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Please, Keep My Secret

How consumer culture influences product-based female empowerment in a specific BOP context

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"Please, Keep My Secret"; How Consumer Culture Influences Product-Based Female Empowerment in a Specific BOP Context

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Abstract: The perception of the Base-of-the-Pyramid (BOP) as one single consumer market is no longer a viable notion. The present article illustrates this through an exploration of how local cultural meanings shape a distinct consumer context in a BOP market. This influences products aspiring to establish themselves in this particular context, as it calls for a diversified consumer perspective. On this note, women are systematically discriminated in BOP contexts, making them a consumer group in need of special attention. In particular, the activity of menstruation is an often stigmatized practice leading to female discrimination. Hence, from a young female consumer perspective, this article performs an intensive single-case study of the menstrual hygiene product, Ruby Cup, which attempts to foster female empowerment in Kenya. Beyond its immediate product qualities, the Ruby Cup empowers girls in its provision of education about menstruation and a forum of discussion regarding female topics. However, these discussions occur almost exclusively between women and parallel to the prevalent male-dominant discourse, leaving the inter-gender menstrual topic taboo unaddressed. Still, the identified dynamic interplay between the product and the cultural meanings holds the potential of altering the cultural meanings in the market in favour of women. This article implicates how BOP markets can be approached and altered from a consumer cultural standpoint with an emphasis on the need to perceive each of these markets separately in theory and practice.

Introduction

The present article focuses on women at the Base-of-the-Pyramid (BOP) as a disadvantaged consumer group and their empowerment in a gender-discriminating cultural context. From a consumer culture perspective, it analyses how cultural meanings, rooted in gender roles and traditions, influence products aiming to empower women. Such products could be provided by companies wanting to establish themselves in BOP markets, in order to create a sustainable business for all involved stakeholders.

In the last decade, the idea of the BOP emerged as a new approach, indicating opportunities for private companies to create new markets around the poor in developing countries (Prahalad & Hammond, 2002; Hart & Christensen, 2002). Engaging them in markets is proposed to create mutual value by increasing the welfare of the poor and, at the same time, enabling companies to create self-sustainable businesses. However, the real outcome of these initiatives has questioned the simplicity of this assumption, as many businesses have difficulties to become profitable in BOP markets. In practice, failure to achieve success in

the BOP is often derived from factors such as the high required penetration rate (Simanis, 2012), inability of organizations to create new consumer markets (Simanis, 2011), the local informal economic systems, the need to operate across sectors (London & Hart, 2010), and the lack of understanding of the poor's life circumstances (Viswanathan, 2011). Surprisingly, many businesses that fail to become profitable on a large scale market truly social goods with a potential to empower the poor (Garette & Karnani, 2010). In contrast, there are examples of morally questionable businesses such as Unilever's skin lightening product "Fair & Lovely" in India, which has become a commercial success (ibid). Still, this article is written from the perspective that if businesses truly aspire to alleviate issues related to poverty, they need to grasp the opportunity to perform business in a sustainable manner for all involved stakeholders. Hence, the real challenge for companies lies in designing market-based solutions that provide socially beneficial products and services to the poor, whilst simultaneously achieving profitability (Garette & Karnani, 2010). Unfortunately, there are very few examples of businesses that fit this description. To face this challenge, according to Garette & Karnani

(2010), the BOP market needs to be considered as any other market. This implies that theories from affluent markets still apply in the BOP context and, accordingly, need to be considered.

Furthermore, within the existing body of research on BOP markets, a top-down, organizational perspective is common. Also, research on BOP consumption is rather new and a consumer perspective is applied scarcely (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007). This may be due to the widely made assumption that individuals in BOP markets consume according to their basic needs (Subrahmanyan & Gomez-Arias, 2008), making a more thorough analysis of their consumption patterns pointless. This has been proven too simple of an assumption. For instance, monetary value is not the only purchasing criteria for impoverished consumers (Nakata & Weidner, 2012; Viswanathan, 2007), and individual needs may have to give way to collective needs (Holzmann & Jorgensen, 1999). Such findings constitute a need to complement present research on the BOP from a consumer perspective. Also limited in discussions of the BOP market, is a differentiation of the potential consumers comprised in it (Viswanathan, 2011). Specifically, women are poorly mentioned as a distinctive consumer group, although they are overrepresented within BOP markets (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007). In light of the large gender gap that is prevalent in developing countries (World Bank, 2011), this low attention is disputable as targeted solutions are needed for the gap's abatement. Concerning the latter, female empowerment has been found to be closely interrelated to economic development (Duflo, 2012), making it a matter of importance in order to overcome gender inequality. Hence, there is a need for solutions that support female empowerment (Hill & Dhanda, 1999).

Referring to the idea of the BOP, private businesses could provide such empowering solutions to these markets in terms of products or services. However, these women's position in society calls for special attention; it is essential to perceive them as a vulnerable consumer group. As indicated by Hill & Dhanda (1999), an understanding of the cultural and sociological reasons for gender discrimination in emerging countries is needed to target these women effectively. From a consumer perspective, it can be inferred that consumption of women in BOP markets is

shaped by their socio-cultural environment, a context which comprises a number of discriminating cultural meanings. Consequently, the research field of consumer culture theories becomes highly interesting. From this perspective, consumption is seen as constructed by socio-cultural factors (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and as an integral part of markets that can result in market ideologies (Holt, 2011). Being channeled differently in each market (ibid), it is necessary to investigate a consumer culture specific to a market. Thus, companies offering products or services aiming to empower women in BOP contexts, have to take in these female consumers' perspective in the distinct market in order to understand its surrounding consumer culture.

In this particular context, the present article performs an intensive single-case study on a social business in Kenya, distributing a menstrual cup called "Ruby Cup" to young girls in school. It is well-documented that women in BOP markets tend to miss out on schooldays due to issues related to menstruation and insufficient access to sanitary products and facilities (Sommer, 2010). Lagging behind in educational levels has been considered a reinforcing element for the gender gap between men and women (Klasen, 2002), inferring the need for girls to manage their menstruation hygiene more efficiently. Attempts have been made to close the educational gender gap by providing girls with free sanitary products. These tests have, however, not proven to be successful in increasing attendance rates for girls in schools (Oster & Thornton, 2011). Thus, further factors can be suggested to cause female truancy during their periods. On this note, earlier research reports young girl's being ashamed of their menstruation and afraid of being humiliated for it in school (McMahon et al., 2011).

Regarding this case, the Ruby Cup is a menstrual product that boasts both practical and sustainable advantages to its users in Kenya. By enabling girls to manage their menstruation better and attend school, the product fosters improved educational levels and, in the long run, female empowerment. However, despite the product's advantages, it has up until today not become a commercial success in Kenya, but rather taken on the role of an aid product. Regarding the research on menstruation in the BOP, the lagging

breakthrough may be explained by cultural meanings surrounding women and menstruation in Kenya, affecting a product such as the Ruby Cup.

The introductive discussion shows the importance of a study focused on cultural meanings revolving around a female issue such as menstruation in order to provide girls with products for its proper management. Hence, from a female consumer perspective, the overall research question asks how cultural meanings related to gender and traditions influence product-based female empowerment in a specific BOP context. The aim of this study is to illustrate how the consumer culture, found at the BOP in Kenya, affects the adoption of a product aiming to empower women.

Women in BOP Markets; a neglected Consumer Group

People at the Base of the Pyramid (BOP), also referred to as subsistence consumers (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007), have been defined as individuals consuming for less than $4 each day. This formation of people are ordinarily considered to be the poorest consumption group in the World, consisting of around 4 billion individuals (Prahalad, 2009). Rather than representing any single country or continent (Subrahmanyan & Gomez-Arias, 2008), subsistence consumers are better described as a globally widespread demographic group, characterized by extreme economic limitations (Hart, 2008). However, the focus on economic limitations has made literature lacking in differentiation of the consumers within this market (Viswanathan, 2011). Specifically, women in BOP markets are poorly mentioned as a distinct consumer group although they outnumber males in this context (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007). Their low attention is problematic in light of the large gender gap found to exist in developing countries. Here, females suffer from excess death, limited possibilities for education, unequal access to economic opportunities and inferior rights in households, politics and society at large compared to males (World Bank, 2011), making them a marginalized group. These issues of gender-inequality are particularly prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this context, the patriarchy is deeply rooted in values and norms, resulting in female discrimination and poverty (Kibuka-Musoke & Ogana, 2009).

Even further, such gender norms give these women little control over their own bodies, their sexuality and reproductive issues (UNFPA, 2014), making the improvement of their situation an urgent matter.

Product-Based Female Empowerment

Duflo (2005) defines female empowerment as "the improvement in the ability of women to access the constituents of development – in particular health, education, earning opportunities, rights and political participation" This has been found to be of utter importance in order to close the gender gap and foster overall development in emerging countries (ibid). Consequently, female consumers in BOP markets are in need of goods, services and opportunities that support their empowerment (Hill & Dhanda, 1999). Regarding the proposition of doing business in BOP contexts by creating mutual value (Prahalad & Hammond, 2002; Hart & Christensen, 2002), female empowerment provides an opportunity for companies wanting to enter these markets. Recently, institutional micro credit solutions have gained much attention as a means to achieve this (Pitt et al., 2006). However, while they rather empower females in roles as suppliers, studies on how to empower women in roles as consumers of products are limited. In this article, such empowerment is called product-based female empowerment, referring to products commercially acquirable in a market. The potential for product-based female empowerment is suggested to be complicated due to the widely present patriarchy in BOP contexts, as was previously illustrated in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007; Kibuka-Musoke & Ogana, 2009). Companies who strive to empower these women, and for that matter succeed with their business, need to perceive them as a vulnerable consumer group. To target women effectively, an understanding of the cultural and sociological reasons for gender discrimination in the specific context is critical (Hill & Dhanda, 1999). The research stream of Consumer Culture Theories (CCT) can be used to identify cultural meanings linked to gender inequality and shed light on how a local consumer culture impacts consumption experiences of women in BOP markets. These theories can provide a better understanding of opportunities and potential pitfalls of product-based female empowerment, aiming to induce a change in the current consumer culture.

