…because I’m wearing white pants and I have great hair’ (U by Kotex, 2010b). Both advertisements end with the rhetorical question ‘Why are tampon ads so ridiculous?’ followed by the call to ‘Break the cycle.’ U by Kotex is indicating that young girls and women need to break the cycle of how we think about the menstruating subject, as well as how that subject is represented through the texts of consumer culture.

**U by Kotex and ‘now-time’**

The everyday presented by U by Kotex is part of a ‘now-time’ that references an interior adolescence, rather than the exterior past place of Moxie. It is also an interiority that projects forward. The ‘now-time’ of U by Kotex is represented through a personalised engagement with the subject’s past and transforming the possibilities of the past in the present. This is apparent through the very brand name, where the ‘U’ is referential to a specific time and place – the ‘here and now’ of the digital-age youth – yet projects forward the subject’s aspirations of being freed from condescending discourses around menstruation. Felski (2000:61) suggests that ‘We may need to go backward rather than forward, to rethink our relationship to past time rather than assume we have transcended it.’ U by Kotex is able to explore both past and future concurrently by using past representations of the menstruating subject to inspire girls to ‘change the future of fem-care’ (Neff, 2011). In this way the ‘now-time’ of U by Kotex is further represented by the ongoing performance of memory and creation that occurs in the present with ramifications for the future (Harootunian, 1996:79). Benjamin’s repetitious performance of now-time is apparent in the repeated playing and reproducibility of U by Kotex advertisements on television screens, YouTube
channels and online news sources, Facebook and Twitter. Repetition is significant to Benjamin’s ideas of history and modernity as repetitive performances of moments in time. Caygill (1994:11) indicates that Benjamin sees the events of historical time are ‘repeats and copies of earlier repetitions.’ But Benjamin also sees technology as having the possibility to reconfigure and repeat the site of tradition through its destruction. This creates new scenes and possibilities for bringing together past, present and future (Caygill, 1994:22), which for Benjamin is the revolutionary aspect of technological reproducibility.

The American advertisement ‘A Trip Along the Shelf’ (U by Kotex, 2010c) signals the interior passing of time for the adolescent female subject of U by Kotex. Menstruation is, after all, about ‘a history of the girl-adolescent-woman in one event’ (Driscoll, 2002:96). The camera pans from left to right along a supermarket shelf, starting at several rows of identical light blue boxes of sanitary hygiene products with the words ‘Hello baby blue’ appearing over the top, then moving towards ‘Hello powder pink’ and ‘Hello pretty princess periwinkle.’ The movement from left to right indicates the passing of time for the adolescent girl, from birth through to toddler stage, to young girl. It is implied that these products are juvenile, a notion highlighted by Ebenkamp (in Cook and Kaiser, 2004:218) who found that young girls viewed pink and blue packages as ‘babyish’. This passing of time culminates in the introduction of a guitar riff with products appearing in black and bright colours – the U by Kotex colours. The words ‘Break the cycle – ubykotex.com’ appear and the background voice remarks that U by Kotex has new tampons, pads and liners – in ‘big girl colours’ (see Figure F).

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34 The reproducibility of these advertisements in totally different spaces, such as those of social media, is a fascinating extension of Benjamin’s original argument, as people (including myself) appropriate and subvert the original meanings of the advertisements through commentary and juxtaposition with other texts. The reproducibility is every time an original repetition, creating completely new or alternative meanings. The internet also allows us to partake in Benjamin’s ‘transcendental discontinuity of historical time’ (Caygill, 1994:10), for images and snapshots of the past can literally be saved on to computer hard drives or on digital networks.
This commercial suggests the transformation of the young female consumer, who takes the missed possibilities of her past and transforms it in the present to create a different future. This future articulates that she is in charge of ‘breaking the cycle’ of mundane, bland sanitary hygiene products, products associated not only with childhood but a sense of the ‘pre-modern.’ ‘Breaking the cycle’ suggests the potential of the U by Kotex now-time that encompasses movement towards a funky, colourful and youthful future of modernity. It should be emphasised that this is not a linear progression, as the future U by Kotex envisages a different way of considering the menstruating subject outside the terms of childhood, adolescence and adulthood.
Reproducibility and the ‘Beaver’ advertisement

