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The menstrual movement:

*An Analysis of the Sustainability of XXX*

*Sanitary Product Subscription Service*

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Abstract

In the new global economy, sustainability has become a central issue for business success. This report set out to critically assess the sanitary product subscription company - XXX, to illuminate the major weaknesses and opportunities to achieve holistic business sustainability within the Feminine Hygiene and Sanitary protection industry.

The aim of this report was to evaluate the Corporate Social Responsibility within XXX’s industry, from the perspective of Creating Shared Value. Secondly, a further aim was to assess XXX’s crowdfunding campaign, drawing from the Russian Doll Model of Sustainability to analyse the extent to which XXX operates sustainably.

The report employed two United Nations Sustainable Development Goals; (1) Good Health and Wellbeing, (2) Responsible Consumption and Production. An analysis of company operations in these areas served as a guideline for recommendations to improve the company’s sustainability practices. Informed by the findings, it is recommended;

* + - XXX implement an educational programme within UK schools for both genders to understand the physical, economic and social implications of menstruation.
		- XXX extend their current product line to include reusable sanitary protection to extend the product life cycle.
		- XXX eradicate using plastic applicator tampons and switch to cardboard applicators to ensure products are completely biodegradable.

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1.0 Introduction

## 1.1 Aims

This report will examine the company, XXX, drawing from the crowdfunding campaign on [crowdfunder.co.uk](http://crowdfunder.co.uk) (Crowdfunder UK, n.d.). The aim of this research is to critically assess the industry of which XXX operates within. From a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) perspective, the theory of Creating Shared Value (CSV) (Porter & Kramer, 2011) will be applied to the industry. By assessing the social, economic and environmental considerations of the company, an investigation will determine the extent to which XXX operates in a sustainable manner. Referring to United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s), two were chosen; Good Health and Wellbeing, and, Responsible Consumption and Production. These will provide a framework for recommendations to improve the company’s practices in these areas.

## 1.2 Company Overview

XXX is a UK subscription box service providing a range of organic sanitary products starting from £6.99 a month (XXX, 2018). Officially launched online in 2018, following concern for the impact of the refugee crisis preventing women from access to basic sanitary products (Borszcz, 2018). The company was set up to challenge economic and social barriers around menstruation with the mission to “change the way the world looks at both period products and periods themselves” (XXX, 2018).

With a minimalistic packaging design and simple branding, shown in Figure 1, the company emphasise their chemical free, eco-friendly products for the benefit of the user and wider society. Boxes can be customised, or, an algorithm can synchronise delivery to the subscribers’ menstrual cycle, as well as offering corporate packages for socially responsible companies (Matthews, 2018).

The following sections will assess the extent CSR is adopted in the industry from the perspective of Creating Shared Value proposed by Porter and Kramer (2011). An evaluation of the sustainability of XXX is provided, referring to the Russian Doll Model of Sustainability (Levett, 1998).

2.0 Analysis of Company Industry & Campaign

## 2.1 Analysis of XXX Health Products Ltd.’s Industry

Mintel (2018) estimated the value of the UK sanitary protection sector to be worth £265.8 million in 2017. They report this sector operates within the wider industry of Feminine Hygiene and Sanitary Protection, encompassing sanitary products, complementary feminine hygiene goods (washes, wipes etc.) and adult incontinence products. Although, sanitary protection remains the largest market segment within the industry accounting for 59% of retail value sales, see Appendix 1 for market breakdown.

***FIGURE 1 - XXX Subscription Box Products***

2.1.1 Creating Shared Value - Porter and Kramer, 2011

Porter and Kramer’s (2011) theory of Creating Shared Value (CSV) provides a useful approach to assess a company’s CSR practices. Notably, this is a unique perspective that suggests in the modern world, CSR is simply not sufficient in achieving business longevity. Whereas, CSV allows a company to align objectives with the needs of wider society, therefore improving long term profitability concomitantly with societal value, shown in Figure 2 (Shared Value Initiative, 2018).