Consumer Culture Theory applied to the BOP

As an often-cited source, Arnould & Thompson (2005) provide a summarizing retrospective on the research stream of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). Fundamentally, CCT is concerned with how cultural meanings, socio-historic factors and social dynamics influence consumers' experiences and identity creation in the complexity of consumers' everyday lives. A central idea is that consumption objects are attached with cultural meanings that get interpreted and reproduced by individuals. In that sense, marketplaces become sources of symbolic meanings that are used by consumers to construct their identities and, if used collectively, result in marketplace cultures (ibid). Considering consumer culture on an aggregated level, composed systems of meanings that dominate a market and thus, have normative forces, are described as marketplace ideologies (Arnould & Thompson 2005). They influence all actors within the marketplace and the ones that want to enter. Similarly, but even wider, these marketplace ideologies act within the social and institutional structures of a society, making the question of what cultural meanings constitute a consumer society relevant (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Stemming from the American context, a large proportion of CCTs relate consumerism widely to materialism and identity construction. Thus, there are challenges to apply CCT to resource-poor markets as impoverished consumers cannot afford material objects, and a materialistic culture is not evident in a similar manner. However, as stated by Askegaard & Linnet (2011), "a wider contextual awareness would provide consumer research with a cross-cultural sensitivity that could transcend the heavy bias of the American middle-class perspective in our understanding of consumer culture" (p. 394). Arnould & Thompson (2005) similarly propose an investigation of how consumer culture manifests itself in developing countries. In particular, Askegaard & Linnet (2011) challenge the current widely assumed consumer-agency in CCTs by seeing deficits in CCT's common focus on lived consumer experience, which neglects the larger social and cultural context they occur in. As a consequence, many CCTs overemphasize the individual's power in consumption choices and do not sufficiently acknowledge material, societal or institutional agencies (ibid).

The questions of agency and what cultural meanings constitute a consumer society are of particular interest when considering women in BOP markets as their consumption choices take place in a context with gender discriminating cultural meanings. Hence, applying a wider CCT approach to a specific BOP context is assumed to be better qualified for investigating cultural meanings, particularly those related to gender, in terms of their influence on women's consumption of products that aim to empower them. These meanings are supposed to be reflected in the distinct consumption characteristics found in BOP markets, making their discussion worthwhile.

Interdependent Consumption Dynamics

BOP consumers have often been found to act short-term, limiting themselves to actions and consumption choices over a time span of just one or two days (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007). This can be explained by their inability of attaining consumption adequacy (Martin & Hill, 2012). The latter refers to basic levels of resources, necessary monetary and intellectual capital, which is needed on behalf of consumers or their social networks to act and consume over a longer time span. Not attaining consumption adequacy infers the need for BOP consumers to look beyond their immediate selves and enrich their social capital to enable them and their kin to attain a more tolerable life (Holzmann & Jorgensen, 1999), pointing towards the importance of social capital in these contexts.

The Value of Social Networks

Social capital has been defined as "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitates coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit." (Putnam, 1995, p. 667). This holds special value in BOP markets, as one of BOP consumers' main characteristics is the exclusion from formal, market based economies, and inclusion within informal markets, signified by customary practices and personal ties (London & Hart, 2010; Viswanathan et al., 2009). These informal market practices are often

referred to as the BOP systems of exchange, which work simultaneously and parallel to the formal market (Biggart & Delbridge, 2004). As a consequence, consumers in BOP markets are often wealthy in terms of different social networks (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007), which illuminates their interdependent and collective nature as consumers (Ruth & Hsiung, 2007; Simanis, 2011). A central element within these social networks, stimulating the creation of social capital, is trust. There are two different entities of trust: trust for unknown individuals and trust for known individuals (Pretty & Ward, 2001). In contexts where institutional strength and trust for governmental institutions is low, as is common in BOP contexts, the intimate trust between familiar individuals as a source of social capital has been found to hold great value and relevance for BOP consumers (Ahlerup et al., 2009).

Family Life

With respect to social networks and interdependent behaviour, Cox & Paley (1997) argue that individuals are inextricably part of a bigger system, and cannot be perceived as singular, independent organisms. Hence, seeing individuals as part of an inherently embedded system is instrumental for holistic behavioural insights (Sameroff, 1994). On this note, families become highly important systems to BOP consumers. Ruth & Hsiung (2007) illustrate this with the application of Cox and Paley's (1997) family systems theory to the BOP context. The theory not only refers to the immediate family, but also connects it to extended networks of kinship, the surrounding community and the society in which it resides (Ruth & Hsiung, 2007). This theory is strongly related to the previously mentioned concept of social capital (Putnam, 1995). Furthermore, families are complex and dynamic, where members coordinate their activities in an interdependent manner, with the end means of pursuing a life that they value (Cox & Paley, 1997). In an on-going process, family members engage in day-to-day activities, balanced with both long-term individual and jointly determined family concerns (ibid).

However, these interdependent relations are not necessarily equal as families are inherently conformed to a hierarchical system, in which some family members have more influence than others (Cox & Paley, 1997). Regarding women in BOP markets,

patriarchy makes them hold an inferior position within the family hierarchy (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007), suggesting their concerns being subordinated to the ones of males. In the African context, they are mainly concerned with taking care of children and elderly and general household duties, often preventing them from taking on professional occupations (Kibuka-Musoke & Ogana, 2009).

Further, families experiencing difficulties in terms of resource generation capabilities, such as time or financial means, experience large amounts of stress (Ruth & Hsiung, 2007; Commuri & Gentry 2005). As a result, BOP families have been found to buffer these stresses and strengthen the relational bonds through intra-network communication (Ruth & Hsiung, 2007) through which social norms and values are also transferred (Heller & Rook, 1997; Parke et al., 2006).

Investment in the Next Generation

Consumers in BOP markets are, in accordance with the model proposed by Maslow et al. (1970), primarily concerned with meeting their survival needs. Thus, the largest proportion of consumption expenditures is spent on food (Hammond et al., 2007). Apart from survival needs, studies of BOP consumers in South Africa have highlighted housing and education as two prioritized areas of consumption. Housing, in this context, refers to living in a geographically safe area with the basic necessities included (Ruth & Hsiung, 2007). Through education, families in BOP markets aim for a better life for the next generation, making them pay relatively large annual school fees for their children (ibid). This consumption priority connects to the family's interdependent consumption dynamics, and is an investment in its future since children are supposed to care for the elderly as they reach old age. Such generation priorities are confirmed by Subrahmanyan & Gomez-Arias's (2008) findings of Indian slum inhabitants who sacrifice a large proportion of their disposable income to send their children to expensive private schools. These priorities do, however, not necessarily apply to girls. It has been found that families prioritize for boys rather than girls to enrol in schools (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007), mirroring the previously mentioned family hierarchy (Cox & Paley, 1997). As for Africa, the continent holds the largest gender gap in education, both regarding

school enrolment and attainment (Kibuka-Musoke & Ogana, 2009). It illustrates patriarchy as a governing factor in consumption priorities in BOP marketplaces.

To sum up, BOP consumption is characterized by rich social capital, interdependent family and social systems and aspirations to invest in a better life for the family and future generations. While a strong social dimension can be identified in BOP consumers attempts to attain consumption adequacy and social security in a context with weak institutions, female consumers in BOP markets are disadvantaged compared to males. Referring to consumer culture (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), these consumption characteristics contribute to a distinct marketplace culture, or even ideology, in BOP contexts, which influences new market entrants. Thus, regarding product-based female empowerment, such a marketplace culture naturally influences the adoption process of new products.

Product Adoption in a BOP's Cultural Context

Despite subsistence consumers' lack of financial resources, a low price is not the only criteria for successful product adoption (Nakata & Weidner, 2012). Rather, product characteristics, social context dynamics and marketing environment are factors that interdependently moderate new product adoption in BOP markets (ibid). Consequently, local insights need to be incorporated in marketing initiatives (Weidner et al., 2010) that have to be tailored according to the cultural differences and conditions in place (Chickweche & Fletcher, 2012). For this to be achieved, it is suggested that consumers in BOP markets should be part of the research and production process (Weidner et al., 2010) and that companies should apply a bottom-up approach (Chickweche & Fletcher 2012; Viswanathan et al. 2009) to enhance product adoption.

The previously discussed element of social capital, strongly influences marketplaces in BOP contexts (Viswanathan, 2007). It has led to word-of-mouth, one-to-one interactions, and trust playing a central role in marketplace exchanges (ibid). These elements influence a product's distributional and promotional activities (ibid) and even support product acceptance

(Chickweche & Fletcher, 2010). Further, as personal needs of subsistence consumers are often subordinated to collective needs, product adoption is more likely to be motivated by the collective welfare than personal satisfaction (Nakata & Weidner, 2012). Regarding women's inferior position in BOP markets, it can be inferred that they struggle to motivate the acquirement of a female product when competing with collective needs.

Further, companies incorporating social capital into their strategies can enhance interaction with consumers in BOP markets by reaching out to them to gather their feedback (Chickweche & Fletcher, 2010). On this note, informal communication channels have proven to be more important than formal ones (ibid), not at least due to the informational constraints found in BOP contexts (Sridharan & Viswanathan, 2008). Instead, personalized and trusted ways of communication such as product demonstrations, collaboration with local partners, opinion leaders and the encouragement of word-of-mouth are powerful tools to overcome consumer reluctance towards a new product and technologies (Weidner et al., 2010). Even further, employing people from the local society holds the potential of creating trusted brand communicators (Sridharan & Viswanathan, 2008). Word-of-mouth in particular, has been shown to be much more effective than mass media in fostering product adoption. This relates to the fact that many consumers in BOP markets turn to credible sources of information, such as relatives and friends, before they take any purchase action (Weidner et al., 2010). Also, intergenerational communication flows can be important to channel new product information. As younger consumers in BOP markets tend to be more receptive to new solutions, they can educate elder generations and influence their consumption priorities (ibid). Hence, BOP consumers themselves can be important facilitators to convince others and enhance new product adoption.

