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The Menstrual Movement in the Media

Reducing stigma and
tackling social inequalities



Maria Kathryn Tomlinson

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This book is dedicated to Yorick.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

‘Let’s reduce the stigma and shame of it! As it becomes more open, that’s what’ll really reduce the stigma, won’t it? Once you’re free to talk about periods, it won’t be seen as an awkward topic.’

—Teenaged boy, Yorkshire, 2021 (focus group participant)

Although the origins of the menstrual activist movement can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century, it was not until 2015 that the menstrual movement captured the attention of the mainstream media and global audiences (Weiss-Wolf, 2017). In 2015, dubbed by newspapers and women’s magazines as ‘The Year of the Period’, news media reported multiple instances of activism from across the globe. These included women in India who launched the ‘#HappytoBleed’ campaign as a protest against a temple chief who would not allow them to enter a shrine in case they were menstruating, Kiran Gandhi’s act of running the London marathon whilst free bleeding, Laura Coryton’s campaign that called for the British government to remove the ‘tampon tax’, and Rupī Kaur’s criticism of Instagram for removing a photo in which she had a spot of menstrual blood on her bedsheets (Chen, 2022; Doshi, 2021).¹ Since 2015, the mainstream media has not only sustained its attention to the menstrual movement but also paid increasing attention to the topic of menstruation

¹Tampon tax refers to the VAT on menstrual products.

itself (De Benedictis, 2023; McKay, 2021; Stanek et al., 2023). This mediation of menstruation has included a variety of health and social issues that also concern menstrual activists, including stigma, menstrual equity (known in the United Kingdom as ‘period poverty’), endometriosis, the environmental impact of single-use period products, and the experiences of transgender people who menstruate.² As Chris Bobel wrote in 2020, ‘[M]enstruation is having its moment’ (p. 2). We are still in this moment. Indeed, menstruation has become increasingly visible in the media, in politics, and in societies around the world, ever since.

For decades, menstrual activists in Great Britain and across the globe have fought to end the stigma that surrounds menstruation, improve public knowledge about menstrual health, and reduce the social inequalities that negatively impact the lives of menstruating women and people (Bobel & Fahs, 2020b; Urban & Holtzman, 2023). Their work is of vital importance to the health, wellbeing, and interpersonal relationships of women and gender minorities who menstruate (including non-binary people, intersex people, and transgender men).³ We can understand menstrual activism as a fight for gender equality that focuses its efforts on ensuring women and other people who menstruate have equal rights, access, and opportunities, as those who do not menstruate (Arber, 2018; Brinkley & Niebuhr, 2023). By speaking openly about menstruation as well as encouraging others to do so, menstrual activists aspire to impart their audiences with the confidence to seek knowledge about menstrual health, to ask for products when required, to find solidarity through sharing their experiences, and even to advocate for others who menstruate (Gaybor, 2019; Koskenniemi, 2021). The efforts of menstrual activists to challenge menstrual taboos may also inspire increased participation in sport and boost self-esteem. By providing accurate information and challenging

² Menstrual equity and period poverty both refer to ‘the state in which people who menstruate find themselves without the financial resources to access suitable menstrual products’ (Vora, 2020, p. 31). The first is commonly used and understood in the United States by activists, scholars, and the public, whereas ‘period poverty’ is commonly used in the United Kingdom (De Benedictis, 2023).

³ From this point onwards, this book uses ‘transgender’ as an umbrella term to refer to all people who menstruate who do not identify as women. This book therefore defines transgender in the following way: ‘*Transgender* is an umbrella term used to describe individuals whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from assigned sex at birth’ (Rosendale et al., 2018, p. 1535). When this book refers only to ‘women’ this is to reflect either an experience that is specific to menstruating cisgender women or the views of participants or scholars.

misinformation, activists do not only aim to reduce the stigma that is caused by menstrual myths but also hope to arm the public with information that may lead them to recognise atypical menstrual symptoms (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022; Wood, 2020). This may lead women and other people who menstruate to seek medical treatment for conditions such as endometriosis, PCOS (Polycystic Ovary Syndrome), and PMDD (Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder) (Hardy & Hardie, 2017; Holowka, 2022). By providing menstrual products as well as striving to improve menstrual health education in schools, activists are trying to ensure that no girls or other young people who menstruate miss school due to reasons such as stigma or a lack of access to products (Brown et al., 2022; Randhawa et al., 2021). Activists are therefore making an important contribution to broader efforts to reduce gender inequalities. By sharing experiences of using sustainable products, circulating information on how to use them, and distributing them to low-income communities, activists are encouraging people to use products that not only are less harmful for the environment but also offer personal financial and health benefits (Ramsay et al., 2023). By shedding light on the menstrual experiences of transgender, non-binary, and other gender minorities, activists are advocating for diversity, inclusion, and the rights of LGBTQ+ people (Schwartz et al., 2022; Selkie et al., 2020). The contemporary menstrual movement is therefore more than just a celebration of the act of menstruating: it is a movement that treats the menstruating body holistically and intersectionally through activists' fight for the visibility, equality, freedoms, rights, and wellbeing of all people who menstruate. Through presentation and analysis of original interviews with activists and focus groups with teenagers, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* offers the very first in-depth examination of the contemporary menstrual movement, its mediation, and its impact on young people.

It is not a coincidence that the emergence of menstrual activism into the mainstream media has coincided with the rise of the fourth-wave feminism, which is a movement that is often visible via hashtags (such as #MeToo, #BodyPositive, and #BlackGirlMagic) (Cochrane, 2013; Hansen, 2021). Indeed, much of the impetus behind the traditional media's sudden interest in the menstrual movement was sparked by hashtag campaigns such as #PeriodPositive, #JustaTampon, #FreePeriods, and #HappytoBleed. As the interviews in this book attest, the menstrual movement is not solely composed of major campaigns, such as those that are led by NGOs, but it also incorporates individuals with small social

media followings. With reference to my interviews with activists, focus groups with teenagers, and existing research that positions any act of talking about menstruation as a contribution to the erosion of menstrual stigma, this book considers these individuals as part of the menstrual movement (Bobel & Fahs, 2020a; Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). As the young people and activists who were interviewed for this book attest, a person neither needs to work for a charity, nor protest on the street, nor directly impact government policy, to be considered a menstrual activist. Hence, this book argues that the videos, texts, and images that engage with menstruation across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter/X contribute to the menstrual movement by helping to open conversations about menstruation and thereby reduce the shame that menstruating women and people can experience.⁴ Examples of menstrual activism on social media can therefore range from a meme that celebrates somebody opening a pad in a bathroom, to a video of girls who are placing tampons in water in front of their male friends, to a campaign by an NGO asking for donations for women in low-income households. This book's definitions of 'the menstrual movement', 'menstrual activism', and 'menstrual advocacy' therefore incorporate any person who tries to improve the experiences of menstruating women and transgender people.⁵ By deconstructing the view that only 'high-effort' actions can be considered as activism, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* offers insight into contemporary definitions of activism that have implications beyond the menstrual movement (Knutper et al., 2023, p. 3). This includes implications for other feminist movements, social movement studies, and the discipline of communication studies.

Although the efforts of menstrual activists from across the globe are often acknowledged by scholars within critical menstruation studies, only a handful of studies have carried out and analysed interviews with menstrual activists (Bobel, 2007; Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). As *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* draws on interviews that I conducted with 32 activists in 2020 and 2021, it offers a rare comprehensive insight into the diverse aims, practices, and experiences of those who form part of the contemporary menstrual movement. Even more crucially, *The Menstrual*

⁴ As I conducted my interviews and focus groups before Twitter was rebranded to 'X', this book will refer to this platform as Twitter.

⁵ When discussing an interviewee's activism or advocacy, the choice of terminology in the book is based on the participant's own preference.

Movement in the Media is the first study to interview the public on their knowledge and perceptions of menstrual activism. Indeed, the Chaps. 4, 5, and 6 of this book, which are based on focus groups that I conducted with 77 teenagers, offer a unique insight into the impact of journalism, social media, and mediated menstrual activism on young people's attitudes towards menstruation and related health and social issues. Although other scholars have interviewed school-aged participants, their studies have not considered how social media or menstrual activism has shaped young people's knowledge and perceptions of menstruation (Freidenfelds, 2009; Fingerson, 2012; Newton, 2016). Furthermore, as these studies were conducted prior to 2015, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* represents the first significant examination of young people's attitudes towards menstruation since the menstrual movement became far more visible both in mainstream media and on social media across the globe (Weiss-Wolf, 2017).

The Menstrual Movement in the Media also offers a rare insight into menstrual experience, menstrual activism, and the mediation of menstruation in Great Britain. Indeed, this book is the very first study to provide a holistic view of the British menstrual movement that includes Scotland, England, and Wales. Although scholarship has emerged over the last few years from Great Britain, and from Scotland in particular, the field of critical menstruation studies is still largely dominated by researchers in the United States (Mckay, 2021; Owen, 2022a). Despite there being an active, visible, and successful menstrual movement in Great Britain, there are few studies about menstrual activism in Great Britain and no in-depth studies into its impact on British society. It is only possible to gain a cursory insight into the British menstrual movement and its mediation by piecing together various studies. Typically, existing studies either only briefly mention the existence of the contemporary menstrual movement or only explore one of the issues with which the movement is concerned.⁶ As Scotland has also led the way in Great Britain in terms of menstrual research and activism, this book also provides a rare scholarly insight into menstrual activist work in Wales and England, as well as the impact of the

⁶Although it only focuses on Scotland and does not include qualitative research on the impact of menstrual activism on public perceptions of menstruation, the special collection by Bildhauer and Owen (2022) is a rare exception. This collection examines how Scotland's menstrual movement successfully campaigned for the Scottish government legally to guarantee universal access to free menstrual products.

menstrual movement on teenagers in England. Although there are studies that have interviewed young people in Great Britain about their attitudes towards menstruation, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* is the first significant study to do so since Victoria Newton (2016) carried out focus groups in a Derbyshire school in 2011. Hence, the focus groups that were conducted for this book constitute the very first piece of scholarly research into young people's attitudes towards menstruation in Great Britain since the menstrual movement gained significant attention both in mainstream media and on social media.⁷ As such a comprehensive study does not exist for menstrual movements in other countries, this book provides a template for future research on the impact of other national movements, such as in India, France, Kenya, Japan, or Canada.

As menstrual activists tend to view their advocacy as one aspect of a broader feminist movement, either locally or transnationally, for gender equality, this introduction begins by exploring how the menstrual movement has been shaped by the evolution of feminism across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Bobel, 2010; Fadnis, 2017). This introduction then contextualises *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* within the growing field of critical menstruation studies that examines the social, cultural, political, and psychological, aspects of menstrual experience (Bobel, 2020). Since the main aim of the contemporary menstrual movement is to reduce menstrual shame, this section focuses on theories about menstrual stigma and how it is perpetuated. Although literature that intersects with other areas of menstrual activism is more limited, this section also discusses studies that give insight into menstrual equity, the environmental aspects of menstruation, menstrual health, and the experiences of transgender and non-binary people who menstruate. Starting from 'the year of the period' (2015), the next section provides a brief overview of the political changes that have been driven by the menstrual movement in Great

⁷ Although *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* analyses interviews with menstrual activists in Great Britain and explores the impact of the menstrual movement on young people in Great Britain, it does so in the context of a globalised world in which different influences can be impossible to unpack. Indeed, the young people interviewed for this study encountered posts about menstruation from individuals and organisations from all over the globe and often could not remember who had created these posts. This book therefore cannot, and does not, narrow its focus to the impact of British menstrual activism on British people. Instead, it focuses on the specific aims of the British menstrual movement and explores the extent to which these have been realised via young people's engagement with social media and news media.

Britain. The subsequent section discusses the methodologies that were used in this book as well as the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on these methodological choices. The final section offers a chapter summary.

THE MENSTRUAL MOVEMENT AND ITS LINKS TO THE WIDER FEMINIST MOVEMENT

Changing Menstrual Practices in the Early Twentieth Century

Although the sudden mainstream media interest in the menstrual movement gave the impression that it was a new phenomenon in 2015, menstrual activists have been fighting for the recognition, rights, and needs of menstruating women and people for much of the twentieth century (Bobel & Fahs, 2020a, b). This fight has therefore spanned the second, third, and fourth waves of feminism, and has evolved in conjunction with feminist discourses, objectives, and practices. Menstrual activists respond to gender inequalities and other issues that are important to the wider feminist movement, but with a specific focus on how they impact menstrual experience (Cole et al., 2021; Daily, 2019). Although the aims and practices of the menstrual movement have evolved across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the menstrual movement has long combined direct action with discursive approaches (Fadnis, 2017; Haymond, 2020). Direct action has included marches and demonstrations to demand free menstrual products in schools, petitions for dysmenorrhea to be recognised as a legitimate form of absence from school, and boycotts of menstrual product brands (Coryton & Russell, 2021; Røstvik, 2022).⁸ The discursive aspect of the movement can be characterised as ‘a scathing critique of the dominant Western cultural narrative of menstruation, resisting the framing of menstruation as dirty, shameful, and something best

⁸For example, #BoycottTampax went viral in 2022 in response to the following tweet by Tampax: ‘You’re in their DMs. We’re in them. We are not the same.’ This tweet was criticised online both for sexualising consumers and for not referring to women directly (as part of ongoing efforts by gender critical feminists against gender-inclusive language). See, for example, Delatto, M. (2018, Nov 2022) “‘#BoycottTampax’ Trends On Twitter After Viral Tweet From Tampon Company” *Forbes*

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/marisadellatto/2022/11/22/boycotttampax-trends-on-twitter-after-viral-tweet-from-tampon-company/?sh=774c27aa72a9>

hidden' (Bobel, 2007, p. 87). Challenging this framing has remained a central aim of the menstrual movement over the past 50 years.

Although there is little evidence of an organised menstrual movement before the 1970s, menstrual practices began to change significantly in the mid-twentieth century (Vostral, 2008). Nineteenth-century practices of keeping women uninformed about reproduction were replaced with calls for menstrual education in schools (Freidenfelds, 2009). Furthermore, society began to reject the centuries-old myth that women were less competent workers than men because of their menstrual cycles (Koskenniemi, 2021). Thus, as there was a sudden demand for products that would allow women to easily manage menstruation in public spaces, the use of disposables became normalised by the 1960s (Vostral, 2008). Despite this increase of menstruating girls and women in public spaces such as schools and offices, the expectation remained that menstruation should be concealed and unspoken (Laws, 1990). Instead of encouraging a more open culture around menstruation, 'these items helped consumers "pass" as non-menstruating at all times and to conform to "menstrual etiquette" every day' (Røstvik, 2022, p. 4). These expectations were also established in menstrual product advertisements. As these advertisements became more commonplace in the 1960s, these discourses became part of the everyday lives of media consumers (Erchull, 2013). To sell single-use menstrual products, brands profited financially from positioning menstruation as a hygienic problem that required a discreet solution (Rosewarne, 2012). These advertisements therefore framed menstrual blood as unhygienic, the act of menstruating as shameful, and menstruation as requiring strict management (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020a, b). In addition to advertising, menstruation also became more visible in the mainstream media via sitcoms which mocked menstruating women for being weak or irrational (Chrisler & Levy, 1990). Hence, despite menstruation being more visible in public spaces than ever before, menstrual shame and stigma continued strongly to influence menstrual experiences in the 1960s (Patterson, 2014).

Second-Wave Feminism

Reducing menstrual stigma and reframing menstruation in a positive light were key aspects of the second-wave feminist movement (Becknuss, 2022; Leclerc, 1974). This challenge to menstrual stigma often accompanied criticisms of the medicalisation of women's bodies and calls for women to reimagine their own bodies outside a medical framework (Wood, 2020).

In the United States, for example, the beginning of the menstrual movement is associated with the emergence of the American women's health movement in the late 1960s. This movement, which originally focussed on legalising abortion, voiced 'a robust resistance to the androcentric and often patronizing medical establishment' (Bobel, 2020, p. 1003). Participants started publishing newsletters and books as well as running women's health centres and advocating for policy changes (Norsigian, 2019). The women's health movement focussed on multiple aspects of women's reproductive health including menstruation, abortion, childbirth, and menopause. For example, they responded to thousands of cases of Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS), including 38 deaths, that were caused by tampons manufactured by Procter & Gamble. Activists called for the stricter regulation of the menstrual product industry and worked with the government to ensure that TSS warnings and absorbency information were displayed on packaging (Vostral, 2008). Seeing a common goal in the fight against harmful single-use products, environmental activists joined this campaign to hold manufacturers to account (Røstvik, 2022). Remaining an important part of the movement today, 'environmenstrual activists' continue to bring 'to light the polluting effects of single-use menstrual care products and promot[e] greener alternatives such as organic tampons and pads, reusable cloth pads, [and] cups' (Bobel & Fahs, 2020a, b, p. 1003).

Some of the key messages of the women's health movement were also echoed by second-wave feminists in Europe and 'feminist spiritualist menstrual activists' in the United States (Bobel & Fahs, 2020a, b). Grounding their approach on sexual difference, both groups considered how women's subordinate position in society undermines, silences, and stigmatises their experiences of menstruation (Bobel, 2010). These efforts to valorise menstruation formed part of their endeavours to 'move embodiment from object to subject status—to see the body not as trivial or unimportant, but as something foundational, urgent, and politically relevant' (Bobel & Fahs, 2020a, b, p. 1001). Through prose, cinema, and art, that celebrate menstrual experience, both groups deconstructed and rejected patriarchal discourses that shame menstruating bodies (Becknuss, 2022). For instance, French second-wave feminists such as Julia Kristeva, Annie Leclerc, and Marie Cardinal argued that women felt ashamed of their menstrual blood and compelled to conceal their menstruation (Kristeva, 1980; Leclerc & Cardinal, 1977). They explained that these behaviours were caused by internalised patriarchal discourses that position women's bodies as abject,

menstruating women as hysterical, and menstruation as something trivial (Tomlinson, 2021). Echoing feminist spiritualists in the United States, Annie Leclerc reimagined menstruation as a meaningful and joyous aspect of womanhood through which women could find solidarity (Leclerc, 1974). She created a *parole de femme* (woman's word) that combats negative patriarchal discourses through reframing menstruation as a positive experience. She also encouraged her readers to write and speak about their own menstrual experiences in a positive and open manner.

Third-Wave Feminism and Intersectionality

Although the objective of the second-wave feminists to eradicate menstrual shame is still echoed by today's movement, menstrual activists' approach to this stigma has significantly evolved since the second wave. The intersectionality of the third-wave feminist movement, which criticised second-wave feminists for speaking from a privileged position, has been especially influential for the trajectory of menstrual activism (Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). As second-wave feminists framed menstruation as an experience that was unique to women, treated women as a homogeneous group, and often spoke from a privileged white middle-class perspective, their approach ignores how menstrual experiences are shaped by various social factors (Tomlinson, 2021). Although very few intersectional feminist writers specifically criticised second-wave feminists for their representations of menstruation, they argued that gendered experiences should be considered in the context of a 'matrix of oppression' (Collins, 1991). Black feminists from the third-wave feminist movement, such as Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, illustrated that gendered experience intersects with race, class, sexuality, religion, and age (Crenshaw, 1991). Although intersectionality is a concept that originated in the Black feminist movement, this approach was also evident in the work of writers from other racial backgrounds. For instance, feminists within postcolonial studies, such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, embodied a transnational feminist approach that recognises that women's experiences are shaped by sociocultural context. These authors criticised white European feminists for their reductive and stigmatising representations of 'third world women' (Spivak, 2014). In a text that is foundational to transnational feminism, Chandra Talpade Mohanty adopts an intersectional stance in her criticism of second-wave feminists. She writes, 'Western feminisms appropriate and "colonize" the

fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races, and castes in these countries' (Mohanty, 1984, p. 335). Intersectional and transnational feminism therefore paved the way for feminist movements to reevaluate how they approached corporeality.

In the 1990s, as a response to intersectional feminism, menstrual activists began to change their approach to menstrual experience (Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). This included focussing on the specific needs of marginalised groups such as menstruating women and transgender people who are homeless, are from low-income households, or are part of ethnic minority communities in which menstrual stigma is prevalent (Dunnivant & Roberts, 2013; White, 2013). As part of their new intersectional approach, activists also reframed menstruation from a phenomenon that is uniquely female and a key aspect of a woman's identity to a phenomenon that is neither exclusive to cisgender women nor a necessary element of womanhood. The term 'menstruator' was therefore coined to include individuals across the gender spectrum such as transgender men, intersex people, and non-binary people (Bobel & Fahs, 2020a, b). According to Bobel (2010), the anti-capitalist and punk-inspired message of certain third-wave feminists also inspired some menstrual activists to adopt a more radical approach to changing societal attitudes towards menstruation and improving menstrual health education. This included championing reusable products, free bleeding as a form of protest and art, comedy performances that narrated menstrual experiences, and the publications of zines. Zines, such as Saskia's *Heavy Flow* (1993–1995) and Chella Quint's *Adventures in Menstruating*, not only disseminated the messages of the menstrual movement but also significantly shaped the movement's agenda.⁹

Fourth-Wave Feminism

As discourses of intersectionality, inclusion, and destigmatisation still characterise menstrual activism today, it is not a *discursive* shift that most

⁹According to Chella Quint, she coined the term 'period positive' in 2006 to encourage a gender inclusive and non-stigmatising approach to menstruation (Quint, 2021). This term, alongside an emphasis on inclusivity, intersectionality, and destigmatisation, is still used by menstrual activists and is visible on social media via the hashtag #periodpositive. However, as explored later in the book, the original meanings of this term are not always known to those who use it.

clearly demarcates today's movement from its predecessors, but a *technological* one. It is undeniable that the advent of the Internet, and social media especially, has profoundly impacted feminist social movements. Not only has social media increased the visibility of feminist movements but it has also shaped how feminist activists support, advocate for, and engage with their audiences (Rich, 2018; Rivers, 2017). As feminist scholars view this technological development as instrumental to the evolution of feminism, this contemporary feminist movement is categorised as a fourth wave (Baer, 2016).¹⁰ Emerging in the 2010s, fourth-wave feminism is often 'defined by its focus on technology' rather on an ideology that distinguishes it from the previous waves of feminism (Knappe & Lang, 2014, p. 364). As Alison Harvey (2020) explains, '[T]he definition of fourth-wave feminism is rooted not in the political development of feminism but in practices associated with digital media and emerging technologies, in particular social media' (p. 17). To indicate the revolutionary impact of digital tools, scholarship has illustrated the various ways in which digital tools have been advantageous to the feminist movement. They argue that digital spaces, such as blogs, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, have significantly increased the visibility of feminist issues both in people's everyday lives and on a political level (Keller & Ringrose, 2018; Sued et al., 2022). They also illustrate that social media has helped to build transnational networks (Rivers, 2017). Matich et al. indicate that, thanks to digital tools, feminists can 'educate, organise and galvanise more easily than ever before' (2019, p. 345). Underscoring the power of this technology, they write:

No other form of activism has had the capability to mobilise thousands within minutes, enabling those invested in social justice to play their part through crowdfunding activity, consciousness-raising efforts, and a call-out culture, by providing a platform for radical forms of education, by providing space and visibility for marginalised bodies and identities, and through the formation of online communities and knowledge sharing platforms. (2019, p. 345)

As one of the aims of fourth-wave feminism is to empower marginalised groups, scholars have debated the extent to which social media can

¹⁰ Although most feminist researchers view third- and fourth-wave feminism as two distinct movements, some scholars argue that new technologies are merely providing a new vehicle for feminism. Hence, the adoption of social media does not constitute a new era of feminism (Rodino-Colocino, 2014; Chamberlain, 2017).

improve the lives of marginalised women and other gender minority groups. A significant number of studies indicate that social media has amplified the voices of marginalised women such as those who are disadvantaged by their race, class, or disability (Bitman, 2023; Clark, 2019; Keller, 2015). As the mainstream media can silence marginalised groups, some studies argue that social media platforms offer a valuable alternative space in which women can effectively call out discrimination, be heard, build communities, and empower each other (Jackson, 2018; Darwin & Miller, 2021; Willem et al., 2022). Other scholars frame social media as an important tool for achieving the intersectional goals of feminist activists (Gogin & Newell, 2007; Merlin & Reed, 2020). Meredith Clark (2019), for example, discusses the power of social media to empower Black women. She argues that hashtag campaigns, such as #BlackLivesMatters, mobilise women to call out racism and sexism. She highlights that the mainstream media distorts the messages of Black women, and thus social media provides a valuable form of self-mediation through which they can effectively raise awareness of the injustices and inequalities that they experience.

Although it is undeniable that, thanks to digital technologies, fourth-wave feminists have access to a larger audience than previous feminist movements, digital activism has neither eradicated existing patterns of privilege nor ensured equal participation (Crossley, 2015). Certain scholars therefore criticise the assumption that digital communication is the most effective vehicle for feminist consciousness-raising and change (Butler, 2013; Fotopoulou, 2016; Gogin & Newell, 2007; Mohammed, 2021). Some of this scholarship has focussed on a lack of access to technology amongst marginalised groups. As Julia Schuster underscores, there is still a noticeable ‘digital divide that prevents an equal access to the tools of representation’ (2013, p. 11). She explains that geography, wealth, and age are contributing factors to the unequal distribution of digital technologies. Although Schuster’s (2013) study was written over ten years ago, her comments about wealth disparity are still relevant to British society today (Beck et al., 2024). What is more, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the gap has not only remained but also widened (Merlin & Reed, 2020). Contemporary activists (including those interviewed for this book), scholars, and journalists use the term ‘technology poverty’ to refer to a digital divide that is based on wealth. This digital divide was particularly problematic during lockdown as some marginalised communities had limited access to education, social support, and certain medical services

(Power, 2020). For this reason, the gap between privileged and marginalised groups widened.¹¹ For the activist participants who were interviewed for this book, lockdowns suddenly separated them from the marginalised communities that they had been supporting offline (Tomlinson, 2021).¹²

Besides demonstrating that digital feminist activism may not be reaching marginalised groups, scholars also question the extent to which feminist digital activism can mobilise, engage, and inspire action in those who are able to access it. Referring to online activism as ‘slacktivism’ (a combination of ‘slacker’ and ‘activism’), some studies argue that online activism requires little effort and therefore is unlikely to lead to any significant change (Caldeira, 2018; Chen et al., 2018; Dean, 2009). Although these studies indicate that online activism may lead to greater awareness of feminist issues, they suggest that engagement with online activism rarely leads to offline direct action (such as taking part in protests) or even discursive activism (such as talking to friends about issues raised online). As Cerise Glenn (2015) explains, ‘[S]lacktivism has increasingly been used to describe the disconnect between awareness and action through the use of social media’ (p. 81). Jodi Dean (2009) theorises that, because the Internet creates strong feelings of intimacy and solidarity, those who participate in online movements can have a heightened sense of impact that does not reflect reality. Dean articulates that ‘technology covers over our impotence and supports a vision of ourselves as active political participants. A particular technological innovation becomes a screen upon which all sorts of fantasies of political action are projected’ (2009, p. 36). As participating in ‘slacktivism’ may be enough to ‘liberate’ someone’s consciousness and satisfy their desire to make a difference, it reduces the likelihood of them engaging in more impactful offline activism (Chen et al., 2018, p. 201). For these reasons, scholars such as Aristeia Fotopoulou (2016) have demonstrated that digital activism alone is not sufficient for achieving feminist goals. When considering the impact of digital menstrual activism, it is therefore important to bear in mind that it may not be reaching, engaging, or influencing all intended audiences. Indeed, these limitations were

¹¹ For example, in some households with slow Internet access or only one computer, not all children were able to effectively engage with online classes (Onyema et al., 2020).

¹² Since all interviews and focus groups were conducted in 2020 and 2021, *The Menstrual Movement* inevitably touches on the COVID-19 pandemic. However, for a detailed exploration of its impact on the menstrual movement in Great Britain, see Tomlinson (2021).

acknowledged by most of my activist participants and will be explored in Chaps. 2 and 3 of this book.

Although almost all the activists interviewed for *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* use digital tools for consciousness-raising, many continue to engage with the public in offline locations such as in community spaces, religious centres, cafes, and schools. This combination of offline and online activism that is visible in the menstrual movement is not uncommon (Cochrane, 2013; Zimmerman, 2017). For example, by posting on social media and participating in offline demonstrations, fourth-wave feminists played a vital role in the Arab Spring. Both methods were used to demand gender equality as well as to contribute to the wider movement's call for social justice, democracy, and freedom (Khamis, 2015). As Maha Tazi and Kenza Oumlil explain, '[O]nline activism was effective as it resulted in greater empowerment of women across the region to claim equal access to the public sphere, where online activism was efficiently translated into offline political and social engagement' (2020, p. 46). Tazi and Oumlil's findings therefore indicate that, in the case of the Arab Spring, online engagement was not merely a form of 'slacktivism' because it inspired significant offline action. By examining how the menstrual movement has influenced offline attitudes and behaviours of young people, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* also contributes to, and provides, an original intervention in debates about the power of social media to affect change in the offline world.

As this section has illustrated, scholarship primarily focuses on technology when differentiating between the fourth wave and the third wave. However, the discursive contradictions that are often evident within fourth-wave feminism also set this movement apart from its predecessors. Understanding these competing discourses within fourth-wave feminism is also key to comprehending the context in which the contemporary menstrual movement operates. Even though fourth-wave feminists (including menstrual activists) echo the third wave by adopting an intersectional perspective to gender inequities, this can be undermined by neoliberal and postfeminist discourses. In other words, fourth-wave feminism recognises structural inequalities but can also propose a postfeminist solution that is based on individual agency (Baer, 2016). As Harvey (2020) indicates, previous waves of feminism 'struggled with institutionalized forms of power such as the legal system (in the case of abolition and suffrage) and differential treatment based on gender within social, economic, and political structures' whereas contemporary feminism primarily gives

prominence to ‘individual feelings of agency and empowerment’ (p. 16). Postfeminism therefore places responsibility on individual women to improve their own circumstances and attitudes rather than tackling the structural issues that disempower women or lead to their internalisation of pejorative patriarchal discourses (Butler, 2013; Koskenniemi, 2021). This is evident in a postfeminist discourse of ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ that erases structural inequalities (Gill & Elias, 2014). Often focussing on the physical appearance of women’s bodies, postfeminism encourages behaviours and attitudes that previous movements would categorise as ‘anti-feminist’. These include encouraging women strictly to monitor their own bodies, perform in ‘fitness’ regimes to improve self-esteem, and believe the neoliberal idea that hard work is sufficient to overcome all obstacles. Indeed, neoliberal ideologies are frequent in postfeminism because both discourses ‘privilege individualism [and regard] individuals as free agents that are unfettered by social, political, or economic restraints’ (Keller, 2015, p. 50).¹³ As Rottenberg (2014) argues, neoliberal feminism undermines intersectionality because its discourses of empowerment are based on a white middle-class subject position.

The mainstream media has played a huge role in the popularity of contemporary feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In so doing, the mainstream and commercial media has diluted radical feminist ideas to present a more palatable and ‘spreadable’ version of feminism (Cefai, 2020, p. 4). As Mary Vavrus explains, postfeminist discourses within the mainstream news media can serve ‘the overall interests of corporate media by diluting or jettisoning aspects of feminism that are incompatible with corporate goals while retaining others, often for the purpose of commodifying them’ (2002, p. 33). Hence, within the same post, magazine article, or feminist blog, we can often see intersectional, anti-capitalist, neoliberal, and post-feminist discourses side-by-side without problematisation. Taking the fashion pages of *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, and *Glamour* as examples, Sofia Caldeira illustrates that women’s magazines can simultaneously adopt ‘openly feminist tones’ whilst also positioning fashion and make-up as empowering (2018, p. 97). She adds that the magazines use the term

¹³For example, Gill and Orgad (2018) demonstrate that a neoliberal discourse of resilience has emerged in the United Kingdom because of austerity: ‘Austerity discourses stress women’s responsibility and need for adaptation and positive thinking, as exemplified by the slogan “make do and mend”, which was championed during the UK recession by television presenter Kirstie Allsop and had a strong gendered association’.

‘feminism’ as a ‘cheer word’ to celebrate the entrepreneurial or commercial achievements of women, rather than to refer to activism that tackles gender inequalities (Caldeira, 2018, p. 98). In these ways, magazines can appear to espouse feminist values whilst also furthering their capitalist agenda to increase advertising revenue (Cole & Crossley, 2009).