Porter and Kramer (2011) suggest three levels of how CSV can be achieved in a business environment, see Appendix 2 for an outlined description. For the purpose of this report, an evaluation of two levels will form an assessment of the Feminine Hygiene and Sanitary Protection industry.

2.1.2 ‘’Reconceiving Products and Markets’’ Level

The Reconceiving Products and Markets level focuses on offering products that satisfy society’s needs and serving consumers that may not be considered in traditional strategies, whilst simultaneously creating profit (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Period poverty and corresponding social stigmas have been gaining traction in the media more recently, see Appendix 3 for recent statistics on the shocking barriers to sanitary protection for young girls. The industry has been responding to this social problem by addressing these unserved markets, specifically of lower-income consumers. The market leader, XXX (2018), launched the #Endperiodpoverty campaign with over 14 million sanitary products donated to UK schools, encouraging the industry to address the wider needs of society. Reconceiving these markets serves the functional needs of consumers and addresses the demand for sanitary products. Subsequently, this also encourages brand loyalty, which is essential within the industry, with 67% of consumers sticking to the same brand of sanitary products (Mintel, 2018).

 (SHARED VALUE INITIATIVE, 2018)

*FIGURE 2 - Creating Shared Value Model*

It can be argued, the industry is a key player of ‘Greenwashing,' predominantly the Sin of Lesser of Two Evils by “distracting the consumer from the greater environmental impacts of the category as a whole” (Terra Choice, 2009). The traditional supply chain of sanitary products can be harmful to consumers and the environment across all stages of the manufacturing process, shown in the ‘cradle to grave’ Life Cycle Assessment of a typical main brand tampon in Figure 3.

 (Mazgaj, Yaramenka and Malovana, 2006)

*FIGURE 3 - Life Cycle Assessment of Disposable Tampons*

2.1.3 ‘'Enabling Local Cluster Development’’ Level

The level of Enabling Cluster Development concentrates on ‘building the efficiency of communities of which the company operates in, to increase business productivity and address gaps in the local business environment’ (Shared Value Initiative, 2018). Clusters are defined as “geographic concentrations of related economic activity” (Delgado, Porter & Stern, 2015, p. 1) thus, the attributes of local areas directly affect business operations within them.

This interdependence between company activity and the local community is shown in the rise of social enterprises in the industry. XXX (n.d) produce reusable menstruation kits that offer a sustainable alternative to disposable sanitary products.

Adapted from levett (1998)

*FIGURE 5 - Russian Doll Model of Sustainability*

Figure 4 shows part of their mission is to “create livelihoods," by basing their operations in Uganda, the company provide full-time, formal employment to over 150 local workers, to overcome barriers to employment in the rural economy. XXX has sold over 2.3 million menstrual kits globally, allowing them to empower, not only the women using their products, but with a 90% female workforce, improve the local business infrastructure by providing stable employment and access to financial independence. (XXX, n.d).

***FIGURE 4 - XXX Local Employment Mission***

However, the individual business model of XXX may not be representative of the industry as a whole. Moreover, Crane et.al (2014) argue CSV theory is limited as societal needs are an unlikely driver of cluster development, it also fails to address the problem of local inequalities as a result of uneven income distribution from cluster development.

## 2.2 Evaluation of XXX Health Products Ltd.’s Campaign

The following section seeks to critically assess the sustainability of XXX’s business operations, primarily referring to the Crowdfunding campaign. The main mission of XXX encapsulates breaking down barriers for women, stemming from women’s basic bodily function of menstruation and the associated social stigma and economic challenges. Their campaign raised £3435 in 42 days to support business expansion through increased marketing and improved product packaging (Crowdfunder UK, n.d).

2.2.1 Introduction to Sustainability Theory

In order to conceptualise XXX’s operations in terms of sustainability, it is important to determine an understanding of what sustainability means. The Brundtland Commission (1987, ch.2) defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. Increasingly, focus has been on the ability of business’ to uphold and increase sustainability practices within the economy. Levett (1998) provides a useful theory to assess the intangible features of sustainability through primary ‘indicators’; environmental, social and economic, Figure 5 demonstrates this Russian Doll Model of Sustainability. This model presents the idea that society must subsist within the limits of the environment, and the economy is a social construct to satisfy societal needs (Levett, 1998).