Brands as Symbols of Trust and Collective Values

In the context of product adoption, branding has the potential of being a useful concept to communicate to consumers in BOP markets by creating positive associations (Weidner et al., 2010). Also, brands can evoke a sense of community as they symbolize

aspirational social values and moreover create substantive word-of-mouth, tapping in to the consumers' social capital (ibid). However, findings that people in BOP contexts consume and prioritize predominately according to their basic needs, have led to a rather hesitant use of the concept of branding (Van Kempe, 2004). As functional values are assumed to precede symbolic values for subsistence consumers, symbolical values being a main element of brands in Western economies, the use of brands in a BOP context is contested.

However, studies indicate that BOP consumers are in fact brand aware and that brand image influences their purchasing decision (Chikweche & Fletcher, 2010). Also, brand communities have been shown to have greater influence in BOP markets compared to developed markets due to the illustrated greater importance of social capital (ibid). According to Chikweche & Fletcher (2010) and Rajagopal (2009), brands for BOP consumers have a function of signifying trust and quality of products. They adopt new brands rather slowly (Rajagopal, 2009), which can be explained by their limitations to compensate for a wrong purchase; implying large switching barriers to a new brand once they are satisfied with a product. Hence, brands in BOP markets are more consistent and less agile in comparison to affluent markets (Rajagopal, 2009).

Further, in contrast to developed markets, brands of low involvement products such as food and hygienic products have been found to hold greater importance for BOP consumers (Rajagopal, 2009), since they claim a large proportion of the poor's income and relates to their wellbeing and health (Chikweche & Fletcher, 2010). Combined with the interdependent nature of this consumer group, it can be inferred that they consider branded products and services in terms of how they will serve families as a whole, rather than the particular individual, as is more customary in affluent markets. However, brands in BOP markets may also provide consumers with cues for social differentiation that are bought to set them apart from each other (Van Kempe, 2004). Such motives contrast the previous inference of brands being considered in terms of how they serve collective needs.

Regarding CCT, brands conceptualize the dynamic and dialectical relationship between cultural meanings related to objects and interpretative consumers (Holt, 2002) and act as social ties in brand communities, centered around one product (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Holt (2002) implicitly emphasizes the importance of a company's understanding of the market in which it acts when establishing a brand. It is not free to choose a cultural meaning for a brand; the consumer culture rather provides the framework in which the brand comes to be. In light of the interdependent consumption, this may hold even greater relevance in BOP markets as the importance of collective needs implies less individual agency and larger societal agency (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). For product-based female empowerment, the situation appears more intricate, since the product opposes part of the cultural meanings and thus, seeks to change a marketplace culture.

Market Transformation for Female Empowerment

A product aiming to foster female empowerment is likely to face even more resistance in the patriarchal context it enters, as is the case in African regions (Kibuka-Musoke & Ogana, 2009). Consequently, for such a product to enter a market in a BOP context, understanding the prevalent cultural meanings is a necessary but insufficient criterion.

Within CCT, consumption is seen as "a historically shaped mode of sociocultural practice that emerges within the structures and ideological imperatives of dynamic marketplaces" (Arnould & Thompson, p. 875, 2005). This implies that to foster new consumption patterns free of female discrimination, they have to emerge from the context of the current market ideologies. With the example of (un)sustainable consumption, Holt (2011) similarly concludes that consumption patterns are integral to markets and that consumer culture manifests itself differently in each market, leading to distinct market ideologies. Similar to market ideologies, Thompson (2004) uses the term market mythologies to describe how myths and metaphors constitute specific markets. According to Holt (2011), a market ideology becomes hard to change if it has become naturalized in the cultural discourse, incorporated in habitual consumption practices and materialized by the market actors, leading to an "ideological lock-in". Hence, a new

product that challenges a market ideology, has to transform the latter in order to succeed. Regarding the deeply rooted cultural meanings in developing countries that foster female discrimination and poverty (Kibuka-Musoke & Ogana, 2009), this would imply a profound change.

According to Holt (2011), changing a cultural meaning requires a unique strategy for each market ideology and the weak points in this ideological lock-in have to be identified and targeted. Weaknesses reveal themselves in ideological contradictions that serve new market innovations (Thompson 2004). Critical in such a market transformation process are social movements that arise out of conflicts of powerless and powerful individuals in a society (King & Pearce, 2010). Social movements can address ideological weaknesses, and are needed to integrate emerging cultural meanings attached to the new consumption practices. Discriminated females in BOP contexts can represent such powerless individuals. However, a critical voice is raised by Simanis (2011) claiming that despite the obvious needs in BOP contexts, there is no given consumer market, marked by a BOP individual's willingness to pay for a product and the product's immersion in a consumer's everyday life. Thus, if a consumer market is absent for a product it has to be created by the company itself to become successful. According to Simanis (2011), this is achieved by products with an open-ended value proposition that enforces BOP consumers to, individually, make sense of a product which provides them with ownership of it. This is seen as a precondition to product adoption as it leads to BOP consumers´ personal commitment and willingness to change behavioral patterns. With this approach, Simanis (2011) acknowledges the limitation of foreign companies to enter a BOP market. Giving the BOP consumers the ownership suggests that despite having an understanding of the cultural meanings, a company cannot fully anticipate the BOP consumer perspective. Thus, the open-ended value proposition strategy goes from being aware of the cultural meanings constituting a society, to an immersion in it. The process is of an iterative nature for both the providing company and the BOP consumers. This holds relevance for product-based female empowerment as it attempts to alter the prevalent market ideology, whilst also being a novel item. This infers that a reflexive process on behalf of

companies, where the open-ended value process is evaluated, can lead to product-adoption and market transformation for female empowerment in BOP markets.

Method

From the perspective of female consumers, this study asks how cultural meanings related to gender and traditions influence product-based female empowerment in a specific BOP context. With an emphasis on a context's distinct consumer culture and focus on one product, an *intensive single-case study* was chosen as the most proper method to address this research question.

Intensive Single-Case Study

This methodological approach seeks the understanding of a unique case from the inside by providing a thick, holistic and contextualized description (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The purpose of this thick description is to make the cultural meanings in the context evident (Shank, 2002). The method stems from qualitative and ethnographical research traditions, emphasizing interpretation and comprehension of case situations with elaborations of cultural meanings in specific contexts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Case studies at large are used to analyze and understand the dynamics of a specific setting (Eisenhardt, 1989) in a contemporary context where the relation between a phenomena and its context is not obvious and different types of empirical evidence are needed (Yin, 2009). The latter is one case study advantage, as an extensive variety of evidence such as interviews, observations, artifacts and documents can be used (Yin, 2009). This wide array of empirical methods can serve explorative, descriptive and explanatory purposes in order to shed light on the potential relations within a setting (ibid). Also, the findings can serve the founding of new theories (Eisenhardt, 1989; Dyer & Wilkins, 1991). Still, the key interest lies in the case itself rather than earlier theoretical propositions and thus, an inductive research process based on actual findings of the case is proposed (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Commonly, multi-case studies are preferred to single-case studies. Motivations behind opting for the latter are often found in limitations of resources (Yin, 2009; Eisenhardt, 1991). However, views of the benefits regarding single-case studies have been put forward that illustrate it as a favorable choice. It is proposed that this type of case study provides a deeper understanding within specific contexts in comparison to the otherwise advocated multi-case approach (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991). Also, the proposal of single-case studies not being valid for future implications is considered to be an unsubstantiated claim (ibid).

Methodology Selection

In light of the general lack of empirical evidence on how cultural meanings affect product-based female empowerment in the BOP, a case study was found useful to gain new insights on this phenomena (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009). Regarding an intensive single-case study's characteristics, it is a highly suitable approach considering the research question's call for a deep market contextualization (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008) to uncover and evaluate its cultural meanings (Shank, 2002). Moreover, it has been highlighted that a consumer culture manifests itself differently in each market, raising the need to perceive a market ideology distinct to its context (Holt, 2011). Hence, applying an intensive single-case study concentrating on a specific market context is highly valid, compared to multi-case studies, as it enables a deep understanding within a specific context (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991).

Furthermore, the research question proposes an emic (female) consumer perspective in the BOP which is strongly relatable to the ethnographical research tradition from which the intensive single-case study stems (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Also, the present article asks for descriptive and explanatory evidence of how the cultural meanings affect product-based female empowerment, for which case studies' explorative, descriptive and explanatory purposes (Yin, 2009) are well-suited. Finally, the research question calls for an inductive research process centered on case specific findings rather than an approach to confirm or evaluate earlier theoretical propositions. This requisite is also fulfilled with the intensive single-case study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Case Selection

As it was found suitable for an intensive single-case study, the menstrual cup "Ruby Cup" and its branch in Nairobi, Kenya was chosen. Being distributed to young girls in impoverished areas in Kenya, the Ruby Cup aims to improve their educational levels by enabling them to manage their menstrual hygiene. In a context marked by gender inequality, young girls in Kenya suffer from discrimination due to menstruation. By interviewing young females in a BOP context who own a Ruby Cup, the case gave the opportunity to take in the perspective of young female consumers and to investigate how their cultural context influenced their product use. Hence, the Ruby Cup makes a valid case for investigating how cultural meanings influence product-based female empowerment.

Furthermore, the company behind the Ruby Cup, from the beginning, showed itself highly cooperative in enabling the intended field studies. Regarding ethnographical traditions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), this was important as it would enable the researchers a desired element of immersion in the studied sociocultural context. This was favorable due to the unfamiliar nature of the territory on behalf of the researchers. Specifically, this immersion resulted in the formation of a structured contextual background, which aided in making stronger and more informed interpretations of the collected data; a central and advantageous element within the chosen methodological approach (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Interview Process

During the course of this study, 44 interviews were conducted, recorded, transcribed and analyzed, in Nairobi and Kisumu, Kenya. Expert interviews were held with four Ruby Cup promoters of different demographical origins, as well as one expert from the Golden Girls Foundation working outside Kisumu. 39 of the interviews were held with school girls between the ages of 12 - 17. The vast majority of these interviews lasted between 15-30 minutes. The interview subjects were purposefully chosen on the basis of their inclusion within this context and experience with the product at hand, as is suggested in ethnographical interview processes (Eriksson &

Kovalainen, 2008). Further, young girls were the chosen consumer respondents as the school context and onset of menstruation had been previously illustrated as an area of great concern (Sommer, 2010). Notable, however, is the fact that access to female respondents was dependent on school cooperation and willingness of respondents to participate. Thus, this influenced the choice of respondents.