The body positive movement, which has strongly influenced the contemporary menstrual movement, is a pertinent example of a fourth-wave feminist movement that embodies these competing discourses (Darwin & Miller, 2021). The Body Positive movement has historical roots in the Fat Acceptance movement that emerged in the 1960s as well as in the sex positive discourses that were promoted by the women’s liberation movement (Stokes, 2013; Darwin & Miller, 2021). Black women have been instrumental in both the Fat Acceptance movement and in the contemporary body positive movement which brought discourses of ‘fat acceptance’ onto social media (Rodgers et al., 2022). Originally, both movements challenged the mainstream media for perpetuating a normative beauty ideal of the cisgender, heterosexual, and thin, white body. Both movements therefore called for increased visibility, acceptance, and celebration of bodies that do not fit these criteria (Griffin et al., 2022). Social media facilitated the growth of the body positive movement and brought it to the attention of women’s magazines and other forms of mainstream media (Tovar, 2018). The contemporary and popular version of the body positive movement, however, rather than tackling the structural issues, such as racism, that cause women to feel ashamed of their bodies, asks individuals to improve their attitudes towards their own bodies.

The intervention of brands, including those that sell menstrual products, is partly to blame for this dilution of the radical messages of the body positive movement (Gill & Elias, 2014). Their campaigns, which co-opt body positive discourses to sell beauty and wellbeing products, often suggest that their products will boost women’s self-esteem and body confidence whilst also selling them a product that helps their body conform to societal beauty standards (Windels et al., 2020). Since these brands tend to use body positive discourses in advertisements that include slim or medium-sized white models, they promote normative beauty standards under the guise of feminism (Chidgey, 2021). One of the most well-known instances of a brand co-opting the body positive movement is Dove’s ‘Campaign For Real Beauty’ which included models who were above average size, models with stretchmarks, and models who were pregnant. This campaign therefore portrayed Dove as a brand that challenges

the traditional beauty standards that are upheld by the rest of the beauty industry and that empowers women through its products and messaging (Johnston & Taylor, 2008). The postfeminist discourses in this campaign are strikingly evident through Dove's reliance on women's insecurities to sell them a beauty product, but also by framing beauty as the key to empowering women (Darwin & Miller, 2021). Dove's misuse of the 'empowerment' and 'acceptance' discourses of the body positive movement therefore 'systematically reproduces and legitimizes the hegemony of beauty ideology in women's personal lives in the service of expanding sales and corporate growth' (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 961). Brands, such as Dove, have therefore transformed body positivity from a discourse that celebrates all bodies that do not comply with normative beauty standards to one that only condones 'acceptably fat' bodies or light-skinned women of colour. The commercial and mainstream media have therefore diluted the original messages of the body positive movement that were rooted in the more radical Fat Acceptance movement (Griffin et al., 2022). We can therefore argue that, due to the influence of neoliberalism and postfeminism, the contemporary body positive movement has remarginalised the very women it had originally intended to empower. As the first study to examine the impact of mediated feminism and menstrual activism on young people, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* will explore whether neoliberal and postfeminist discourses are also shaping young people's attitudes towards menstruation.

CRITICAL MENSTRUATION STUDIES

Although scholars have examined the social aspects of menstruation for decades, sociological research about menstruation has increased sharply since 2015 (Douglas, 1984; Williams et al., 2021). This increased interest in researching menstrual experience has mirrored the rise of the menstrual movement both on social media and in the mainstream media. Since many researchers, such as myself, undertake this research with a view to improving the experiences of menstruating women and people, we could even argue that this scholarship is part of the menstrual movement and those who write could be referred to as 'researcher-advocates'. To reflect the rising scholarly interest in menstruation from across the humanities and social sciences, the editors of the *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* named this field 'critical menstruation studies' (2020). In the introduction of this handbook, Chris Bobel describes

critical menstruation studies as a field that is ‘premised upon menstruation as a category of analysis: asking how systems of power and knowledge are built upon its understanding and, furthermore, who benefits from these social constructions’ (2020, p. 3). Bobel also illustrates that the field is composed of knowledge from both within and beyond academia: ‘from its beginning, [critical menstruation studies] has been a site where activists, artists, journalists, clinicians, and researchers, have each contributed to its articulation and application’ (2020, p. 3). Although researchers, activists, and journalists exchange knowledge at events about menstrual health, there is little research that considers menstrual activism and the media together. Indeed, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* offers a rare insight into both the discourses of menstrual activists and the impact of their work on the public. By drawing together activism, journalism, and scholarship from critical menstruation studies and beyond, this book therefore captures the spirit of the menstrual movement that is evident at events but rarely in publications. By paying close attention to five key aims of the menstrual movement, this book also draws together, and makes an original intervention into, scholarship that is usually fragmented across different publications or even disciplines.

Menstrual Stigma

Echoing most contemporary sociological scholarship about menstruation, this book begins its theoretical exploration of menstrual experience through a focus on stigma (Gaybor, 2019; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2020; Miller et al., 2023). To evaluate the messages, mediation, and impact of the menstrual movement, it is important to define menstrual stigma, understand what causes it, how it manifests, and how it is perpetuated. Even if an activist’s main aim is something other than reducing menstrual stigma, stigma is often something with which menstrual activists need to contend when engaging with the public about the health and social issues that affect menstrual experience. For instance, activists who advocate for women and people with endometriosis must also tackle the stigma that can deter prospective patients from talking about menstrual bleeding or pain (Sims et al., 2021). Although menstrual stigma is frequently discussed in academic literature, it is rarely consistently or concisely defined (Bowen-Viner et al., 2022). To define menstrual stigma, studies often draw on the work of Erving Goffman who describes stigma as a ‘situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social

acceptance' and who may be labelled as 'bad', 'dangerous', or 'weak' (1963, p. 9; p. 12). For example, Lara Owen elucidates: 'Goffman identified stigma as a stain or mark that sets people apart as spoiled or defective. Goffman found that stigmatised individuals suffered profound psychological, social, and material consequences' (2022b, pp. 3–4). Hence, women and other people who menstruate are 'what Goffman terms "discreditable individuals": persons marked by difference' but whose differences are not 'immediately apparent' to those with whom they are interacting (Sear, 2009, p. 1222). Thus, drawing on Goffman's theory (1963), we can define menstrual stigma as the otherisation that individuals experience due to a societal perception of menstruation as negative, dangerous, or debilitating. Or, to put it more simply, the feelings of shame that are caused by negative societal attitudes towards menstruation. Indeed, this definition is one which is generally accepted by menstrual activists, including those who were interviewed for this book. For example, this is reflected in one of my participant's comments: '[N]o one is born feeling embarrassed about something, it doesn't work that way, it's the stigma that's inflicted upon them by society'.

Scholarly discussions that theorise why menstrual stigma exists often link it to societal perceptions of menstruation as abject and dirty (Bildhauer & Owen, 2022). Some studies have drawn on Mary Douglas' theories about pollution (1984) to argue that menstrual blood is stigmatised because it is viewed by society as a contaminating substance that can disrupt the social order (Britton, 1996). In other words, menstrual blood is traditionally associated with womanhood and therefore is seen as a threat to the patriarchal order. Other studies have built on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection (1980) to argue that menstrual blood is viewed with horror because it blurs the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the body and acts as a reminder of our mortality (Condren, 1999). For example, Jane Ussher (2006) argues that patriarchal society views women's bodies as monstrous because their blood is a signifier of 'a dangerous feminine excess' (Ussher, 2006, p. 1). She explains, '[C]entral to this positioning of the female body as monstrous [...] is ambivalence associated with the power and danger perceived to be inherent in woman's fecund flesh, her seeping, leaking, bleeding womb standing as site of pollution and source of dread' (Ussher, 2006, p. 1). Even though most contemporary studies do not focus on Douglas' and Kristeva's theories explicitly, ideas about dirt and pollution remain in their discussions of hygiene. These studies have identified a variety of contemporary discourses that are used

to characterise menstruation. These include ‘unhygienic’, ‘dirty’, ‘messy’, ‘leaking’, ‘gross’, ‘smelly’, and ‘unsanitary’ (White, 2013; Fahs, 2016; Erchull, 2020; van Lonkhuijzen et al., 2022).

In addition to a view of menstrual blood as unsanitary, menstrual stigma can be compounded by negative stereotypes about menstruating women specifically (Marván et al., 2014). Pejorative discourses that are used to describe menstruating women include ‘hormonal’, ‘weak’, ‘erratic’, ‘out of control’, ‘irrational’, ‘violent’, and ‘unreliable’ (Ussher, 2006; Chrisler, 2011; Gottlieb, 2020). These stereotypes are rooted not only in the belief that menstruation is debilitating but also within broader pejorative discourses that characterise women as pathologically emotional because of their ‘reproductive biology’ (King, 2020, p. 287). Sally King (2020) refers to this societal belief that women are inherently less logical than men as ‘the myth of the irrational female’ (2020, p. 287). This myth is used to dismiss women’s legitimate emotions as ‘PMS’ and has contributed to the stigmatisation of mental health conditions, such as PMDD, which are linked to the menstrual cycle (Hardy & Hardie, 2017; Ussher & Perz, 2020). Furthermore, the myth that menstruation is naturally debilitating for both mental and physical health has also rendered it more difficult for individuals to recognise if their symptoms are typical or whether they need medical support (Wood, 2020).

The stigmatisation of menstruation not only causes individuals to feel shame, but it is also accompanied by societal expectations that menstruation should be ‘concealed verbally as well as physically’ (Kissling, 2006, p. 484). Menstrual stigma therefore discourages open conversations about menstruation, obliges individuals to hide the fact that they are menstruating, and compels them to restrict their physical activities (Houppert, 2000; Erchull, 2020). Within critical menstruation studies, these restrictions have been labelled and conceptualised in various ways. For example, Sophie Laws (1990) categorises these behaviours as taboos namely, the ‘communication taboo’, the ‘concealment taboo’, and the ‘activity taboo’. Houppert (2000) coined the expression ‘culture of concealment’ to refer to the shame that ‘manipulates’ women into keeping their menstruation a secret. More recently, Wood (2020) has referred to this phenomenon as the ‘concealment imperative’. Echoing many other critical menstruation scholars, Wood (2020) draws on Michel Foucault’s (1977) model of the panopticon which he uses to explain social control and self-discipline

(Ussher, 2006).¹⁴ In Foucault's model, the prisoners feel constantly observed and compelled to monitor their own behaviour (1977). Wood (2020) explains that menstrual stigma functions in a similar manner:

Arguing that biopower is produced through discourse (and individuals' desire to adhere to it), [Foucault] explains how pressure to conform to cultural norms produces individuals' voluntary self-subjugation. In this way, biopower is a form of social control enacted through individuals' internalization of dominant discourses that result in self-disciplinary practices [...] menstrual discourse creates biopower at both micro and macro levels. Individuals voluntarily conform to disciplinary strategies of their bodies through their own desire, and in doing so biopower is produced and (re)produced.

Menstrual stigma is therefore a form of social control that causes individuals to monitor their menstruating bodies so that others are unaware that they are menstruating. Behaviours such as hiding products up sleeves or constantly checking to see if blood has leaked onto clothing are therefore not 'freely chosen' but are examples of 'self-disciplinary' behaviour that result from social norms that position menstruation as something shameful (Wood, 2020, p. 320). When individuals accidentally reveal their status as 'menstruators' this can lead to their feeling embarrassed and ashamed (McHugh, 2020).

The 'concealment imperative' can have significant detrimental impacts on women and other people who menstruate (Wood, 2020). In societies that celebrate thin bodies as the ideal 'feminine' form, menstruating women can internalise a societal discourse that characterises them as bloated, unattractive, and uncontrollable (Erchull, 2013). This can lead to low self-esteem especially during puberty (Rembeck et al., 2006). The concealment imperative also reduces access to menstrual health education. If menstrual stigma inhibited teachers' opportunities to learn about menstruation prior to entering the profession, or even during their careers, teachers may struggle to teach pupils about menstruation with accuracy and confidence (Bowen-Viner et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2022). Menstrual stigma may also deter parents from talking to their children about menstruation. If young women and transgender people lack knowledge about menstrual health, they are more likely to feel ashamed of their bodies and

¹⁴In the panopticon, prisoners cannot see each other but are constantly observed by a guard at the very centre of the building.

experience low self-esteem (White, 2013). These feelings can lead to alienation and may linger during adulthood (Ussher, 2006). Menstrual stigma can also cause girls to experience poor concentration during class, miss school, or even leave education completely (Jewitt & Ryley, 2014). Reasons for poor concentration and absenteeism can include a lack of access to effective menstrual products, fears of leaking onto school uniform, embarrassment at managing menstruation in public bathrooms, and menstrual pain (Herrmann & Rockoff, 2012). According to Plan International, 13% of 14–21-year-old girls in the United Kingdom miss school once a month during menstruation (2021). Menstrual stigma can also lead to absenteeism or presenteeism at work, discourage people from discussing their menstrual health with medical professionals, and impact sexual relationships (Grose & Grabe, 2014; Owen, 2022b). Scholars have also linked menstrual stigma to structural inequalities and human rights (McLaren & Padhee, 2021; Williams et al., 2021). For example, Inga Winkler explains that menstruation ‘either facilitates or impedes the realization of a whole range of human rights’ and quotes the following statement from the United Nations:

The stigma and shame generated by stereotypes around menstruation have severe impacts on all aspects of women’s and girls’ human rights, including their human rights to equality, health, housing, water, sanitation, education, freedom of religion or belief, safe and healthy working conditions, and to take part in cultural life and public life without discrimination. (2020, p. 9)

Menstrual stigma therefore not only intersects with multiple aspects of someone’s daily life but also maintains gender inequalities. In other words, menstrual stigma ensures that menstruating women, transgender men, and non-binary people continue to experience fewer opportunities, more obstacles, and feel less included than cisgender men in education, the workplace, and other public spaces.

As demonstrated across multiple studies, the media plays a significant role in the perpetuation of menstrual stigma such as by portraying menstruation as embarrassing or by denoting which aspects of menstruation should, or should not, be openly discussed (Berg & Coutts, 1994; Chrisler, 2011; Rosewarne, 2012; Røstvik, 2020). As young people may turn to the media to fill gaps in their education about their bodies and health, it can strongly influence their knowledge about their bodies, the language they use to talk about their bodies, and their self-esteem (Camacho-Miñano

et al., 2019). Considering the influence of the media is therefore imperative to understanding young people's knowledge and perceptions of menstruation. Yet, this is an avenue that the field of critical menstruation studies is yet fully to explore. The overwhelming majority of existing research about the mediation of menstruation focuses on discourses in advertisements or comedy programmes (Rosewarne, 2012; Mucedola & Smith, 2022). This research argues that television programmes contribute to menstrual stigma through reinforcing the secrecy around menstruation, such as via euphemisms, and mocking menstruating women, such as by portraying them as weak, irrational, or violent (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Rosewarne, 2012). This representation not only encourages women to hide the fact that they are menstruating but also plays into patriarchal stereotypes that can be used to undermine women and reassert male dominance (Newton, 2016). These comedic representations of menstruating women therefore play 'a significant part in the social construction of gender [and reinforce] the patriarchal status quo' (Mackie, 1990, p. 13). This scholarly focus is unsurprising as sitcoms and advertisements have traditionally been the areas of the media in which discussions of menstruation have been permitted (Malefyt & McCabe, 2016; Merskin, 1999). Indeed, this resonates with Kissling's (2006) observation that there are limited socially acceptable ways to speak about menstruation: 'such as complaining about menstrual symptoms, mocking menstruating women, or helping to sell something related to menstruation' (2006, p. 1). As studies on menstrual product marketing indicate, brands often play on fears of discovery alongside relying on discourses of hygiene. By celebrating the 'leak-proof' nature of their products, brands reiterate societal discourses that women's bodies are messy and in need of containment (Fingerson, 2006). They can also promote secrecy by emphasising the discreet nature of packaging (such as it being quiet to open) or the small size of the product (Røstvik, 2022). Furthermore, scholars argue that the use of blue liquid, references to the 'sanitary' or 'hygienic' nature of products, and the use of euphemisms such as 'time of the month' reinforce the notion that menstruating bodies are dirty (Chrisler, 2011; Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). These discourses combine to reinforce the societal norm that menstruation is something embarrassing that should neither be discussed nor made visible in public (Guo et al., 2022). Even though we have seen a steady increase in research about menstrual discourses on social media that are not about advertisements, most research about menstruation on social media is still focussed on advertisements rather than public

communication, health communication, or interpersonal communication (Davis et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023).

Although scholars are beginning to examine social media discourses about menstruation, menstrual experience, and menstrual health, research is yet to determine the impact of social media on young people's knowledge and attitudes towards menstruation (Gaybor, 2022; Kosher et al., 2023). Indeed, existing studies only tend to go so far as considering the potential impact of these discourses rather than conducting focus groups, interviews, or other fieldwork with social media users. Furthermore, although most studies on the mediation of menstruation focus on its potential to stigmatise menstruating women and people, scholars are starting to consider how the media can be used to challenge and reduce menstrual stigma (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2020; Gaybor, 2022). By considering how activists are engaging with news media and social media to reduce menstrual stigma as well as evaluating the extent to which these media are impacting young people's views and experiences of menstrual stigma, *The Menstrual Movement* is therefore filling crucial gaps within critical menstruation studies.

Menstrual Equity in a British and International Context: 'Period Poverty' and 'Menstrual Hygiene Management'

Although the field of critical menstruation studies focuses on menstrual stigma more than any other area of menstrual experience, studies have begun to pay attention to other aspects of menstrual experience that are of interest to menstrual activists. These topics, which include menstrual equity (known widely as 'period poverty' in Great Britain), the medicalisation of menstruation, and the experiences of transgender people who menstruate are also primarily analysed through the lens of stigma (Miller et al., 2023; Selkie et al., 2020; Vora, 2020). Research about menstrual equity argues that stigma can inhibit access to menstrual products, health-care services, and education (Brown et al., 2022; Randhawa et al., 2021). Although research about menstrual equity in the Global North is emerging, most literature about this topic focuses on the Global South, including countries such as India, Nepal, Kenya, and Uganda (Izugbara & Ngilangwa, 2010; Parajuli et al., 2021; Rossouw & Ross, 2021). These studies explore topics such as the stigma that surrounds period poverty, local cultural and religious beliefs that contribute to menstrual stigma, as well as the stigmatisation of women from the Global South by NGOs from

the Global North (Kumar & Srivastava, 2011). As McCarthy and Lahiri-Dutt (2020) explain, menstrual hygiene management (MHM) campaigns that frame women's experiences 'through the twin lenses of taboo and restriction' contribute to the marginalisation of women from the Global South (p. 19). In her analysis of MHM campaigns, Chris Bobel describes the neocolonial nature of their discourses: 'When it comes to menstruation, the fascination seems to be with faraway people in another time: their bizarre customs, their menstrual huts, their menarche rituals' (Bobel, 2010, p. 30). As MHM campaigns are often supported by major menstrual product brands, they tend to reinforce the same messaging around hygiene and concealment that can be found in advertising (Agnew & Sandretto, 2016). Indeed, the discourses of dignity and hygiene that are often apparent in MHM campaigns frame marginalised women's bodies as 'deficient and in need of correction' (Bobel, 2018, p. 232). By presenting single-use products as an easy solution and criticising marginalised women for using 'rags', these narratives mask the complex structural issues that sustain poverty and promote the profit-driven agenda of major brands which sell single-use products (Thomson et al., 2019). MHM campaigns can also perpetuate discourses of 'white saviourism' because they position brands, development workers, teachers, and public health officials from the Global North as the purveyors of dignity and hygiene to women in the Global South (Rajagopal & Mathur, 2017; Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). In these ways, MHM campaigns silence women and other people who menstruate in the Global South and undermine local initiatives that often employ more sustainable methods for eradicating period poverty, such as through the distribution of reusable menstrual products (Garikipati & Phillips-Howard, 2019). Although these MHM campaigns about women in Africa and Asia may not seem relevant to the experiences of young people in Great Britain, it is important to note that, to increase sales or donations, brands and NGOs have promoted these MHM campaigns in their marketing that is aimed at audiences in the United Kingdom. For this reason, media coverage of MHM campaigns may be influencing how young people understand transnational feminism, the menstrual experiences of those living in 'period poverty', or menstrual experience more broadly.

Even though many menstrual activists in Great Britain use the term 'menstrual equity', 'period poverty' is more widely recognised by the British public (Mckay, 2021). The British media has played an enormous role in popularising the term 'period poverty' and raising awareness of the

struggles that people can face to access products (Briggs, 2021). This sustained coverage of period poverty has emerged as part of the British media's framing of poverty as an individual, rather than a structural, issue (De Benedictis, 2023). According to research about the mediation of menstrual equity in the United Kingdom, this narrow view relies 'largely on anecdotal evidence', ignores the role played by austerity in perpetuating poverty, and focuses more on girls than any other group which is affected by period poverty (Boyers et al., 2022, para. 2; De Benedictis, 2023). As Fiona McKay indicates (2021), the mediation of period poverty has been so influential that it has inspired further activism and shaped the political agenda. For instance, this mediation has led to the removal of the 'Tampon Tax' and the provision of free products in schools (Coryton & Russell, 2021). Nevertheless, since there is no research on the impact of this coverage on the British public, the extent to which it has shaped the general public's attitude towards menstrual equity and activism is unknown. *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* is therefore original in its exploration of the impact of this media coverage on young people's awareness and understanding of menstrual equity. Furthermore, as some of this coverage has also focussed on organisations that are tackling menstrual inequities, we can argue that it has likely shaped the public's understanding of menstrual activism.

In contrast to the media's narrow view of menstrual equity, scholarship defines menstrual equity, menstrual justice, and period poverty in relation to both financial and non-financial barriers (Briggs, 2021; Jewitt & Ryley, 2014; Gomez & Karin, 2021). Not only do these definitions incorporate a lack of access to menstrual products, but they also include menstrual stigma and inadequate menstrual health education (Crawford & Waldman, 2021; Rahnejat & Narice, 2023). Examining menstrual equity in the United Kingdom, Juliette Astrup explains: '[P]overty is not the only factor at play—it's combined with the stigma and taboo around menstruation which silences girls and leaves them uninformed about what to expect and how to manage their periods' (2018, p. 40). Scholars have also argued that menstruating women and other people who experience period poverty are 'doubly stigmatised' (Vora, 2020, p. 36). Shailini Vora, for example, focuses on the experiences of homeless women and explains that their bodies are 'marginalized by a culture that eschews and rejects manifestations of poverty and leaky corporeality' (2020, p. 36). As Alison Briggs' (2021) research in Stoke-on-Trent indicates, this double stigmatisation deters people from accessing products. This can include asking for

products at foodbanks, schools, clinics, and other establishments, where they are freely available (Garthwaite, 2016). Scholarship has also underscored that menstrual inequity should not solely be defined as a lack of access to products, but should also incorporate inadequate access to hygiene facilities, waste management, and health services (Michel et al., 2022). By using the terms ‘period poverty’ and ‘menstrual equity’ to refer to inadequate access to menstrual products and services that is caused by financial, social, and structural factors, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* also approaches menstrual equity from a holistic perspective. Through interviewing menstrual activists, this book will offer a unique insight into how activists are navigating the popularisation of ‘period poverty’ and explore whether, and how, their activism frames period poverty as a structural, rather than individual, issue.

Menstrual Health Communication

Health communication is an interdisciplinary field which brings together scholars from medical science, environmental science, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and languages (Malikhao, 2020). Key areas of focus within health communication include an examination of health advocacy and its impact on policy, a semiotic analysis of how health is communicated and mediated, as well as a sociocultural approach that explores how public communication shapes sociocultural norms (Babrow & Mattson, 2003). The contemporary menstrual movement and contemporary sociological research on menstrual health form part of decades of feminist philosophy about the medicalisation of women’s bodies (Leclerc, 1974; Ruzek, 1978; Kaufert & Gilbert, 1986). *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* contributes to the field of health communication through theorising how medicalisation has affected the discourses that we use to communicate about menstrual health (Bobel, 2010; King, 2020). According to feminist scholars, the medicalisation of menstruation positions menstruation as an illness that requires medical management (Chrisler & Gorman, 2015). Scholars and activists argue that the medicalisation of menstruation stigmatises menstruating women and people because it characterises them as ‘in need of fixing’ because they are ‘deficient, ill, and diseased’ (Levitt & Barnack-Tavleris, 2020, p. 569; Oinas, 1998; Wood, 2020, p. 323). These discourses also reinforce the patriarchal notion that menstruation causes mental illness and instability (Ussher, 2006). Furthermore, this medicalisation encourages menstrual suppression because it frames

menstruation as something inconvenient and unnecessary (Hillard, 2014). In this way, it has also contributed to the commodification of menstruating bodies (Patterson, 2014).¹⁵ As the medicalisation of menstruation establishes medical practitioners as the experts on women's bodies, scholars argue that this silences women (and others who menstruate) by suggesting that they are ignorant about what is best for their physical and mental health (Gagné-Julien, 2021; Kaufert & Gilbert, 1986). Thus, feminist scholarship also positions the medicalisation of menstruation as a form of surveillance and social control (Wood, 2020). Menstrual activists have, since the 1970s, continued to criticise and try to change these medical discourses such as by promoting the idea that menstruation is a healthy and natural bodily process (Bobel & Fahs, 2020a, b).

Since 2015, menstrual activists' criticisms of the medical profession have increasingly focussed on the inadequate support that is offered to women and transgender people with conditions such as endometriosis, PCOS (Polycystic Ovary Syndrome), fibroids, adenomyosis, or PMDD (Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder) (Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021; Guidone, 2020). In Great Britain, activists frame the inadequate treatment of these conditions within the context of a medical profession and political system that neglects women's health (Cole et al., 2021; Craddock, 2022). The menstrual movement's critique of the National Health Service (NHS) and government in the United Kingdom has included the dismissal of women's pain, long waiting lists, limited treatment options, a lack of investment in research, and insufficient training for medical practitioners (Womersley et al., 2022). Furthermore, research suggests that, due to their young age, the symptoms of girls under the age of 18 are more likely to be dismissed than those of adult women (Armour et al., 2022). In addition to fears of being dismissed by doctors, research indicates that many girls and other young people with menstrual health conditions are unaware that their symptoms are atypical and require medical attention (Harlow & Stewart, 2003; Seear, 2009). This is not only a result of poor menstrual health education in schools but also a consequence of the menstrual stigma that discourages individuals from talking about their experiences (Randhawa et al., 2021). This lack of knowledge about atypical symptoms can continue into adulthood with many menstruating women and

¹⁵In the United States, for example, pharmaceutical companies have profited from selling menstrual suppression pills through emphasising that menstruation is inconvenient for physical activities (Johnston-Robledo et al., 2006).

transgender people remaining unaware that they are living with menstrual health conditions (Gagné-Julien, 2021; Holowka, 2022). For example, research on endometriosis, which is a condition that can cause dysmenorrhea and heavy bleeding, frames it as an ‘invisible’ illness (Whelan, 2003).¹⁶ Scholars frequently contrast the prevalence of endometriosis with the lack of social awareness of the condition (Hawkey et al., 2022; Randhawa et al., 2021). Advocates and researchers underscore the widespread nature of endometriosis through citing the statistic that ‘one in ten women’ has the condition (Ten, 2018; Yong, 2020). This is usually accompanied by the statistic that women with endometriosis wait on average seven years for a diagnosis (Ilschner et al., 2022). This diagnostic delay, as well as initial hesitance to seek medical advice, is usually attributed to menstrual stigma, the normalisation of severe menstrual pain, the normalisation of vaginal pain during sex, and a lack of awareness around endometriosis (Bullo, 2020; Hintz, 2022). As medical practitioners rely on patients’ description of their pain to diagnose endometriosis, the normalisation of debilitating menstrual pain is particularly damaging to patients with endometriosis because it can lead to them downplaying their pain and therefore not receiving the treatment that they require (Ilschner et al., 2022; Metzler et al., 2022).

Social media has provided a valuable tool for awareness-raising because menstrual health conditions such as endometriosis, PCOS, and PMDD have been traditionally overlooked by the mainstream media (Hawkey et al., 2022). Social media has made it possible for individuals with menstrual health conditions to share their experiences with the public and therefore to help others to recognise that their own menstrual cycles might be atypical (Lindgren & Richardson, 2023). It is also beneficial for these individuals because it allows them to create and partake in their own epistemological communities (Stanek et al., 2023). Within these communities, which exist in online spaces such as Facebook groups, subreddits, and hashtags, women and other people with menstrual health conditions can find relevant information and experience a sense of collective identity (Bullo, 2020). Furthermore, social media facilitates the creation of a counterpublic that can hold the medical establishment to account. For example, as Eileen Holowka (2022) underscores in her article about endometriosis, social media is the key to improving ‘future patient-practitioner

¹⁶The NHS website defines endometriosis as ‘a condition where tissue similar to the lining of the uterus grows in other places, such as the ovaries and fallopian tubes’ (NHS, 2022).

and patient-research relationships' (2022, para 1). Although, as we can see here, research about the mediation of menstrual health has recently begun to emerge, this research usually focuses on the online discourses of patients rather than considering how social media influences young people's knowledge about menstrual health more broadly. Research has also yet to explore how online menstrual health communication impacts young people's offline experiences and relationships as well as how this mediation intersects with their education in schools. Considering that social media is ubiquitous in young people's lives, this is a significant gap. As demonstrated by scholarship on other areas of health, social media has a profound impact on young people's health and wellbeing (Best et al., 2014). Thus, to understand young people's knowledge and experiences of menstrual health, it is vital to consider how they are influenced by social media. For instance, as demonstrated in other areas of health communication research, such as on sexual health or COVID-19, social media can perpetuate damaging misinformation that can lead individuals to view atypical symptoms as normal, try harmful home remedies, feel alienated, experience anxiety, or share misinformed advice with others (Lim et al., 2022; Ngien & Jiang, 2022). By examining how teenagers' engagement with traditional and social media has influenced their knowledge and attitudes towards menstrual health as well as their everyday social interactions, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* makes a significant and original contribution to the interdisciplinary field of health communication (Malikhao, 2020).

The Environmental Impact of Menstruation: From Period Plastics to Period Pants

As the creation and disposal of plastic single-use menstrual products contribute to the climate crisis, menstrual advocates are increasingly encouraging audiences to switch to reusable products and are increasingly distributing them to those who experience period poverty (Somers et al., 2021). As single-use plastic products are not biodegradable, they add to landfill sights and end up in bodies of water where they can harm wildlife (Munoz et al., 2022). In addition to their environmental benefits, research has also emphasised the long-term financial savings and health benefits of products such as cups, discs, menstrual underwear, and reusable pads (Gottlieb, 2020). Reusable products such as these have been on the market for decades. Prior to the 'the year of the period', however, they were

generally only marketed to a niche group of eco-consumers and available in health food stores (Punzi & Wener, 2022). Today, reusable products are now available to be purchased on the high street and on a variety of websites. They have also become much more visible both in the mainstream media and on social media (Liu et al., 2023). Social enterprises that sell reusable products tend to position themselves as an ethical alternative to large manufacturers that have a history of perpetuating menstrual shame and damaging the environment through their single-use products (Parthasarathy, 2022). Social enterprises frequently echo the discourses of the menstrual movement such as by articulating that they want to ‘change the conversation’ around menstruation and improve the experiences of menstruating women and people. For example, Ruby Raut, the founder of Wuka Wear (the United Kingdom’s first reusable period wear manufacturer), states on the WUKA website: ‘WUKA stands for “Wake Up Kick Ass” and from the very beginning we have been passionate about smashing taboos and innovation in sustainability and menstrual health’.