2.2.2 Environmental Aspect

Referring to the Russian Doll Model, the campaign states XXX produces tampons made from “100% certified organic cotton” which ensures they are eco-friendly due to the avoidance of harmful pesticides and chemicals (Soil Association, n.d). Moreover, on average, a woman will use 11,000 disposable sanitary products in a lifetime, (Ahpma, 2007). However, once used, these products are not recyclable, thus, in order to be environmentally conscious, XXX aims to offer biodegradable products by ensuring cotton is the only ingredient (XXX, 2018).

Their campaign fails to mention XXX sanitary pads concord to the Nordic Swan Label (XXX, 2018). This means pads adhere to strict regulations regards materials and manufacturing and are subject to inspection to ensure the company is environmentally compliant (Nordic Ecolabelling, 2018). This is a key factor of XXX’s environmental considerations, as the voluntary eco-label promotes a circular economy, shown in Fig. 6. The Nordic Swan criteria aims to stimulate longevity in the product life cycle that ensures sustainability at all stages, from production to disposal, this not only reduces the environmental impacts but also provides visible proof of sustainability.

(nordic ecolabelling, 2018)

*FIGURE 6 - Nordic Swan Eco-Label Circular Economy*

2.2.3 Social Aspect

The campaign shows XXX focuses on the social benefits of its products, the key attribute being transparency across the manufacturing phase. Presently, sanitary product manufacturers are not legally required to disclose ingredients, meaning women using unregulated conventional tampons are exposed to potentially harmful toxins, chemicals and pesticides (Donsky, 2013). Adhering to the voluntary Nordic Swan label means XXX goes above legal obligations, supplementing a CSV strategy (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

Their partnership with two charities is highlighted on the campaign, focusing on improving access to sanitary products. Although, it fails to explain exactly how it helps these charities, whereby XXX incorporate a ‘giveback’ pledge by giving part of their profits to the charities and donating their own products for the cause (XXX, 2018).

2.2.4 Economic Aspect

The economic sustainability of XXX’s business model is not referred to in the campaign or explicitly outlined anywhere so it is difficult to gage the number of employees and assess the internal operations of the company. Although, XXX offers a reward for supporting the campaign; a corporate period package for 2 months for 70 female employees (Crowdfunder UK, n.d). However, the campaign does not mention the benefits of this; Levett (1998) insists sustainable development is only achieved when all elements are integrated to work together. Therefore, XXX’s corporate subscription primarily offers environmentally friendly sanitary products aimed at companies to improve their social responsibility and inclusion, which it could be argued, inevitably increases business productivity by addressing the fundamental needs of staff.

3.0 Sustainable Development Goals & Recommendations

## 3.1 Introduction to Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals were initiated for the purpose of gathering world leaders as a collective force towards successful growth alongside global sustainability. The 17 goals are a framework of 169 targets for countries to work towards achieving by 2030 (United Nations [UN], 2015). The following section details two SDG’s and presents insightful recommendations for XXX to better achieve the goals.

## 3.2 Good Health and Wellbeing

Good Health and Wellbeing is focused on universally improving the quality and access of healthcare. The goal describes incorporating healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health into educational national strategies (UN, n.d). XXX strives to improve access to female healthcare by partnering with charities such as ‘A Bloody Good Cause’ that deliver sanitary products to homeless and refugee shelters (XXX, 2018).

Basic access and understanding of menstrual hygiene is hindered by a harrowing stigma, with reports showing 71% of girls are embarrassed to purchase sanitary products (Plan International UK, 2017). This prevents open conversation and therefore education on feminine healthcare, especially for young girls entering puberty. This encourages a culture of taboo and can also lead to severe health impacts such as Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) with many young girls unsure how to properly use sanitary products (Mosanya, 2017).