The interview scripts differed slightly between school girls and experts. For the girls, as proposed by Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008), the script contained an open-ended line of questioning, generally beginning with "How?" or "What?". The rationale was to gather thick, descriptive responses in areas of product experience, brand awareness, relationships and social norms and values regarding menstruation. Regarding the latter, such an example was found in the question "How was it when you first received your menstruation? What happened?". This created very rich responses as the school girl respondents would retell their lived experiences of this situation, found to be a turning point in their lives. Their responses illustrated who they confided in, their previous knowledge levels, values regarding menstruation, the teachings they received at this time, and their emotional reaction and product choice; such rich answers divulged cultural meanings, which were found to be of great value for the subsequent analysis. The expert interviews focused on the same topics but differed in their nature. Rather than mirroring the emic perspectives, they aimed for descriptive and more generalizable responses regarding these topics. Hence, they complemented the school girls' answers, whilst also contributing to a more holistic interpretation and contextual awareness.

The interviews were performed separately between the interviewers in order to gain a greater amount of data during the limited time slots provided by the schools. Two schools in Nairobi were visited in the districts of Kibera and Mathare. Both areas were considered to be slums, characterized by extreme poverty and low living standards. Further, three schools were visited outside of Kisumu, in rural areas. Again, these areas were characterized by extreme poverty and low living standards. Despite the geographical differences, urban versus rural, no significant differences were found regarding the cultural meanings related to female hygiene management. Hence, responses were evaluated in the same manner.

Participant Observations

Apart from the interviews, significant time was spent with the expert team behind the Ruby Cup. This resulted in the attendance of several events for the researchers. For example, it was possible to participate at a community meeting, a ruby cup education meeting, and a female mentors meeting. This enabled a deeper insight in the Kenyan culture beyond the interviews, utilizing the mechanisms of participant observations common in ethnographic research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Notes were taken to preserve these insights and complement the collected data, most of which was used in order to provide a contextual background in the analysis section. However, it can be argued that this approach creates research bias in the form of additional sympathy for the Ruby Cup and its cause. This is one of the main challenges connected with performing an ethnographical study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), and although methodological awareness existed on the hands of the researchers, this could arguably be cause for some limitation in the research process.

Challenges During Data Collection

One of the most important issues to address during the course of the consumer interviews was a presumed *trust barrier* with the girls, especially in regards to a male interviewer. An early understanding, due to the secondary research process already being initiated, illuminated the fact that menstruation and related issues are not discussed with men. This was overcome for the male representative as he had the advantage of being a foreigner, making the menstruation speaking taboo less applicable. He was also enabled, with the help of school administrators, to properly introduce himself to the classes before conducting interviews. As it was found that the schools enjoyed large amounts of *trust* on behalf of girls in this case, school representatives served as important gatekeepers throughout the study. This allowed him and his female counterpart to showcase their genuine interest and sensitivity for the girls´ issues regarding menstruation. Whether this was favourably received or

not is subject to speculation, but it was evident that no clear differences in responses on behalf of girls were found when comparing his answers with the answers of his female counterpart.

Another matter of initial concern was found in the *interview environment* in some of the schools. During the first interview session, held in Kibera, interviews were held in the schoolyard as no spare class rooms or sitting areas were available. While this initially was not an issue, it became an unbearable situation during recess and interviews were then not carried out in a relaxed and private setting during that time, as is suggested in ethnographical interviews (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This was immediately remedied after this initial session and from that point on interviews were held in quiet, private and comfortable speaking zones. Although only two interviews were interrupted during this initial session it can be considered a limitation in the interview process at large.

Another issue that became recurrent was a *language barrier* between researchers and respondents. Although English is one of the two official languages of Kenya, there were times when the girls did not possess high levels of proficiency of the English language. In some cases, this created the basis for misunderstandings, unfortunately resulting in poor and sometimes contradictory responses. Vigilance towards this issue was raised and questions were reposed if it was evident that they had been misunderstood by the character of the responses. Unfortunately, there were some cases of misunderstandings and contradictions in responses found during the transcribing process that needed to be disregarded for the subsequent analysis as they could not be considered as valid empirical findings. Furthermore, the researchers also adapted their *language* in a manner which would suit the respondents. Terms such as menstruation or menses were not always as easily understood compared to words like M.P. (short for monthly period). Hence, this term was applied. Furthermore, the word "commercial" was not understood and thus the word "advertisement" was opted for as it was more related to the Queen´s English, taught in Kenyan schools. Judging from the responses, these two small alterations, combined with a small accent adaptation,

appeared to be having the desired effect. They made for less confusion during interviews which in its turn arguably made for a more security in the conversation, facilitating greater openness and richer descriptions.

These alterations were decided and reflected upon during continuous feedback sessions in-between interviews. Since the interviews were performed separately, the need to discuss results in order to make *coordinated adjustments based on actual findings* was great. Apart from the previously mentioned alterations in semantics, it also became evident at an early stage that the girls did not respond to advertisements aired on television as would have been expected in a more western context. Instead it was found that information and trust for different brands was communicated differently here. Thus, larger emphasis was placed on questions regarding the course of events in relation to their first menstruation and how they talk about different menstrual hygiene products and issues with other people.

Data Analysis

For the analysis process, a Grounded Theory Approach (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008) was utilized. This entails an inductive coding process based on natural variations in findings rather than pre-proposed theoretical propositions (Stake, 1995), an analytical approach consistent with the intensive single-case study approach applied throughout this study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The grounded theory approach also entails a refinement or refocus of the research question as the analysis progresses (Stake, 1995). Also, in accordance with the proposal by Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008), a revision of prior research and empirical findings are intertwined actions throughout the analysis process to further increase and best determine the contribution of the study.

Initially, the research question focused on an exploration of the sociocultural environment at large, within which a product such as the Ruby Cup would attempt to foster female empowerment. Accordingly, following the "open-coding" approach, 14 sociocultural factors related to menstrual hygiene were found to be recurrent in the interviews. Following this, these

factors were compared, discussed, and grouped. Within the identified groups, the codes were hierarchically sorted. This helped to form categories and their labels. One such grouping was found in "Menstruation as a symbolic source of female discrimination". It was grouped due to its perceived connection with secrecy (not to reveal menstruation due to fear), cleanliness (afraid to smell and thus lose secrecy), informal education (how to relate to boys, myths, practical issues) and female discrimination (laughter, sexual violence). However, during the analysis, the broad focus on sociocultural factors became subject to change as it was found that the factors were all related to gender and tradition. Hence, the research question was adapted in accordance with the findings, becoming narrower and more focused. This is a recommended process during the grounded theory approach (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

After the four main cultural meanings related to gender and traditions in Kenya affecting the Ruby Cup had been determined, they were individually highlighted and analyzed using the theoretical framework, thus sensitizing the findings (Eisenhardt, 1989). After being individually evaluated, their influence on the Ruby Cup and its ability to foster product-based female empowerment in this context was discussed.

Generalizability

According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008), the main aim of case studies is not to create generalizable results that are transferrable to other contexts, but rather to illustrate the case's uniqueness to an audience. The exceptional nature of the chosen case is not a problem, but a key issue of research interest. The uniqueness of the Ruby Cup case justifies the appropriateness of a case study approach. Hence, typical generalizability as an indicator of research quality was not of concern for this particular study. However, naturalistic generalization is a promoted quality of a qualified intensive single-case study. Stake (1995) refers to this as the shared issues and aspects between the reader´s experiences and the case study report itself. It is expected that the intensive single-case study can resonate experientially with the readers, thereby facilitating a greater understanding of the case among the readers. Hence, the findings from

this study could arguably be generalizable to an informed audience.

As the intensive single-case study stems from ethnographical research traditions, it is of greater interest to evaluate this study in terms of ethnographical quality. However, what constitutes good quality within ethnographical research has long been a contested matter (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Still, reliability (Lecompte & Goetz, 1982) as well as validity of the study (Hammersley, 1992) have often been put forward as two possible criteria for such an evaluation.

Reliability

The reliability of a study refers to the ability of other researchers to replicate the same findings within the same setting as the study (Lecompte & Goetz, 1982). This is considered to be a strong reflection of research credibility (ibid). However, an ethnographical case study focuses on a unique subject at a specific time, making reliability of an ethnographical study a matter of debate (Lecompte & Goetz, 1982). Hence, it has been considered that ethnographical studies at large approach reliability rather than attain it (Hansen, 1979). In terms of this study, it was undertaken with an empirically driven approach and was facilitated by the Ruby Cup organization and the cooperating schools. The case as such is unique as it is performed at a specific time, in a distinct context, and has its unique gatekeepers (Lecompte & Goetz, 1982). Still, the methodological process and adjustments to the local context have been well-accounted for. Hence, the study is replicable in terms of its methodological process, but highly limited due to its unique nature and preconditions.

Validity

Internal validity is concerned with the accuracy of the scientific findings rather than their potential to be replicated; whereas external validity is more concerned with how the derived theoretical constructs can be reproduced within other scientific approaches (Lecompte & Goetz, 1982). This is determined through an assessment of the conclusions in the study and to what extent they are derived from the empirical reality of the researched context (Hansen, 1979). Whereas

reliability is a contested matter, internal validity in ethnography is often highlighted as one of its major strengths (Lecompte & Goetz, 1982). Main contributors to internal validity strength in ethnography are found in the conduction of the study in its natural setting, gaining the emic perception and conducting participant observations in the culture of interest (ibid). This study has illustrated a strong correlation to the empirical findings as it altered its research question and correspondingly also the results and conclusions. Also, the emic perspective is illustrated as quotations, combined with researcher interpretation, have guided the presentation of the study´s results. Lastly, participant study as a method of attaining stronger contextual insight was also utilized. Hence, this study can be considered to contain great levels of internal validity. In contrast, external validity can be considered to be a weakness in ethnographical studies in general, and case studies in specific. This is due to their unique and highly contextual nature, making them less generalizable compared to other studies. Concluding, this study does not strive or attain external validity but is highly valid from an internal research point of view.