Even though they are becoming increasingly popular in Great Britain, uptake of reusables ‘still represents a small fraction of the market and is not yet normative behaviour’ (Owen, 2022b, p. 1096). Although research on societal perceptions of reusable products is still limited, and rarely includes external reusable products such as period underwear, existing studies have offered some insight into why women may be reluctant to try them (van Eijk et al., 2019). For example, Rose Grose and Shelly Grabe argue that ‘sociocultural attitudes about women’s bodies and menstruation may deter many women from using alternative products that require more contact and acceptance of the body’ (2014, p. 678). In other words, the stigma and shame that surround menstruation can also prevent women from trying reusable menstrual products because they involve greater attention to, and handling of, menstrual blood. Studies about menstrual cups suggest that inadequate menstrual health education in schools is also a key factor in low uptake (Milne & Barnack-Tavlaris, 2019). Nevertheless, research from across the world has demonstrated that once women persist with trialling cups for at least three menstrual cycles, they are very likely to continue to use them on an indefinite basis (Madziyire et al., 2018). For instance, a study with first-time cup users in South Africa demonstrated that after six months of using menstrual cups, participants preferred them over single-use products (Beksinska et al., 2015). Reasons included their comfort, quality, and the ability to monitor blood flow. Similarly, in her study of young urban-dwelling Australian women who were trialling menstrual cups for the first time, Owen reports:

Using the cup altered the experience of menstruation by exposing participants to both the sensory experience and the unabsorbed nature of their menstrual blood. [...] This new awareness impacted their sense of embodiment more broadly as they began to be more aware of the relationship of menstruation to their overall health and self-awareness. (2022b, p. 1096)

Owen's (2022b) study therefore suggests that the use of menstrual cups can reduce consumers' feelings of menstrual shame and improve their wellbeing. Although there are very few studies on the topic, existing research also suggests that reusable products, such as boxer shorts that are designed to absorb menstrual blood, can be of particular benefit to transgender, non-binary, and other gender minority groups (Rydström, 2020). Indeed, traditional menstrual products, such as tampons and single-use pads, can be dysphoric for transgender people because they require close physical contact with the body as well as handling and looking at menstrual blood (Frank, 2020). Reusables can also be advantageous for transgender people because they do not need to frequent shops to buy single-use products and therefore to be constantly reminded of their menstruating bodies (Rydström, 2020). Furthermore, as the packaging of disposable products is often traditionally 'feminine', such as pink wrappers or flowery designs, this can add to gender dysphoria (Dallaria & Frank, 2020).¹⁷ It is important to note here, however, that reusable products may be more suitable for some menstruating women and people than others. Depending on their own individual sensory difficulties, some neurodivergent people, such as those with autism, may prefer reusables whilst others may prefer single-use products (Gabrielsen et al., 2023; Steward et al., 2020). Since using a reusable product requires access to running water, homeless people may be unable to wash them. In a study of homeless women in the United States, for example, participants explained that they struggled to clean reusable products because of the lack of privacy in shelters (Vora, 2020). Furthermore, for people with energy-limiting conditions such as chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia, daily tasks, such as cleaning or changing menstrual products, can expend significant energy (Vøllestad & Mengshoel, 2023). Thus, using sustainable products that necessitate regular cleaning may be more fatiguing than disposing of single-use products. Due to religious or cultural reasons, others may wish

¹⁷Gender dysphoria is the distress associated with one's gender not aligning with one's body appearance (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020, p.387).

to neither use internal products, such as menstrual cups, nor wash menstrual blood (Grose & Grabe, 2014). Although reusable products can provide cost savings and health benefits for many women and others who menstruate, we must approach someone's choice to use reusables from an intersectional perspective that considers factors such as disability, culture, religion, and socio-economic status.

*People Who Menstruate: The Menstrual Experiences
of Transgender Men, Non-binary People and Other Gender
Minority Groups*

Although sociological research about the menstrual experiences of transgender people has grown over the last five years and scholars are increasingly using inclusive terms such as 'menstruators', there are still very few studies that pay significant attention to menstruating people who do not identify as women (Gupta & Parimal, 2023; Rydström, 2020). Certainly, there is very little research about how transgender people communicate about menstruation on social media, how their experiences of menstruation are mediated, and how the media has shaped audience knowledge and perceptions of these experiences (Kosher et al., 2023). Through exploring young people's engagement with social media content by, and about, transgender people who menstruate, this book builds on the findings of a unique study by Rowen Kosher et al. (2023) about trans and non-binary YouTubers. The authors analyse the discourses in their videos as well as comments by viewers. The study argues that YouTube is a space for these creators to navigate feelings of gender dysphoria and create a neutral or masculine language around menstruation. Nevertheless, studies on trans representation on social media are rare. Research has yet to explore whether this social media content has also shaped the knowledge and attitudes of cisgender audiences about the experiences of transgender people. Through the inclusion of transgender and non-binary activists as well as the analysis of young people's knowledge about trans activism, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* begins to fill this gap in critical menstruation studies, queer studies, and the field of communication.

Most studies about transgender menstruators are from the fields of medicine or psychology and focus on topics such as gender dysphoria and the medical management of menstruation (Alaniz, 2022; Kanj, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2022). Only a handful of sociological studies have analysed interviews with transgender people to better understand their

menstrual experiences (Frank, 2020; Holst et al., 2022). These studies indicate that menstruation can cause transgender and non-binary people to experience gender dysphoria because their body reminds them of a gender with which they do not identify (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). These studies have also uncovered that, during their menses, transgender people face added obstacles in public spaces that are not experienced by cisgender women (Rydström, 2020). Some of these obstacles are practical, such as being able to dispose of menstrual products in a men's bathroom or a gender-neutral bathroom. Other obstacles are psychological, such as the fear of being outed as a menstruator (Fahs, 2016). As Dallaria and Frank (2020) argue, transgender people may feel anxious that others will hear them opening menstrual products or notice that they are carrying them. Finally, research demonstrates that transgender people can feel anxious about discussing menstruation with medical professionals because they worry that they will be misunderstood or experience discrimination (Rydström, 2020). As menstrual health services are often part of 'women's health' clinics, this can accentuate feelings of gender dysphoria (Unger, 2015).

Existing research therefore underscores the importance of menstrual activists' campaigns for more gender-neutral bathrooms, bins to be provided in all bathrooms, better healthcare for transgender menstruators, alongside the increased use of inclusive language such as 'women and people who menstruate' (Gottlieb, 2020). Indeed, some brands have responded positively to the menstrual movement and to trans activism more broadly. This is evident when brands adopt gender inclusive language, hire transgender and non-binary models for their campaigns, use gender-neutral colours, or offer products that are preferred by transgender people. For instance, brands such as WUKA, Thinx, Aisle, and Pantys have begun to sell period boxers. Gender inclusive language is becoming more commonplace on menstrual products, in marketing campaigns, and on brands' websites. For example, on their 'Our story' Page, the Aisle website states: '[B]ecause people with periods deserve products that feel good, fit well, and never let us down' (Aisle, 2024). However, gender inclusive language or the inclusion of transgender people is far less visible in the mainstream media (Montiel-McCann, 2022).

As Chap. 2 of *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* explores, there has also been backlash in the mainstream media in Great Britain and on social media towards the use of gender-neutral language by menstrual product brands, charities, and others who are part of the menstrual movement

(Pearce et al., 2020). Although there is very little research about newspaper articles and social media posts that discuss gender-neutral language in the context of menstruation, existing studies have examined how journalists and social media users have condemned gender inclusive language more broadly (Montiel-McCann, 2022). For instance, scholars have highlighted that the British media is increasingly giving voice to trans-exclusionary radical feminists when reporting on trans rights, legislation, and experiences (Armitage, 2020; Pearce et al., 2020). Trans-exclusionary radical feminists (also known as gender critical feminists) argue that transgender people should not be part of the feminist movement and, due to their beliefs that sex and gender are immutable, they do not recognise the gender with which transgender people identify (Bassi & Lafleur, 2022). In Great Britain, trans-exclusionary radical feminist discourses became increasingly prevalent in the mainstream media both as a response to the proposed reform of the Gender Recognition Act and as a product of the increasing polarisation of British society (Pearce et al., 2020). The reform, which was initially proposed in 2018, would allow transgender people to legally change their gender without having to obtain a gender recognition certificate (Fairbairn et al., 2021). Hence, this reform would mean that transgender people could avoid the expensive, long (and potentially traumatic) process of proving to medical professionals that they have gender dysphoria (Sharpe, 2007). Since 2018, trans-exclusionary feminist organisations, as well as celebrities, have continued to rally against these changes on social media (Rogers, 2024). Their opinions have also received significant attention from the mainstream media. This amplification of the voices of gender critical feminists has played a large role in the UK government's decision not to reform the act and to prohibit Scotland from doing so (Armitage, 2020; Rummery, 2024). Furthermore, this platforming of trans-exclusionary radical feminists in the mainstream media has also fuelled transphobia both on social media and in everyday life (Rogers, 2024). As Armitage (2020) reports, 'The anti-trans media commentary was so pervasive that it was cited as a contributing factor to the demotion of the UK from first (in 2014) to fourth place (2018) in the Rainbow Index, a ranking of LGBTI equality in European countries' (2020, p. 12). Although the former prime minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, was in favour of self-determination, she faced significant backlash and was unable to pass the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill (Rummery, 2024). As encapsulated by two activists holding a banner outside the NHS headquarters in London that read, 'We are not pawns for your politics',

trans-exclusive rhetoric continued to dominate political communication during campaigns for the 2024 election (The Guardian, 2024). This book has therefore been written in an ever-increasing climate of transphobia in Great Britain and is one of the first studies to engage with its development.

Discourses and debates around the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) have also framed and influenced the mediation of other topics that pertain to transgender people. For instance, one of the key ideologies of gender critical feminists that informed their objections to the GRA is their argument that women's rights are a sex-based issue (Armitage, 2020). This ideology is informed by their perceptions of gender and sex as innate and immutable (Bassi & Lafleur, 2022). By arguing that transgender women should not be allowed to access 'single sex' spaces such as women's shelters, bathrooms, prisons, clinics, and changing rooms, gender critical feminists position transgender women as a threat to cisgender people (Jones & Slater, 2020). Gender critical feminists also denounce gender-neutral language, such as 'people who menstruate' because they argue that it 'erases' the sexism that cisgender women have faced and the battles that feminists have fought (Lewis & Seresin, 2022). These trans-exclusionary perspectives not only are apparent in right-wing news media but can also be implicit or even explicit in news media from across the political spectrum (Montiel-McCann, 2022). As many cisgender people rely on the mainstream media or social media to learn about transgender people, the pervasiveness of these gender critical discourses has contributed to public distrust, fear, and misunderstanding of transgender people (Lester, 2017; Rogers, 2024). Hence, when examining trans-inclusive menstrual activism and young people's understanding of the menstrual experiences of transgender people, it is important to bear in mind the current polarised socio-political context alongside the mainstream media's perpetuation of trans-exclusionary radical feminist discourses. It is also important to understand this context when examining how menstrual activists are campaigning for the rights and inclusion of transgender menstruators in policies, healthcare, and other arenas. By analysing how activists are using the media to support transgender people who menstruate, and by exploring the impact of the mediation of transgender people on young people's attitudes towards this community, *The Menstrual Movement* makes an important and original intervention into queer studies, critical menstruation studies, and feminist scholarship.

THE CONTEMPORARY MENSTRUAL MOVEMENT IN GREAT
BRITAIN: SOME KEY POLITICAL ACHIEVEMENTS
AND MILESTONES

As The Menstrual Movement in the Media is the first study to look at the influence of the menstrual movement on societal knowledge and attitudes, there is limited evidence about the social impact of the movement. The menstrual movement's impact on governmental guidelines, legislation, and discourses, however, can be more easily measured. Although the menstrual movement has instigated political change across England, Scotland, and Wales, this progress has not occurred at the same rate in each nation. Due to the devolved nature of Great Britain, local governments have implemented some menstrual-related policies, such as the provision of free menstrual products, but these have occurred at different times across Wales, England, and Scotland (Bildhauer & Owen, 2022). There have also been differences amongst administrative regions within the same country.¹⁸ Other policies, such as the removal of the 'tampon tax', have been implemented by the UK government and have therefore simultaneously applied to all three nations. In line with its more liberal political landscape, Scotland has arguably made the most progress towards menstrual equity. Not only has Scotland taken the lead in Great Britain, but it is also viewed by activists and journalists across the globe as 'world-leader' in menstrual equity (Mckay, 2021; Thornton, 2020). However, as one of my Scottish participants explained in 2020, the specific progress of Scotland tends to be erased in international scholarship about the menstrual movement because it usually treats the United Kingdom as a homogeneous entity. Referring to the *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, she stated:

I don't think they reference Scotland in it at all. They talk about the *UK* and how the *UK* has changed—that's not actually factual at all! So I think it's still wild how this has been a global phenomenon, but still people do not get that Scotland has its own movement in that way and its own autonomy [...] we opened the door for the *UK* as well and I think Scotland has got quite a reputation as doing that too, when you look at our public policy on

¹⁸ For example, in 2023, the Welsh county of Carmarthenshire announced that it would begin to offer free menstrual products to all (South Wales Guardian, 2023). Led by Jane Dunn, Sheffield city council, for example, launched a city-wide Period Equality and Menopause Charter in 2024 which is part of the city's long commitment to menstrual equity.

neurodiversity as well. We have a very inclusive way going forward with our social policy too and I think sometimes that encourages the rest of the UK to catch up.

Since the menstrual movement attracted British news media attention in 2015, there have been legislative changes in Scotland, England, and Wales that have improved access to menstrual products. These changes were inspired by campaigns that demanded the removal of the tax from menstrual products and campaigns that called for free menstrual products in schools, hospitals, and other public spaces. Prior to the tax being removed in 2021, single-use menstrual products were taxed at a rate of 5% in the United Kingdom (Hunter, 2016). Before 2001, the rate of the tampon tax had been at 17.5% since it was established in 1973 (Coryton & Russell, 2021). Campaigns to remove the tampon tax included slogans such as ‘periods are not a luxury’ and ‘end the sexist tax’ (The Independent, 2021). One of the campaigns against the tampon tax that received the most significant media attention was Laura Coryton’s ‘Stop Taxing Periods’ campaign that was launched in 2014 (Crawford & Waldman, 2021).¹⁹ As a result of these campaigns, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, pledged to remove the tampon tax during his autumn statement that same year. Furthermore, he simultaneously launched the ‘Tampon Tax Fund’ which allocated the VAT on menstrual products to charitable organisations that supported vulnerable girls and women. The tampon tax was eventually removed in the United Kingdom in conjunction with the country’s exit from the European Union in 2021 (Freedman & Loutzenhiser, 2022). Although the removal of the tampon tax can be framed as a symbolic step towards gender equality, we can also argue that the impact of this tax removal on women and others who menstruate may be minimal, or even negative. Firstly, the removal of this tax resulted in the end of the ‘Tampon tax fund’ which was being used by organisations to support menstruating women and people (James, 2022). Secondly, as

¹⁹ Echoing other menstrual activists in the movement who viewed the tampon tax as sexist, Laura asked herself the following questions upon discovering the ‘tampon tax’: ‘What kind of message about women does tampon tax send to society? Does the government not value female participation in the public sphere? How has this clear example of sexism been able to thrive for so many years?’ (Coryton & Russell, 2021, p. 2). With a view to removing this ‘sexist tax’, she launched an online ‘Change.Org’ petition in 2014 (Do et al., 2017, p. 527). In 2015, Laura’s campaign attracted the attention of the Labour MP Paula Sherriff who took Laura’s petition to parliament.

news media have indicated, the cost of menstrual products has not reduced for consumers. Thus, the tax removal has merely resulted in larger profits for companies (Flinders & Lowery, 2023). Finally, as the initial tax exemption was not applicable to reusable products, activists and social enterprises, such as Ruby Raut (WUKA), Chella Quint (Period Positive), and Ella Daish (#EndPeriodPlastic), led a campaign to change this. As a result, the tax was removed in January 2024.

Other progress towards menstrual equity that has been instigated by the menstrual movement in Great Britain has included the provision of free menstrual products in schools, colleges, and hospitals. Greater awareness of the impact of period poverty on gender inequalities has been a catalyst for this change. Plan International's 2017 report, which states that 1 in 10 girls between the ages of 14 and 21 struggle to afford menstrual products, was particularly influential in putting period poverty on the agendas of the Welsh, English, and Scottish governments (Boyers et al., 2022). From 2015, various organisations across Great Britain, such as 'Free Periods', 'Love Your Period', and 'The Red Box Project', began to emphasise the need for free menstrual products in schools. For example, The Red Box Project highlighted the existence of period poverty in Great Britain through placing red boxes with free menstrual products in schools and colleges. In Scotland, Scottish Labour MSP Monica Lennon has been a leading figure in tackling gender inequality (McKay, 2021). After she was elected in 2016, she raised the issue of period poverty in Scottish parliament and called for free period products in schools. Thanks to a combination of Lennon's advocacy with awareness campaigns by Scottish activists, Scotland made history by providing free period products in schools in 2018 (Thornton, 2020). In response to Welsh activists' calls for free menstrual products in schools, the Welsh government began to allocate funds to period poverty in 2018. In 2019, free period products became available in schools, hospitals, and further education across Wales. The provision of free products has been incorporated into the Welsh government's 'Period Dignity Strategic Action Plan', which also mentions the importance of destigmatising menstruation, providing accurate education, and using gender inclusive language (Welsh Government, 2021). It also sheds light on topics such as menstrual health conditions (including endometriosis and PMDD) as well as the environmental impact of single-use menstrual products. In England, Amika George, who founded 'Free Periods' in April 2017, was a key figure in the campaign for free products in schools (Astrup, 2018). In 2019, she partnered with the Red Box

project to launch a legal campaign to urge the UK government to provide free products across all nations. As a result of this campaigning, the UK government committed to providing free menstrual products in England and began to run this scheme in January 2020. However, this scheme has been criticised by activists, journalists, and some MPs for not automatically delivering products to schools. For example, in 2021, MP Ruth Cadbury shed light in parliament on the low opt-in rate in schools across England: ‘From 2020, it appears that the north-east has an uptake of only 44%, compared with 50% in London. [...] If the Government could make it easier by making this scheme an opt-out one, rather than opt-in, that would really help’ (Cadbury, 2021). Today, the scheme includes both single-use and reusable products as well as tights. Researchers, NGOs, and other stakeholders continue to work with the Department for Education to improve the provision of free products in schools (UK Government, 2024).

Scotland, however, has gone one step further than England and Wales through the provision of free period products to all who require them. Once menstrual products became free in Scottish schools, Monica Lennon continued to advocate for those who experience period poverty through campaigning for free universal access to menstrual products. Scotland once again made history through becoming the first country in the world to provide universal free access to menstrual products (Bildhauer et al., 2022). In January 2021, the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act stipulated that local authorities, educational providers, and public services must ensure that period products are obtainable free of charge on their premises (Scottish Parliament, 2021). This pioneering act is written in gender-neutral language to ensure that it applies to women, transgender men, and non-binary people, who menstruate. It therefore is a significant step towards the better inclusion of transgender and non-binary people in discourses and progress on gender equality.

Governments in Great Britain have also responded to activists’ campaigns for better quality menstrual health education in schools as well as their calls for menstrual health to be taught to students of all genders. Governments have responded by including updated guidance for primary and secondary schools as well as the provision of training materials for teachers (Department for Education, 2021; Welsh Government, 2021). For example, in 2020, the Department for Education in England updated their guidance on ‘Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), and Health Education’. This guidance states that all

pupils (regardless of their gender) should be educated about menstrual health and wellbeing at secondary as well as primary level. The guidance stipulates:

The onset of menstruation can be confusing or even alarming for girls if they are not prepared. Pupils should be taught key facts about the menstrual cycle including what is an average period, range of menstrual products, and the implications for emotional and physical health. In addition to curriculum content, schools should also make adequate and sensitive arrangements to help girls prepare for and manage menstruation including with requests for menstrual products. Schools will need to consider the needs of their cohort of pupils in designing this content. (Department for Education, 2020)

In addition to the guidance, the Department for Education published a teacher training module on the ‘changing adolescent’ body that mentions topics such as reusable products, endometriosis, and menstrual pain (Department for Education, 2021). Even though advocates in England have welcomed the government’s attention to menstrual health and attempts to normalise conversations about menstruation in schools, this guidance has also been criticised for focussing only on biology rather than everyday social experiences of menstruation. For example, some activists and scholars argue that this guidance does not sufficiently tackle menstrual stigma because it focuses on the biology of menstruation ‘rather than the ways in which menstruation and menstrual prejudice may appear in young people’s everyday lives such as on television, on social media, or through discussions with peers and family members’ (Bowen-Viner et al., 2022, p. 5). A draft of the revised RSE curriculum was published in 2024. It includes more emphasis on menstrual health conditions and how to access support, but also discourages any teaching about menstruation to children below year 4 (age 8–9) and any discussion of transgender identity whatsoever for pupils of all ages (Department for Education, 2024).

The menstrual movement also shaped the Women’s Health Strategy for England which was first implemented in 2022. Echoing the discourses of menstrual health campaigners, the policy paper highlights the structural gender inequalities in the British healthcare system: ‘[W]omen spend a significantly greater proportion of their lives in ill health and disability when compared with men. And while women make up 51% of the population, historically the health and care system has been designed by men for

men’ (Department of Health and Social Care, 2022).²⁰ This document also references menstrual health conditions, such as PMDD and endometriosis, that have been overlooked, misdiagnosed, and inadequately treated within the National Health Service (NHS). For example, in a section on the government’s ambitions for the next ten years, it indirectly refers to the poor-quality care that has typically been provided to patients with endometriosis: ‘women and girls with severe endometriosis experience better care, where diagnosis time is reduced on the journey from initial GP appointment through to final diagnosis’ (Department of Health and Social Care, 2022). The document also outlines ambitions to improve how menstrual health is supported in workplaces, schools, and community centres. This document pledges to support menstrual health in a variety of ways such as ‘improving education and information provision on menstrual health and gynaecological conditions through the introduction of RSHE in schools’, and ‘working to reduce waiting times and improve patient experience within gynaecology services’ (Department of Health and Social Care, 2022). Although the Health Care Strategy was not in place when I conducted interviews with activists in 2020 and 2021, it was something towards which some of my participants were working. Furthermore, since the completion of my interviews and focus groups, endometriosis and PMDD have become more visible in the mainstream media and in popular culture. For instance, IAPMD (International Association for Premenstrual Disorders) have worked closely with ITV television to include a storyline about PMDD on the soap *Emmerdale* in 2023 (The Mirror, 2024).

RESEARCHING THE MENSTRUAL MOVEMENT: METHODOLOGIES

The Menstrual Movement in the Media employs a variety of methods to examine the menstrual movement and its impact. These methods include semi-structured interviews (via video call), focus groups (some of which were via video call), and thematic analysis. These methods are all guided by an intersectional feminist approach. This approach is central not only to

²⁰The government has also demonstrated an interest in improving menstrual, perimenopausal, and menopausal health in the workplace. For example, Helen Tomlinson was appointed as the government’s first menopause employment champion: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-appoints-first-menopause-employment-champion-to-improve-workplace-support>.

the analysis in the book but also to the recruitment of all participants. I ensured that the activists whom I interviewed were diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender, and age. I also asked about their work with specific minority groups and asked them to reflect on how their own identities shaped their interactions with these groups. Although recruitment of young people in schools was based on whether they and (if they were under 18) their parents consented, I was able to attract a diverse group of participants. To ensure a diverse sample, I contacted schools which had students from multiple ethnic minority groups and created a recruitment poster that used gender inclusive language. To encourage conversations during the focus groups that adopted an intersectional approach to menstruation, I used elicitation materials that included images of people who were diverse in their ethnicity, age, and gender (Barton, 2015). I asked participants to reflect on their own reactions to the photos and whether they related to, or could understand, their key messages. This often led to students reflecting on how their own identity affected their engagement with menstruation on social media and in the mainstream media. Furthermore, by asking the participants to whom they would talk about menstruation, I created a space for them to consider how their knowledge and attitudes were influenced by their family, religion, ethnicity, or gender. Finally, throughout data collection, analysis, and writing this book, I have reflected on my own positionality as a white European female scholar to try to ensure that I amplify, rather than erase, the voices of people from other backgrounds.

As I was granted ethical approval in February 2020 from the University of Sheffield for the research on which this book is based, I began to contact schools and activists at a time when the spread of COVID-19 was causing some alarm but had not yet led to closures of schools or other public buildings. As concerns about COVID-19 grew in March, I postponed my contact with schools and concentrated on arranging interviews with activists via video call. From early March 2020, many of the organisations for which my participants worked were starting to operate solely online. Then, on 26 March 2020, the population of Great Britain was instructed to stay at home.²¹ My interviews began a few days later and traversed the three lockdowns that occurred between March 2020 and March 2021. As many menstrual activists suddenly had spare time and an increased desire to connect with other people, potential participants were

²¹ With the exclusion of shopping for essentials or one hour of exercise a day.

usually very keen to talk to me about their work. Since I conducted many interviews between March and June 2020, I asked my participants how lockdown was affecting their work. They expressed concerns about the difficulty of operating solely online as well as the increasing social inequalities that resulted from the pandemic.²² For example, some activists discussed their struggles to provide products to those who were suddenly unable to access them at school. Others explained that their online workshops, such as those that gave advice on how to use reusable products, were less effective via video call than in offline settings. As I argue in my article on the implications of COVID-19 for the menstrual movement, my participants' experiences during lockdown indicated that digital communication is less effective than offline communication 'for conducting intersectional activism that supports communities who are disadvantaged by factors such as race, class, or disability' (Tomlinson, 2023, p. 1).²³

As lockdowns and social distancing continued, most schools did not admit any visitors between March 2020 and June 2021. Whilst waiting a year and half to be allowed into schools, I decided to ask schools if they would be happy for me to run focus groups via video call. Most of the schools which had been initially keen for offline focus groups did not want their students to be involved in online focus groups. Some stated that video calls with external people were against their safeguarding policies, whilst most teachers said that they no longer had the time to host the focus groups due to their needing to catch up with lessons that students missed during lockdown. Two schools, however, agreed to me conducting online focus groups. Although these focus groups are still included in my data and I cite some quotes from them in this book, they were significantly less effective than my offline focus groups. As they were not always allowed by their schools to turn on their camera, I was unable to see their reactions to my questions and had to rely on vocal cues. Echoing the experiences of some of my activist participants who struggled to engage audiences in online workshops about menstruation, my teenaged participants were far less talkative over video call than they were face to face (Tomlinson, 2023). Due to the stigma that still exists around menstruation, it is important to

²² For example, period poverty increased due to rising unemployment (Power, 2020).

²³ As it is not within the scope of this book to look at the impact of lockdown on menstrual activists' aims and practices, I have explored this in my article "'Periods Don't Stop for Pandemics': The Implications of COVID-19 for Online and Offline Menstrual Activism in Great Britain' (Tomlinson, 2021).

create a supportive and encouraging atmosphere to ensure that young people are comfortable to talk about menstruation. As it was harder for me to establish the same trusting and engaging atmosphere that I was able to establish when I visited schools in person, this resulted in offline focus groups being livelier and more in-depth than online focus groups. Furthermore, as they could not see each other, there was less conversation between the participants. In the offline settings it was common for participants to bounce ideas off each other, share their experiences, and ask each other (and me) questions. This led to some very rich discussions between the participants that would not have happened in one-on-one interviews.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The Menstrual Movement in the Media is split into two parts. Part I is based on interviews with activists and Part II is based on my focus groups with teenagers. Chapter 2, which focuses on the mediation of menstruation, provides a thematic analysis of interviews that I conducted with 32 menstrual advocates from across Great Britain. It examines their views on the media's role in shaping social norms, knowledge, attitudes, and experiences of menstruation. As my findings indicate, there are three aspects of mediation that activists believe to most harm menstruating women and people: the perpetuation of menstrual stigma, the circulation of misinformation, and the reinforcing of social inequalities. Although my participants' criticisms are primarily aimed at the mainstream media, they articulate that social media, despite offering a valuable space in which activists can self-mediate, are also responsible for perpetuating menstrual stigma and misinformation. By revealing activists' criticisms of traditional and social media, the chapter exemplifies why the menstrual movement is seeking to change media narratives. Chapter 3 analyses the tactics used by my 32 participants to transform the mediation of menstruation and affect change via the media. This chapter explores various discursive strategies used by my participants to alter the mediation of menstruation, and, as a result, improve the lives of menstruating women and people. Tactics include using non-stigmatising language, speaking openly about menstruation, highlighting the intersectional nature of menstrual experience, and promoting the inclusion of menstruating people of all genders and ethnicities. This chapter argues that, for menstrual activists, transforming the mediation of menstruation both on social media and in journalism are vital steps towards destigmatising menstruation and reducing social inequalities

in Great Britain. Furthermore, this chapter also explores various points of disagreement and tension within the menstrual movement about which discourses are the most effective for social change.

Part II includes three chapters that are based on findings from my focus groups with 77 teenagers across schools, colleges, and a university in Yorkshire. To understand how the mainstream media and social media are shaping young people's perceptions and knowledge of menstruation, it is important first to pinpoint which discourses they are encountering in the media, the sources of these discourses, and the format with which they are conveyed. Chapter 4 therefore explores young people's engagement with the mediation of menstruation via a focus on memes, news stories, and advertisements. This chapter demonstrates that social media and news media are perpetuating misinformation, menstrual stigma, and a narrow view of lived experiences of menstruation. For example, this chapter builds on research that has examined the discourses in menstrual product advertisements but only theorised their impact. The original findings of this chapter indicate that, because they minimise menstrual pain and portray a monolithic view of menstruation, advertisements can negatively impact the wellbeing of girls and other young people who menstruate. Nevertheless, this chapter makes a significant contribution to critical menstruation studies by demonstrating that the visibility of menstruation on social media and news media is encouraging young people to view menstruation as a normal topic of discussion. Memes, for example, albeit sometimes perpetuating pejorative stereotypes, are having a positive influence on girls and other young people who menstruate through encouraging them to question menstrual stigma, feel a sense of collective identity, and share their menstrual experiences with each other. Hence, as this chapter demonstrates, it is humour, rather than explicitly politically driven communication, that is most significantly contributing to both the normalisation of menstruation and young people's perceptions of menstrual experience in general.

Chapters 5 and 6 build on these findings by focussing on young people's knowledge and perceptions of menstrual activism, stigma, and social inequalities. Chapter 5 takes a more in-depth look at the extent to which menstrual activism and the media have destigmatised menstruation and encouraged more open conversation. It also considers which platforms and what kind of social media accounts are having the largest impact on young people's views of menstruation. This also includes a reflection on their views of who is a menstrual activist and what constitutes menstrual

activism. This chapter argues that, for many of the young people in this research, the ‘everyday’ presence of menstruation in their virtual worlds is encouraging them to view menstruation as a natural bodily experience about which they can speak openly offline with family, friends, and, increasingly, within mixed gender groups. Since the menstrual movement has catalysed and sustained this increased visibility, these findings offer a very strong indicator of the success of the movement’s central aim of destigmatising menstruation. Furthermore, as social media provides a space for non-traditional and smaller acts of activism, it has transformed how young people understand, appreciate, and conduct activism. Nevertheless, as this chapter also indicates, many young men do not feel included in menstrual activism, feel unsure as to when and how they can communicate about menstruation without causing offence, and want to learn more about menstrual experiences. Thus, as evidenced in Chaps. 5 and 6, the most impactful way in which menstrual activists can further reduce menstrual stigma is to better engage men and to support them to become allies. Furthermore, the menstrual movement would also resonate better with young people through amplifying the voices of activists from ethnic minority groups and highlighting their work. Chapter 6 explores young people’s awareness and perceptions of period poverty, menstrual health conditions, reusable products, and transgender people who menstruate. It also considers the extent to which their awareness of these four themes has led to a change in their attitudes and offline behaviours. This chapter argues that, thanks to social media in particular, young people in Great Britain are becoming increasingly aware of issues around menstrual equity. Nevertheless, they have limited knowledge about menstrual health such as being able to identify if symptoms are typical or atypical. Ultimately, as my findings demonstrate, the changes that will have the greatest impact on young people are improved access to high-quality menstrual education (which include tactile engagement with menstrual products and discussions of lived experiences), opportunities to develop their media literacy skills, and the fostering of an inclusive and open culture around menstruation in educational settings. The menstrual movement must therefore continue to exert pressure on governments and, where possible, support teachers and pupils.