In discussing the infamous ‘Beaver’ group of television advertisements shown on Australian television in 2008, it is important to underline the tremendous shattering of tradition that Benjamin emphasised about technological reproducibility. He quotes from Surrealist writer Paul Valéry, who suggests a revolution of the arts can be brought about by technological change (Benjamin, 1968b:217). In a contemporary setting, the extension of digital media to the advertising world has enabled an ongoing reproducibility of a brand, their products, ideas and aesthetics, revolutionising the way in which brands engage with consumers. This occurs throughout various texts such as websites, YouTube channels, Twitter and Facebook. Even the usage of specific graphics on product materials, website design and imagery are significant in considering the relationship between advertising and technological change. The splintering of tradition that has occurred with technological change allows responders to develop their own responses, unique to their situation, thus repeating the object again – albeit in a wholly different way and context (Benjamin, 1968b:221). This ultimately changes how we view the world, as reproduction of objects and art differs from that ‘seen by the unarmed eye’ (Benjamin, 1968b:223). The mediums of television and the internet are new phenomena in this respect, as they allow consumers to view and respond to advertisements in interior and private spaces like homes.

The Beaver advertisement, with its euphemistic function and style, could be considered a shattering of a different type of tradition – the tradition of silence and speaking frankly about menstruation and vaginas. This advertisement indicates such traditions are ‘old-

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35 U by Kotex Australia has a YouTube channel, as does the American arm of the brand. There is also a U by Kotex Australia Facebook page with over 2,300 ‘likes’. The background of the Facebook page (U by Kotex, 2011e) shows several bright arrows with phrases such as ‘Like our page’, ‘hottest news’ and ‘keeping u connected’.
fashioned’, yet continues the euphemism as a form of subversion – of creating the new modern out of the old. Figure G shows a young woman with her hair in rollers sitting next to her ‘beaver.’ This shot is reminiscent of the nineteen fifties and sixties, where women would spend hours getting their hair ‘done’ in hair salons – a key symbol of their femininity.

Figure G – ’Beaver’ advertisement (U by Kotex, 2008)

This advertisement was one of the most complained about advertisements on Australian television in 2008; it was rated M15+ (for mature audiences) and only allowed to be shown after 8.30pm (Howden, 2008). Though it was aimed at 18-24 year olds, part of its interest lies in the way it conveys movement from both young adolescence to adulthood,
as well as from the old to the new. It creates a sense of the modern through subverting the old-fashioned, resulting in a re-imagining or appropriation of the menstruating subject and her everyday in contemporary Australia. The ‘Beaver’ advertisement therefore sets the stage ‘for an allegorical representation of the origins of the present’ (Buck-Morss, 1981:66). The beaver-carrying young woman brings to a standstill the nostalgic fantasies about women’s bodies and ‘good old days’; despite the euphemisms, this woman is part of a new generation in modernity of speaking honestly about the menstruating subject.

This new discourse is made possible through consumption, further characterised by the ‘Real Talk’ Declaration (U by Kotex, 2010d), which contains a list of how young women will speak frankly about the menstruating subject and challenge the way we think about menstruation in everyday settings.

U by Kotex negotiates the complex intersection of modernity, menstruation and consumption. The brand exemplifies new and unique ways through which the menstruating subject in both Australia and the US are brought into being via the process of consumption. It further suggests that consumption can be a force of potential freedom in modernity, particularly for young girls who are usually marginalised in discussions of women, menstruation and consumption. U by Kotex encourages these girls and women to be a part of transforming and re-fashioning the present, saying (in Patricia Field’s words) ‘Go for it – it’s you [U]’ suggesting that it is we, the young menstruating subjects of modernity, who can change the future of feminine care.
Conclusion: The Feminine Future?