Case Contextualization

Referring to the aim of this study, a consumer culture has to be studied specific to its context, presupposing a holistic comprehension of the case. Thus, previous to the following analysis and discussion, a case presentation of the Ruby Cup as well as a case-specific contextual description of Kenya is presented. These are based on a report from SIDA about the Ruby Cup (2013) and findings from the present study.

Case Presentation

The menstrual cup "Ruby Cup" is provided by the social business Makit, whose Kenyan branch is located in Nairobi. For Kenyan women, the Ruby Cup presents a cost-saving alternative to other sanitary products as it can be reused for up to 10 years and thus, in the long run saves up to 90% of expenditures. Further, being made of silicon, the cup is a healthy solution compared to other menstrual products using perfumes and cotton, and safe as it prevents leakage. This value-proposition is important considering Kenyan

women's difficulties in affording sanitary products that can result in the use of unhygienic choices, such as cloth or paper, or absence from school, work or various social activities.

The Ruby Cup was introduced to the Kenyan market in 2011 by its female founders from Denmark. Currently, the product is available in pharmacies and supermarkets, in the company's Web-Shop or is distributed through NGOs and schools to impoverished areas. The two latter distribution channels hold particular relevance for young females in BOP contexts. To target them, the company collaborates with schools in Nairobi slums and educates them, not only about the product, but also about menstruation in general. Important resources in these attempts are the company's local female promoters. Having similar backgrounds as the girls enables them to establish personal connections with the girls, and to do monitoring and follow-ups in the field. Also, the company encourages the forming of Ruby Cup Clubs - a forum of discussion for the girls in schools where the Ruby Cup is distributed. They convene once a week and are supervised by local social workers. The idea of the Ruby Cup Clubs is that girls can talk about the product and related issues. Apart from schools, Makit also collaborates with an NGO called Golden Girls Foundation in Kisumu, in Western Kenya. In that case, the company leaves the further marketing activities to the NGO, which distributes the Ruby Cup to schools independently in rural areas, around Kisumu and provides the local girls with necessary education about menstruation.

Despite the advantages of the Ruby Cup and the positive consumer feedback, the product has had difficulties in becoming successful on a wide basis. Slowly growing sales numbers have left earlier break-even projections unrealized. A problem is the highly limited purchasing power of the young girls in this BOP context, currently forcing the company to provide these consumers the Ruby Cup for free or at highly reduced prices. However, this approach entails risks of cannibalizing potential income. Income generated by affluent consumers through web-shop sales, often in the form of "buy one give one"- campaigns, largely subsidizes the distribution of the Ruby Cup to young female BOP consumers. However, the low-purchasing power due to lack of income, is not the only barrier

facing the Ruby Cup. The competitive landscape is dominated by Always pads, with roughly 62% share of the Kenyan market for menstrual hygiene products. This success stems from having built up a loyal customer basis through strong advertising efforts. The latter has motivated Makit to establish a strong brand for the Ruby Cup. Apart from pads, tampons are not widely used in Kenya, and have a considerably small market share. Thus, competition from pads is the strongest for the Ruby Cup, not at least as user practices differ greatly between the products. Implying a new user practice, the company sees the overall novelty of the menstrual cup as a further barrier.

Patriarchy

Within the context of Kenya, the patriarchy is an overarching and deeply rooted ideology. Via gathered consumer insights, it was found that it was a concept which shapes cultural meanings related to tradition and gender. Thus, it holds great relevance for the context in which the Ruby Cup operates. The patriarchy manifests itself in significant gender inequalities. This was particularly expressed by Liza, one of the interviewed experts, who painted a picture of a systematical discrimination in Kenya. Examples included a law that excludes women from inheriting property of their husbands and a male-dominated parliament that would oppose propositions favoring female rights and thus, impede political female movements. This infers that attempts to foster female empowerment are likely to be opposed.

Multiple Cultures

Furthermore, the Kenyan society comprises over 42 different tribes. According to experts, each tribe comes with a distinct set of cultural beliefs and practices. Hence, cultural meanings regarding menstruation vary depending on the region, religion and/or tribe. In cases where differing beliefs were present in the same school context, the Ruby Cup promoters needed to address them simultaneously, making their educational and distributional task more complex.

School Setting

Also, the school revealed itself as an important institution of influence, trust and security for the interviewed girls. Schooling in Kenya begins from the age of three and school days are very long. Thus, the pupils spend a large proportion of their childhood in school, which gives the institutions and their teachers a large potential to influence them. Regarding menstruation, pupils are taught about it during a course in class six. Trust was displayed via the girls in school opting to confide in female teachers when faced with difficulties regarding female hygiene. But also, the male teachers displayed an interest in addressing these female issues. Still, it is important to bear in mind that the visited schools collaborated with the Ruby Cup, arguably creating a more supportive environment for the specific issues regarding menstrual hygiene. Consequently, these schools do not necessarily represent the large majority of schools in Kenya.

Menstrual Hygiene Management

The management of menstrual hygiene was found to be a matter of concern for most girls. Before the Ruby Cup, most girls had experiences of using pads, pieces of cloth or various other solutions. However, due to limited financial resources, they did not have continuous access to proper menstrual hygiene products. Also, it was found that sanitary facilities in some schools were lacking, further complicating the menstrual hygiene management for the girls. In the present case, relevant findings were made of the school as a subsidized supplier of menstrual hygiene materials. Unfortunately, supply was not constant and thus, failed to meet the girls' needs properly. However, despite this established issue, most girls still attended school. Although sporadically occurring, school absence due to menstruation was not a generalizable pattern in spite of alternative menstruation hygiene practices, such as the usage of pieces of cloth.

Menstrual Topic Taboo

Conversations about menstruation and related female themes have been found to solely be held between females. Talking to men or children about female topics turned out to be taboo. Nearly all girls chose to tell and ask their mothers, elder sisters, female friends or female teachers about their first menstruation and the Ruby Cup. In contrast, they did not want to tell their fathers or brothers about it. The taboo is

manifested as girls are being taught not to talk to men or children by their mothers or other related females.

Experts confirmed that girls in Kenya are brought up to believe that menstruation is a girl's secret. Even among females, it is only talked about sparsely and many feel discomfort speaking about it. Also, experts put forward that children ought not to know about menstruation as this is closely related to getting pregnant and thus, relates to female sexuality. Parents fear that talking with children about such topics would result in irresponsible behavior on their part or create rumors about the daughter.

Analysis

This section examines the four identified cultural meanings, derived from empirical findings, related to gender and traditions in Kenya, affecting the Ruby Cup. After being individually highlighted, their influence on the Ruby Cup and its ability to foster product-based female empowerment in this context is discussed.

Consumption as Governed by Male Values

A trickle-down effect of the established patriarchy in Kenya was identified in the gender-related cultural meaning of consumption as governed by male values.

Low Priority of Female Products and Short-term Decision Making

It was evident from the findings of the young female respondents that consumption of menstrual hygiene products was not a high priority item in the family budget. Items such as food, water and electricity were mentioned as items of preferred consumption as opposed to menstrual hygiene products. In cases where the families did not have sufficient purchasing power, this could be a source of stress.

> *"My mother, when she gave me that money she is sad, she even beat me because "I am giving you money"...She tell me that the money she is using to buy for me pads is very wasteful, she said that she wants to buy food" Skyler, Mathare*

Also, within families where purchasing power was an issue, children were often provided with alternative methods to pads, such as cotton or pieces of cloth, or told to simply sort themselves out. Communication from mothers regarding their choice for the month would often be transferred only a few days before the actual onset of menstruation for that particular month.

Men as Purchasing Decision Makers

This low prioritization of menstrual hygiene products was found to be an underlying driver to some of the problems girls face with their menstruation at large, making them feel less empowered. Governing this low prioritization of menstrual hygiene consumption was not only insufficient funds but also a skewed gender-related power balance and perspective within families. Men´s decisions were found to overrule female decisions and men were generally the financial providers of the household. The latter was found to influence the different purchasing roles of family members. Men were predominately put forward as the financial providers within families and responsible for consumption related to larger capital investments, whereas women tend to govern the domestic budget.

> *"My dad decide on like in paying the house rent, that one. But when it comes to this side, using ruby cup, pads, that one, mom decide on it." Anne-Marie, Mathare*

Despite men having the decision power, the findings from the young female respondents illustrated, with a wide majority, that the go-to person for money to manage their menstrual hygiene in families was their mother. The mother was then supposed to approach her husband and allocate money from the domestic budget with his approval and without the daughter´s further involvement. The mother would then purchase the products and provide it for the daughter. Thus, there was little or no direct father-daughter interaction in the purchasing process; it was kept as a secret feminine affair with a silent agreement between father and daughter, facilitated by the mother. The father was, however, still the ultimate decision maker and his values governed the menstrual hygiene consumption of the family. The respondents accredited this communication and purchasing process to the fact that their fathers did not know anything about these

issues and that their mothers were more understanding since they had passed through these matters themselves.

Product Implications

A market ideology (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) becomes hard to change if it has become naturalized in the cultural discourse, incorporated in habitual consumption practices and materialized by the market actors, manifested through an "ideological lock-in" (Holt, 2011). Consumption as governed by male values illustrates two elements comprising such a lock-in, namely the low consumption priority of menstruation hygiene products as well as purchasing-decision power on behalf of men. Hence, this lock-in opposes product adoption of the Ruby Cup in the BOP context of Kenya.

Also, in some cases, the consumption decision process was found to bring on a tremendous amount of stress for the family. Ruth & Hsiung (2007), highlight the fact that for families experiencing limitations in resource generation capabilities such as time or money, with a corresponding limitation in resource allocation capabilities, stress is a palpable element of the family dynamics. The short-term communication and consumption behaviour, illustrated by the parents in this context, is supported and recognized by Viswanathan & Rosa (2007) as a generalizable pattern in the BOP context where funds are limited.

Ruby Cup has recognized that with these consumption dynamics in the Kenyan market, male values will be reflected in the consumption choices so long as men ultimately are the financial decision makers. The company behind the product illustrates cost-saving benefits of investing in the product as well as the positive effect it has on the daughter's schooling. This will arguably tap in to collective consumption mechanics on behalf of future generations´ level of education, found to be of great importance for families in BOP contexts (Subrahmanyan & Gomez-Arias, 2008). These arguments in the marketing strategy shows a comprehension of the importance of male consent in the local context, able to stimulate product adoption (Weidner et al., 2010), and ultimately persuade men to value the Ruby Cup. However, the

success of these arguments is not fool proof as women in other patriarchy dominated BOP contexts have been found to be denied basic levels of education in favour of men in their communities (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007). In a patriarchy, such as Kenya, men are still promoted and given advantages on most societal levels and hence, female schooling will not always be seen in equal terms of male schooling by all families.