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PART I

Concerns, Aims, and Tactics of the
Menstrual Movement



CHAPTER 2

The Demands of the Menstrual Movement: Stigma, Misinformation, and Social Inequalities

Mediation is a social process that perpetuates discourses, influences social norms, and, consequently, impacts lived experience (Silverstone, 2002). Leah Lievrouw argues that mediation significantly distorts ‘the relationship between people’s everyday experience and a “true” view of reality’ (2009, p. 313). As indicated by the 32 interviews that are presented in this chapter and Chap. 3, this belief that the media distorts lived reality is shared by the menstrual movement and is key to understanding their critical perspectives on news media and social media. Before exploring how menstrual activists are transforming dominant media narratives about menstruation and how they use the media as a tool to effect change, it is necessary first to examine how activists perceive the mediation of menstruation, and its role in shaping societal norms, knowledge, views, and experiences. Or, to employ the terms of Meyer and Staggenborg (2012), this chapter will explore the ‘demands’ of menstrual activists to provide necessary context to the examination of their ‘tactics’ in Chap. 3.¹ To pinpoint aspects of the news media and social media that activists strive to change, this chapter identifies mediated discourses and journalistic practices that activists believe to harm, misinform, and misrepresent women and other people who menstruate. This chapter also reveals elements of

¹As explained in the introduction, ‘demands’ refers to problems that are identified by social movements and ‘tactics’ are the actions they take to resolve the identified problems.

menstrual experience that activists believe to be insufficiently represented, or ignored, in the news media.

By thematically analysing interviews with 32 menstrual advocates across Great Britain, this chapter and Chap. 3 offer an insight into the menstrual movement's ambivalent relationship with both traditional and social media. Reflecting studies on the relationship between other social movements and the mainstream media, we can characterise the relationship between menstrual activists and news media as one of distrust (Cammaerts, 2012). Yet, due to this relationship being necessary to achieve the aims of the movement, it is also one of reliance. Although social media offers opportunities for self-mediation, my participants are also aware that their posts can be misinterpreted, misappropriated, undermined, or only viewed by those within their own echo chamber (Cinelli et al., 2021). Since social media and news media are central to my participants' engagement with their audiences, this chapter compares their views of these media and how they influence public attitudes towards menstruation. The structure of this chapter is focussed on three key themes that emerged during my thematic analysis: menstrual stigma, misinformation, and social inequalities. These themes primarily reveal activists' negative and sceptical attitudes towards the media, thereby highlighting elements of mediation and journalistic practice that they desire to change. To provide an insight into how menstrual activists perceive the mediation of menstruation and how this impacts societal views, knowledge, and experiences, this chapter frames my participants' responses within the limited existing literature about the mediation of menstruation. Furthermore, it situates my participants' views within critical menstruation studies, feminism, and gender studies. Through my examination of how activists perceive the mediation of menstruation in the news and on social media, this chapter fills a significant gap within the field of critical menstruation studies which, to date, is yet to deeply evaluate the relationship between menstrual activists and the media.

THE MEDIATION OF MENSTRUATION

Since there are only a handful of studies about the mediation of menstruation in the news or on social media, there is little insight into how representations of menstruation in these media reflect, but also influence, social norms, structural inequalities, commercial interests, and political agendas (de Benedictis, 2022; McKay, 2021; Thornton, 2012). Most scholarship focuses instead on how advertising, cinema, or television maintain social

norms that negatively impact women and other people who menstruate (Campbell et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2022; Rosewarne, 2012). Scholars within critical menstruation studies tend to argue that the traditional media frames menstruation in a pejorative light and perpetuates harmful normative ideas, such as by portraying menstruating women as out of control, mentally ill, weak, and unhygienic (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Kissling, 2006). As such, the mainstream media reinforces secrecy, stigma, and shame (Erchull, 2013). Such mediation discourages both menstruating and non-menstruating people from engaging in open conversations about menstruation. It also encourages self-surveillance such as hiding menstrual products from public view or constantly checking for leaks (Sveinsdóttir, 2017).

Scholarship has argued, for example, that menstrual product advertisements have a harmful impact on menstruating women and people because they rely on discourses of hygiene and concealment to sell products (Erchull, 2013; Fingerson, 2012). Both large brands and some smaller social enterprises have continued to tap into these discourses and combine them with neoliberal feminist messages that their products are empowering (Guo et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023). Drawing on this research, we can argue that advertisements continue to perpetuate menstrual shame, but these discourses are hidden within overt messages that frame campaigns as feminist. A quick search for #periodpositive on Instagram reveals multiple advertisements that frame their messages as feminist.² An Instagram post by Daye, for example, depicts an illustrated woman who is pointing to a blood stain on another woman's skirt. This is juxtaposed with the '#periodpositive' hashtag and the following sentence: 'We don't wanna sound like an @always_uk_ireland ad, but #fearofleakage is something that can hold us back from doing the things we love'. This post simultaneously presents Daye as a company that is critical of larger brands that play on women's fears of leakage whilst also perpetuating these very same discourses to sell their own absorbent tampon. The use of the period positive hashtag also suggests that this advert forms part of a strategy to reduce menstrual stigma and frames the advert as a form of activism. Hence, by presenting a confusing conflation of menstrual stigma and menstrual positivity, it echoes the postfeminist discourses in other 'body positive' campaigns by brands (Griffin et al., 2022; Harriger et al., 2023).

²#periodpositive was created by activist and educator Chella Quint.

Although most studies about the mediation of menstruation focus on how advertisements perpetuate stigma, their findings can also shed valuable light on how menstruation is constructed on social media and in newspapers. As Ingrid Johnston-Robledo et al. (2006) highlight in their study about the framing of menstrual suppression in newspapers, the language used in marketing has also infiltrated discourses in the news media. Based on their findings, we can theorise that not only are readers influenced by the language and imagery in the advertisements that are featured within newspapers and on social media but also, since journalists have internalised these discourses, audiences once again encounter the stigmatising messages of advertisements when they read or watch the news. Thus, journalists' adoption of such discourses further reifies the menstrual shame that is central to the marketing campaigns of many brands that sell menstrual products. The limited scholarship about social media also tends to focus on stigma, arguing that this space perpetuates negative stereotypes about menstruating women, such as by mocking them for being uncontrollable (Stanek et al., 2023; Thornton, 2012). Leslie-Jean Thornton's (2012) study reveals that the most common ways in which menstruating women are conceptualised on social media present them as angry, emotionally unstable, and deceitful. Furthermore, in her dataset of 2211 tweets, not even one post presented a non-stigmatising view of menstruation.

In addition to perpetuating menstrual stigma, scholars argue that the media presents a narrow view of menstruation that limits, rather than enriches, public conversation about this subject (Coleman & Sredl, 2022). Elisabeth Kissling (2006) theorises that the media reinforces a normative belief that there only exists three acceptable ways of discussing menstruation: complaining, mocking, or selling menstrual products. For instance, an emphasis on leaking helps to sell products because it reinforces the idea that menstruation is an embarrassing problem that requires a quiet product-based solution (Karzai, 2010). McHugh (2020) builds on Kissling's (2006) findings by illustrating that the media has helped to foster a culture of 'menstrual moaning' that reinforces negative ideas that menstruation is debilitating and uncontrollable. This mediation facilitates and legitimises conversations that play into negative stereotypes about menstruation, rather than encouraging more nuanced conversations that consider individual difference and frame menstruation in a more neutral, or positive, light (McHugh, 2020). Studies have highlighted that marketing and the media more broadly are also responsible for spreading myths

about menstruation and presenting a stereotypical view of menstrual experience (Rosewarne, 2012). These myths, which include notions that women are irrational because of their female biology, or that it is unhygienic for menstruating women to swim, can have a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of people who menstruate (King, 2020). Myths and misinformation are particularly harmful to young people who, because they lack knowledge about menstruation, turn to the media and the Internet for answers (White, 2013). This can lead to a harmful cycle in which inaccurate and stigmatising information is shared amongst peers and passed on to future generations. Nevertheless, despite the considerable negative implications that mediations of menstruation on social media, advertisements, and news media can have on young people, there is extremely limited research that has interviewed young people to explore this impact (Mucedola & Smith, 2022).

The final theme that is examined in this chapter is the media's perpetuation of the social and structural inequalities that impact the lives of menstruating women and people.³ Although the field of critical menstruation studies is yet to pay significant attention to how the media perpetuates these inequalities, existing scholarship has briefly outlined that the global menstrual movement aims to expose and deconstruct structural issues such as racism, gender inequalities, transphobia, classism, and ableism (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). Of these issues, it is gender inequality that is the most discussed in critical menstruation studies. Young (2005) argues that menstruation is the main marker of sexual difference within society, and this leads to women being subjected to gender norms that otherise them. If we turn to feminist media scholarship, we can observe that the media constructs gendered discourses, limits gender expression, and reinforces gender inequalities (Reddy et al., 2020). This can have far-reaching consequences for women, such as justifying unequal access to employment and education as well as legitimising gender-based violence (Harvey, 2020). Liesbet Van Zoonen refers to the media as 'social technologies of gender' (1994, p. 41) and articulates that the media modifies, reconstructs, and produces sexual difference. Through this discourse of sexual difference, the media reinforces essentialist stereotypes that position men

³This chapter (and others within this book) frequently uses the terms 'women and other people who menstruate' or 'menstruating women and people' to echo the language used by menstrual activists. These terms not only recognise that menstrual stigma is rooted in misogyny but also acknowledge the fact that not all menstruating people identify as women.

and women as diametrically opposite and erases those who do not conform to this binary (Mocarski et al., 2019). The media, therefore, shapes how individuals understand their own gender identity and which traits are desirable for men and for women (Wood, 1993). For instance, the normative binary that frames men as rational, but women as irrational, is commonly explored within critical menstruation studies (King, 2020; Patterson, 2014). Scholars have criticised medical discourses for feeding into this binary because they characterise the menstruating body as pathologically other to the masculine norm, and therefore in need of medical treatment (Gunn & Vavrus, 2010). Discourses of sexual difference and rigid gender norms that are perpetuated in the media are harmful not only to cisgender women but also to gender non-conforming people. Since they do not fit into this binary, mediated discourses of sexual difference also erase transgender people as well as other gender non-conforming individuals (Bloodworth-Lugo, 2007; Nelson, 2020). As not all menstruating people identify as women, it is also important to consider how the mediation of menstruation influences the public's knowledge of transgender experience, as well as how this mediation can harm, or benefit, gender non-conforming menstruators. Studies have only recently begun to explore discourses in the media about transgender and non-binary people who menstruate and therefore, by exploring how activists are supporting transgender people, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* makes an important intervention into gender studies and critical menstruation studies (Kosher et al., 2023).

By adopting an intersectional approach to gender inequalities, we can see that the gendered discourses in the media reinforce other structural inequalities such as those based on ethnicity, class, or disability (Molina-Guzman & Cacho, 2013). These inequalities can be shaped by the predominance of certain voices, imagery, and discourses. For example, by reproducing white supremacy, the media can preserve inequalities that lie at the intersection of race and gender (hooks, 2014). The media can also maintain structural inequalities by citing certain sources over others (Dreher, 2009). When minority groups are ignored or they are spoken for by more privileged members of society, social hierarchies are perpetuated and the experiences of marginalised people are erased (Alcoff, 1991; Toolan, 2018). Such social hierarchies are reinforced on social media when activists from minority groups, such as the transgender community, are harassed because of their identity (Abreu & Kenny, 2018). To present a further example from feminist scholarship, the media tends to celebrate

bodies that fit with the western beauty ideals of the slim white cisgender body and otherise those that do not conform to this model (van Amsterdam, 2013). Thus, we can argue that menstruating people who do not resemble this white, cisnormative, and ableist image can face discrimination both from journalists and from social media users. Before exploring participants' views about the media's perpetuation of stigma, misinformation, and social inequalities, in more detail, this chapter outlines how participants were recruited and interviewed.

METHODOLOGY

Recruitment

Participants were recruited at conferences, via Twitter, or, after finding their website, directly via email. As academic conferences on menstruation tend to bring together both activists and researchers (some of whom fit both categories), they provided an ideal space to promote this study. Seven participants were recruited from the Menstruation Research Network and an event at Brunel University entitled 'Periods and Beyond: Menstruation, Inequalities and Social Change' that took place in January 2020. Charities such as Plan International, Freedom4Girls, and Irise International were present alongside individual activists. Interviews with these activists took place in March and April 2020. Then, in May 2020, I recruited a further 24 activists via Twitter or via email. Intersectionality was a key consideration in participant recruitment both in ensuring a diverse range of experiences and in providing data for my analytical approach that considers the impact of factors such as gender, ethnicity, and religion on attitudes towards, and experiences of, menstruation. Participants were selected to ensure diversity with nine participants in total being from ethnic minority groups. Participants included cisgender women (28), non-binary people (3), and a transgender man. Ages ranged from 18 to 70. Twenty-five participants lived in England, five in Wales, and two in Scotland.

The recruited participants reflect the diversity of aims within the menstrual activist movement, including destigmatising menstruation, tackling period poverty, raising awareness about menstrual health, promoting environmentally friendly products, and supporting transgender people who menstruate. Many activists engaged with multiple aspects of menstrual advocacy. For instance, advocates who sought to eradicate period poverty also tended to discuss their aims to destigmatise menstruation. Interviews

began with the question ‘What are your aims?’. The below table reflects their responses. Participants are represented more than once in the right-hand column if they mentioned more than one aim during the interview.

<i>Aims</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>
Destigmatising menstruation	20
Tackling period poverty	13
Promoting environmentally friendly products	10
Raising awareness about menstrual health	12
Supporting transgender and non-binary people who menstruate	4

Interview Process

Interviews took place between March 2020 and January 2021 and lasted between 25 and 40 minutes. Twenty-seven people were interviewed via Google Meets and five over the telephone.⁴ Semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide the participants with the freedom to raise issues that they believed to be important and allow them the space to think reflexively (Franks, 2002). The list of questions was designed to ascertain participants’ aims, explore their opinions about social and news media, determine how they engage with the media to affect change, and identify how they would like media discourses to change. This chapter examines their views of the current media landscape, with a particular focus on how it shapes social norms, knowledge, attitudes, and experiences of menstruation. The analysis in this chapter is based on their answers to the following question: ‘What is your opinion on how menstruation has been portrayed in the media over the last five years?’. This broad question gave them the opportunity to talk about any aspect of menstrual experience and how it has been mediated. After their initial response, further questions about the mediation of menstruation in news and social media were asked to explore the participants’ attitudes in more depth. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then uploaded to NVivo for coding. To protect the vulnerable communities with which many of my participants work, all my participants will be quoted anonymously in this book.⁵

⁴These participants were interviewed over the phone due to their having slow Internet connections.

⁵Participants who wished to be named are mentioned in the acknowledgements.

Thematic Analysis

The codebook was created by a combination of a data-driven inductive approach with a template of pre-established codes that were based on a theoretical framework (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). To highlight how the interviews reflected existing research, the initial codebook included concepts from critical menstruation studies and scholarship on feminist activism. For this chapter, codes included menstrual stigma, hygiene, ‘monstrous feminine’ (Ussher, 2006), misinformation, gender inequalities, and racial inequalities. For Chap. 3, codes included ‘menstrual crankiness’ (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020), ‘collective identity’, and ‘consciousness-raising’ (Baer, 2016). During a close reading of the transcripts, further codes were added to highlight patterns of meaning that answered the project’s research questions (Legard et al., 2003). These themes included neocolonialism and the environment. Adopting Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method of reflexive analysis, themes were refined through multiple close readings of the dataset. The thematic analysis of the dataset is grounded in the participants’ own experiences and interpretations of reality (van Zoonen, 1994). In this way, the analysis in this chapter (and the subsequent chapter) brings out my participants’ nuanced and multiple understandings of the media.

Menstrual Stigma

The Language of Advertising

To frame their discussions of how the media continues to perpetuate stigma, some participants firstly identified positive changes that they had observed since 2015. They commented most frequently on the increasing visibility of menstrual blood in the mainstream media and on social media. Although activists have been producing art using menstrual blood for decades (Bobel & Fahs, 2020), participants attributed the recent visibility of menstrual blood in the mainstream media to the use of red, rather than blue, liquid in advertising. Reflecting on the link between advertising campaigns and news media, one participant stated: ‘There was the whole thing around it being blue liquid, and now we see red much more in the media in general’. Similarly, another participant explained: ‘On social media and in the news, people are becoming very open about using blood to combat that blue liquid on the pad. It’s more realistic and makes it more normal’. As feminist work about menstrual product advertisements

has demonstrated, blue liquid reinforces menstrual stigma because it suggests that menstrual blood is unsanitary and therefore should remain invisible (Merskin, 1999). This sanitised image distorts the ‘ordinariness of the menstrual experience by erasing blood’ and leads to an internalisation of menstrual shame (Bobel & Fahs, 2020, p. 1011). As participants indicated, the use of red liquid has the opposite impact to the use of blue liquid. Since red liquid resembles menstrual blood, it has the power to shape social attitudes towards menstruation because it presents menstruation as an ordinary experience that can be spoken about in everyday conversation (Campbell et al., 2021). As these two participants suggest, by bringing blood into the mainstream, marketing campaigns have acted as a catalyst for journalists and social media users to include images of menstrual blood in articles and posts. Hence, by legitimising the presence of menstrual blood in public, advertisements have contributed to the destigmatisation of menstruation. As imagery of menstrual blood offers a powerful way to challenge the ‘menstrual concealment imperative’, the mainstream media has complemented activists’ work on normalising menstruation (Wood, 2020).

Despite, however, their positive response to the use of red liquid in marketing campaigns, most participants were still very critical of the language used by brands. These participants argued that the stigmatising language of advertising filtered into mainstream news media. According to my participants, this is manifest when journalists frame menstruation as something unhygienic, embarrassing, or taboo. One participant criticised the hypocrisy in the marketing materials of the brand ‘Bodyform’. Although this participant praised Bodyform for using red liquid and including stories by women, she argued that their continued use of stigmatising language harms women because it reinforces the ‘menstrual concealment imperative’ (Wood, 2020). She explained, ‘[T]hey’ve done Womb Stories which was brilliant. But then you go onto their website, they are still doing all this communication about discreet management of your period’. She added that this language continues to shape mainstream media coverage of menstruation which is evident in journalists’ frequent use of terms such as ‘menstrual hygiene’, ‘unsanitary’, ‘undignified’, and ‘sanitary pads’.⁶ Another participant highlighted that the mainstream

⁶ It is important to note that many activists refuse to use the term ‘sanitary pad’ because it implies that menstruators are dirty (Chrisler, 2011). Instead, many of the activists who I interviewed use ‘menstrual pad’ or ‘pad’ as more neutral alternatives. Some of my participants, however, did use the term ‘sanitary pad’.

media's adoption of the discourses from advertising undermines activists' work to challenge the menstrual concealment imperative (Wood, 2020).

A lot of articles I've seen in the mainstream media use language that people within different period circles and communities would never use. [...] [Journalists] are focussed on sanitary products and they use a different language that focuses on hygiene and periods being unclean and taboo.

Hence, participants' views resonate with scholarship that argues that brands construct menstruation as a 'hygienic crisis' that must be discreetly solved through the purchase of menstrual products (Bobel, 2019, p. 114). Participants also underscored that these stigmatising discourses are internalised by journalists (Chrisler, 2011; Fingerson, 2012). Since they are prevalent in news media, these stigmatising discourses may, therefore, be reaching a wider audience than that which is targeted by advertisements. Based on the views of my participants, we can argue that, since journalists appropriate the language used by brands, they inadvertently perpetuate a neoliberal view that individuals can avoid shame and be empowered through products. In this way, news media position capitalism as a solution alongside masking the 'patriarchal structures' (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 4) that sustain menstrual stigma. In other words, we can argue that journalistic approaches to menstruation reinforce the ideology that it is the responsibility of individuals to feel less ashamed about their own menses, rather arguing for structural changes that would lead to a destigmatisation of menstruation at a societal level.

Participants not only criticised journalists for reinforcing discourses from advertising but also argued that journalists' use of language negatively impacts the work of menstrual activists. A participant explained:

There is always an enterprise element attached to menstruation in the media right now. The enterprise angle is just neoliberalism and late-stage capitalism, co-opting something that should be more egalitarian. Media coverage should be more about human rights and more socialist. It's disappointing. Presenting campaigns from companies over campaigns from activists is wrong. I know they both use the word "campaign", but journalists shouldn't get mixed up.

This response resonates with a recent observation in critical menstruation studies that brands are co-opting the discourses of activists, such as by stating that they are normalising menstruation or fighting period poverty (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). Scholarship, however, has not yet considered how this co-optation feeds back into the mainstream media. If we draw on feminist studies about the neoliberal discourse of ‘empowerment’, we can understand why menstrual activists perceive journalists’ individualistic framing of empowerment as a threat to their work to tackle structural inequalities (Baer, 2016). As another advocate said, ‘We recognise the need for change at a structural level so when we read articles that praise brands for throwing a lot of single-use products around, we get a bit annoyed’. Hence, by framing marketing campaigns as menstrual activism, journalists are promoting a neoliberal view that undermines the efforts of activists towards menstrual justice. Not only, then, do activists need to challenge the negative discourses in advertising, but they also need to work with journalists so that they, too, stop perpetuating menstrual stigma.

Resonating with the concerns of these two participants, eight activists articulated that menstrual stigma was deeply entrenched in journalism. This finding therefore suggests that activists who are trying to transform media narratives face an extremely arduous task. Participants illustrated that menstrual stigma was present in journalistic framing, lexical choices, and journalists’ attitudes towards the menstrual activists who they interview (De Vreese, 2014). One participant argued that journalists are merely ‘contributing to the stigma’ because each of their articles starts by claiming that menstruation is a ‘very stigmatised subject’. Making the same criticism of journalistic framing, another participant stated, ‘[Y]ou cannot hold onto a taboo any harder than if you are talking about the fact that it's a taboo’. As these responses suggest, although the media’s preoccupation with menstrual stigma does raise awareness of its existence, this frequent framing of menstruation as a taboo subject constantly reiterates that it is something society views as shameful. Thus, we can argue that this framing is undermining and, potentially undoing, activists’ work to reduce menstrual stigma.

Participants indicated that journalists’ internalisation of menstrual stigma has a harmful impact on both their relationship with activists and the mediation of menstrual activism itself. One participant not only noted that some journalists were ‘embarrassed’ to discuss menstruation with her but also that some journalists showed reluctance to write about this topic. As she illustrated, the consequence of these engrained negative attitudes is

that, even when journalists report on menstrual activism and interview activists directly, they tend to reuse language that shames menstruating women and people as well as ignore activists' requests to avoid stigmatising words. Another participant, who expressed her frustration that journalists do not replicate her specific lexical choices, expressed: '[W]henver there is an article in a newspaper or magazine about [my organisation], the term "sanitary pad" is always used even though I literally never say that word'.⁷ Her response indicates that, even though journalists are reporting on menstrual activism, they are, through their use of stigmatising language, simultaneously undoing activists' efforts to normalise menstruation and reduce social inequalities. Thus, menstrual activism is often mediated using the very language that activists seek to dismantle. We can argue that this sends a confusing message to the public as to the nature of menstrual stigma and how it can be challenged. By examining this participant's response alongside those of the other nine participants who criticised the media's perpetuation of menstrual stigma, we can feel activists' strong sense of frustration that their work to destigmatise menstruation is not feeding into mainstream media narratives. Even more concerning is journalists' substitution of an activist lexicon that seeks to normalise menstruation with one that does the opposite. Hence, according to activists, journalists simultaneously undermine their work and continue to perpetuate the cycle of shame that has been present within the media for decades (Rosewarne, 2012). We can therefore understand that activists have an ambivalent relationship with journalists because the media coverage of their advocacy is vital to their success, but it is also simultaneously distorting their messages.

The Monstrous Feminine

Besides expressing a general concern about journalists' perpetuation of menstrual stigma, participants were especially frustrated with the stigmatising manner with which the mental health of menstruating women and people is mediated. All participants who advocated for women and other people with PMDD (Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder) criticised journalists for sensationalising women's experiences of this debilitating

⁷The name of this participant's organisation has been redacted for confidentiality.

condition.⁸ As their responses indicate, this practice, which is used by journalists to sell newspapers, reinforces normative societal perceptions that menstruating women, and especially those with mental health conditions, are dangerous, irrational, and out of control (Chrisler, 2013; Winslow et al., 2023). Ussher's (2006) concept of the 'monstrous feminine' outlines that society views menstruating bodies as a threat that must be contained. She explains that women 'who fail to perform femininity within the tight boundaries within which it is prescribed [...] are at risk of being positioned as mad or bad, and subjected to discipline' (Ussher, 2006, p. 4). Ussher's theory is about menstruating women in general; however, as highlighted by the responses of three of my participants who advocate for people with PMDD, this discourse of the 'monstrous feminine' is exaggerated in the mediation of PMDD. One participant recollected a magazine article about PMDD which was headlined 'From Mother to Monster', another criticised a journalist for referring to her in an article as 'Hulk on heroin and speed', and another expressed frustration that journalists portray women with PMDD as 'raging lunatics [...] because they will sensationalise [PMDD] to sell papers'. By portraying them as threatening, 'mad', and 'bad' (Ussher, 2006, p. 4), all three of these examples from the mainstream media otherise women with PMDD. Hence, we can argue that the news media doubly stigmatises women with PMDD. The concept of 'double stigma' is one that is explored in the field of health communication (Daftary, 2012). This concept refers to the experiences of someone who has two illnesses or conditions both of which carry social stigmas (Winslow et al., 2023).⁹ The participants' responses show that this concept of double stigma is also applicable to women with PMDD and the mediation of their experiences. Not only does the media subject them to stigmatising language that positions all menstruating women as irrational, but they also face a heightening of such language by journalists because of their struggles with their mental health (Hardy & Hardie, 2017; King, 2020). This stigmatising language could cause women with PMDD to feel more ashamed about their mental health and less likely to seek support

⁸The symptoms of PMDD include depression (including suicidal ideations), anxiety, and poor concentration. These symptoms usually appear one week before menstruation and end within two days of bleeding. It is generally unknown by medical professionals and often confused with PMS (Malvika & Supriya, 2019).

⁹It has also, on occasion, been used within critical menstruation studies to refer to menstruators who are marginalised because they face other inequalities such as period poverty (Perianes & Roberts, 2020).

from employers or medical practitioners. My findings from these interviews therefore suggest that, by playing into social discourses of the ‘monstrous feminine’ and sensationalising PMDD, the media’s drive for capitalist gain is harming individuals with PMDD and potentially those with other mental health conditions as well.

According to my participants, this mediation of PMDD undermines the efforts of activists to raise awareness of this illness and its real impact on the lives of menstruating women and people. Participants noted two ways in which journalists are working against them. Firstly, they argued that the mediation of PMDD discourages individuals from speaking openly about their experiences and therefore from contributing to consciousness-raising efforts that are led by activists. Reflecting on how her own experience of PMDD was significantly misconstrued by a journalist, one participant reflected:

These articles will not make people feel like they can come forward and say they have got this illness because they’ll just feel stigmatised by that. They’re not going to want to talk about it. [...] I really wasn’t happy with that article about me, so I didn’t share it at all. I kept it secret and hoped that as few people as possible would read it.

Here, she illustrates that, by distorting lived experiences of PMDD, journalists can act as a barrier to menstrual activists who, by sharing their own stories or encouraging others to do the same, seek to raise awareness of the realities of the condition and reduce the shame felt by those who have PMDD. This experience echoes that of other participants who criticised journalists for inserting stigmatising words into articles about menstrual activism and ignoring the inclusive and non-stigmatising language used by activists themselves. The example above highlights that activists’ words are subject to distortion by journalists who, themselves, have internalised normative social discourses about menstruating women or mental health. Hence, rather than amplifying the voices of activists and individuals with PMDD, the news media has impaired activists who raise awareness of PMDD.

Secondly, participants claimed that, by delegitimising PMDD, journalists are undoing their efforts to ensure that doctors, and broader society, regard PMDD as a legitimate condition. Four participants talked about their struggles to ensure that women and people with PMDD receive the treatment that they require. Indeed, as many medical professionals are

unaware of PMDD and, as with many chronic illnesses that are primarily experienced by women, not all doctors and clinical researchers believe that PMDD is a real condition, activists are battling against both ignorance and scepticism (Chrisler & Gorman, 2015; Hardy & Hardie, 2017; Winslow et al., 2023). One participant, who documents her experiences of PMDD on her Instagram page, criticised the media for mocking women with PMDD: '[T]he media is mocking us and delegitimising something that is actually quite serious. [...] For years, we have just been branded as crazy. If our condition is not given any legitimacy, who is going to take us seriously?' Her response reveals that the mediation of PMDD is working against activists who are demanding that this illness be recognised and treated by doctors. Another advocate argued that the media often explicitly denies the existence of PMDD. She expressed her frustration at newspapers and magazines that quote doctors who state that 'PMDD doesn't exist'. Similarly, another participant exclaimed, 'Like with many chronic illnesses that mostly affect women, we're told it's all in our heads. This is the message we see in the very few news stories out there. Articles about crazy sad women sell more papers, I guess'. Hence, these responses reveal that, for menstruating women and people with mental health conditions, menstrual stigma is compounded by ableist discourses that erase the existence of their illness and discredit their experiences. Based on these interviews, we can argue that the pejorative discourses that are used to characterise women with PMDD combined with the media narrative that it does not exist could encourage readers to dismiss women's experiences of PMDD. Thus, as activists are competing with public communication that delegitimises PMDD as a condition, medical professionals and other members of the public may be less likely to give serious consideration to the efforts of activists to support women and people with PMDD. By examining the responses of all four activists who advocate for those with PMDD, we can see that activists need to work more closely with journalists to ensure that their own experiences, and those of other women and people who have PMDD, are neither distorted nor delegitimised by journalists. My participants' responses indicate that awareness-raising efforts do not always translate into accurate or positive mediations of menstrual health. Even if media coverage may lead to the public learning of the existence of conditions such as PMDD, it is important to bear in mind that this coverage may cause more harm than good if it is contributing to stigmatisation and scepticism about PMDD.

If we contrast these participants' opinions about the mediation of PMDD with their views about the mediation of endometriosis, we can see that activists believe that the media gives more legitimacy to physical illnesses than to mental health conditions. This comparison further highlights the fact that the media reinforces the double stigma faced by menstruating women and people who struggle with their mental health (Winslow et al., 2023). Two participants celebrated the fact that journalists were starting to write articles about endometriosis that listed symptoms such as pain and heavy menstrual bleeding. One participant, who started a support group for women with endometriosis, expressed relief that journalists were finally shining light on this issue: 'These masculine papers, like the Guardian and the Independent, are finally taking endometriosis seriously. They are showing that we are not just crazy women'. By referring to the papers as 'masculine', her feminist perspective on the media highlights that journalists have long perpetuated patriarchal ideas about menstruating women being irrational, and systemically dismissed their pain (King, 2020). Her response suggests that journalists have started to recognise endometriosis as a real illness and have therefore begun to legitimise and raise awareness of women's pain. Another participant expressed, 'We're getting so many more invitations to speak on TV and radio about endometriosis—people are starting to take it seriously, I think. There is a long way to go, but we will get there. I'm hopeful'. Thus, as these two participants indicated, journalists are contributing to activists' efforts to raise awareness of this condition and improve patients' access to appropriate treatment. If we draw on these interviews and studies about stigma in health care, we can argue that, by giving more legitimacy to a primarily physical, rather than a psychological, condition, the mainstream media reinforces a normative societal attitude that mental health issues are much more shameful and much less legitimate than physical health issues (Sartorius, 2007; Winslow et al., 2023).

MISINFORMATION

Myths and Stereotypes in the Digital Space

During their discussions of menstrual stigma, activists mentioned news media far more than social media. However, five participants argued that social media also perpetuates discourses that can harm women and other people who menstruate. Their discussions of menstrual stigma combined

an examination of how memes, social media posts, and blogs can perpetuate negative stereotypes that reflect myths about menstruation. As the oldest participant in the study underscored, these myths themselves are not new, but their perpetuation has been facilitated by new technologies. She referred to these myths as ‘woo-woo’:

The scary thing about a lot of websites is the “woo-woo” crystal stuff—I don’t know where it was before social media. I’m sure there were magazines, but it wasn’t all over the place. One of the problems with periods is that they go with “woo-woo”. Just the fact that they’re called, menstrual, from the moon, and they’ve got nothing to do with the moon!