XXX declares itself as an ‘advocate’ towards social change, using its online platforms to encourage both genders to talk about periods and ensuring safe products are available to use. Furthermore, challenging the corporate stage to take responsibility for their employees health, launching a petition in May 2018 with the #PeriodDramas campaign aimed at desensitising the subject and urging companies to allocate a budget for sanitary products within the workplace, allowing female employees access to basic healthcare.

3.2.1 Recommendations

It is evident, a lack of education is a fundamental deterrent for basic feminine healthcare. People need to be comfortable discussing the subject for women to be able to understand and properly manage their basic bodily functions. Plan International (2017) stated 26% of girls were not aware of what to do when they started their period. As a result, it is recommended XXX instigate an educational programme, aligning the company with a movement towards compulsory menstruation education within schools. Partnering with local schools to educate boys and girls on the “biology, social and practical matters” of menstruation, will not only educate but normalise the subject from a young age, encouraging a more open conversation (Plan International, 2018, p.52). Crane and Matten (2016, p. 466) highlight a cause—related marketing campaign would be beneficial to amplify XXX’s involvement towards “building social capital” in local communities and also strengthen the company reputation. Betty For Schools (undated) is a good example of resources aimed at PHSE teachers that could guide XXX’s educational lessons.

***FIGURE 7 - XXX’s ‘Period Manifesto’***

## 3.3 Responsible Consumption and Production

The goal of Responsible Consumption and Production concentrates on complete supply chain efficiency, this can be achieved through manufacturing processes and consumer education of sustainable behaviour (UN, undated). XXX’s business model reaches numerous targets of this goal; their ‘Period Manifesto,' shown in Figure 7, sets out the business purpose to encompass sustainable practices in manufacturing and the final product. Furthermore, using their social platforms to promote awareness of period poverty and associated stigmas, stimulates progression towards socially conscious consumer behaviour.

Sustainable procurement is another aspect of this SDG, XXX’s adherence to the Nordic Swan ‘Eco-label’ promotes Green Public Procurement (Nordic Ecolabelling, n.d). This involves authorities seeking environmentally sustainable goods and services for public use, these goods can be identified through Eco-labels that meet a specific sustainability criteria, as discussed in 2.2.2.

3.3.1 Recommendations

A suitable recommendation to improve XXX’s Responsible Consumption and Production is to extend their product line to offer reusable sanitary products. As a result, this would extend their product life cycle and delay an immediate disposal system. In 2017, sewage related debris, including disposable sanitary and complimentary products accounted for 8.5% of Britains beach litter (Marine Conservation Society, 2017), reusable products contribute significantly less waste. The economic benefits, as the user gets several wears, achieves better value for money than disposable products. XXX are one example of reusable cloth products that offer various benefits above disposable sanitary towels, championing a sustainable production and consumption in the industry (XXX, 2018).

It can be expected a change to reusable products will be met with some resistance from consumers due to the overarching cultural taboo causing many women to feel awkward discussing menstruation and therefore unaware of sustainable alternatives to conventional brands. Therefore, it is also recommended XXX improve the environmental responsibility of their existing applicator tampon range by switching to cardboard applicators. This would eradicate the need for plastics in their tampons and ensure they are completely biodegradable, Appendix 4 examples XXX’s approach to cardboard applicators.

4.0 Conclusions

In conclusion, this report has analysed the sustainability of XXX’s business practices. It is evident, a strong sense of social purpose exists within the company to improve access to sanitary protection. The brand remains focused on creating a community by supporting charitable organisations and adopting consumer centric manufacturing processes that places consumer health and wellbeing at the forefront of its value proposition.

The industry analysis revealed elements of greenwashing, largely amongst the main market leaders. Through the perspective of CSV (Porter & Kramer, 2011) a demand for innovation within conventional sanitary products was highly sought after to satisfy the rise in conscious consumer behaviour.

Through the lens of Good Health and Wellbeing, education was shown as a universal driver towards sustainable consumer behaviour, whereby XXX can adopt a cause - related marketing strategy to simultaneously satisfy societal needs and achieve business profitability, as Porter and Kramer refer to in CSV (2011). Likewise, XXX must innovate within their existing products to improve their Responsible Consumption and Production packages to offer cardboard applicator tampons, lowering their contribution to the plastic waste crisis. Re-usable products must also be offered as a viable alternative to traditional disposable sanitary pads and tampons.