Communication as Governed by Trust

Trust in communication was found to be essential to inform and educate females about Ruby Cup and create positive word-of-mouth. Contributing to social capital, this cultural meaning mirrors the traditional communication flow in other BOP contexts, although here reserved for females.

Trust as a Product Facilitator

The creation of trust to the girls and their parents revealed itself as an important factor for the Ruby Cup promoters to successfully communicate the product and thus, foster product adoption. At first sight, a majority of the girls feared the Ruby Cup due to its size or felt uncomfortable with the idea of using it. Also, the girls' parents were skeptical about the Ruby Cup as they were unfamiliar with it, worried that it would break their daughter's virginity, or in general, had little knowledge of menstruation and the female body system. To reduce worries, the Ruby Cup promoters were present in the schools and teamed up with the teachers who are highly trusted in the community. The girls were educated about the Ruby Cup and menstruation step by step before the product was handed out. This approach created trust that was essential to meet the girls' fear and convince them about the product.

> *"I think that, 'this thing can entering my body, .. how? Maybe it can affect me?' Then my teacher come and tell us the good of it and that it cannot affect us. So now it's good.., but for the first time, I did not feel comfortable." Matilda, Kibera*

Meetings were arranged for the girls' mothers to educate them and engage them in conversations

about the Ruby Cup. The occasion was used to demonstrate the product. Questions and concerns could be brought forward, giving the Ruby Cup promoters the ability to build trust to the parents and alter their opinions towards the product. Their consent was important, it was demanded by the company behind Ruby Cup as a formal precondition for the girls to use the product. First and foremost to cover the company legally but it can also be perceived as a trust-building measure to the parents as it opened up for discussions about the product.

> *"Why did she [mother] refuse the Ruby Cup?" "Because she never see it.. She tell, 'you are with your monthly period'. Then she asked these people [Ruby Cup promoters] what they say, then she saw them and it was okay." Catherine, Kisumu*

Female Word-of-Mouth to Spread Information

Trust also triggered positive word-of-mouth about the Ruby Cup between the girls, their female friends or their female family members. As menstruation is a conversational taboo, such word-of-mouth turned out to be essential for spreading information and knowledge about the Ruby Cup and menstruation between females. Girls that were satisfied with the product, were eager to educate others about it. As a result, it was common that the girls' mothers, sisters and girlfriends also became interested in the Ruby Cup. Discussion forums such as the Ruby Cup Club supported these intentions further and facilitated communication among the school girls. In these clubs the girls not only talked about the product but also about menstruation and sexuality in general.

> *"What do you talk about [in the Ruby Cup Club]?" "..Menstruation, how to be clean when you have your periods and how to use the Ruby Cup and how to help the other girls who don't have the Ruby Cup or the pads, how they can manage and also we talk about how to clean the Ruby Cup" Juno, Mathare*

Female Word-Of-Mouth to Transfer Stories and Myths

Word-of-mouth was further mentioned by the experts to be responsible for the transference and conservation of stigmatizing stories and myths about menstruation. As exemplified by expert Brenda, grandmothers would teach their grand daughters or aunts would teach their nieces about such stories and myths. Also, they were spread through rumors. According to the expert Liza, they are easily spread in the slums, where females live closely together and meet frequently. She gave examples of conversations between females where menstruation is mentioned negatively that can easily be overheard by young girls, thus, forming their perceptions on menstruation.

Product Implications

Trustful relations and word-of-mouth as ways for the girls to inform and educate others about the Ruby Cup or menstruation, emphasizes the value of social capital and particularly trust in this context, as defined by Putnam (1995). It also mirrors the known informal and relational structures of BOP markets (London & Hart, 2010; Viswanathan et al., 2009). Reasons for the importance of trust may be found in Kenya's weak institutional environment that is proposed to result in low trust towards unknown subjects (Pretty & Ward, 2001; Ahlreup, Olsson & Yanagizawa, 2008), raising the need of familiarity. Also, the informational constraints that are evident in these contexts (Sridharan & Viswanathan, 2008), are assumed to give personal interactions and personal ties more weight. Still, in this context, social capital and trust is reserved for women, mirroring the taboo of talking with men about menstruation.

As implied by Chickweche & Fletcher (2010), companies in BOP markets can create better relationships to consumers by incorporating social capital into their strategies. By using informal, personalized ways of communication, product adoption can be enhanced (Weidner et al., 2010). This can be observed with the Ruby Cup's approach of employing local promoters that use the product on their own and have the ability to establish personal connections with the girls and parents that creates intimate trust (Ahlreup, Olsson & Yanagizawa, 2008). The way they explain and demonstrate the Ruby Cup is supposed to overcome consumer reluctance (Weidner et al., 2010), which is important considering the new user practices accompanying the Ruby Cup. This approach also hold the potential of the promoters

becoming powerful brand communicators (Sridharan & Viswanathan, 2008). Being merely distributed to BOP markets on a small scale, this informal way of communication appears rewarding.

However, concerning the company's limited resources, it is hardly replicable on a larger scale. Hence, an important effect of this personalized approach is the encouragement of word-of-mouth between the Ruby Cup users and others. Weidner et al. (2010) value word-of-mouth in BOP markets more than mass media to foster product adoption, as these consumers primarily turn to each other for information, manifesting the rich prevalent social capital (Putnam, 1995). Also, the reported interest of mothers in the Ruby Cup shows the value of intergenerational communication (Weidner et al., 2010) where daughters using the product can educate and convince mothers about the Ruby Cup.

Even further, the positive word-of-mouth shows signs of building a positive brand image for Ruby Cup, which is important in BOP markets to signify trust and quality (Rajagopal, 2009). Against the notion of Van Kempe (2004), the girls' eagerness to convince others of the product, shows no signs of social differentiation through the brand of Ruby Cup. Rather, the girls strive for social inclusion and want to share their life improvement. According to Weidner et al. (2010), brands can evoke a sense of community, that can be identified in the emerging Ruby Cup Clubs. From a CCT perspective, these clubs resemble brand communities in which the brand of the Ruby Cup acts as a social tie (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Being a forum for discussions of otherwise restrained topics, the Ruby Cup Clubs foster social capital among females. On this way, the brand adopts important cultural meanings of its cultural context, which according to Holt (2002) provides the framework in which the brand comes to be. According to Rajagopal (2009) and Chikweche & Fletcher, (2010), such social capital makes brand communities even more powerful in BOP markets. Hence, a strong brand community will eventually be important for the Ruby Cup in order to convince new consumers of its value (ibid), and foster product adoption.

However, while the positive and initiated word-of-mouth favors the Ruby Cup, the transference of

female discriminatory stories and myths among females do not. It shows the transference of social norms and values (Heller & Rook, 1997; Parke et al., 2006) through intra-network communication (Ruth & Hsiung, 2007), which rather hinders product adoption and indicates the backside of social capital (Putnam, 1995) when comprising gender-discriminating norms for women. Viswanathan et al. (2009) call for attention to these negative aspects of social ties and the need to understand social relationships in subsistence markets. In the case of opposing word-of-mouth, its informal nature becomes a disadvantage to the Ruby Cup, considering its predicted strong impact (Weidner et al., 2010).

Menstruation as a Symbolic Source of Female Identity

Clear patterns could be drawn from the findings regarding menstruation and its effect on the female identity. The gender division between men and women, evident in this context of a strong patriarchy, was something that bore strong linkages to the onset of the menstruation. Menstruation represented a strong division between childhood and womanhood, filled with normative symbolical values and practices.

Early Knowledge Gap due to Speaking Taboo

As menstruation is a taboo topic in regards to children, parents rarely educate their children about this previous to the onset of menstruation. The earliest formal teachings of menstruation are taught in Kenyan schools during year six, when girls are generally around 12 years old. As this age does not always coincide with the onset of menstruation, a large knowledge gap was found to exist in girls before having their first period. It was found to be the cause of much fear and anxiety for girls as they could not understand what their bodies were undergoing upon their first menstruation.

> *"As you know, menstruation this is when you´re a grownup. Even sometimes it starts at a low age. Maybe age of seven. Because they don´t know anything about menstruation. So what do they say? "Hey, I´ve cut myself!" She doesn´t understand what is that." Lauren, Kibera*

Informal Teachings Between Females

In relation to the onset of the first menstruation, the mother was found to be the main confidant for girls to turn to for guidance and support, followed by sisters and other trusted females. The female confidant was the main channel for informal teachings on how women are supposed to handle their menses and more importantly how they are supposed to behave as women. This information was found to be very limited in terms of biological facts regarding menstruation. Rather, via this form of informal education, girls were taught different myths and behavioral patterns, meant to govern how they carry themselves as ladies within this context.

Normative Practices due to Menstruation

Throughout the expert interviews, further female identity practices and values when menstruating were highlighted, traceable to the symbolical value of women being unclean while on their menstruation period. A myth related to this was that of withering plants in the farms while menstruating.

> *"They tell me that you should not go to the farm when you have menstruation. You will push the spinach…They tell me not to drink milk, milk tea" Naomi, Kisumu*

Further, the experts spoke of religious gatherings and practices as something forbidden for menstruating women, perceived as unclean. Muslim prohibitions while on the period included access to the mosque, fasting, any form of prayer, or even touching the holy book. Christian prohibitions on the other hand centered purely on access to the church premises. Also, according to experts, women were considered to be unlucky while menstruating and should preferably not cook food for the family, further limiting their everyday life practices.

Another aspect of womanhood is the calling for increased levels of responsibility, hygiene and cleanliness for the girls. They could not play around with boys and get dirty as they had been able to before.

> *"I had to avoid deep relationships with boys. You still have to abstain. Like at five I used to be all dirty but I am clean now." Blossom, Mathare*

Favorable Associations of Womanhood

The female identity characteristic of being able to carry a child was highlighted in this context as something natural and positive. On this note, it was considered to be an unhealthy sign not to have your menstruation after you had passed a certain age.