Her remark that myths are ‘all over the place’ suggests that people who are searching for information on the Internet cannot avoid encountering menstrual myths. By referring to an ancient mythical connection between women and the moon as well as using the term ‘woo-woo’, this participant illustrates that, by presenting women as being controlled by the moon, the Internet is disseminating longstanding myths that menstruating women are irrational (Walker, 1997). Another participant, who listed a few different myths she encountered on social media, expressed her frustration at one myth in particular: ‘[T]he number of times I see on social media that you can’t get pregnant during your period. ... People believe the marketing and use their period apps to avoid pregnancy. I worry for teenagers. [...] This myth has always been around, but it being on the socials makes it stronger’. As these participants indicate, social media, in this regard, poses more of a threat to women and menstruating people than traditional media because it provides a much more effective way to preserve these myths and rapidly circulate them to a new audience. Hence, these responses suggest that menstrual activists face an immense task to undo a complex web of myths that, due to digital technology, have become more visible in our everyday lives.

When discussing myths, four participants referred specifically to memes and their perpetuation of stereotypes. In today’s social media landscape, memes are an increasingly popular form of communication that conveys discourses in image and/or text format (Wells, 2018).¹⁰ Although

¹⁰ Since memes carry within them social discourses that can be analysed, scholars within digital media studies have increasingly turned their attention to them in recent years (Wiggins, 2019). Hence, this book, which examines the role played by menstrual memes in shaping societal discourse about menstruation, is part of this emerging trend.

seemingly trivial due to their humorous and simplistic content, memes reflect social discourses and have the potential to shape social norms (Wiggins, 2019). Indeed, one participant highlighted the significance of this method of communication by referring to memes as the ‘cultural lexicon of contemporary society’. Interviewees argued that the reproduction of myths and negative stereotypes in memes has a negative impact on menstrual experience. One participant, who ran an organisation with a large online following, expressed her frustration that menstruation is primarily depicted on social media via memes that mock menstruating women. Before she became an activist and started to follow accounts run by menstrual activists, her social media feeds only mentioned menstruation in the context of memes: ‘All I’d see were memes. But they all stigmatise periods and put people down’. Another participant criticised ‘period memes’ for stereotyping menstruating women.¹¹ In her opinion, these stereotypes not only reinforce stigmatising social discourses, such as portraying menstruating women as out of control, but they also cause people to believe that these stereotypes are indicative of actual menstrual experiences (Ussher, 2006). She explained that this was evident in online comments that respond to memes: ‘Thanks to a lack of education, you see people commenting really negatively and spreading stereotypes. [...] This isn’t helpful because it makes people feel less comfortable talking about periods’. Here, this participant articulates that, by presenting negative stereotypes about women and menstruating people, memes perpetuate shame and reinforce the ‘menstrual concealment imperative’ (Wood, 2020). Indeed, studies that examine the impact of social media on identity formation argue that negative stereotypes harm young people’s self-esteem and that young women who lack knowledge about menstruation are particularly susceptible to developing feelings of shame (White, 2013). Hence, if we combine this theoretical perspective with my participants’ views, we can see these pejorative discourses in ‘period memes’ counter activists’ efforts to encourage open dialogue about menstruation and promote the wellbeing of women and people who menstruate. In addition, my participant’s engagement with social media suggests that, unless users specifically choose to follow accounts that are run by menstrual activists,

¹¹ On social media, memes about menstruation are commonly referred to as ‘period memes’. See, for example, popular hashtags such as #periodmemes and Instagram accounts such as ‘_Period_Memes_’ (https://www.instagram.com/_period_memes_/) and ‘PeriodMemez’ (<https://www.instagram.com/periodmemez/>).

they primarily encounter menstruation via memes. Thus, we can hypothesise that memes may be overshadowing the more inclusive and accurate messages about menstruation that activists share on social media.

These two participants' responses also underscore that for young people who have not received adequate education about menstruation, memes, and online comments about these memes may lead these young people to absorb and spread myths. Indeed, if we draw on recent studies about the influence of memes on gender inequality, we can argue that menstrual memes may be exacerbating existing social inequalities because they reduce complex and diverse experiences into a simplified format (Ferreira & Vasconcelos, 2019). Since menstrual health education varies enormously between schools, online social media users who have received little or no education about menstrual health will likely be particularly vulnerable to internalising their messages (Kissling, 2006; Bobel & Fahs, 2020). The fear that memes cause young people to assimilate inaccurate information about menstruation was encapsulated by a participant who works for an organisation that provides menstrual education in schools. She articulated: '[W]ithout the education surrounding memes, it becomes misinformation, and that can be really damaging'. Another participant who tackles misinformation about menstruation echoed this idea when she discussed social media more broadly. She underlined the fact that young people are often ill-equipped to view content on social media through a critical lens because they 'hadn't been properly educated about menstrual health' and therefore 'start from a position of ignorance'. If we consider this response in the context of memes and link it to research about health communication more broadly, we can argue that, if young people lack media literacy skills, they may struggle to realise that memes are reproducing societal stereotypes rather than representing actual lived experience (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022; Oh & Lee, 2019). Hence, without the ability to critically examine and discount myths, young people could internalise inaccurate information from memes, and social media more broadly, that could lead to poor menstrual health management.

In addition, as participants underscored, young people are especially susceptible to internalising the messages in memes if trusted adults, such as family and doctors, are not countering these myths. One participant explained that, unless young people receive accurate information from adults, they are likely to share misinformation with their peers: 'If you start from a position of ignorance, who is going to tell you otherwise? Your teachers aren't, they don't know, doctors don't know, parents definitely

don't know, your peers will be telling you all the myths'. Indeed, memes facilitate this proliferation of misinformation amongst young people because they are humorous and easy to share (Wells, 2018). As another participant highlighted, this shareability is leading to the amplification and multiplication of existing social discourses: '[M]emes tend to be a barometer of what's culturally available as a representation, and if those predominant memes are ones that have negative connotations, then that's going to just keep growing'. Hence, without a significant shift in social discourses, these memes will continue rapidly to spread misinformation and stigma that will harm young people's self-esteem and ability to effectively manage their menstrual health. These serious consequences of memes highlight the urgency of the work of menstrual activists to improve menstrual health education in schools and reach young audiences on social media with accurate and non-stigmatising information. Since my participants argue that young people do not always have the critical skills to identify misinformation in memes, these findings also indicate the value of teaching media literacy skills as part of health education in schools.

Misinformation About Menstrual Health

My participants were especially concerned about how menstrual health is mediated and many asserted that journalists, memes, and other online content frequently misrepresent how women and others typically experience menstrual symptoms such as pain and those related to mood. Their main concern was that both memes and the mainstream media normalise acute symptoms such as severe pain and extreme anxiety or depression. One participant, who was particularly exasperated by this mediation on social media, expressed: 'Almost every time I see a meme, I just think, there's no need to normalise severe experiences'. Another expressed, '[S]ome memes make it seem like fainting or not being able to go to work because of period pain is normal. So maybe girls that have this see memes and won't go to the doctor because they think they just need to put up with it'. If we draw on critical menstruation studies, we can see why this normalisation of extreme symptoms is highly problematic for women and people who menstruate. Since menstrual health is rarely covered in any depth, if at all, during their schooling, menstruating women and people generally lack knowledge about menstrual health and which symptoms are typical (Bowen-Viner et al., 2022; Kissling, 2006). Thus, many menstruating women and people may have no idea as to whether their level of pain

is typical or indicative of an underlying condition such as endometriosis. This is further complicated by a social discourse that strong menstrual cramps are a normal part of menstrual experience (Guidone, 2020; Hintz, 2022). Indeed, as another participant illustrated, the mainstream media mirrors the messages in memes by normalising the idea that severe pain is normal:

Pain is not talked about properly [...] a few years ago there was a report that said periods are the same level of pain as a heart attack. They compared it to a heart attack because [...] this is how cisgender men can understand pain. It's really, really, frustrating.

This participant's feminist approach to mediation suggests that societal knowledge about pain has been distorted by patriarchal discourses that contextualise women's health within a masculine frame of reference. She therefore signals the need to approach menstrual pain from a more feminist perspective that will allow women and transgender people who menstruate to understand whether their pain is typical. Participants' comments about the mediation of symptoms therefore illustrate that menstrual activists need to counter normative social discourses about menstrual symptoms so that women and people who menstruate will know if, and when, to seek medical attention. As Heather Guidone (2020, p. 277) indicates in her work on endometriosis, if these myths are left unchallenged by educators and activists it can lead to 'delayed diagnosis and quality treatment of endometriosis and other gynepathologies with subsequent impact on fertility, loss of libido and pleasurable sex, chronic pain, diminished quality of life, loss of sense of self, body-negative thoughts, and more'. Combatting misinformation is therefore urgent because young people are increasingly turning to social media for information about their bodies (Rich, 2018). As scholarship on other aspects of health communication suggest, due to their receiving limited health education in schools, young people are especially vulnerable to discourses that normalise extreme symptoms (Lim et al., 2022; Ngien & Jiang, 2022). Hence, we can argue that this combination of the media's diminishment of menstrual pain and a lack of formal education may be leading to the delayed diagnosis of painful menstrual health conditions such as endometriosis.

Another participant explored misinformation in the news media in the context of women and other people's experiences of endometriosis symptoms and treatment. She expressed:

I've never seen a news story that's factually correct all the way through. Even when I did my bit for the News at Ten, I was glad, obviously, for spreading awareness, but I really wanted to make it clear that a hysterectomy isn't a cure. There I am getting the hysterectomy, and there's no note to say, "this is not a cure, this was her decision as a means to an end". [...] It's always a bit fluffy. It's not the horror and the true grit of what endometriosis actually is. [...] There's always a myth that once you reach menopause, it will be fine. That's not true. The worst one was that doctor on "Embarrassing Bodies". He said, "girls, all you've got to do is get pregnant". I literally threw my cushion at the telly. I can't believe he said that. That's the problem with the media, if you're going to put something like that out there about endometriosis, at least take it seriously enough to get it right and be very careful about the words you put.

This participant underlines that, by spreading misinformation, journalists and TV personalities are harming menstruating women and people. Other activists who used social media to disseminate accurate information about endometriosis also mentioned the same myths. One participant was keen to relay the following message to journalists: '[C]an you tell them to stop telling women that pregnancy is a cure, the pill is a quick fix, and then menopause is the end?'. Drawing on the specific examples given by these participants, we can theorise that if women and other people who menstruate encounter such mediations of endometriosis, they may not recognise when to seek help or may miscommunicate their own symptoms or accept care that is not appropriate to their specific needs. In addition, these depictions of endometriosis in the media may cause them to feel that their menstrual health is a trivial or shameful issue that they should not openly discuss with family, employers, or teachers. For instance, if women believe the widely perpetuated myth that their endometriosis will be cured if they give birth, they may wait until after childbirth, or after many years of trying to conceive, before they seek help (Leeners et al., 2018).¹² In addition, by erasing the 'true grit' of endometriosis, these media representations are also playing into normative social discourses that dismiss and underestimate women's pain (Guidone, 2020). Menstruating women and people therefore may be less likely to approach a doctor for fear of not being believed or because they feel too ashamed to talk about their menstrual health.

¹² As mentioned above, infertility is a symptom of endometriosis (Guidone, 2020).

SOCIAL AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES

'Period Poverty'

Almost all participants who work to alleviate period poverty were critical of the media's coverage of this topic. Participants emphasised that the term 'period poverty' itself, which was originally coined by the British mainstream media, is problematic (McKay, 2021). Although this alliterative phrase has brought attention to menstrual activism, it echoes the problematic nature of other catchy terms that the British media has promulgated, such as 'fuel poverty' and 'food poverty', because it presents a monolithic view of poverty that ignores the intersecting factors that can lead to people having inadequate access to vital resources (Crossley et al., 2019). One participant explained: '[T]he actual issue of period inequality is so much more than that. It's to do with culture, stigma, religion, parenting styles ... there are so many factors that come into period poverty'. Another participant, who used social media to provide accurate information about menstrual health to young women of colour explained,

I think period poverty is just as much to do with education as poverty really. If you're a Muslim girl like me, maybe your parents don't let you go to any RSE classes, or they don't fit with your faith and they make you feel really uncomfortable, actually. Then maybe you don't have the knowledge you need to manage your period or ask for the best products for you.

This intersectional approach to poverty reflects the work of scholars within critical menstruation studies who highlight that, in order to effectively tackle the injustices that menstruating women and people face, it is necessary to consider how issues of class, culture, religion, and socioeconomics overlap (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). Another participant echoed this criticism of the media and argued that the term 'period poverty' does not reflect how activists and researchers conceptualise menstrual inequities. They added, 'I really hate the term "period poverty" being used everywhere because it often isn't, I think poverty is such a buzzword for the UK media'. A different interviewee argued that the term 'period poverty' presents a very superficial view of menstrual inequities that leads to unconstructive public conversations: '[Y]ou get the knee jerk responses, and comments from people who say, "but a pad pack only costs 59p!". So it's just this perpetuated cycle of not really looking at the significant issues that

are at stake'.¹³ As another activist underscored during their interview, reducing menstrual inequities to 'period poverty' is a neoliberal discourse that indicates that 'you just need to throw products at the problem' rather than effectively tackling multiple barriers such as 'poor menstrual literacy' or 'cultural stigma'. Based on these observations and scholarship on menstrual inequities, we can argue that, by popularising the term 'period poverty', the media misrepresents and presents a narrow view of menstrual inequities (de Benedictis, 2022; Medina-Perucha et al., 2022). This monolithic image of poverty as an individual's inability to buy a product masks the existence of intersecting forms of oppression and structural barriers that prohibit access to menstrual products and adequate menstrual education (Crawford et al., 2019; Sommer & Mason, 2021). In this way, the British media is framing individuals as responsible for finding their own way out of poverty rather than calling for the government to support those who are living in poverty. Thus, my findings indicate that the British media is not effectively supporting the messages, aims, and requirements of the menstruation movement in Great Britain.

Although my participants believed that the term 'period poverty' misrepresents the true nature of menstrual inequities and how they can be tackled effectively, they expressed frustration that, because of its extensive coverage in the media, they were compelled to continue this term in their activism. Thus, they felt trapped into talking about 'period poverty' rather than their preferred alternatives, such as 'menstrual inequities', 'menstrual justice', or 'period equity'. One participant encapsulated this viewpoint as follows: '[P]eriod poverty is the label now that everyone will see and it represents so much, but then at the same time, if you start calling it something else, is it going to catch on? Because people know it as period poverty now'. Hence, due to the British media's popularisation of the term 'period poverty', activists find themselves in a difficult position. If activists use language that more accurately represents the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, they risk the public not recognising their work, whereas if they continue to employ the term 'period poverty', they are masking the very social inequalities that they are trying to expose and to alleviate. These findings therefore indicate that activists need to think carefully and strategically about using language that the public can understand whilst at the

¹³Another participant stated: '[Y]ou still get articles and opinion pieces where they say it doesn't exist because period products can be bought quite cheaply'.

same time not perpetuating the same neoliberal messages as the British media (de Benedictis, 2022).

Drawing on their experiences as advocate who support people who struggle to afford menstrual products, participants also expressed concern that the media's framing of menstrual inequities masks the structural inequalities that perpetuate poverty. One participant, who runs workshops about reusable products, articulated that journalists' frequent use of statistics paints a one-dimensional picture of 'period poverty' that erases the multiple structural issues that contribute to poor menstrual health management: 'I feel like the media just reports statistics. [...] Obviously, period poverty goes back to structural issues. News coverage very much sees it as a silo rather than [presenting] a fuller picture'. According to another participant, journalists' superficial approach to period poverty is evident in their positioning it as a problem faced by individuals who can't afford to buy products, rather than a widespread social issue that results from deep structural inequalities and austerity. She stated:

Every time there is a media piece about period poverty, it's the same surface level narrative of "this person can't afford products, so we have stepped in, and isn't it awful in the rich, glorious west that a person can't afford products". And I think "media, why are you feeding into that narrative, rather than having a deeper conversation about why [period poverty] exists in the first place?" It's not a shock that women's health issues are underfunded, are not spoken about regularly, and women are made to feel like others in society.

In her reference to the 'glorious west' and her repetition of the singular noun 'person', we can infer that she is criticising journalists for perpetuating neoliberal ideologies that camouflage the fact that structural inequalities need to be addressed. As her response suggests, these ideologies are manifest both in the media's tendency to blame individuals for their inability to afford products and in the media's sensationalistic approach to poverty that portrays it as a rare shocking occurrence within the context of a 'so-called developed country' (de Benedictis, 2022; Bobel, 2019). By linking this mediation of period poverty to deeply embedded gender inequalities that have marginalised women, she illustrates that the media harms women by masking the structural inequalities that negatively impact their menstrual experiences. Indeed, if we compare her response to existing literature about the mediation of other health conditions that are experienced by women, we can argue that journalists' framing of

menstrual inequities is perpetuating gender inequalities rather than addressing them (Arber, 2018; Williams et al., 2021). My participant's response also indicates her belief that journalists have a responsibility towards women to cast a light on the embedded gender inequalities in society. Drawing on research about health inequalities and misinformation, we can argue that, by masking the structural inequalities that affect women and other menstruating people, journalists are reducing the likelihood that these structural issues will be addressed (Mochish, 2022; Wallington et al., 2010). Indeed, as such studies demonstrate, journalists' obscuring of structural inequalities reinforces gender inequalities because this discourages the public from critically evaluating and denouncing current policies (Edelman, 2001; Mantsios, 2003).¹⁴ By considering my participants' attitudes towards journalism in the context of these studies, we can hypothesise that journalists' portrayal of period poverty is hampering activists from gaining more public support and achieving further change to government policies.

Another concern expressed by participants pertained to the British media's tendency only to focus on menstrual products as a solution to period poverty, rather than presenting other more long-term and sustainable solutions. Another participant stated: '[T]he focus is very much on accessibility of the products, and affordability of products. Not so much on menstrual health education or accessing good health care'. We can draw on the work of Crossley et al. (2019) to understand how the British media's focus on product-based solutions perpetuates the structural inequalities that fuel menstrual inequities:

Responding to the 'problem' of period poverty or food poverty with free sanitary products or a food parcel represents a partial fix, which can assist people living in poverty temporarily, but ultimately, are likely to mean that people continue to risk facing the chronic and multiple realities of poverty in the longer term because the underlying causes remain unaddressed.

In other words, the fragmentation of poverty into silos such as 'period poverty' or 'food poverty' promotes neoliberal, rather than structural, solutions. In addition to highlighting that the provision of products is not

¹⁴For instance, a social norm to blame individuals for their own financial difficulties, such as by considering their poverty to be a result of their laziness, could justify government acts, such as cutting welfare, that would cause poverty to increase (Strier, 2019).

a sustainable solution, my participants add to Crossley et al.'s (2019) work by demonstrating that short-term product-based solutions can lead to negative long-term problems. For example, another participant explained: '[Y]ou're giving someone a pad, you're not really solving [period poverty]. [...] It just perpetuates the inequalities because the people that have lower incomes are getting the products that are worse for their health or not very effective. I just feel like the media coverage doesn't really go into any of that'. We can infer from this quote that, by pushing unhealthy and poor-quality products as a solution to period poverty, the mainstream media is reinforcing the structural inequalities that lead to women (as well as others who menstruate) having poor access to accurate health information and health care (Arber, 2018). According to my interviewees, solutions to menstrual inequities would include better quality menstrual health education in schools, sustained efforts to reduce menstrual stigma, and 'investing in the NHS'. One participant, for example, highlighted that, to reduce menstrual inequities significantly, women and people who menstruate need to occupy leadership positions: '[I]f you're not having any women or anyone with a period at the leadership table, the priorities of those with periods is going to fall behind'. Thus, by focusing only on products rather than structural inequalities, journalists are perpetuating the cycle of poverty through promoting unsustainable, unhealthy, and narrow solutions to menstrual inequities.

Another way in which participants believed that the mediation of menstrual inequities reinforces social inequalities is through the promotion of disposable, rather than reusable, products as a solution to period poverty. One participant stated that 'alleviating period poverty with conventional products [...] causes more plastic pollution and is not very sustainable'. Resonating with these views, another participant demonstrated how reusable products provide a more long-term solution to menstrual inequities than single-use products: 'If you don't have the money to buy products why not just have something you can use for 10 years or that you never have to buy again? Then the foodbanks never have to worry about supplying that person with more products'. Based on the concerns raised by my participants, we can argue that news media are promoting a short-term solution to menstrual inequities that negatively impact women and other people who menstruate, activists, and the environment. This need to continually provide huge volumes of disposable products is not only a huge financial and time-consuming burden on charities and the government but it also contributes to the climate crisis by circulating products that will

end up in landfill (Hait & Powers, 2019). Whereas, if journalists spotlight the work of advocates who distribute reusable products and educate people on how to use them, this could encourage policymakers, charities, and educational institutions to provide more reusables to those who struggle to afford products.¹⁵

Finally, advocates argued that media coverage of the ‘tampon tax’ masked the profound structural inequalities in Great Britain. Many expressed frustration that the removal of this tax from single-use menstrual products, which, at most, would save people only a few pence per month, was represented by journalists as a solution to period poverty.¹⁶ Not only did participants express concern that this mediation misinformed the public about the impact of this change on those who struggled to afford products, but they also argued that it concealed the profound nature of social inequalities in Great Britain. One participant articulated that the media presented the following narrative: ‘[W]e were fighting period poverty and now, [the media] is saying, “oh yay we've done it, the tampon tax is going to be taken away”’. Adding to this argument another participant expressed: ‘I think the coverage of the campaigning tends massively to de-contextualise period poverty. It talks about the tax, but it doesn't talk about austerity more generally’. As a different participant suggested, the media’s frequent engagement with the issue of the ‘tampon tax’ did not reflect an agenda to alleviate poverty, but instead was part of a pro-Brexit agenda:

Then there’s the bad side that can happen to any activist on any topic; it can be co-opted for unhelpful political moves. [...] Quite rightly, activists were concerned that there was a luxury goods tax on disposable menstrual products, and this wasn’t a new campaign, this had been going on since the 80s, but it got a resurgence. The government blamed the EU for why that was, which wasn’t true, because the UK has always been able to make independent decisions from the EU, but it was positioned as part of a pro-Brexit movement.

¹⁵ It is important to note here that reusable products are not suitable for all menstruating women and people. For instance, as one participant noted in her interview, ‘[H]omeless people can’t really use them as easily because they can’t clean them’.

¹⁶ It is important to note here that the removal of tax from menstrual underwear occurred three years after these interviews were conducted.

Drawing on the concerns expressed by these three participants, we can argue that coverage of the tampon tax masked, and reinforced, social inequalities in Great Britain (de Benedictis, 2022; Toolan, 2018).¹⁷ Thus this coverage did not effectively shed light on the true nature of menstrual inequities and poverty more broadly. Hence, we can see that, even if journalists cover campaigns by menstrual activists, neoliberal discourses and political agendas can overshadow and misrepresent the menstrual inequities about which they are raising awareness. Thus, journalists can undo the messages of a social movement both by distorting their messages of social justice into a different political narrative and by masking the true nature of the social inequalities against which they are fighting.

ERASING THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF MENSTRUAL INEQUITIES

Many participants raised concerns about the mainstream media's erasure of women of colour, women with disabilities, and working-class women from stories and reports about menstrual inequities. Talking about journalists' representation of period poverty one participant stated: '[T]he way it's portrayed is quite white and it's always talking about girlhood stories'. Focussing on women with disabilities, another participant stated,

News about periods never really includes women with disabilities, like women with autism or wheelchair users who can't use those sanitary bins because they have pedals. The media is so ableist. We're an afterthought there and in society. Women with autism are not really represented in the media anyway, but it would be so useful for people, especially teachers, to know about sensory processing disorders that girls, like my daughter, have when they use sanitary products. Period pants have saved the day for us.

My participants therefore argued that journalists do not paint an accurate and inclusive image of menstrual inequities in Great Britain. My participants' views that the mainstream media excludes women of colour, working-class women, and women with disabilities are echoed in feminist scholarship that explores media coverage about other social inequalities (Ellcessor, 2016; Kanai, 2020; Sobande et al., 2020; Tormos, 2017). This

¹⁷This argument made by my participants in 2020 and 2021 echoes the findings of Sara de Benedictis in her (2022) article which examines news coverage of the Tampon Tax.

scholarship argues that such marginalisation can lead to these groups feeling undervalued by society and alienated from others within their own social or cultural groups. This monolithic coverage of menstrual inequities could therefore have a negative impact on these three minority groups because it suggests that journalists, and perhaps activists as well, neither understand their experiences of menstrual inequities nor wish to amplify their voices. The media is also depriving these groups of the opportunity to improve the public's knowledge of, and empathy for, their specific experiences. Such improved knowledge could also lead to a better awareness of their needs at a political level (Toolan, 2018).

Participants also discussed how journalists 'whitewash' the menstrual movement itself and argued that, despite their being 'many women and transgender people of colour' within the movement, journalists rarely 'spotlight' their work or invite them for an interview. Commenting on the lack of diversity in the mediation of the menstrual movement, one participant, who was a woman of colour, expressed:

When I've seen period poverty, I hardly see anyone with a background like me, growing up in a council flat in southeast London, being represented as actually working on this as well. It's very much the similar class, background, good uni, good family that are represented.

Another participant expressed her disappointment that the media under-represented the participation of women of colour in the menstrual movement. Reflecting on the success of one campaign, she explained, 'I won't give specifics, but they interviewed none of my sisters, South Asian or Black. It was like the whole thing had been totally led by white women which really wasn't the case'. We can argue that this exclusion of activists of colour from the mainstream news media reproduces a neo-colonial discourse that white activists are the authority on menstrual inequities both locally and transnationally (Bobel, 2019; Thussu, 2022). By focussing on the voices of white activists who are tackling menstrual inequities and ignoring those from minority groups, the media reinforces power imbalances between privileged and marginalised groups (Couldry, 2000; Toolan, 2018). Since white activists cannot relate to, or empathise, as strongly with women from ethnic minority groups as can activists who are from these communities, they are less likely to accurately represent the experiences of the ethnic minority groups that they support (Tormos, 2017). As the public generally view the news as a legitimate source of

knowledge, the exclusion of people of colour is especially harmful because a privileged view from white activists, rather than a more nuanced and representative perspective from activists of colour, becomes naturalised (Connell, 2008). Furthermore, as it could deter people from minority groups from participating in menstrual activism, other areas of feminist activism, or even engaging in leadership more broadly, this coverage could also harm individuals from these groups and the menstrual movement itself (Gabriel, 2016; Sobande et al., 2020).

Although participants criticised journalism far more than social media for perpetuating social inequalities, some participants also discussed how social media content about menstruation excludes and stereotypes women of colour. For example, two interviewees argued that the lack of diversity within online advertisements for reusable products discourages people of colour from trying them. One participant, who used social media to raise awareness of the benefits of reusable products within Muslim communities and other minority groups, stated that these advertisements ‘give you a feeling that this is not a product for people of colour and it’s not something that you should choose’. Indeed, we can argue that these advertisements not only contribute to the invisibility of menstruating women of colour within the media but also discourage women of colour from trying a product that could benefit their health and save them money in the long term (Kakani & Bhatt, 2017; Sobande et al., 2020). She added that there is a ‘misconception’ that cups are the only reusable products that are available. She explained that this excluded many Muslim women do not wish to use these due to their beliefs around virginity (Ndichu & Rittenburg, 2021). She therefore focussed her efforts on raising awareness of both internal and external reusables so that Muslim women are aware that they have the option to use external reusable products. Considering the intersection of race and religion, another participant also commented on the specific discrimination that is experienced by Muslim women on social media:

Unfortunately, I’ve seen posts by white people about how Islam views periods. They say Islam views periods as unclean, dirty, and women aren’t allowed to be touched. When, in fact, me as Muslim, I can tell you this is not true. I made a post about it. Periods are meant to be celebrated as a positive aspect that God gave us.

By mentioning her own response to Islamophobic tweets, we can see that media narratives place an extra burden on activists from minority groups who not only tackle menstrual inequities but also must battle religious discrimination. Hence, because of these discriminatory discourses, menstrual activists of colour endure added affective labour that is not experienced by their white counterparts (Conner et al., 2023; Mäkinen, 2021). Another participant highlighted that the representation of reusables on social media as a product for ‘white women is unhelpful for Muslim girls and other BAME groups’. She explained that this representation is ‘especially harmful’ to girls if they have missed education about reusables. Adding to this, she explained, ‘[P]eriods are part of sex ed so some parents take girls out of school for these lessons. If they do attend, they find that their lessons are not really inclusive of what Muslim girls or their communities might want or need’. These comments from two participants echo research that demonstrates that, by spreading misinformation and stereotypes, social media can also perpetuate inequalities that affect minority groups (Gabriel, 2016; Molina-Guzmán & Cacho, 2013). We could argue that this impact would be especially profound for girls who have not received formal menstrual education. The representation of reusable products as something for ‘white women’ is therefore discouraging women of colour from trying a product that could be beneficial for their health and finances (Ramsay et al., 2023).

Participants’ comments about the lack of diversity in mainstream media coverage of menstruation also explored the limited inclusion of transgender men and non-binary people in these narratives. One advocate, who campaigns for the improved inclusion of transgender men in the media and society, explained that the mainstream news media is ‘very ciscentric, very white, and for the most part doesn’t offer a lot of diversity’. His response indicates that those who are part of both groups are doubly marginalised (Nakamura, 2008). By stressing the strong, and decades-long, contribution of transgender activists to the menstrual movement, participants pointed to the unbalanced nature of the mediation of the menstrual movement. Criticising the striking absence of transgender activists from news stories about the menstrual movement, another participant stated, ‘[G]ender non-conforming people, non-binary people, and trans people, have always been a big part of menstruation activism. It’s really important that is acknowledged’. Drawing on research about trans-exclusion, we can argue that the absence of transgender voices in the media is harmful because it deprives transgender and non-binary people of opportunities to

shape public opinion, removes them from narratives about improving menstrual health support and inclusion in workplaces and schools, as well as delegitimises their political claims (Billard, 2016; Box, 2020). Thus, we can argue that this lack of acknowledgement maintains the heteronormative and cis-centric policies and cultures of institutions that marginalise transgender people who menstruate (Ambjörnsson, 2016; Kanj, 2016). Hence, by not casting a light on the specific experiences of transgender activists and other transgender people who menstruate, journalists perpetuate the inequalities that affect transgender people who menstruate. These inequalities include limited access to specialised menstrual health services, trans-inclusive health education, and facilities (such as bins in men's bathrooms) (Schwartz et al., 2022; Selkie et al., 2020).

Although participants pointed out that transgender people who menstruate are far more visible on social media than in the mainstream media, they also mentioned that they frequently encounter transphobia in response to their posts.¹⁸ These comments, some of which my participants specifically linked to trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs), were written not only in response to posts in which transgender people spoke about their own menstrual experiences but also in response to activists, including cisgender women, who use gender-neutral or -inclusive language such as 'people with periods'. One participant, for example, expressed her frustration at being condemned on social media for 'erasing women'. She also strongly emphasised that this view did not reflect that held by anyone from within the menstrual movement itself:

I get contacted by LGB feminists and I'm like "where is the T?". I don't know one person [in the menstrual movement] who is trans exclusive. [...] This has just been used as a way to attack and exclude trans people. I don't know a single cis woman who feels erased.

Another cisgender woman activist echoed this by stating:

[I]t's important to include trans people. They've experienced years of discrimination like [women] have. Why not lift them up too? I get attacked a lot on socials for erasing women. I'm not doing that. I'm fighting for

¹⁸For example, when talking about his collaboration with brands that advertise on social media, one participant stated: '[O]n social media it's very different, especially with the companies that are utilising social media in a [certain] way ... it's cool to be inclusive now'.

women *and* for gender non-conforming people. They exist and they're facing similar issues because they are AFAB too.

Discussing how transgender activists are also subject to harassment on social media, one participant spoke about his experiences of reading replies to his posts that undermine his gender identity:

I don't think that people realise when they [...] say that men can't have periods, essentially what they're telling me is that I shouldn't exist or that I don't have the right to exist. [...] I can't detach myself from my personal experience and so it can get really personal at times. I don't think people do it maliciously for the most part, there are some people that just do that but, I think, that some cis people are so caught up in this idea that cis is right and anything else is otherness and that's wrong.