*If consumption is indeed the vanguard of history, then, by implication, it is women in particular who have radically transformed the world. (Miller, 1995:38)*

In writing this thesis, I was reminded of Slavenka Drakulic’s memoirs, in which she recounts hoarding *Vogue*, hair dye and tampons while she lived under communist rule. When she later visits a friend who still lives in communist Hungary, Drakulic is asked for her packet of tampons and she is not sure whether to laugh or cry. Drakulic (1992:30) remarks on the failure of communism to produce a simple sanitary napkin, seen as a basic necessity for women. She further comments, ‘So much for its [communism’s] economy and its so-called emancipation, too.’

Drakulic’s musings make me wonder whether those women in the ‘Menstrual Education’ workshop ever questioned that their choice to use or not use particular menstrual products is a privilege in itself, particularly in a world increasingly negotiated through the consumer. Their views suggested that perhaps we as feminists are often caught up in what it means to ‘politicise’ while we forget the very ordinary and everyday objects of our existence that remind us of our histories as women and as subjects in modernity. The U by Kotex tampons are objects that assist me in reflecting on my own personal relationship to politics and consumption in a similar way to Drakulic’s reflections about the mundane objects of women under Eastern European communism. She explains, in a way I cannot, that ‘Women’s lives, by no means spectacular, banal in fact, say as much about politics as no end of theoretical political analysis’ (Drakulic, 1992:xxiii).
In this thesis, I have suggested a different way of speaking about ‘the personal is political’ for the menstruating subject in twenty-first century modernity. Analysing how Moxie and U by Kotex interpret the everyday for young women demonstrates there is an alternate way to consider who might be the female subjects of modernity. At the same time I acknowledge that this does not necessarily extend to the raced/classed/(dis)abled/queered subjects at the forefront of discussions about modernity.36

What Benjamin’s work ultimately offers are ways of articulating the spaces of our lives, and opportunities to articulate a different kind of history, memory and temporality for the menstruating, consuming subject of twenty-first century modernity. Articulating and appropriating the past and present allows women to participate in a re-imagining of the everyday. Menstruation is not merely concerned with the body of the female subject in modernity, but is linked to other key reference points for the subject of late capitalism, such as consumption and consumer culture. Moxie and U by Kotex indicate the very development of the subject as consumer. They exemplify Benjamin’s understanding of history as cyclical whilst also indicating that consuming subjects can participate in the different spaces of history. This occurs in the present, which allows for the forgetting of the mundane and the everyday while also suggesting a possibility of transformation of the present for the consumer.

In offering these alternate ways of conceptualising the menstruating subject, I have challenged whether it is necessarily undesirable or destructive for feminism to consider the menstruating subject in terms of consumption, which is fundamentally a

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36 In speaking from the site of the personal, I am limited by my own experiences as a young, white middle-class feminist living in urban Australia.
construct of capitalism. What might that mean for feminist thought and feminism, which have in some circles traditionally talked about the female subject of history and modernity in the same way that Benjamin (cited in Tiedemann, 2002:944) talks about the subject of historical knowledge as an oppressed, struggling ‘class.’ Perhaps feminism needs a kind of ‘dialectics at a standstill’ – a way to move into the future through recognising the moments and possibilities of the past that configure the present. Feminism may need a different way of reconsidering its place in modernity and how young women engage with it – I have offered another place from which to begin that process, so that we might ‘collect the “trash of history”, and to “redeem” them for its end’ (Tiedemann, 2002:945).

The consumer of sanitary hygiene products brings time to a standstill, where history is re-articulated and re-recognised as something altogether different. The subjectivity of the female consumer is defined in this space ‘by a history and […] dynamic determined by Utopia and not, say, the means of production’ (Schølem, 1972:86). It is in this space of the present, the ‘now-time’ of consumption and advertising, that the menstruating subject can grasp those missed possibilities of the past and create a new space for the future. U by Kotex’s exhortation ‘You can inspire the future of feminine care’ suggests that articulating who this ‘you’ is might just allow us to define these possibilities for the menstruating subject in modernity.
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