> *"You can see someone who is too slim, she doesn´t have, she´s having sixteen years and hasn´t started her menses. You are just twelve years and you have first. That person isn´t a good student, she is weak, she is not healthy." Kinsey, Kibera*

Some respondents accounted to menstruation also bringing about a change in their community status, having their voices heard as adults rather than children.

> *"In our tribe, Luo tribe, they believe that menstruation is now you´re a woman. You´re considered a person. Cause they usually believe that a person who doesn´t experience menstruation is a woman who cannot give birth." Hannah, Mathare*

Fear of Insertion

It became evident that the vagina is valued and any insertion is a matter of taboo met with skepticism from both genders. It stems from the concepts of faithfulness and valuing the pre-marital virginity. These values bring on array of practices, with the most important one being the emphasis on the intact hymen.

> *"At first they said that that thing can cause affection to me [the parents]. And I told them no. Here in school they told us that if you´re a virgin you can use that ruby cup. Then I told them yes. They asked me if it can bring affect on me if you´re a virgin and I said no. Then they said that if it is in that case, I can use it." Claire, Mathare*

Also, an expert illuminated that insertion of the Ruby Cup would allegedly cause expansion of the vagina, an assumption creating much anxiety in women as they then feared being left by their husbands for a woman with a "smaller" vagina.

Another insertion myth, illustrating the previously mentioned knowledge gap, is found in the belief that items would disappear within the body upon insertion.

> *"Some people, I think the reason why they don't use it [Ruby Cup]…I think it's pain and the virginity. And also they are used to…they think that this thing may enter deeply inside and that it might disappear and that it affects them…I think that's why some of them don't use it" Zoe, Mathare*

Product Implications

The cultural meaning of female identity is strongly linked to normative forces on an aggregated level, which, in accordance with the definition by Arnould & Thompson (2005), bears strong linkages to the concept of marketplace ideologies. It is an aspect of a society which affects all participants in a marketplace but also acts within social and institutional structures in its specific context (ibid). Here, the normative forces in relation to the onset of menstruation are plentiful. On the one hand, a societal gender division, leading to female inferiority, is combined with limitations in physical liberty such as religious activities, responsibility measures in terms of boys and hygiene, and farming restrictions. On the other hand, the onset of menstruation also brought about implications of healthy motherhood capabilities and a voice in the community for young women. Highly relevant for this case study, as the Ruby Cup is a product which is inserted, is also the strong value placed on pre-marital virginity and remaining "small" in the vagina with associated normative practices regarding insertion. Understanding these normative forces holds great relevance when linking CCT theories to a BOP context (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011); since these theories have been overemphasizing the individuals´ power to influence their consumption behavior and not sufficiently considered the larger collective context consisting of material, societal and institutional agencies in the market (ibid).

Allowing these normative forces to persist and be spread is not only societal institutions but also informal teachings through word-of-mouth on behalf of the female confidants. This channel of exchanging competencies holds further relevance due to the identified knowledge gap created by the limited contribution of formal educational institutions. The informal teachings are often not based on scientific knowledge but rather cultural values and practices upholding the status quo. This arguably relates to the previously discussed characteristic of BOP consumers as acting within informal markets, or BOP systems of exchange, which are signified by personal ties and customary practices (London & Hart, 2010; Viswanathan et al., 2009). Even further, it illustrates the established family dynamics of exchanging norms and values within the family (Cox & Paley, 1997).

Menstruation as a Symbolic Source of Female Discrimination

Recurrent throughout the interviews, were the themes of keeping oneself clean when menstruating and keeping menstruation a personal secret. These concealment efforts can be explained by the discrimination that girls had to experience when their menstruation was revealed to the other sex. Hence, menstruation was identified as a symbolic source of female discrimination.

Public Humiliation

As discussed for female identity, in connection to the onset of menstruation girls were taught that taking care of their bodies and keeping proper hygiene was part of becoming a responsible, female adult. Consequently, being unclean implied a shortcoming for the girls, which induced humiliation from their surroundings. On this note, the former use of pads or the like had been problematic for the girls. Due to the limited availability of pads, or access to toilets, they could not always change pads when needed. Full pads could cause leakage that stained the girls' clothes or developed a smell of blood and thus, made their menstruation noticeable. If realized by others, the girls would be exposed to humiliation of particularly boys that laughed at them, avoided them or even referred to menstruation as a disease.

"The boys will only laugh and talk about that and somehow they can stop chatting with you and they avoid you anywhere you find them (...) sometimes boys think that is a disease so they tend to stay away from you so that you cannot affect them." Juno, Mathare

As a result, girls suffered mentally from experienced, potentially recurring discrimination, or even refrained from attending school if they did not have the possibility to manage their menstruation safely.

Security of Keeping Menstruation Secret

A majority of the girls tried to keep their menstruation secret, especially in regards to men. This can partly be related to cleanliness; being clean helped the girls to keep their menstruation private and thus, avoid humiliation. Beyond that, however, menstruation as such was perceived as something private and shameful that each girl was supposed to keep for herself.

"People think that menstruation should be a secret, girls sometimes don´t want people to know (...) Because they don´t like other people to know, if somebody else knows they might expose and they would feel ashamed." Eliza, Mathare

This feeling of unease also became apparent in discussions about the Ruby Cup. The product was hidden, if unused, as it could otherwise indicate to others about them having their menstruation.

"I clean it [Ruby Cup] privately (...) You can´t feel comfortable, maybe your brothers are there and they see the ruby cup. They will start asking what it is and you can´t explain to them something like that." Gretel, Mathare

Reasons for this urge to keep menstruation private and why it would constitute a sense of shame could be identified in the relationship between men and women. This changes profoundly with the onset of a girl's menstruation, as it symbolizes her entrance into womanhood. In discussions with expert Victoria, it was explained that by entering womanhood, men in Kenya no longer perceive a girl as a child but as a potential

sexual partner of marriageable age. A girl's physical transformation, in connection with the menstruation, would help men to assess if a girl has "become a woman". To be sure, men would even ask a girl about her menstruation, emphasizing it as a decisive criterion for sexual intercourse and marriage. Hence, disclosing the secret of menstruation to boys or men could infer stress for young girls, as boys could make demands, pose threats and put them under pressure.

"They say that now I am ready to be a mother and I could not feel that because I am still a learner (...) There was also a boy who was saying that soon you will marry me and I tried to chase them but they would not go." Skyler, Mathare

Also, feared sexual abuse was identified as a further reason for girls to keep their menstruation secret. Some girls reported a danger of being raped, since they had their period, which forced them to behave differently.

"I should protect myself. You know some boys have bad manners. They can take you and rape you. It usually happens here" Yasmine, Mathare

According to the expert Victoria, sexual abuse is a particular issue in Kenya's low-end areas and slums. Correspondingly, with the onset of menstruation, most girls were warned by their parents, mostly mothers, and teachers in school of getting pregnant.

They were also advised to protect themselves from men due to potential sexual abuse.

"She [her mother] told me, when I get my menstruation I should not walk at night and not play with boys (...) I stop playing with them and walking at night. Because when you walk at night, in this area, some people can kidnap you and rape you" Isabella, Kisumu

Still, in cases of sexual abuse, the expert Victoria was not convinced that a girl's menstruation would matter to the offender. Thus, the danger for sexual abuse is ever-present for young girls in Kenya and not related to menstruation. Consequently, it was questioned why girls do not get warned for sexual abuse until their first

period. A reason for this is the taboo of talking with children about sexuality, which impedes such conversations. But also, getting pregnant due to sexual abuse would bring the girl and her family the community's judgment. As explained by expert Victoria, in some cases the abused girl would have to leave town. Further, she could be accused by her parents of having behaved irresponsibly, of being a bad example to her sisters or of wasting the money cumbersomely invested in her education. Consequently, a parent's warning expressed to the girls does not necessarily relate to the girl's wellbeing or protection from sexual abuse. Rather, it can relate to the endangered reputation of the family and potential loss of money that would come along with an unwanted pregnancy. Hence, the risk of getting pregnant, created by the onset of menstruation, is proposed to stress young girls even more due to the implications it could bring to their social life.

Product Implications

The described female discrimination related to menstruation is another expression of the patriarchy found to exist in Kenya (Kibuka-Musoke & Ogana, 2009). It also exemplifies how the deeply rooted gender roles give women little control over their own bodies and sexuality (UNFPA, 2014). Further, parents' concerns about an unwanted pregnancy bringing shame and financial losses to the family, not only indicates the inferior rights of females in BOP contexts, but again the hierarchical system that subordinates the daughter's wellbeing to the family's interests (Cox and Paley, 1997). It also emphasizes the importance of children's education, a prioritized area of consumption for families in BOP markets (Ruth & Hsiung, 2007; Viswanathan & Gomez-Aria, 2008). Education is perceived as an investment in the wellbeing of the whole family (Ruth & Hsiung, 2007). Hence, an undesired pregnancy would indicate a lost investment from a parental perspective that has negative consequences for the concerned girl. As for the risk of sexual abuse, this would imply an additional form of discrimination for her.

In this context, the Ruby Cup becomes a welcomed product; girls have reported feeling free and relieved from stress since they used the product, as it prevents any leakage, smelling or waste. Hence, it helps them

to keep their menstruation secret. By doing this, they protect themselves from being disclosed to men, who may get interested in them and also from humiliation in public spaces. Hence, the Ruby Cup's intended value proposition gets extended with an additional value, distinct to its context; it helps the girls to keep their menstruation secret and on this way, protects them from discrimination. Thus, from a CCT perspective, the product has been attached with a further meaning, that has been shaped by its cultural surroundings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In line with Askegaard and Linnet (2011), this further meaning of the Ruby Cup illustrates a lack of consumer agency as it emerged due to the patriarchic culture found in Kenya. Thus, it is evidence for how societal and institutional agencies shape a consumer culture and strengthens the argument that it may be of use to take a wider context when applying CCT to BOP markets (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Being a disadvantaged consumer group in BOP markets, the limited consumer agency of females is a logical consequence of the gender inequality prominent in these contexts.