By stating that most comments are not malicious, and thereby implying that their origin is from a place of ignorance rather than spite, this participant's response suggests that cisnormative social structures are to blame for the transphobic comments that he, and other activists, receives. These comments that deny the existence of transgender people are thus a product of a society that marginalises the experiences of those who do not conform to binary gender norms. All three of these participants therefore present social media as a toxic environment in which transgender activists, and their allies, face discrimination. We can argue that being subjected to such cyberbullying constitutes an extra-emotional burden to the affective labour of menstrual activists on social media (Mäkinen, 2021). This burden may have harmful consequences such as anxiety and burnout (Conner et al., 2023). This transphobic environment also has harmful repercussions beyond the menstrual movement. Since they reify cisnormativity, the transphobic comments that are targeted at gender-inclusive activists and transgender activists perpetuate structural inequalities that marginalise transgender people. As studies indicate, this cisnormativity can perpetuate the inequalities that the transgender community face, such as their being disproportionately subjected to homelessness and sexual violence (Nelson, 2020; Harvey, 2020).¹⁹ Hence, as well as putting transgender and gender-inclusive menstrual activists in a vulnerable position, the cisnormative and trans-exclusive space of social media is also undermining and overshadowing

¹⁹ As compared with cisgender people.

their inclusive messages (Mclean, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2022). As these transphobic views have become increasingly normalised on social media since these interviews were undertaken, we can hypothesise that activists today are facing even more obstacles and discrimination (Atwood et al., 2024; Rogers, 2024). These findings indicate that the visibility on social media of transgender people who menstruate is a double-edged sword: although the public is becoming simultaneously more aware of transgender experiences they are also being more greatly exposed to transphobic discourses.

CONCLUSION

By examining activists' perceptions of how the media misinforms, misrepresents, and harms women and people who menstruate, this chapter has both contextualised and justified the importance of menstrual activist work to transform media narratives. It has demonstrated the power of the media to shape social norms, knowledge, attitudes, and experiences of menstruation, and argued that the mediation of menstruation and menstrual inequities in the mainstream media, and to some extent social media, has, so far, had a largely negative impact on women and other people who menstruate. Although my 32 participants do not deny that the increased mediation of menstruation that we have witnessed since 2015 has helped to spark conversations about menstruation and educate the public about certain aspects of menstrual experience, these participants also identified many areas in which the news media and social media continue to harm women and others who menstruate. Firstly, even in articles about activist campaigns to end menstrual stigma, the news media continues to perpetuate stigmatising discourses and thus reinforce the shame that women and other menstruating people experience. This is also true of social media content, such as memes that present a very stereotypical and comedic view of menstruating women. As my participants demonstrated, this stigma is particularly pronounced in the mediation of conditions such as PMDD because these representations can combine a societal stigmatisation of mental health issues with menstrual shame. Secondly, according to my participants, the news media and social media continue to spread myths and misinformation about menstruation. These myths are particularly harmful to young people, especially if they have received little education about menstruation and do not have access to support networks that are able to challenge these myths. For example, the normalisation of extreme

symptoms may lead to young people with endometriosis to not recognise that their pain requires medical intervention. Thirdly, as my interview findings indicate, the monolithic and fragmented portrayal of menstrual inequities masks the structural and social inequalities that fuel and exacerbate these inequities. Thus, the mediation of period poverty, which attributes blame on individuals for not affording products, neither raises awareness of the true nature of poverty nor encourages the public to call for changes to government policy that could alleviate menstrual inequities. Finally, as my participants underscore, the lack of diversity in the mainstream media, and even on social media, can silence the experiences of people from minority groups (such as ethnic minority communities, gender non-conforming people, working-class people, and people with disabilities). The next chapter of this book builds on these findings by exploring not only how my participants are working to transform the mediation of menstruation but also how they engage with the media to effect social change.

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CHAPTER 3

The Discursive Tactics of the Menstrual Movement: Destigmatisation, Intersectionality and Collective Identity

INTRODUCTION

As the previous chapter elucidates, menstrual activists are concerned about the harms that the media can cause to menstruating women, non-binary and transgender people. These harms include the perpetuation of menstrual stigma, the dissemination of misinformation and a neoliberal approach to menstruation that masks structural inequalities. Returning to my interviews with 32 menstrual activists, this chapter explores the discursive tactics that they use to both improve the mediation of menstruation and effect social change via the media (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012). Drawing on research about feminist activism and scholarship about gendered communication, this chapter identifies how my participants are using discursive tactics on social media to reduce menstrual stigma and to raise awareness of the health and social issues that surround menstruation.¹ It also explores how my participants are trying to change narratives in the news media. As discussed in the methodology section of the

¹Although activism outside social media and journalism is not within the scope of this chapter, it is important to note that many of my participants complemented the discursive work that is examined in this chapter with other practices, such as workshops in schools and community centres, or collaborating with policymakers. As I have argued in another article, offline activism can be more effective in tackling social inequalities because digital platforms are not always accessible or empowering for audiences from marginalised groups such as those who are disadvantaged by race, disability or socio-economic status (Tomlinson, 2023).

previous chapter, this chapter provides a thematic analysis of the discursive practices used by my participants to reduce menstrual inequalities and gender inequalities more broadly. It pays close attention to how my participants use, or avoid, certain language in their activism. These tactics include openly sharing menstrual experiences, employing non-stigmatising language, using gender-inclusive language and highlighting the intersectional nature of menstrual experiences. This chapter also considers some points of contention within the movement as to which discursive tactics are the most effective for creating social change. Finally, it examines some of the risks of discursive activism and how activists navigate these.

FEMINIST DISCURSIVE ACTIVISM

Traditionally, scholarship has defined activism as a process that seeks to transform laws and policies (Gamson, 1989; Dixon-Mueller, 1993). To evaluate the success of social movements, this scholarship primarily considered the extent to which activists engendered changes in legalisation or policy (Staggenborg, 1995). These studies also define political impact as the recognition of activists' messages within parliament or other elite groups (Bernstein, 2003). More contemporary scholarship, however, recognises that social movements can also have impact via mobilising audiences and creating cultural change (McAdam and Tarrow, 2010). Today, scholarship on social movements considers three categories of impact: politics, mobilisation and culture (Mkono, 2018). Mobilisation can be evaluated by examining the collective action that activists have inspired (Lee, 2015). This can include measuring how many times a particular hashtag has been shared or how many people have participated in a protest (Sinpeng, 2021). Cultural impact refers to a movement's influence on social norms, behaviours, beliefs and knowledge (Constantino et al., 2022; Selvanathan et al., 2020). Cultural outcomes not only include the movement's influence on public opinion and behaviours, but also include its impact on the media, popular culture, education and medicine (Giugni & Grasso, 2020). Although existing literature often treats cultural and political outcomes as distinct, feminist scholars argue that they are interconnected (Clark, 2016). A new government policy, for example, can be created in response to a shift in public attitudes that was inspired by a social movement (Amenta & Polletta, 2019).

The use of discursive tactics is one method through which activists can create cultural change (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012). Discursive activism,

which includes speech and text, aims to shape societal knowledge, practices, norms and behaviours (Mkono, 2018). It is, therefore, a broad term that encompasses any form of activism that engages in ‘the politics of knowledge building, critique, reflection, reframing, “consciousness raising” and general “meaning making”’ (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2017, p. 91). Discursive activism therefore not only identifies and unpacks power relations in existing discourses, but it also creates new discourses that deconstruct and shatter these power relations (Shaw, 2016). Social movements that use discursive tactics seek to alter discourses in the news media, on social media and in offline communication (Bernardini, 2022; Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012). Discursive activism includes both the criticism of existing discourses and the creation and dissemination of counter-discourses (Clark, 2016). Social movements also engage in discursive activism to break the silence around certain topics that have traditionally been unspoken in public and political communication (Hansen, 2021). By exposing the assumptions and discrimination on which social discourses are built, discursive activism raises awareness of social inequalities (Gabriel, 2016). Discursive activism can also uncover the political discourses that justify and perpetuate inequalities (Fine, 1992). In other words, it tackles social inequalities through ‘denaturalising what appears natural’ and promoting the use of alternatives (Shaw, 2012, p. 42). Discursive activism therefore serves to reveal, counter and reduce the power imbalances in society (Fine, 1992). Social movements which employ discursive tactics can be conceptualised as counterpublics (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019). Counterpublics, which are usually comprised of people from ‘subordinated social groups’, invent and perpetuate counter-discourses ‘to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs’ (Fraser, 1992, p. 67). Furthermore, Nancy Fraser explains that when counterpublics ‘emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help to expand discursive space’ (Fraser, 1992, p. 124). They therefore form a space through which social inequalities can be revealed, narrated, problematised, contested and deconstructed. Menstrual activists, the vast majority of whom have themselves faced inequalities because of their gender, can also be defined as a counterpublic. Indeed, as menstrual activists disseminate counter-discourses that challenge dominant societal views of the identities, interests and needs of menstruating women and people, their activities fall within Nancy Fraser’s (1992) definition. For instance, Chris Bobel’s definition of menstrual activism as a ‘scathing critique of the dominant Western cultural

narrative of menstruation' highlights the use of counter-discourses within the movement (2007, p. 87).

For decades, discursive activism has been a key feminist approach to tackling gender inequalities (Young, 1997; Hansen, 2021). As Rosemary Clark indicates, feminists have long used discursive tactics to 'make visible the hegemonic, taken-for-granted power structures that infuse daily life' (2016, p. 791). Discursive activism therefore encourages audiences to think critically about their own experiences and societal norms. This critical thinking can then lead to the adoption of a feminist approach and a desire to take part in social change (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2017). Feminist discursive activism is rooted in the assumption that 'language and society are co-constitutive' (Clark, 2016, p. 791). In other words, feminist discursive activists believe that their efforts to denounce sexist language and provide a feminist alternative can reduce the gender inequalities that negatively impact lived experience (Pauwels, 2003). Feminists therefore perceive discursive activism as a form of advocacy that has a 'real-world impact' (Liao, 2019). This feminist belief in the power of language to affect social change has been evident since the second-wave movement. For example, in *Parole de femme* (1974), Annie Leclerc implores women to combat sexism by using language that celebrates, rather than stigmatises, their bodies. Contemporary tactics, such as hashtags, are an extension of this feminist discursive activism against gender inequalities (Clark, 2016; Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012).

Although the mediation of gender inequalities has changed and some contemporary social movements are now also advocating for transgender and non-binary people, many of the goals of fourth-wave feminist discursive activism are the same as previous waves of feminism (Bernardini, 2022; Shaw, 2016). This includes the aim to inspire collective action (Wiley, 2012). To 'legitimate and motivate collective action', activists use language and framing to 'fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves' (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 6). For feminist collective action, this involves sharing experiences of injustice and oppression so that the movement can tackle gender inequalities in an informed, inclusive and effective manner (Sweetman, 2013). Collective action is also important to feminist movements because it draws together knowledge, resources and skills that can legitimise and bolster efforts to tackle gender inequalities (Dominelli, 1995; Kabeer, 2005). In this way, collective action can lead to courses of action that individuals or organisations may not have considered. Due to its potential to reflect a diversity of experience, knowledge

and solutions, feminist activists therefore view grassroots collective action as an important complement to formal political participation (Kelly & Breinlinger, 1995).

Fostering a sense of solidarity amongst audiences is key to inspiring collective action that leads to social change (Wiley, 2012). Feminist activists create this solidarity amongst their audiences by illustrating that women and gender minority groups are all negatively impacted by gender inequalities and could benefit from working together to address them. As Bennett and Segerberg theorise, activists can inspire feelings of solidarity through ‘easily personalized ideas’ (2013, p. 742). Since audiences can relate these ideas to their own lives, it helps them to empathise with others whilst also learning about the different factors that shape individual experiences. As contemporary research has underscored, intersectional understanding of gender inequalities is essential to fostering feminist solidarity and inspiring collective action (Daniel & Dolan, 2020; Einwohner et al., 2021; Tormos, 2017). This view recognises that, although gender inequalities impact individuals or marginalised groups in different ways, feminists can mutually support each other to achieve the common goal of eradicating gender equality (Kumar et al., 2019). Feminist digital activists view social media as an ideal space in which to create this sense of solidarity, which can be the basis for consciousness-raising and social change (Crossley, 2015). Feminist hashtag campaigns, for example, call for social transformation through amalgamating multiple voices and themes into a collective narrative about gender inequalities that can be easily tracked (Hansen, 2021). Hashtag feminism, which is a form of discursive activism, is therefore built on the idea that, through the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experiences, online communities can unite to collectively fight against gender inequalities (Dixon, 2014). As Rosemary Clark-Parsons underscores, hashtag feminism ‘bridg[es] the individual with the collective and illustrat[es] the systemic nature of social injustice’ (2021, p. 362). In this way, hashtag feminism plays into the traditional feminist mantra of ‘the personal is political’. Furthermore, studies indicate that hashtag activism is advantageous to feminist movements because it attracts new voices, perspectives and experiences that may not be represented within formal organisations (Baer, 2016; Chen et al., 2018; Clark, 2016). Hashtag activism also facilitates the growth of collective action beyond organisations and therefore allows them to reach and mobilise new audiences (Mundt et al., 2018).

In addition to shaping societal discourses and attitudes, another key aim of feminist discursive activism is to empower women and gender

minority groups (Gabriel, 2016). Although its meaning is shaped both by sociocultural context and by individual experiences of gender inequalities, feminist activists tend to view empowerment as increased knowledge and agency that can lead to individual and collective efforts to change oppressive conditions (Conlin et al., 2021; Zimmerman, 1995). As it can create feelings of connection, empathy and solidarity through the sharing of experiences, feminist activists believe that discursive activism can be ‘personally and collectively empowering’ (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2017, p. 92). ‘Collective empowerment specifically refers to collective action and activism, whereas personal empowerment includes personal and interpersonal agency’ (Conlin et al., 2021, p. 391). As interviews with discursive feminist activists illustrate, the empowerment they hope to engender includes giving audiences the confidence to speak out against gender inequalities, to make life choices that benefit their health and wellbeing, and to work together to create social change (Keller, 2015). Consciousness-raising and education are key aspects of this work to empower audiences (Crossley, 2015). By empowering them via discursive activism, feminist social movements hope to bring individuals together from various social groups so that they can collectively tackle gender inequalities. As Naila Kabeer writes, ‘From a state of powerlessness that manifests itself in a feeling of “I cannot”, empowerment contains an element of collective self-confidence that results in a feeling of “we can”’ (1994, p. 245). Feminist organisations and digital activists who seek to empower marginalised groups, such as those who face disadvantages because of their race or class, encourage and support these groups to fight structural obstacles (Medina, 2021). If these groups are unable to advocate for themselves or are not being heard, feminist discursive activists try to empower these groups by sharing their experiences and amplifying their voices (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2017).

When analysing discourses of empowerment in online feminist discursive activism, it is, however, important to question the extent to which these discourses can reflect and engage with structural inequalities and can lead to actual change for marginalised groups (Kabeer, 2005). Indeed, feminist media scholarship argues that the neoliberal characteristics of digital media platforms can depoliticise feminist activism and limit its potential to be inclusive and intersectional (Baer, 2016; Craddock, 2020; Rivers, 2017). Since social media is guided by neoliberal ideas of competition, self-promotion and personal choice, it can undermine and erase the intersectional, collective and political messages of feminist campaigns

(Banet-Weiser, 2018). On social media, we can find campaigns that strive to be ethical and feminist but inadvertently perpetuate neoliberal messages by positioning products as solutions to the climate crisis or period poverty (Brown, 2015). Analysing the neoliberal nature of feminist influencers, Silvia Semenzin argues,

activist influencers become the expression of the entanglement between neoliberal feminism and platform affordances that encourage self-branding and consumer activities. In so doing, digital feminism reinforces a culture of competition, individual empowerment, and depoliticisation, which could be detrimental to feminist solidarity and the urgency of creating shared political agendas to implement feminist policies and push for structural socio-political changes. (2022, p. 113)

Hence, if discourses of empowerment propose capitalist solutions and place the responsibility on individuals to make change, they can exclude marginalised groups in society (Gill, 2017). According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ‘neoliberal narratives disallow the salience of collective experience or redefine this experience as a commodity to be consumed’ (2013, p. 971). As they reduce political action to personal responsibility and individual-minded actions, neoliberal feminist discourses undermine the shared feminist consciousness that is necessary for collective action against social inequalities (Girerd & Bonnot, 2020). It is, however, important to note that even when activists are deliberately ‘contesting neoliberalism’, we can often still ‘see the cultural effects of neoliberalism at play, in particular via the belief that young people might “choose” to “change the world” through their individual actions’ (Kennelly, 2014, p. 250). Nevertheless, even though we can argue that it is an extremely difficult task to completely avoid using neoliberal discourses, ‘attempts can be made to utilise and subvert its dominant discourses in ways that create an alternative, emancipatory meaning’ (Craddock, 2020, p. 80). As one participant suggested in her interview, a solution to this neoliberalism would be a collective parodying and challenge to the discourses in advertisements, known as ‘adbusting’.²

Drawing on my interviews with menstrual activists, this chapter identifies the discourses of empowerment, inclusion, intersectionality and

²To find an example of adbusting, see Chella Quint’s zine series *Adventures in Menstruating* (2005).

collective action that inform the menstrual movement's discursive tactics for creating social change (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012). This chapter critically examines the extent to which these discursive tactics challenge structural inequalities or perpetuate neoliberal ideologies that place the onus on individuals to change their attitudes or circumstances. It reflects on the potential and limitations of social media and traditional news media for feminist ideologies of inclusion, intersectionality and visibility (Semenzin, 2022). In so doing, this chapter's analysis of discursive activism responds to recent feminist scholarship that calls for more research on the tensions between the neoliberal nature of social media and feminist activism that addresses social inequalities (Craddock, 2020; Fotopoulou, 2016; Semenzin, 2022). It also forms part of a limited, but growing, body of work that examines trans-exclusionary radical feminist discourses in journalism and on social media (Duggan, 2022; Gwenffrewi, 2022; Willem et al., 2022). This chapter is, however, unique in its examination of the implications of transphobia for feminist movements. To evaluate how the menstrual movement engages with journalism and social media as vehicles for social change, the chapter first considers how menstrual activists challenge menstrual stigma. It then considers how they are using these tools to reduce social inequalities.

OPENNESS, SHARING AND (COLLECTIVE) EMPOWERMENT

The most common discursive tactic that was employed by my participants to reduce menstrual stigma was to engage in frank, open and honest communication about menstruation on social media (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012). They used this tactic to emphasise that menstruation is a normal and natural experience. One participant explained that her organisation posts frequently about multiple aspects of menstrual experience, such as symptoms, blood flow, clots and products, to indicate to their Twitter and Instagram followers that 'it's perfectly normal to talk about periods'. By emphasising that menstruation was a normal topic of conversation and sharing honest stories about personal experiences, my participants hoped to inspire others to talk more openly about menstruation. Illustrating that open and frank communication on social media has already created a ripple effect, another participant stated, 'So many pages have now appeared, so people are having far more open conversations about their periods now'. One of my participants, who used social media to communicate with young people about menstruation, stated, 'I think as soon as we start

empowering them at that age and telling them that it's normal, it's fine, it's not something that you should be embarrassed or ashamed about, I think that's really going to improve young people's confidence and improve their experiences'. This participant's characterisation of this type of discursive activism as 'empowering' illustrates its potential to disrupt the patriarchal or societal power structures that perpetuate silence and shame around menstruation (Ussher, 2006). This discursive tactic of open conversation is therefore a form of counter-discourse to normative perceptions of menstruation as 'an embarrassing event that must be concealed from others and never discussed openly' (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 414). By exemplifying that menstruation is a normal part of everyday conversation, these frank and open counter-discourses seek to reduce the shame that audiences feel around menstruation and encourage them to speak more openly about it in their online and offline lives (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2017). This frank discursive activism therefore aims to 'expand discursive space' by inspiring other social media users to communicate openly about menstruation (Fraser, 1992, p. 124). Activists are therefore forming a growing counterpublic against dominant social norms of menstrual stigma and concealment which may lead to social change by inspiring others to communicate frankly about the inequalities faced by menstruating women and people (Wood, 2020).

Furthermore, since activists' frank conversations take place in the public space of social media, the menstrual movement is redefining the boundaries between public and private (Archer, 2019). For example, one participant explained that she hoped her frank posts about menstruation on social media would lead audiences to view menstruation as a subject about which they could have 'very confident, calm and normal conversations' in public spaces such as workplaces and schools. By encouraging open conversations about menstruation in public spaces, this participant's discursive activism is, therefore, a counter-discourse to the 'societal pressure to keep menstrual distress a secret from co-workers' and classmates (Levitt & Barnack-Tavlaris, 2020, p. 566). Another participant commented that activists' open discussions on social media have already had a huge impact on transforming menstruation from a private to a public issue. She stated that, thanks to menstrual activism and online engagement with it, menstruation 'has rapidly become part of social policy and the public discourse as well'. Hence, by discussing menstruation on online public platforms, the menstrual movement is reframing menstruation from something that should be managed secretly by an individual to a

topic that can be openly acknowledged in public spaces and institutions (Kissling, 1996). We can argue that this framing could have a ‘real-world impact’ because it reduces inequalities in two ways (Liao, 2019). Firstly, it can give individuals the confidence to talk openly about menstruation when it is important to their menstrual health, such as by asking for products at school, raising concerns about dysmenorrhea with their doctor or requesting workplace adjustments (Stanek et al., 2023; Zaman & Mohiuddin, 2023). Secondly, it elevates the status of menstruation from an individual issue of ‘bleeding management’ to a topic of public concern that should be reflected in policies and strategies that aim to reduce social inequalities (Bildhauer & Owen, 2023; Koskenniemi, 2023, p. 6).

The sharing of personal narratives about menstrual experience was another key tactic used by my participants to destigmatise menstruation and raise awareness of social inequalities (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). As one participant asserted, this discursive tactic ‘breaks down stigma and taboo by creating a place where people can share their period stories’. By opening this space, activists can create social change through inspiring solidarity, empathy, a sense of community and collective action (Wiley, 2012). For example, four participants articulated that their open communication about their own menstrual experiences aimed to create a sense of empathy and solidarity that would help others to feel ‘more comfortable’ to share their own stories. Illustrating how social media can reduce menstrual stigma via collective action, one of my participants discussed how she had been inspired by other activists to become part of the menstrual movement:

That’s been a really empowering experience. Personally, it’s made me feel a lot more confident. When we started our campaign, it was an issue I really cared about, but I felt a little bit like, “Oh, do I really want to share my own personal experience? That’s a bit scary and not something that I’ve done before”. But finding all these new social media pages has really made me feel more comfortable to talk about periods.

If we consider this participant’s experience through the lens of research on feminist activism, we can argue that online content about personal menstrual experiences can lead to collective action because these narratives inspire empathy, solidarity and an intersectional understanding of inequalities (Daniel & Dolan, 2020; Tormos, 2017). This type of discursive

activism can inspire collective action because it brings together diverse voices and experiences under a common goal (Kumar et al., 2019).

A sense of community was also evident in discursive activism which, via the sharing of personal narratives about menstrual experience, aimed to both reduce menstrual stigma and educate audiences about menstrual health:

If you see a story that someone has of their first period or maybe something quite personal like a side effect that they have (that you maybe wouldn't normally associate with periods but recognise from your own experiences) then that will be a nice source of comfort for people, and they'll realise that it's perfectly normal to talk about periods.

Here, a story of someone's experiences of menarche acts as an 'easily personalised idea' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 742). As social media users can relate to this story and may be inspired to share their similar stories, this first-person narrative can trigger collective action to reduce stigma. Furthermore, her response indicates that sharing experiences can also be a powerful form of knowledge exchange that can help individuals feel more confident about managing their health and develop a stronger sense of identity (Polak, 2006). This link between knowledge and comfort has also been articulated in research which indicates that: 'knowledge can facilitate comfort, and comfort can facilitate open discussion' (Erchull, 2020, p. 403). Also indicating that activists hope that their sharing of 'honest' personal narratives will cause a ripple effect, another participant stated, 'We can't as individuals go around and discuss periods with each person—that's not a sustainable transmission of knowledge! We need others to be in a position that they are comfortable to talk about periods and can go pass on that knowledge and so on'. Hence, we can see that the menstrual movement views knowledge, comfort and open discussion, as an iterative process that increasingly reduces menstrual shame. Although the menstrual movement inspires this process, it is reliant on collective action beyond the boundaries of the movement for its continued success.

For my participants who experience Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) or endometriosis, creating content that frankly communicated their feelings about their condition was a key tactic for reducing the stigma around them and raising awareness of the struggles that are faced by individuals with these conditions (Bullo, 2020; Winslow et al., 2023). Through examining their own vulnerability, emotions and struggles, these

participants adopt a form of feminist activism that encourages women and other people who menstruate to resist the expectation of silence around menstruation (Wood, 2020). For example, one participant with endometriosis filmed herself every day for three weeks in the lead-up to surgery, ‘Lots of people joined in who were going through it themselves. It’s about connecting with people’.³ Another participant organised an Instagram campaign that created ‘a lovely sense of community’ through the collation of posts in which women openly shared their struggles with PMDD. A different participant, who uses her Instagram page to talk about her experiences with PMDD, explained:

I’m very open with my vulnerability on social media. When you hit rock bottom and you’ve taken an overdose, you can’t get anything lower than that. I find it to be empowering, not just for myself, but for others. They feel empowered by my page so they think “OK, so if she can talk openly about her mental health or her struggles during like her luteal phase or during hell week so can I”. My experience gives them the encouragement to say “it’s OK. There is light at the end of the tunnel, and you will come out of it” [...] We go through the mental and emotional, and then we function too: we have full-time jobs, we are mothers, we are career women, we are professionals as well. We contribute to society. We are sisters, aunts, you name it, we are all those things.

As McHugh writes, ‘recognizing our shared experiences of shame can help us to recognize our collective vulnerability and women can come to realize that they are not alone’ (2020, p. 414). As shame is rooted in isolation, the empathy and connection that this participant creates via her Instagram page have the potential to ‘heal shame’ and therefore contribute to social change (Brown, 2007). She frames her honest communication as empowering for both herself and her audiences with PMDD or other mental health conditions. By repeating the word ‘we’, referring to careers, and listing family members, she creates an ‘easily personalizable’ narrative around her experiences of PMDD (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 742). She therefore creates a strong sense of ‘we-ness’ by evoking feelings, values and interests with which her audience can identify. This ‘we-ness’ aims to mobilise audiences to join the movement’s efforts to reduce menstrual stigma and raise awareness of PMDD via openly sharing their own stories

³As my participant underlined, ‘a hysterectomy isn’t a cure’ for endometriosis but a treatment option that can lead to reduced pain (Rizk et al., 2014).

(Gamson, 1992). Indeed, her page has the potential not only to empower those with PMDD to speak more openly about their condition, but it may also mobilise audiences to speak more openly about both menstruation and mental health. This may lead to collective action to raise awareness of the challenges faced by those with PMDD. Her reflection on her own vulnerability and her shifting from the singular to the plural also echo Kabeer's definition of empowerment as 'a state of powerlessness that manifests itself in a feeling of "I cannot"', empowerment contains an element of collective self-confidence that results in a feeling of "we can"' (1994, p. 245). We can therefore argue that the empowerment of which she speaks is grounded in a sense of connection between women with PMDD (or, more broadly, between women who struggle with their mental health) rather than in neoliberal discourses of self-empowerment (Baer, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Finally, by speaking openly about their own experiences with journalists or by writing blogs with the hope that they will 'be picked up by the media', some of my participants tried to create solidarity and empathy via the news media. For example, one participant articulated,

I see so many stories of people talking about their reproductive health, periods, endometriosis, PCOS, fertility treatment, really brave people sharing their story to help other people, and there's definitely a lot of diversity out there. With the age of online digital media, people can write their own stories and submit blogs that could be picked up by the media.

Another participant talked about how activists' open sharing of personal narratives with journalists could reshape media coverage and, as a result, reduce menstrual stigma amongst audiences: 'We just need to be more open, because when these big media outlets are more open, that's when society is more open'. Illustrating how mainstream media could create a sense of solidarity and empower women with endometriosis, another participant stated: 'Any magazine that's got endometriosis in there, will help someone. One person will read that and feel like they're not on their own'. Although participants underscored the importance of this open discursive activism that aimed to reduce menstrual stigma through the sharing of 'easy personalizable narratives', they were careful to acknowledge the pitfalls of relying on journalists (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 742). Comparing social media and mainstream media, one participant illustrated that social media 'has been really instrumental in creating more open and

positive conversation about periods’ whereas journalists can ‘package honest stories about menstruation in a stigmatising or misleading way’. Echoing this view, another participant expressed her fear that mainstream media coverage of her hysterectomy, which she hoped would offer a frank and honest view of endometriosis, gave an inaccurate and narrow view of her experiences:

Even when I did my bit for the News at Ten, I was glad, obviously, for them doing it and getting the awareness, but I really wanted to make it clear that a hysterectomy isn’t a cure. There I am getting the hysterectomy, where there’s no note to say, this is not a cure, this was her decision, a means to an end. My idea was that at the end, I wasn’t going to be cured, I might just be a bit better. So, there’s all this misinformation. They just like to get their story, focus on what they want, and it’s always a bit fluffy.

As these participants indicate, the sharing of personal narratives about menstruation via news media is a double-edged sword. It can create a sense of solidarity amongst women and people who menstruate but risks perpetuating misinformation and stigma. Even though we could argue that users on social media could also ‘repackage’ activists’ stories in a misleading or stigmatising way, it is evident that activists view social media as a more empowering space because they have more control over their initial narratives and how these might inspire collective action or reduce menstrual stigma amongst their audiences.

DISCURSIVE TACTICS OF AVOIDANCE

As my interviews with menstrual activists demonstrate, the menstrual movement is built on the underlying assumption that ‘language and society are co-constitutive’ (Clark, 2016, p. 791). The work of menstrual activists therefore ‘engages in a politics of critique [and] reflection’ about the potential of language to perpetuate gender inequalities (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2017, p. 91). For this reason, my participants were careful to avoid certain terms when undertaking digital activism or communicating with journalists about menstruation. Although scholarship has explored the use of alternative terms as a form of discursive activism, it has not as explicitly examined how the omission of certain words can lead to social change (Shaw, 2012). Hence, as this scholarship focusses on counter-discourses, it has not considered how the avoidance of certain

terms can have the effect of ‘denaturalising what appears natural’ (Shaw, 2012, p. 42). This chapter and the rest of this book refer to this type of activism as ‘discursive tactics of avoidance’.

Echoing critical menstruation studies scholarship which argues that women and other people who menstruate are stigmatised by language that frames them as ‘dirty’, many of my participants avoided terms such as ‘hygiene’, ‘feminine hygiene’ and ‘sanitary’ (Bildhauer & Owen, 2023; Fahs, 2016; White, 2013). Not using such terms was a conscious effort to avoid perpetuating menstrual stigma whilst also trying to stop these terms from appearing on social media or in news media. Commenting on her ‘discursive tactics of avoidance’ when being interviewed by journalists, one participant stated: ‘We have been conditioned by society into saying “sanitary pad”, I literally never say “sanitary pad”, I have not said it for years. We’ve learned from Chella Quint’s work not to say “sanitary” or “hygiene”’.⁴ Discussing why menstrual activists believe that using ‘discursive tactics of avoidance’ can reduce gender inequalities, another participant explained: ‘There is important work going on at the moment around language and using the right terminology. It’s about removing the stigma and showing people that periods are not a dirty thing to hide so young people can talk to friends, doctors, family and others about periods’. Another expressed, ‘We don’t say “sanitary” or “hygiene”. Women—you are not dirty! And this word just spreads that message’. This discursive tactic of avoiding ‘hygiene’ and ‘sanitary’ is therefore a way of tackling gender inequalities through reframing menstruation as a normal bodily experience that should not be viewed as something unhygienic or shameful (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2017).

Two of my participants employed ‘discursive tactics of avoidance’ by deliberately omitting the terms ‘menstrual stigma’ and ‘taboo’ in their interviews with journalists, social media posts and creative outputs. These participants argued that referring to menstruation as stigmatised or taboo perpetuates the idea that it should not be discussed, thereby maintaining the status quo. One of these participants explained, ‘If we always start everything, [...] in whatever media about periods with going “Periods are a very stigmatised subject but...” then we are just all contributing to the

⁴For more information, see Chella Quint’s discussion of these terms in her article in the Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/periods-period-poverty-tampons-menstruation-empowerment-language-sanitary-a8000641.html>

stigma, and we're perpetuating it'. Another participant discussed why her organisation never uses the word 'taboo':

We never talk about it because [...], you cannot hold onto a taboo any harder than if you are talking about the fact that it's a taboo, just talk about the thing and then the taboo is gone. [...] Sometimes not saying the words that you think you are supposed to say when you talk about something is more important.