Furthermore, sustainability remains a highly subjective process, for XXX to improve their practices in these areas it must be understood that sustainability within the sanitary product sector is not reliant on the individual products. Whereas, a holistic approach encompassing social attitudes, environmental concerns and economic impact of sanitary protection must address the needs of individual consumers and the wider society.

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6.0 Appendices

**Appendix 1: Feminine Hygiene & Sanitary Protection Industry Analysis**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Feminine Hygiene and Sanitary Protection Products - UK - January 2018 - Market Segmentation |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| UK retail value sales of feminine hygiene, sanitary protection and adult incontinence products, 2015-17 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 2015 |  | 2016 |  | 2017 (est) |  | % change |
|  | £m | % | £m | % | £m | % | 2016-17 |
| Sanitary protection | 278.1 | 64 | 271.5 | 61 | 265.8 | 59 | -2.1 |
| - Sanitary towels | 143.1 | 33 | 140.5 | 32 | 138.2 | 30 | -1.7 |
| - Tampons | 80.9 | 19 | 79 | 18 | 77.1 | 17 | -2.3 |
| - Panty liners | 53.9 | 12 | 51.9 | 12 | 50.4 | 11 | -2.7 |
| - Others | 0.2 | - | 0.1 | - | 0.1 | - | -16.5 |
| Incontinence products | 130.7 | 30 | 147.9 | 33 | 163.9 | 36 | 10.8 |
| Feminine hygiene | 22.5 | 5 | 23.6 | 5 | 23.4 | 5 | -0.7 |
| Total | 431.2 | 100 | 443 | 100 | 453.1 | 100 | 2.3 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Note: totals may not equal 100 due to rounding |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Source: based on IRI/Mintel |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Figure 1: Market Segmentation of Feminine Hygiene & Sanitary Protection industry (Mintel, 2017)**

**Appendix 2: Creating Shared Value (Porter & Kramer, 2011)**

Figure 2 outlines the core principles of Creating Shared Value from Porter and Kramer (2011). The differences between traditional Corporate Social Responsibility and Creating Shared Value are also highlighted in Figure 3.

**Figure 2: Levels of Creating Shared Value (Adapted from Porter & Kramer, 2011)**

| Creating Shared Value |
| --- |
| **Reconceiving Products & Markets** | **Redefining Productivity in the Value Chain**  | **Enabling Local Cluster Development**  |
| * Meeting needs of society through products and services
* Addressing needs of unserved or undeserved customers or markets
 | * Innovation in business operations to address needs of society
* Utilising; resources, logistics, energy, suppliers, distribution and employees more effectively to reshape the value chain in favour of societal needs.
 | * Improving the infrastructure and institutions that affects business operations
* Strengthening local clusters around area of business operations
 |

**Figure 3: Differences between CSR & CSV (Porter & Kramer, 2011)**

**Appendix 3: Period Poverty Statistics (Plan International UK, 2017)**

The following statistics represent data obtained from a sample population of 1000 girls aged 14-21 in 2017 (Plan international UK, 2017). The information reflects the growing issue of period poverty across the UK due to societal and economic barriers across family, education and governmental institutions.

**Figure 4: Period Poverty Statistics (Plan International UK, 2017)**

**Appendix 4: XXX and ‘Plastic Free Periods’**

XXX is one brand that produces plastic free disposable sanitary products and pioneers the “#periodswithoutplastic” campaign by Women’s Environmental Network (2018). XXX would benefit from launching their plastic free tampons in line with this campaign that encourages education of responsible consumerism of sanitary products and champions brands that demonstrate responsible production in the industry.

Figure 5 shows the product description from XXX’s website of their cardboard applicator tampons, illustrating the benefits of plastic free sanitary protection of which XXX could emulate by adapting their current applicator tampons.

**Figure 5: XXX Cardboard Applicator Tampons (XXX, 2019)**