Also, following Holt (2002), the new meaning of secrecy is supposed to shape the brand of the Ruby Cup. Even further, this attached meaning supports an open-ended value proposition, as suggested by Simanis (2011). According to the author, in order to be succesful, consumers themselves have to make sense of a product, as a foreign company has a limited ability to fully anticipate their needs. It limits the idea of a company's ability to integrate local consumer insights into marketing strategies in order to enhance product adoption in BOP markets (Weidner et al., 2010). However, for the Ruby Cup, the idea is not contradicted either, as the intended value proposition can be naturally combined with the new attached meaning.

Conclusion

The four identified and discussed cultural meanings related to gender and traditions collectively form the context within which the Ruby Cup operates. Taking a consumer perspective, their interplay resembles an ideological lock-in, as defined by Holt (2011), for the market of menstrual hygiene products in Kenya. This is suggested to influence Ruby Cup's adoption on

behalf of consumers and its ability to foster female empowerment. The ideological lock-in emerges from the deeply rooted patriarchy that neglects or discriminates female concerns and thus, largely excludes them from an open societal discourse, giving female specific products low priority. Regarding the Ruby Cup, the inability to talk about menstruation openly not only complicates the spreading of information about the product, but has also led to a knowledge gap on behalf of potential female consumers that needs to be addressed in order for them to understand the product and successfully adopt it. Also, the circulating ideas of the female role and experienced discrimination make young girls in Kenya inhibited about their own identity and body. There are beliefs, for instance regarding insertion, which directly conflict with the use of the Ruby Cup and thus, create user barriers that unsettle young girls. Consequently, when entering this context, the ideological lock-in provides the initial market conditions for the Ruby Cup with the potential to hamper or oppose its adoption.

Since its introduction, the Ruby Cup has started to interplay with this context. The inability to talk about menstruation and related female issues initially created a barrier. However, the value of word-of-mouth and trust in the Kenyan context, in line with the proposal by Weidner et al. (2010), supported and influenced Ruby Cup's strategy of localized personal education and establishment of Ruby Cup Clubs. This enables both knowledge sharing and the girl's personal opening towards others to talk about a taboo topic. It not only fosters social capital among females but has been found to create self-confidence regarding her own body. Thus, in line with Holt (2002) and Muniz & O'Guinn (2001), if these meanings continue to be interpreted on a larger scale, a strong brand community centred on the Ruby Cup can evolve. Consequently, one contribution of the product to female empowerment is the *fostering and enabling of discussions* about, not only the Ruby Cup, but also broader female issues. Being largely limited to females, these discussions can enable women to independently shape their own female identity. However, this also induces a parallel discourse of conflicting values with the prevalent male-dominated discourse in Kenya. This holds the potential for future tensions.

Another result of this topic taboo, is the identified knowledge gap regarding menstrual hygiene on behalf of young women in Kenya. The existing and highly limited knowledge has been found to contain a number of discriminatory normative practices influenced by the patriarchy at large. These practices are manifested in various manners but are all unified in the perception of women being unclean while menstruating. Ruby Cup's educational value proposition addresses these cultural meanings in an indirect manner. Rather than opposing them, they foster physical awareness and portray the activity as menstruation a natural part of life for all females, thus removing the stigma attached to menstruation. Again, the trust given upon local promoters was found to be an essential facilitator in this process. Hence, *female education* was found to be an additional contribution of the product to female empowerment.

The Ruby Cup has enabled young females to be more focused in school, attain an enhanced level of hygiene, and keep their menstruation secret. The latter was found to be a response to experienced harassment and expected levels of responsibility. Thus, a further contribution to female empowerment on behalf the Ruby Cup can be found in *physical freedom,* which will result in reduced levels of anxiety as well as health and educational benefits. However, while aiding young girls to keep proper hygiene was an expected outcome, attaining a higher level of secrecy was not. This cultural meaning attached to the Ruby Cup has evolved in this specific context. It resonates with Holt's (2002) implicit proposition that a consumer culture provides the framework in which the brand comes to be, outside the company's control. Further, this cultural meaning has evolved as a reaction to discriminatory forces, illustrating strong societal and institutional agencies and a lack of consumer agency (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). This process relates to the concept of an open-ended value proposition (Simanis, 2011) found to be crucial in establishing a product successfully in the BOP. Even though unintended by the company, it shows the potential benefits of giving consumers ownership over a product, allowing them to make sense of it on their own. However, the reactive nature of this particular cultural meaning also bears a risk. Helping young girls to keep their menstruation secret has the potential outcome of making it a matter of increased secrecy

and thus, exclude menstruation even further from public discourse, reinforcing the present cultural structure.

An opposing force to the Ruby Cup's ability to foster female empowerment is found in the male-dominated consumer culture in Kenyan families. This infers that product adoption is hindered by prevalent male consumption values. Demanding a large proportion of the household budget, or even exceeding it, results in the Ruby Cup not being purchased at a larger scale. This can already be observed today, as the Ruby Cup is mostly provided at a highly discounted price or at no cost. Even further, the status quo with a low priority or even indifference on behalf of men to purchase menstruation hygiene products, can be fuelled by a continued lack of public discourse regarding this topic. The latter's continuity stems from Ruby Cup initially stimulating discussions limited between females, combined with the cultural meaning created by consumers to further enhance inter-gender secrecy of menstruation.

Up until this point, the ability of the Ruby Cup to foster female empowerment has been evaluated in terms of its interplay with the current cultural context. However, while potential for attaining female empowerment has been established, the current cultural context demands a resource-heavy approach for the company, both in terms of time and money. As previously mentioned, there is a challenge of providing socially beneficial products whilst attaining profitability (Garette & Karnani, 2010). While the social benefits of the Ruby Cup are evident, financially, the company is not yet self-sustainable and should not yet be regarded as a successful social business in a BOP context. Hence, it must be questioned whether this approach, in a self-sustainable way, can promote female empowerment on a larger scale over time (ibid). For this to be achieved, it can be argued that the current ideological lock-in needs to be dissolved, calling for a market transformation. It has been established that Ruby Cup facilitates an open discussion about menstruation for females. However, this parallel discourse must eventually interact with its counterpart in order to reshape it and its attached cultural meanings from which the ideological lock-in is shaped. According to King & Pearce (2010), a social movement with a corresponding conflict with the

powerful members of society is a vital ingredient for changing cultural values. This is achieved by addressing the weaknesses and contradictions in the ideological lock-in (Holt, 2011; Thompson, 2004). Regarding Chikweche & Fletcher's (2010) proposition that brand communities in BOP markets have a comparably high influence, signs of such movements can be identified in the emerging brand community surrounding the Ruby Cup. The ideological weaknesses that such social movements in this context could address are found in the financial losses incurred on families by opting for other alternatives to the Ruby Cup, as well as in the obstruction of overall development by not fostering female empowerment. Hence, with the continued active approach to foster these Ruby Cup Clubs on behalf of the company, in the long run it may have the potential to foster a broader female empowerment than it does today.

Finally, it is of interest to discuss Ruby Cup's ability to foster female empowerment in Kenya in relation to the proposed definition by Duflo (2005). It is suggested that the Ruby Cup's direct contribution is not measurable in, e.g. economic terms, but rather stimulates psychological empowerment. Apart from the beneficial elements to be found in terms of female education and health, it is not yet certain to what direction this increased self-awareness and confidence will be channelled, and correspondingly what changes will occur in the market. However, observing the potential conflict between the cultural meanings of the parallel discourse and its societal impact could set a precedent for future studies on product-based female empowerment.

Contributions

The present study illustrates that "the BOP" cannot be perceived as one market, but rather as a fragmented market in need of analysis specific to each (cultural) context. Also, it supports the call for a consumer perspective in BOP markets to facilitate a deep understanding of a specific consumer context (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007; Viswanathan, 2011). On this note, the body of research regarding CCT (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) has been proven valuable to identify cultural meanings in a specific BOP market, relevant as they shape its distinct consumer culture

(Holt, 2011). Even further, by differentiating BOP consumers, the study is unique as it has illustrated the importance of perceiving women as a distinct consumer group and of taking in their perspective. Through this lens, it has been shown that the identified discriminatory market place culture (Holt, 2011) calls for value propositions targeted to women, in order to foster product-based female empowerment. This goes in line with propositions for organizations to incorporate a bottom-up approach (Viswanathan et al., 2009), and tailor marketing initiatives according to the cultural context (Chickweche & Fletcher, 2012), in order to enhance product adoption. This study has also illustrated how a product aiming to foster female empowerment, is shaped by, and can potentially alter, its cultural context. These contributions infer implications for businesses and further research.

Implications for Businesses

For businesses wishing to attain product-based female empowerment in BOP markets, this study's contributions implicate the need for a profound knowledge of the specific consumer culture in the market they want to enter. As such a product is likely to challenge prevalent cultural meanings that have created a topic taboo, trust on behalf of female consumers and the activity of word-of-mouth, has been proven critical to enhance product adoption in the Kenyan BOP context. Hence, a marketing strategy for a BOP market needs to reflect this accordingly. Furthermore, the relatively large value of social capital found in this study, resulting in interdependent consumption behaviour, needs to be considered in the value proposition. Also, regarding the unpredictability of the interplay between the cultural meanings and the product, an iterative learning process on behalf of businesses is key. As this interplay is capable of shaping a product's meaning and the cultural context in which it acts, an open-ended value proposition, as suggested by Simanis (2011), can be a useful approach.

Implications for Research

Regarding research, this study illustrates the applicability of CCT to studies of BOP consumers, as well as the necessity to perform such studies specific to each BOP context. Further, it shows the relevance of taking in a wider sociocultural perspective on the consumer context when applying consumer culture in BOP markets. Hence, it supports Askegaard & Linnet's (2011) notion to acknowledge societal or institutional agencies in a consumption context, which is supposed to hold even greater relevance for discriminated consumer groups such as women in BOP markets. To confirm these propositions, additional research is needed that takes a wider sociocultural perspective into account when applying CCT to a specific BOP context. But also, this study has shown that a differentiated consumer perspective, in this case female, is needed for future studies in BOP markets. Further studies regarding women as a distinct consumer group are of utter importance, since female empowerment holds particular relevance for overall sustainable development.

Acknowledgements

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