Her final sentence underscores that the menstrual movement's 'discursive tactics of avoidance' are underpinned by their aim to denaturalise 'what is natural' (Shaw, 2012, p. 41). By combining her response with that of my other participant who seeks to reframe conversations around menstruation by avoiding mention of stigma, we can argue that discursive activism that mentions stigma in order to address it could be perpetuating the very gender inequalities that it seeks to reduce (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2017; Brown, 2015).

These tactics of avoiding the words 'stigma' and 'taboo', however, contrasted those employed by most of my participants who deliberately mentioned menstrual stigma in their activism (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012). For these participants, it is only possible to tackle stigma and encourage audiences to speak more openly about menstruation if they are aware of the existence of menstrual shame and its negative impact on menstruating women, transgender people and gender inequalities more broadly. One participant argued that gender inequalities cannot be addressed effectively unless there is an awareness that stigma fuels menstrual inequities. Illustrating the importance of mentioning stigma in mediations of period poverty, she elucidated:

The actual issue of period inequality is so much more than [not being able to buy products]. It's to do with culture, it's to do with stigma, it's to do with religion, and it's to do with parenting styles, there are so many things that come into period poverty and what period inequality is.

Echoing this viewpoint, another participant expressed, 'We need to talk about stigma, period poverty isn't just about accessing products. You need to talk about the embarrassment someone might go through to access those products. [...] everything links and counts, and it's not being spoken about'. These differing approaches to menstrual stigma within the

menstrual movement therefore indicate the difficult balance that activists face between acknowledging menstrual stigma so the public understands its negative impact on society and normalising menstruation by not continuing to mention the shame and taboo that can surround it. We can, therefore, see that menstrual activists find themselves in a complex discursive space in which the very mention of their aim to destigmatise menstruation may undermine their discursive work.

Many of my participants also believed that ‘degendering’ (Rydström, 2020, p. 945) the language around menstruation, such as through avoiding the terms ‘feminine hygiene’ or ‘feminine care’, helps to reduce gender inequalities by validating the experiences of all people who menstruate. As one of my participants illustrated, these discursive tactics of avoiding gendered language have been part of menstrual activism for decades, thanks to the important role that ‘gender non-conforming people, non-binary people, and trans people’ have played in defining the movement’s aims (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). As my sample of activists indicates, this gender-neutral language is not only used by transgender people within the movement, but it has also been adopted by cisgender women who want to recognise and support menstruating people of all genders. Talking about the benefits of gender-neutral language, one participant expressed: ‘It’s about avoiding gendered language that is stigmatising for women and trans people, I don’t say terms like “feminine hygiene” and “sanitary products”, I say “menstrual products” because that is what they are, products for menstrual blood’. Commenting on the word ‘feminine’, another participant said,

As well as it not being trans-inclusive, I don’t say “feminine hygiene” because a lot of women don’t feel particularly feminine during their period or otherwise! The word ‘feminine’ is kind of wrapped up in societal expectations for women to always look a certain way to please men. It makes me think of the pink packaging, the flowers, the bags with the fancy lady on them, the whole idea that you need to be ladylike, prim and proper, so don’t let us know you’re on your period!

As both responses indicate, menstrual activists not only view gender-neutral language as important for the inclusion of transgender people, but they also consider it to be beneficial for women. Drawing on scholarship from critical menstruation studies, we can argue that the term ‘feminine hygiene’ encodes certain expectations for women’s appearance and

behaviours during menstruation (Laws, 1990; Roberts et al., 2002). Discourses that combine femininity and menstruation, for example, can be especially stigmatising to women with conditions such as PMDD because ‘normative femininity requires a serene comportment that is uncontaminated by the presence of “negative” emotions’ (Cosgrove & Riddle, 2003, p. 47). Therefore, as my participants indicate, ‘feminine hygiene’ may be stigmatising for women who do not identify as ‘feminine’ or conform to restrictive societal norms of femininity. Furthermore, because the term ‘feminine hygiene’ is evocative of the language and imagery in advertisements by large brands, it perpetuates the discourses of shame and secrecy that are used to market products (Malefyt & McCabe, 2016). Hence, we can argue that avoiding ‘feminine hygiene’ is an anti-capitalist discursive tactic that takes control of the menstrual narrative away from brands.

A final ‘discursive tactic of avoidance’ used by my participants to reduce menstrual stigma is never to use euphemisms such as ‘time of the month’, ‘Aunt Flow’, ‘having the painters in’ or ‘on the blob’.⁵ As critical menstruation studies scholarship underscores, euphemisms reflect internalised stigma (Kosher et al., 2023; Young, 2005). ‘The effort to circumvent speaking about menstruation in simple, neutral, or scientific terms’ perpetuates gender inequalities because euphemisms are rooted in patriarchal ideologies that menstruation is ‘dirty’ and ‘shameful’ and therefore should be censored (Gottlieb, 2020, p. 145). Hence, if activists were to use euphemisms instead of terms such as ‘menstruation’, this would perpetuate menstrual stigma rather than address it (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). Illustrating that the menstrual movement’s perception of euphemisms echoes that in academic scholarship, one of my participants expressed:

We need more conversation that uses proper language, like using “menstruation” instead of “that time of the month”. At the end of the day, I would never criticise anyone for saying whatever they want to call it, but words have so much power over us and [...] if we use any kind of slang, it has an unintended meaning and keeps suggesting that periods are a topic we can’t talk about directly.

⁵The word ‘period’, however, which is also technically a euphemism for menstruation, was used by almost all my participants (Bildhauer et al., 2022). As one participant suggested, this word was used by activists as they saw it as a ‘more colloquial’ and ‘less medical sounding’ version of menstruation rather than a euphemistic word that frames menstruation as shameful.

This participant's assertion that words have power indicates that menstrual activists believe that euphemisms perpetuate gender inequalities because they suggest that women and transgender people should feel ashamed and strictly monitor their bodies. In this way, euphemisms have a negative 'real-world impact' because they disempower menstruating women and people (Liao, 2019). Framing acronyms as a form of euphemism, another participant elucidated: 'I absolutely loathe acronyms, and I think they're particularly dangerous in the menstrual world, because everybody in the menstrual world, that I know, says we have to get rid of the stigma, and the taboo, and stop using euphemisms. Well, an acronym is a euphemism'. As menstrual euphemisms were invented to avoid the embarrassment of directly referring to menstruation, discursive tactics of avoiding euphemisms ensure that activists reduce, rather than inadvertently perpetuate, menstrual stigma (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012).

My participants further underscored the importance of avoiding euphemisms by highlighting that euphemisms for menstruation and for body parts, such as vaginas and vulvas, create a distance between individuals and their bodies. One participant who aimed to destigmatise menstruation amongst young people explained, 'I am all for using the proper language—actually saying the words vagina and clitoris and vulva. I think it's incredibly empowering, incredibly important'. Another participant who strived to reduce the menstrual stigma experienced by women from ethnic minority backgrounds also highlighted the importance of using direct language to talk about women's bodies and menstruation: 'With the stigma aspect, I think education is key, I think especially in minority communities who are probably more open or aware of cultural and religious customs. It's important to educate them properly about the anatomy, about periods'. Echoing these participants' views of euphemisms, studies indicate that referring euphemistically to vaginas, vulvas, labia and clitorises can engender girls and women to feel distant from their bodies.⁶ This alienation can

⁶It is important to note that only women and girls are included here because there is insufficient evidence to support whether this applies to transgender men or non-binary people. Indeed, Rowan Kosher, Laura Houghton and Inga Winkler argue that euphemisms could even have an empowering effect for transgender men. According to their study about transgender men who communicate about menstruation on social media: 'Some individuals find affirmation in wordplay and hyper-euphemisms based on masculine scripts, upending the association with femininity' (2023, p.19).

lead to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, a lack of awareness about when to ask for medical support, unwillingness to speak to healthcare professionals about sexual or menstrual health, and even the avoidance of important health checks such as cervical screenings (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001). It is important to note that it is not only patients who use these euphemisms, but medical professionals are also complicit in perpetuating embarrassment through their own use of this language (Berry-James, 2014). Euphemisms such as ‘down there’, when used by patients or medical professionals, impede precise discussions about health and therefore could reduce the effectiveness of treatment (Rodriguez & Schonfeld, 2012). As sociological studies argue, not naming something reduces its legitimacy, whereas direct language has power because it can shape cultural attitudes towards the person or object that is being named (Fraser, 1992; McGlone et al., 2006). Direct references to body parts can therefore be collectively empowering because they provide women with a more accurate understanding of their bodies that can help them discuss their health, understand their sexual desires and make more informed choices about their bodies (Stubbs & Sterling, 2020). If medical professionals use correct terminology without shame, this promotes the idea that body parts are not embarrassing and encourages patients to communicate more openly about their health (Berry-James, 2014). By avoiding euphemisms and directly naming body parts, menstrual activists are therefore helping girls and women to improve their knowledge about their own bodies, to feel more confident to articulate their concerns to medical professionals, and to feel increased self-esteem.

Although all my participants explained how they use language to destigmatise menstruation on social media, none of them worked directly with journalists to ensure that their language was not perpetuating menstrual stigma. My participants’ tactics to reduce the stigma that is perpetuated by the media were, therefore, often limited to leading by example rather than actively trying to change how journalists mediate menstruation (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012). Echoing other interviews that were analysed in Chap. 2, this participant indicates that journalists lack knowledge about how their mediation of menstruation can perpetuate stigma, myth and social inequalities:

I'd love, love, love media outlets to stop using words like unsanitary, sanitary products and feminine hygiene products, I think it would be really interesting to have journalists working more with the period community and actually asking them, what is appropriate language and what language is not okay [...] how can I make the piece more inclusive? Is there more that I should learn? I think journalists have a responsibility to present news and with that responsibility comes a need [...] to learn about these topics and to make sure that the message that you're actually putting out there is true, honest, real and appropriate.

Despite suggesting that journalists may be unaware of the harm they can cause, this response places the responsibility on journalists to approach menstrual activists to ask them how to write in an inclusive and non-stigmatising manner. Only one participant spoke about the importance of engaging directly with journalists. She reflected on the limitations of activists' tactics of avoidance: 'Whenever we're printed about [...] in the newspaper or in a magazine, the term "sanitary pads" is always used even though I literally never say that word'. This response indicates that using non-stigmatising language when speaking to journalists is not sufficient in ensuring that journalists do not use stigmatising language. She added, 'We wanted to create a postcard for journalists every time we gave an interview so we could encourage them to talk differently'. She acknowledged, however, that her organisation had not yet found the time to create such a resource. Her response therefore illustrates that activists need to actively encourage journalists to take a critical approach to menstrual discourses, inspire them to take part in reducing menstrual stigma and train them on how to avoid perpetuating stigma. We can, therefore, argue that the menstrual movement will have limited impact on how menstruation is mediated in news media unless they directly advise and train journalists on how they can write about menstruation inclusively, accurately and without perpetuating menstrual stigma. As part of this, they must persuade journalists of the importance of this issue and indicate how it is relevant to them. Without such direct engagement, journalists will continue to perpetuate the gender inequalities that activists are trying to fight via the mainstream media. To prevent stories about the menstrual movement, and menstruation more broadly, from perpetuating stigma and misinformation, activists need actively to convince journalists to change how they communicate.

The deliberate choice not to say or write something is therefore a form of discursive activism which, by omitting language that is rooted in

patriarchal discourses, aims to shape societal power structures. As words such as ‘feminine hygiene’ or ‘sanitary products’ are used in everyday speech, by refusing to use them, activists are undertaking a form of discursive activism that is ‘denaturalising what appears natural’ and therefore encouraging audiences to think critically about the menstrual discourses that they use (Shaw, 2012, p. 41). In this way, the menstrual movement mirrors other feminist movements, such as #metoo, that seek to generate a ripple effect (Clark-Parsons, 2021). Although audiences who engage with activists’ posts or interviews with journalists may not realise that activists are making deliberate choices to avoid stigmatising language, their ‘discursive tactics of avoidance’ are reducing the number of stigmatising words in circulation with the aim of slowly altering societal perceptions of menstruation. By taking up space on social media and in the news, the menstrual movement is slowly seeking to change how menstruation is mediated through normalising a new inclusive, direct and non-shaming manner of talking about menstruation. We can argue that if audiences encounter stigmatising words less often in their everyday media consumption, then they are less likely to use these stigmatising terms in their everyday conversations and are less likely to view menstruation as something unclean that should be hidden, sanitised or only alluded to via euphemisms (Gottlieb, 2020). Albeit seeming trivial, these ‘discursive tactics of avoidance’ could reduce gender inequalities by reducing the stigma that can act as a barrier to accessing education, healthcare and other forms of support. If this activism encourages individuals, organisations and institutions to speak more openly, inclusively and directly about menstruation, it could lead to menstrual health and wellbeing policies in the workplace, improved education in schools, and encourage menstruating women and people to access healthcare. Hence, these ‘discursive tactics of avoidance’ can have a positive ‘real-world impact’ (Liao, 2019). Nevertheless, as two of my participants highlight, the impact of these ‘discursive tactics of avoidance’ is undermined when quotes from menstrual activists are framed by journalists who continue to use the words that activists deliberately avoid. We can therefore argue that to reduce menstrual stigma more effectively, activists need to collaborate with journalists so that they adopt a critical approach to language and change how they communicate about menstruation.

USING ALTERNATIVE TERMS: ‘MENSTRUAL POSITIVITY’ VERSUS ‘MENSTRUAL NEUTRALITY’⁷

Despite an almost unified approach to which language should be avoided, there was a lack of consensus amongst my participants about which alternative terms are the most effective in reducing menstrual stigma. A particular point of disagreement was whether using celebratory language (referred to by activists in this study as ‘period positivity’) or neutral language was the most effective way to challenge menstrual stigma. Activists’ different approaches to ‘period positivity’, or, to use Przybylo’s and Fahs’ term (2020), ‘menstrual positivity’, were often based on the communities with which they were working. Many of my participants who were women of colour and who specifically tackled stigma amongst ethnic minority groups believed that discursive activism that reframes menstruation as something that should be celebrated is the most effective way to encourage their audiences to feel less ashamed about menstruation and empower them to speak more openly about it (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2017). One participant, who targeted her discursive activism at British South Asian women, shared examples on social media of ‘communities in Pakistan who actually celebrate periods’. Another participant who focussed on this community also shared examples on social media of how different cultures framed menstruation as a ‘powerful thing or a force’. Both participants referred to this celebration as ‘empowering’ for their communities. Another participant, who educated Muslim South Asian women about menstruation, explained that celebratory language is empowering for this group. She argued that ‘menstrual positivity’ is not only an effective way of reducing menstrual shame amongst her community, but it also helps to reframe how they are perceived by other members of British society:

There are accessibility barriers and my community experiences additional shame and stigma around periods [...]. I have seen it, unfortunately, a post

⁷This book defines ‘menstrual positivity’ as any language that celebrates periods and ‘period positive’ (the term popularised by Chella Quint and her organisation Period Positive) as an inclusive and non-stigmatising approach to menstruation. According to the Period Positive website: ‘Being #periodpositive is about inclusion and visibility for everyone who menstruates, and #periodpositive is committed to challenging and pushing the menstrual discourse forward so that it is in line with social justice and human rights values of equity and inclusivity’ (Quint 2005). Participants’ use of the terms ‘period positive’ does not always refer to the organisation ‘Period Positive’ founded by Chella Quint. Some participants use this term to refer to celebratory language. Most participants in the study did not view ‘Period Positive’ as a term that belonged to any particular organisation and more of a collective hashtag movement or linguistic choice.

by white people about how Islam views periods, and it said Islam views it as unclean, it's dirty, women aren't allowed to be touched. When, in fact, me as a Muslim I can tell you that that is not true and I even made a post about it, it's actually meant to be celebrated as a positive aspect that God gave us.

My participant therefore reveals a form of double stigma that has not yet been examined in critical menstruation studies (Daftary, 2012). According to my participant, this double stigma, which is rooted in patriarchy and Islamophobia, can be reduced through the dissemination of discourses that demonstrate the positive framing of menstruation within Islamic teachings (Dunnivant & Roberts, 2013). We can therefore argue that her work to raise awareness of the positive representation of menstruation in Islam is two-fold in its approach to structural inequalities. Firstly, this discursive activism encourages Muslim South Asian women to speak more openly about menstruation so that they can access products, support and education. Secondly, it aims to reduce Islamophobia through tackling the misinformation on which some of this prejudice is built. My participant is therefore using a form of discursive activism that critiques two discourses that perpetuate gender inequalities: stigma and islamophobia (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2017).

Another group of my participants who use celebratory language on their social media channels are those who advocate for women and people with Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder. Echoing scientific research that indicates that PMDD symptoms of anxiety and depression disappear after the onset of menstruation (Halbreich et al., 2007), one of my participants highlighted that menstrual bleeding can be a positive experience for individuals with PMDD:

For us with PMDD, who don't have any other conditions, heavy periods, or endometriosis, periods are *really positive*. I used to see the blood on the toilet paper and cry. It would literally be like oh my god, it's here. And that's really common. People punching the air being like, "Oh my god, I get my life back, I'm going to feel normal again". And there's a real movement with lots of people for period positivity. Embracing [menstruation] and making it a positive part of being a woman rather than everything being about pain and cramps.

This response indicates that, for women and people with PMDD, celebratory discourses can be representative of their experiences of menstruating.

We can therefore argue that discursive activism that frames menstruation in a celebratory way validates the experiences of this group and may encourage those with PMDD to speak more openly about this condition (Hardy & Hardie, 2017). Nevertheless, as this participant also indicated, discourses that celebrate menstruation may not be appropriate for women and people who experience other menstrual health conditions such as endometriosis, fibroids and PCOS (Bullo, 2020). Drawing together the responses of my participants who work with South Asian communities in Great Britain and those who raise awareness of PMDD, we can see that their celebratory menstrual discourses are targeted to specific groups of menstruating women and people. We can therefore see that they take an intersectional approach to their discursive activism that targets menstrual stigma by considering how ethnicity, religion and chronic illness respectively intersect with lived experiences of menstruation (Wiley, 2012).

Further highlighting the importance of approaching discursive activism from an intersectional perspective, my participants who advocate for women and transgender people with endometriosis discussed their deliberate avoidance of ‘menstrual positivity’ (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). My participants who targeted their discursive activism at audiences who experience debilitating menstrual symptoms (such as heavy bleeding or dysmenorrhea) argued that celebratory discourses are alienating for this group. Framing ‘menstrual positivity’ as ‘toxic positivity’, four of my participants strived to reduce the stigmas around menstruation and endometriosis by using ‘neutral’ and ‘realistic’ language (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022). One of these participants stated, ‘For women who have endometriosis, period-positive language is really stigmatising because we can’t relate to that experience. We can’t celebrate our periods because they cause us so much pain. For us, it is toxic positivity’. Discussing how her organisation avoids celebratory language, another participant explained, ‘We talk about menstruation in a gritty and realistic way, not in a positive way’. Another participant who advocated for patients with endometriosis added, ‘Periods are not a woohoo and yay thing for us, they’re really painful, they can be heavy, just saying that we should feel happy about our period is really toxic. This won’t heal our pain or our long wait for a diagnosis and treatment’. Analysing the responses of these participants, we can see that they view ‘menstrual positivity’ as a form of ‘toxic positivity’ that frames positive thinking as a solution to menstrual stigma. As studies that explore discourses of ‘toxic positivity’ on social media illustrate, toxic positivity offers an unrealistic and exaggerated view of how to address gender

inequalities (Tufvesson, 2020). Toxic positivity is informed by a neoliberal ideology that suggests that individuals can challenge gender inequalities and take control over their health and wellbeing through ‘positive thinking’ (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022, p. 1). Thus, rather than reducing social inequalities, toxic positivity discourses exclude marginalised groups by trivialising their experiences and reducing public compassion for their plight (Burke & Kraute, 2016). Hence, as my participants underscore, ‘menstrual positivity’ can perpetuate neoliberal ideologies about menstruation because, by presenting ‘positive thinking’ as a solution to menstrual stigma, it erases the structural inequalities experienced by women and others with endometriosis.

Echoing these sentiments expressed by participants who focussed on endometriosis, another participant argued that discursive activism which encourages people to celebrate menstruation is a form of ‘gaslighting’. Referring to this discourse as ‘period pride’, she explained:

I’m not one for period pride. I don’t give a shit about that, I don’t give a shit if anyone feels positive about their periods, I think we should feel neutral about our periods actually. I think that’s the most you can ask for in a society that has shamed us beyond belief and, also, people don’t necessarily enjoy their periods. And asking people to can feel quite gaslighting in a way!

Sociological studies define ‘gaslighting’ as ‘the act of manipulating others to doubt themselves or question their own sanity’ and illustrate that gaslighting is embedded in a larger system of social inequalities (Johnson et al., 2021, p. 1024). If we examine gaslighting in the context of gender inequalities, we can see that it maintains patriarchal power structures by persuading women and other gender minority groups to doubt the validity of their beliefs and experiences (Stark, 2019). The disavowal of women’s experiences is inscribed into a patriarchal system which perpetuates both sexism and ableism by labelling women as ‘hysterical’ or ‘crazy’ (Sweet, 2019). Hence, we can see that my participant frames ‘menstrual positivity’ as a form of ‘gaslighting’ because it causes menstruating women and people to doubt the existence of debilitating symptoms or social inequalities. In other words, by positing ‘positive thinking’ as a simple solution to menstrual stigma, it denies the validity of any experience of menstruation that is challenging, troublesome, painful, or negative in any way. For example, we can argue that discursive activism that compels people to find joy in menstruating frames women with endometriosis as ‘crazy’

because it suggests that their pain is only ‘in their heads’ and will disappear through a change of mindset (Johnson et al., 2021; Hintz, 2022). Drawing both on sociological studies and on the views of my participants, we can argue that ‘menstrual positivity’ can have the unintended effect of maintaining gender inequalities because it perpetuates patriarchal discourses that invalidate women’s experiences and therefore dissuades them from undertaking feminist collective action (Stark, 2019; Sweet, 2019). This ‘toxic positivity’ which we see around menstruation is part of a wider culture that perpetuates gender inequalities by dismissing women’s symptoms that are linked to a variety of chronic conditions (Buonaguidi & Perin, 2023; Yong, 2020).

My participants who criticised ‘menstrual positivity’ discussed their use of ‘neutral’ language to shed light on realities such as menstrual pain, the barriers to receiving effective medical care for endometriosis, and the difficulty of accessing menstrual products (Guidone, 2020). For example, one participant who shared her experience of chronic illness explained how she uses a neutral discourse in interviews with journalists: ‘it’s really difficult and your brain function isn’t always there. I try to stick it in as many interviews as I can—and sometimes it is even taken out—but this is the reality [of the menstrual cycle]: it’s cramps, it’s food issues etc.’ Outlining how neutral discursive tactics offer a more inclusive approach to menstruation than ‘menstrual positivity’, another participant asserted: ‘we acknowledge that periods are not always the best things in the world and there are loads of issues around them, including access to products, access to medical treatment and diagnosis of related issues’. Illustrating how a ‘period neutral’ discourse avoids perpetuating an unrealistic and neoliberal view of menstruation, my participant who criticised ‘menstrual positivity’ for being gaslighting explained:

I’ve been lucky enough to have quite like a neutral, I guess, relationship with [menstruation]. Which is, yeah, sometimes it’s painful, sometimes it’s annoying, but I’ve always been able to talk about it quite openly. That’s not to say that I’m exempt from the shame and the stigma of menstruating. But, having grown up in a very female environment at all girls’ schools, with three sisters, and an open mother, I didn’t want to create this highly feminised hush hush euphemistic type thing. I wanted it to be funny, because periods are funny, quite frankly. And I wanted it to feel neutral for people and just bold and quite challenging, rather than hiding away.

If we compare my participant's response to her criticism of 'menstrual positivity', we can see that, whilst celebratory discursive activism presents an unrealistic view of menstruation, 'period neutral' discourses acknowledge the realities of women and people who have difficult or debilitating menstrual experiences. We can therefore see that the 'period neutral' language that is used by my participants is a form of counter-discourse because it defies the 'concealment imperative' and encourages others to speak more openly about menstruation through presenting reality rather than proposing a utopic version of menstruating (Wood, 2020, p. 316). My participants' 'neutral' approaches to tackling menstrual stigma echo Ela Przybylo and Breanne Fahs' (2020) discourse of 'menstrual crankiness'. Przybylo and Fahs argue that 'menstrual crankiness' challenges ableism, neoliberalism, transphobia and sexism, because it recognises the pain and other obstacles that menstruating women and people can face (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). 'Menstrual crankiness' is a counter-discourse to menstrual stigma and 'menstrual positivity' discourses. We can therefore argue that my participants' use of 'period neutral' discourses avoids the pitfalls of perpetuating neoliberal and ableist ideologies that present 'positive thinking' as the solution to menstrual stigma, menstrual pain and other social inequalities (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022). Instead, by presenting the multiple and difficult realities of those who menstruate, 'period neutrality' tackles menstrual stigma by creating an intersectional counter-discourse to 'toxic positivity'.

Demonstrating that even people who are part of the menstrual movement are not immune to the neoliberal ideas that proliferate on social media platforms, my participants' differing interpretations of the phrase 'period positive' illustrate that social media can undermine, erase and distort the intersectional approaches of menstrual activists (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Some participants used the phrase 'period positive' to signify celebratory discourses and believed that the associated hashtag (#periodpositive) reflected this. Other participants, who were aware of the original meaning of #periodpositive, used the term 'period positive' to describe an inclusive approach to destigmatising menstruation. For example, one participant stated, 'We love seeing what our sister charities and other organisations are doing that's period positive. We also try to normalise the language around periods'. Echoing this view, another participant stated, 'Period positive is a normal part of the way we talk about menstrual health'. Commenting on the differing interpretations of 'period positive' within the menstrual movement, another participant explained that it is a

discourse that is ‘anti-shame rather than pro-celebration’. Another participant expressed, ‘I am annoyed at how “period positive” is used now, because we use it like “Period positive” do, you know, we follow the pledge. It’s meant to be more like “sex positive”. It is about intersectionality, tackling stigma, being inclusive... not “yay” periods’. Drawing on scholarship about the co-option of ‘body positivity’ by brands, we can argue that the use of neoliberal ‘menstrual positivity’ discourses in advertisements, and the appearance of ‘#periodpositive’ on posts that encourage audiences to celebrate menstruation, has also led to some activists associating the terms ‘period positive’ with neoliberal ideas about positive thinking and individual empowerment (Gill, 2017).⁸ This has led some activists to reject the term completely. Similarly to the ‘body positive’ movement, the original message of the ‘#periodpositive’ movement has been diluted by brands that refer to themselves as ‘period positive’ because they frame menstruation as something to celebrate and their menstrual products as an empowering solution to menstrual stigma (Harriger et al., 2023). As social media and marketing have also transformed activists’ understanding of ‘period positive’, we can observe the power of these neoliberal spaces to distort the anti-capitalist, collective and intersectional messages of the menstrual movement (Caldeira, 2018). Since the global menstrual movement has expanded rapidly since #periodpositive was originally created in 2006, it is unsurprising that the original intention behind this hashtag is not always known, understood or followed by many within the menstrual movement. My findings therefore build on scholarship that considers how brands have co-opted ‘body positive’ discourses (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). However, this scholarship has not considered how these neoliberal discourses complicate discursive activism by creating divisions or confusion within movements themselves. Through my participants’ dismissal or approval of ‘menstrual positivity’ or ‘period positive’, we can observe that neoliberal ideas of competition and self-promotion have created a division in the menstrual movement that undermines its intersectional, collective and political messages (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Their different uses of these terms may cause their audiences to misunderstand the nature and impact of menstrual stigma as well as how this stigma can be tackled through communication.

⁸Taking a blog post by Diva cup as an example, we can see how neoliberalism has influenced public and activists’ perceptions of the ‘period positive’ movement. In this post about an employee’s ‘period positive’ attitude, she discusses how she ‘loves’ menstruating and finds ‘self-love and inspiration’ whilst bleeding.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF AN INCLUSIVE AND INTERSECTIONAL
DISCURSIVE APPROACH: PERIOD POVERTY
AND THE ‘J.K. ROWLING EFFECT’

To change the superficial narrative in the media as well as shape the British government’s approach to menstrual inequities, my participants engaged in a politics of ‘reframing’ via two distinct discursive tactics (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2017, p. 91). Some participants completely avoided using the phrase ‘period poverty’ and employed alternative terms such as ‘period inequality’, ‘menstrual inequities’, ‘menstrual justice’ and ‘menstrual equity’. Criticising ‘period poverty’ for being monolithic, one participant explained her preference for the phrase ‘period inequalities’:

The actual issue of period inequality is so much more than that. It’s to do with culture, it’s to do with stigma, it’s to do with religion, and it’s to do with parenting styles. There are so many things that come into [...] it.

Underscoring that the struggle to access menstrual products is ‘a question of inequality and injustice’, another participant stated that she had recently adopted the phrase ‘menstrual justice’ from the United States. Since ‘menstrual justice’ illustrates that ‘systems’ perpetuate poverty and therefore that structural inequalities must be addressed, we can argue that this phrase better represents the aims of my participants who tackle period poverty (Gomez & Karin, 2021, p. 123). Furthermore, we can also argue that the phrase ‘menstrual justice’ highlights to audiences that menstrual inequities are a serious issue that needs to be addressed by the government (Crawford et al., 2019). We can, therefore, see that, for participants who refuse to employ the term ‘period poverty’, alternative language is necessary to critique media narratives and distance their own activism from a neoliberal approach to menstruation. The alternative phrases that they adopt are therefore a discursive tactic that my participants are using to transform the popular neoliberal feminist conversation around menstruation that has been, and continues to be, promulgated by journalists. By using alternative terminology on social media and in interviews with journalists, they are dismantling neoliberal discourses around menstruation

and striving to change the political and public conception of period poverty as an individual issue to one that recognises the role that is played by structural inequalities. In so doing, they may spark legal and political change that aims to reduce structural barriers. We can therefore argue that this form of discursive activism which promotes ‘the use of alternative’ terms is a way that language can be used to raise awareness of structural inequalities and potentially lead to their being addressed (Shaw, 2012, p. 42).

Most of the participants, however, continued to use the phrase ‘period poverty’ despite feeling uncomfortable about using a term that does not highlight the role that is played by social and structural inequalities in impeding access to menstrual products, services and education. Many participants felt trapped into saying ‘period poverty’ because, thanks to the British media’s popularisation of this term, they feared that alternative terminology would be understood neither by the public nor by politicians (Mckay, 2021). For example, one stated, ‘I really can’t stand the term “period poverty” but I know [...] that’s what made the campaign so “big”’, whilst another articulated: ‘period poverty has elevated status, but not necessarily the nuances of it’. The politics of ‘reframing’ that was used by these participants was therefore one which tried to change how the public and politicians defined and understood the phrase ‘period poverty’ (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2017, p. 91). Those who continued to use the term therefore ensured that they framed it within conversations about inequalities, intersectionality and structural barriers. One participant stated that she always emphasises the ‘social aspects that interact with period poverty’, whilst another explained, ‘We now talk a lot more about education, we talk about the intersectionality of period poverty and menstrual inequity, racism, classism, lack of funds, lack of control over your spending, all of that kind of thing’. One participant reflected on how she had spent a lot of time in meetings with other activists discussing which terminology to use:

Period poverty is the label now that everyone will see and it represents so much, but then at the same time, if you start calling it something else, is it going to catch on? Because people know it as period poverty now. If you start talking about period equity, or menstrual equality or menstrual equity, it might be a more fitting term, but will people understand it? It is the media that coined the term ‘period poverty’—it wasn’t researchers, it wasn’t doctors, so it is difficult...

Sharing a similar experience, another participant who attended a meeting with multiple organisations and activists who tackled menstrual inequities explained, ‘Sometimes I think we are too sensitive about language. We spend a lot of time talking about it. I don’t like what period poverty means now either, but I just want to get on with helping women. We were supposed to come up with a plan of action, but we barely started’. We can therefore see that these participants are employing discursive tactics of ‘reframing’ and ‘meaning making’ to change the definition of period poverty from one that treats period poverty as a silo to one that illustrates that it is fuelled by structural barriers and austerity (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2017, p. 91; de Benedictis, 2022). As these responses indicate, media coverage of period poverty has been a double-edged sword. Although this coverage has started conversations about period poverty and led to some policy changes, it has caused extra discursive work for activists who are trying to undo and transform the public’s understanding of menstrual inequities that has been shaped by the neoliberal discourses of journalists. This discursive work is not just evident in their communications on social media and with journalists, but also evident during meetings within organisations and between activists. Indeed, we can argue that this extra discursive work, which has been sparked by journalists’ neoliberal framing of period poverty, has reduced the time activists spend on finding solutions, planning and fostering new collaborations. We can therefore argue that a preoccupation with how to undo the popular neoliberal interpretation of period poverty that was perpetuated by journalists is ultimately having a negative impact on the menstruating women and transgender people who activists are supporting. This raises the question of whether the menstrual movement is too preoccupied with language to the detriment of planning and taking actions that will benefit menstruating women and transgender people or whether these discussions about language are vital to ensuring that the government and NGOs tackle the structural barriers and social inequalities that affect women and other people who menstruate.⁹

⁹Another point of discussion amongst some of my participants centred around the name ‘Menstrual Hygiene Day’. Due to their perception of the word ‘hygiene’ as stigmatising, many believed the name should be changed to ‘Menstrual Health Day’. Others, however, believed it was too late to change the name of an event that had been running since 2014. Once again, as three participants indicated, this discussion had detracted from other aspects of meetings such as planning events that would benefit women and transgender people who menstruate. For example, one participant said: ‘we’re focussing on why it is called menstrual

Once again demonstrating that journalistic discourses about gender inequalities are undermining menstrual activists and creating obstacles for their discursive work, many of my participants explained the complexities of using gender-inclusive language in a society that had become increasingly polarised by the British media's platforming of trans-exclusionary radical feminist discourses (Armitage, 2020; Rogers, 2024). To raise awareness of the social inequalities that are faced by transgender and non-binary people who menstruate, my participants used gender-inclusive language such as 'women and people who menstruate' or 'menstruators'. This form of discursive activism 'denaturalise[s] what appears natural' and exposes the gendered assumptions about menstruation on which societal discourses and perceptions are built (Gabriel, 2016; Shaw, 2012, p. 42). This includes phrases such as 'feminine hygiene' and the sole provision of bins in women's toilets. As some of my participants explained, inclusive language foregrounds that 'not all women have periods, and not everyone who has a period is a woman'. Echoing the British media's popularisation and perpetuation of the phrase 'erasing women', my participants were particularly subject to trolling on social media for using gender-neutral language such as 'people with periods' or 'menstruators' (Willem et al., 2022). Although research is yet fully to document the root causes of this online transphobia, studies on the Gender Recognition Act have argued that, by amplifying the voices of trans-exclusive radical feminists such as J.K. Rowling, British journalists have played a huge role in igniting a public aversion towards gender-inclusive language (Bassi & LaFleur, 2022; Duggan, 2022). Since most of the interviews took place in the summer of 2020, many of my participants were suddenly inundated with tweets that attacked their trans-inclusive approaches to menstruation, as well as some that were rebuttals to these transphobic comments. This 'drowned out' their discursive activism about a variety of topics, such as menstrual inequities and menstrual health. As one participant stated, the volume of these tweets was so high that any message that she tried to convey on Twitter was 'getting completely lost'.¹⁰ This 'moral panic' on social media was

hygiene day [...] lots of people call it MH day and I think health is a far more inclusive term because it incorporates wellbeing, mental health, your whole bodily experience and environment as well'.

¹⁰Describing these comments, one participant stated: 'You can see a lot of comments of people being really negative about not using the word woman and girls. They're like "most people menstruate are women", and then someone else is like, "oh but, you know, think about the minority who aren't". It's very divisive'.

ignited by the British media's coverage in June 2020 of a tweet by J.K. Rowling that denounced a charity for using the phrase 'people with periods' (Gwenffrewi, 2022, p. 507). It was further compounded by her subsequent essay that defended her viewpoint with reference to her experiences of sexual assault. Her tweet and essay were so damaging to the menstrual movement and their inclusive discursive activism that many of my participants signed an open letter to J.K. Rowling that implored her to 'do better by trans and non-binary people as well as the betterment of the Menstrual Equity and Intersectional feminist movements' (Edlin, 2020).¹¹ This letter, which was written by Gabby Edlin who founded Bloody Good Period, also challenges Rowling's statement that only women menstruate: 'The fact of the matter is that yes, when we as a society were woefully uneducated, there used to be a word for people who menstruate, and that word was "women". What we know now, due to extensive work and amplification from the trans activist community is that it is not just women who menstruate, but trans men, GNC and non-binary people' (Edlin, 2020).¹²

Commenting on the 'J.K. Rowling Effect' and Gabby Edlin's letter, one of my participants discussed the influx of transphobic comments that her organisation had recently received on Twitter due to their use of language such as 'people who menstruate'.¹³

I know you will have seen the stuff that happened with JK Rowling and her comments on menstruation last week? [...] Twitter is just such an awful platform for that kind of discourse. It doesn't provide productive conversations in my eyes anyway. Even when it does, it is so rare for the conversation to be holistic and provide proper context. It's exhausting. I've been attacked as well on social media, but I've also had lots of messages from people who do not agree with JK Rowling and how it's become this much broader discussion about trans rights, around sexual abuse, and domestic violence. What's gone from that discussion unfortunately is that what we are all trying to do, is to highlight the experience of menstruators. It is completely up to

¹¹For example, one participant stated: 'it's so great that Bloody Good Period pulled together all the activists in the space and they got us all to sign the letter to JK Rowling. [...] They made it clear that they did not want to encourage trolling behaviour as well, which I really respected them for—because Twitter is a horrible place'.

¹²GNC stands for 'gender non-conforming'.

¹³The term 'J.K. Rowling Effect', which has not yet been used in scholarly research, is used in this book to refer to the trans-exclusive discourses on social media that have been inspired and fuelled by J.K. Rowling and the British media's platforming of her views and those of other trans-exclusive radical feminists.

them what they want to be called. Saying “people who menstruate” allows for that, whereas limiting it to women doesn’t. We have been embroiled and accused of neglecting sexual abuse survivors, which has nothing to do with what we were saying!

Echoing studies about Twitter and polarisation, this response indicates that Twitter is not a suitable platform for activists to undertake discursive work that seeks to spark accurate, nuanced and informative conversations about the menstrual experiences of transgender people (Lorentzen, 2014; Yardi & Boyd, 2010). My findings therefore contrast with scholarship that positions social media as an ideal space for creating a sense of feminist solidarity (Dixon, 2014; Crossley, 2015). These findings also suggest that trans-inclusive feminism faces more barriers than feminist activism that only advocates for women. By linking menstrual activism and inclusive language to other issues such as sexual abuse, the ‘J.K. Rowling Effect’ has caused the public to misinterpret and misrepresent the purpose of the menstrual movement and the meaning of gender-inclusive language. This framing of the menstrual movement amongst arguably irrelevant conversations about sexual abuse, which are largely rooted in a trans-exclusionary radical feminist fear of transgender women using ‘single sex’ spaces, has therefore caused the public not only to absorb misinformation about transgender people but also to misunderstand the inclusive aims of the menstrual movement which seeks to empower both women and transgender people (McLean, 2021). As a result, ‘the J.K. Rowling Effect’ engendered, intensified and perpetuated a public belief that the menstrual movement’s trans-inclusive discursive activism is detrimental to cisgender women. Thus, many activists whom I interviewed were spending time trying to ‘undo’ the ‘J.K. Rowling Effect’ by tackling ‘backlash’, supporting transgender people and illustrating the value of gender-inclusive language. Many viewed this work as the movement’s ‘responsibility’ or ‘duty’. Underscoring the historical and long-lasting importance of undertaking discursive menstrual activism that includes and advocates for transgender people, one participant exclaimed, ‘I know people find it hard to understand that it’s not just women who menstruate, but the fact of the matter is it’s not, sorry. And we have to change that, and I feel like it’s very much our responsibility. [...] It’s the right side of history’.

Since the British media constructed, and continues to represent, contemporary feminists and trans allies as enemies, it was clear that the ‘J.K. Rowling Effect’ not only undermined their trans-inclusive work but

also complicated my participants' positioning of themselves as feminists (Pearce et al., 2020). One participant who advocated for women and people with endometriosis articulated: 'I'm a feminist, and I say that on social media, but I also *have to* be clear that I am a trans-*inclusive* feminist because some people think all feminists are TERFs now, thanks to old JK. It's so tiring and I'm so over it. But I'll keep fighting for our trans siblings'. Another participant who supported women and transgender people who experience menstrual inequities expressed her frustration as follows:

I'm constantly accused of erasing women. [...] It's not true and just because they say it, it doesn't mean it is true. I get contacted by LGB feminists. I'm like, where's the T? It's just this new kind of fascism that's being played out in the period activist world, which is really bizarre. I don't know anybody in the menstrual movement who is trans exclusive, actually. [...] This trans-exclusion is also coming from women who are proclaiming to be feminists and that's what is so confusing about it.

Hence, the polarisation between trans-exclusive feminists and trans allies that has been engendered by the 'J.K. Rowling Effect' has complicated, threatened and unravelled multiple areas of my participants' activism as well as their identity as feminists. In their expressions of exhaustion, frustration and anger, it had become clear that activists were trapped in a war that was not of their own making. This war was adding to their workload through their needing to undertake extra discursive activism to justify their position, use of language and even the movement itself.

Indeed, the 'J.K. Rowling Effect' not only undermined the movement's online discursive activism but also disrupted, and continues to disrupt, meetings between menstrual activists, organisations and other collaborators. According to my participants, meetings about any aspect of menstrual experience were often dominated by debates about whether, and how, to use gender-inclusive language. Expressing her irritation about these meetings, one participant reflected: 'Are we being too sensitive about language or [...] should we be at the forefront of the change rather than lagging behind at the back?' Another expressed with dismay, 'It's distracting us from our goals' whilst a different participant indicated her disgruntlement by stating, 'You can't police all language'. Although my participants had a variety of opinions on which discourses to use, it was clear that they were united in their frustrations about the extent to which discussions about language had dominated and unravelled some of their

meetings. My participants fell into three camps that reflected the three different approaches to language that activists debated during these meetings. This choice was often based on participants' willingness to receive and deal with backlash on social media. Firstly, there were those who, despite experiencing significant backlash, always used gender-neutral language (such as 'menstruators' or 'people who menstruate') in their discursive activism. One of these participants stated, 'We waste time talking about language. We won't ever make everyone happy. I'm not happy trying to appease people who are prejudiced. I wish we could just get on with it'.¹⁴ The second group, which represented most of my participants, specifically mentioned women in their gender-inclusive activism (e.g. they used phrases such as 'girls, women and transgender people who menstruate' or 'women and people with periods'). These participants were keen to support transgender people but wanted to avoid as much backlash as possible and/or wished to highlight that most people who menstruate are women. Some of these participants refused to use the word 'menstruators' as they believed it to be 'too clinical' and 'dehumanising'. Explaining why her organisation used the 'longwinded' phrase 'girls, women and people who menstruate' in their discursive activism, one of these participants expressed:

Communication is so important, and you need to be sensitive to all sides. Some people are so desperate to clutch onto language so it's hard to convince them to be more gender inclusive. We spend so long debating all this rather than just finding solutions, and ultimately doing our work that benefits women and just happens to benefit trans men and other AFAB people too.

Finally, some participants were unwilling to take part in debates around gendered language and only referred to women and/or girls in their discursive activism. According to one of these participants, 'the whole gender identity thing is a minefield'. It is important to note that some of the participants' linguistic choices depended on their audiences. For example,

¹⁴ Discussing her use of gender-neutral language, another participant stated: 'I think it's still important that we do understand that it is a gender issue because it is something that has been held against women but that is not to say that it doesn't include other genders now. And I think there needs to be a new more nuanced way of talking about it that isn't brought up in a way that it negates or questions trans lives, it rather just affirms them and just brings them in'.

those who only engaged with people under 30 often used gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language such as ‘women and people who menstruate’. One participant stated: ‘There’s this new generation of people coming through. Thankfully, apart from J.K. Rowling (*participant laughs*), it seems to be well accepted and embraced in the communities that I see online. They’re very understanding that not everyone identifies as a woman who has a period’. A further participant explained:

Young people are growing up in a world where they are more open, and they are questioning things. [...]. We haven’t got the narrative right in the past. What I grew up with in school: the education, advertising—it was not right. We can’t be the ones that lead the conversation, it needs to be the young people who might actually get it right.

Illustrating that these linguistic choices might change over time, another participant reflected: ‘I keep checking myself constantly. I’m like, how do people who menstruate want to be talked about?’ As all these responses about gender-inclusive discourses indicate, the ‘J.K. Rowling Effect’ has disrupted, undermined and overwhelmed the menstrual movement. Indeed, the time spent debating language during meetings could instead be used to devise strategies for supporting and empowering menstruating women and people. Hence, we can argue that the British media’s amplification of trans-exclusionary views and perpetuation of transphobia on social media does not solely harm transgender people (McLean, 2021). Indeed, through undermining activists who support women significantly more than any other gender minority group, the ‘J.K. Rowling Effect’ also harms cisgender women.¹⁵ It is evident, then, by denouncing gender-inclusive discourses and those who use them, trans-exclusive radical feminists are not, as one participant stated, ‘achieving their goal of protecting women’. Instead, in the context of menstruation and menstrual advocacy, at least, they are achieving the opposite effect. It is therefore important that future research consider the impact of trans-exclusive radical feminist discourses on other areas of feminist advocacy.

¹⁵ It is important to note here that, four years later, activists are still trying to undo the impact of the ‘J.K. Rowling Effect’. Furthermore, due to public debates around the Gender Recognition Act, there has been an amplification of trans-exclusive views by the British media since 2020 (Fairbairn et al., 2021). Today, the menstrual movement continues to face significant backlash for their trans-inclusive activism and activists are still deliberating over whether and how to use gender-inclusive language.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is evident that the menstrual movement's discursive tactics that seek to reduce menstrual stigma and encourage open conversation about menstruation have been the most impactful (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012). Although not all activists agree on whether discourses of 'period neutrality' or 'menstrual positivity' are the most effective, we can observe that activists' open, frank and honest communication about menstruation on social media is breaking the silence around menstruation (Hansen, 2021). We can argue that their sharing of 'easily personalised ideas', construction of a collective identity (we-ness) and 'tactics of avoidance' are effective tactics for empowering audiences to speak about their own menstrual experiences or engage in collective action that advocates for menstruating women and people. This may result in 'real-world impact' by empowering audiences to speak openly about menstruation to friends, family, doctors, employers or teachers (Liao, 2019). This may lead to their receiving menstrual health support, menstrual products and menstrual education. Furthermore, through their intersectional approach to stigma and their dismantling of the media's neoliberal discourses around period poverty, their discursive activism effectively raises awareness of the structural barriers that negatively impact menstruating women and transgender people. Furthermore, we can observe that their digital discursive activism has also inspired others to participate in menstrual activism such as by creating new web pages or openly sharing their own menstrual experiences. In other words, their tactics have already mobilised audiences and inspired collective action. We can therefore argue that, by defying the 'concealment imperative' and encouraging collective action, menstrual activists are empowering menstruating women and people and, as a result, reducing the power imbalances in society (Fine, 1992; Wood, 2020, p. 316). It is important to point out here, however, that the movement has not yet found a solution to tackling the stigma and structural inequalities that are perpetuated in the mainstream British media. Although it may be difficult to convince journalists to change how they represent menstruation, activists' current attempt to change journalistic narratives through leading by example had not yet been effective at the time of the interviews.

Despite their shared aims to reduce menstrual stigma and empower all menstruating women and transgender people, the menstrual movement appears to be disjointed. Although we can see that their decisions to use 'menstrual positivity' or 'period neutrality' are based on an intersectional

approach to their audiences, their misinterpretation and disparagement of each other's discursive choices as well as their arguments about gender-inclusive language are undermining the cohesion of the movement. We can hypothesise that activists' disagreement as to which discourses to use is painting a confusing image to the public about the goals of the menstrual movement. This indicates that there are many discursive complexities which the movement must navigate and overcome so that they can effectively unite to support and empower women and other people who menstruate. We can argue that the root cause of this lack of cohesion is the neoliberal and polarising space of social media which has eroded the shared feminist consciousness that is necessary for collective action against social inequalities (Girerd & Bonnot, 2020). It is evident that their discursive activism is being disrupted, undermined and muddled by neoliberal discourses on social media as well as online transphobic discourses that have been fuelled by British journalists (Pearce et al., 2020). Although there is some agreement as to how to avoid perpetuating neoliberalism, such as by underscoring that period poverty is a structural issue, there appears to be no solution within the movement as to how, or whether, to include transgender people in their discursive activism. What is apparent, however, is that the movement's disagreements and deliberations over whether to use gender-neutral, gender-inclusive or feminine language are enormously disruptive. Although language is an important tool for empowerment and inclusion, we can argue that these debates over language are reducing the time that activists are spending on planning activities and leading campaigns that will ultimately benefit both women and transgender people. Hence, we can argue that trans-exclusive radical feminism is not only harming transgender people, but it is also detrimental to women who are, by far, the largest group that the menstrual movement supports. It is important that future research examines how transphobic discourses and trans-exclusive radical feminist discourses are undermining other feminist movements that focus on the health of people who were assigned female at birth or who advocate for cis and transgender women. More research is therefore necessary to examine the relationship between health communication and gender inequalities. Ultimately, however, we can only effectively gauge the impact of the menstrual movement's discursive activism on social media and via the mainstream media by asking audiences. By analysing focus groups that I conducted with 77 teenagers, the next few chapters will seek to determine the impact of the menstrual movement on young people's attitudes towards the health and social issues around menstruation.

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PART II

The Impact of Social Media, News
Media, and the Menstrual Movement
on Young People's Knowledge and
Perceptions of Menstruation,
Menstrual Health, and Menstrual
Inequities



CHAPTER 4

Seeing Menstruation in the Media: The News, Advertisements, and Memes That Teenagers Encounter via Social Media and the Mainstream Media

INTRODUCTION

As young people are often the primary targets of menstrual activism, it is important to understand the extent to which they are aware of the key messages of the menstrual movement and how this movement, alongside contemporary mediations of menstruation, has shaped their knowledge, attitudes, relationships, and behaviours. Part Two presents the findings from focus groups with 58 girls, 16 boys, and 3 non-binary teenagers in Yorkshire. It examines what they encounter in the media, where they find it, what format it takes, who creates it, and how it shapes their knowledge and perceptions of menstruation, menstrual stigma, period poverty, menstrual health, reusable products, and transgender people who menstruate. This chapter explores the menstrual discourses and images that young people encounter on social media and in the mainstream media as well as examining their views about these representations of menstruation. It includes sections on the news media, advertisements, and memes. This chapter therefore delineates the broader discourses about menstruation with which the menstrual movement is competing when trying to capture young people's attention and shape their attitudes, knowledge, behaviours, and experiences. If we refer to the criticisms of the media that were articulated by the activists who were interviewed for this book, we can see

the importance of understanding the influence of memes, advertisements, and news media, on young people. As social media and traditional media can be a source of (mis)information, stigma, and neoliberalism, it is important for activists to understand the impact of these discourses and how they can effectively challenge them (Baer, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018). Before evaluating young people's engagement with mediations of menstruation, this chapter will first explore existing research on young people's attitudes towards menstruation. It will then outline how the focus groups were organised, conducted, coded, and analysed.

Previous Research on Young People's Attitudes Towards Menstruation

This chapter, which provides an in-depth analysis of focus groups with 77 teenagers across 8 institutions, is original in its examination of the impact of social media, such as advertisements, memes, and news media, on young people's perceptions of menstruation. Although this book project is original in its examination of how the menstrual movement and the mediation of menstruation have influenced young people, there are some studies that examine their attitudes towards menstruation in general. These studies have been conducted in a variety of cultural contexts such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Mexico, Australia, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and Taiwan (Moronkola, 2006; Cheng et al., 2007; Allen et al., 2011; Mason et al., 2013; Padmanabhanunni & Fennie, 2017). Although some of the studies have spoken to boys and, very occasionally, transgender people who menstruate, most of this research has only been conducted with girls (Chrisler et al., 2016). Suggesting that menstrual stigma discourages young people from engaging in mixed-gender conversations about menstruation, very few of these studies have included findings from focus groups that include boys and girls (Newton, 2016). Research on young people's attitudes towards menstruation has employed a variety of data collection methods including questionnaires, online comments, interviews, and focus groups (Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Polak, 2006; Chrisler, 2013). These studies tend to focus on shame, myth, bullying, or education (Fingerson, 2005; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013). They tend to overlook related health and social issues such as the mediation of menstruation, period poverty, reusable products, and the menstrual experiences of transgender people. It is also important to note that only a handful of research on young people's attitudes towards menstruation has been conducted since 'The Year of The Period' (Padmanabhanunni & Fennie, 2017; Mondragon & Txertudi, 2019; Kosher et al., 2023). None of this

research has investigated the extent to which young people's feelings of menstrual shame and their knowledge about menstruation have been transformed by menstrual activism. By considering the extent to which young people's attitudes in Great Britain have changed since they were last recorded in studies that were undertaken prior to 2015, this book project is filling this gap. Drawing on limited research from Great Britain and some studies from across the globe, this section will outline the main findings of previous research that has investigated young people's attitudes towards menstruation.

Existing research that analyses interviews or focus groups with young people tends to argue that girls have a profoundly negative attitude towards menstruation that has a detrimental impact on their menstrual experiences (Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Sveinsdóttir, 2017). These studies indicate that girls view menstruation as something shameful and dirty that should be concealed and unspoken (Roberts, 2004; Newton, 2016). They note that their participants hide their menstrual products, such as up sleeves and in bags, on their way to the bathroom (Roberts et al., 2002; Grose & Grabe, 2014). During interviews and focus groups, scholars have noted that their participants frequently use euphemisms, 'it', or other forms of imprecise language to talk about menstruation (Fingerson, 2005; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Newton, 2016). Theresa Jackson and Rachel Falmagne (2013), for example, conducted interviews in the United States with 13 women aged between 18 and 22. They observe that, 'the range of discursive and material methods employed to hide, conceal, and manage menstruation recalled by young women in this sample reflects the extent to which they have appropriated the societal discourses that mark menstruation as shameful, humiliating, and dirty' (2013, p.384). Jackson and Falmagne (2013, p. 385) also note that their participants relied on 'a support network of girls and women' to help them to conceal menstruation and to monitor their bodies (such as checking for leaks). Victoria Newton, who conducted focus groups with teenaged girls and boys in a Derbyshire school in 2008, observed a similar phenomenon of self-surveillance: 'Time and effort are put into managing this monthly ritual of taking care to avoid exposure and shame' (2016, p.94). She underscores that the 'concealment imperative' engenders strong feelings of anxiety amongst her participants: 'For those who menstruate, there is, in their experience of bleeding, a consistent fear of exposure, leaking, and being "found out" ' (2016; p. 186; Wood, 2020). It is also important to note that some researchers in Great Britain

(and overseas) have experienced barriers to accessing schools due to teachers or principles arguing that menstruation is a ‘sensitive’ topic that their pupils will not want to discuss (Beausang & Razor, 2000; Burrows & Johnson, 2005). This gatekeeping could explain the paucity of studies that have been conducted with young people in schools.

Scholarship has also revealed that young people lack knowledge about menstruation, which renders them more susceptible to internalising menstrual stigma and absorbing myths (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; White, 2013; Wood, 2020). Examining her experiences of teaching undergraduate students in the United States, Joan Chrisler argues that menstrual stigma is the root cause of young people’s limited, and often inaccurate, knowledge about menstrual health:

I continue to be amazed about how little students know, or understand, about women’s reproductive health. It is clear that they have had little access to reliable information, and much of what they “know” comes from popular culture and is based on stereotypes [...] Given both instructors’ and students’ discomfort with the issues, and given political and economic pressures that have caused many schools to drop or “dumb-down” their health and sex education courses, it seems that fewer and fewer people are willing to teach about these taboo topics. (2013, p. 128)

Echoing Chrisler’s findings, other studies conducted by scholars or NGOs indicate that young people rarely receive sufficient menstrual health education in schools (McKeever, 1984; Laws, 1990; Newton, 2016; Bowen-Viner et al., 2022; Plan International, 2020). As Laura Fingerson’s (2012) and Chrisler’s (2013) research demonstrates, this lack of education perpetuates menstrual stigma because schools are neither challenging menstrual myths nor menstrual shame. Without formal education in school, young people turn to representations of menstruation in popular culture that is often based on stereotypes (Rosewarne, 2012; Chrisler, 2013). Fingerson explains that young women ‘are more susceptible to negative attitudes and superstitions about menstruation because they have more limited experiences with menstruation than older women have’ (2012, pp.40–41). Newton (2016) also observes that her participants have poor menstrual literacy. After talking with teachers, she links this poor menstrual literacy to teachers’ embarrassment around menstruation that can be manifest in the way in which they teach about menstruation. She adds that teachers only mention branded disposable menstrual products to

their pupils and offer a solely biological, rather than social, view of menstruation:

They watch a video, draw diagrams and make notes using worksheets, and are told by the teacher that the menstrual cycle ‘is designed to produce a single offspring with a good chance of survival’. Thus, the Science lesson deals with biological fact rather than exploring a more subjective view of female experience. (2016, p. 75)

In the school that Newton visited, pupils were usually educated about menstruation in mixed-gender groups in biology classes. However, other researchers have visited schools in which girls and boys were either taught separately about menstruation, or boys received no lessons whatsoever about menstruation (Prendergast, 2000; Fingerson, 2005). Furthermore, research has indicated that girls are often too embarrassed to fill gaps in their knowledge, such as by asking teachers or seeking information resources (Kissling, 2006). Hence, existing studies suggest that young people lack knowledge about menstruation and are therefore susceptible to absorbing myths, misinformation, and pejorative discourses.

Although most qualitative research about menstruation involves only female participants, there are a handful of studies that have investigated boys’ and men’s attitudes towards menstruation (Allen et al., 2011; Erchull, 2020; Mahon et al., 2015). These studies have observed a mixture of attitudes ranging from very negative to neutral, and, on rare occasions, positive (Forbes et al., 2003; Peranovic & Bentley, 2017). Studies have noted that boys either refuse to talk about menstruation or would only talk about it via euphemism (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001). Scholars recount that, during interviews and focus groups, their male participants talked about menstruating women in pejorative and stereotypical terms, such as describing them as ‘unstable’ and ‘difficult’ (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001; Forbes et al., 2003; Burrows & Johnson, 2005). Laura Fingerson (2012) observed that almost all the boys in her focus groups had negative and stigmatising attitudes towards menstruation. Overall, her male participants perceived menstruation as a taboo subject and were generally unwilling to talk about menstruation both in public and in private. She explains that their lack of knowledge is one of the reasons for why boys felt unable to discuss menstruation in public: ‘most boys do not want to admit that they do not know about menstruation. Thus, they are uncomfortable in situations where menstruation is the topic of conversation’ (Fingerson,

2012, p. 113). The boys in Fingerson's (2012) study stated that girls used menstrual cramps as an excuse to avoid sport and claimed that the topic had no relevance to them. Fingerson also observed that one of the only ways in which boys communicated about menstruation was via 'gross joking' and bullying (2012, p. 119). For example, Fingerson discusses how, by stealing pads from girls' bags and throwing them around, boys are 'violating' personal space (2012, p. 129). Observing similar phenomena, Newton articulated that her male participants framed menstruation as shameful, made rude jokes, threw around menstrual products, and even shamed girls for leaking or carrying products (2016, p.77). Nevertheless, in contrast to Fingerson, Newton argues that their playing with menstrual products could be seen as a way in which they are challenging taboos around 'a sensitive subject' (2016, p. 87). This previous research paints a bleak image of men's attitudes towards menstruation that suggests that they often perpetuate menstrual stigma, have very limited accurate knowledge about menstruation, and have little interest in supporting menstruating women.

There is very limited research about how young people communicate about menstruation on social media. Studies about the representation of menstruation on social media tend to collect posts without examining the age group or gender of the people who share or comment on these posts (Thornton, 2013; Urban & Holtzman, 2023). Some studies, however, have suggested that blogs and social media platforms are spaces in which teenagers can communicate more openly than in their offline conversations (Polak, 2006; Kosher et al., 2023). There is, however, no consensus within this research on the extent to which social media is perpetuating, or even challenging, menstrual stigma and menstrual myths. In her analysis of chat rooms, message boards, and blogs, Michele Polak (2006) observes that American girls are asking and answering questions about menstruation, sharing menstrual experiences, discussing colours of menstrual blood, and encouraging each other to talk to their boyfriends about menstruation. According to Polak (2006), these online conversations could help to reduce menstrual stigma and improve girls' relationships to their bodies. Echoing Polak's view that social media can normalise open discussions about menstruation, a study of YouTube videos by transgender and non-binary people argues that the Internet provides a space for them to challenge cisnormativity, raise awareness of trans experiences of menstruation, 'build a community', and engage in menstrual activism (Kosher et al., 2023, p. 9). Even though Leslie-Jean Thornton (2013) observes

open communication about menstruation in her study of 2211 tweets, very few of these tweets adopt a positive or neutral approach to menstruation. Indeed, most of the tweets she collected were highly stigmatising, perpetuated negative stereotypes about menstruating women, and framed menstruation as naturally debilitating. She argues that, despite the

uncensored environment of Twitter, the license to communicate freely was not used to advocate, enlighten, or redress misconceptions. It was used to reinforce, act out, and seek or offer acceptance. The tweets from this study appear to validate and perpetuate a previously constructed reality of how menstruating women should be viewed and treated. (Thornton, 2013, p. 50)

It is also important to note that none of these studies have examined how representations of menstruation on social media are shaping offline interactions about menstruation. This book is therefore the first study to consider how social media and digital activism are influencing young people's attitudes towards menstruation, menstrual health, and related social issues. Furthermore, this book is unique in its consideration of how online discourses about menstruation shape offline behaviours.

Nevertheless, to explore how perceptions of menstruation have been influenced by social media and online menstrual activism, this chapter can draw on the findings from Newton's focus groups that were conducted in 2008. Since her focus groups were conducted prior to 'The Year of the Period' and before most people had constant access to social media via smartphones, the timing of her focus groups is an ideal baseline for examining the impact of social media on young people (Thompson, 2017). Although her book was published in 2016, it is the most recent piece of in-depth academic research that has examined young people's attitudes towards menstruation in Great Britain. Furthermore, her book is unique in its brief discussion of how the mainstream media has impacted menstrual stigma in England (Newton, 2016). Newton hypothesises that the increasing visibility of menstruation in TV programmes and cinema is evidence of a slow reduction in societal stigma. She articulates: 'in light of these activities and public discourses it does feel that perhaps, finally, attitudes are changing; a trickle, perhaps, and not yet a 'crimson wave' ' (p.187). Based on her participants' attitudes towards menstruation, Newton's findings suggest that this change is indeed only a 'trickle' (2016, p. 187). Her results indicate that, in 2008, increasing representations of menstruation in the mainstream media were yet to have a significant

impact on normalising open conversation about menstruation. Analysing her participants' reticence to talk about menstruation at school or in other public spaces she argues, 'Menstrual discourses are complex, and a blunt and "out of place" reference to menstruation in public is still viewed by many as distasteful; attitudes and expressions that devalue women by virtue of their bodily functions remain commonplace' (Newton, 2016, pp. 181–182). She concludes her study by asserting that 'the menstruating body is still subject to concealment, secrecy, and shame, and, in this respect, little seems to have changed over the past five decades' (2016, p. 182). Her book therefore opens the way for the following chapters to analyse the extent to which young people's attitudes towards menstruation have changed as a result of their engagement with journalism, social media, and the mediated menstrual movement.

METHODOLOGY

Recruitment

Due to the disruptions that were caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the recruitment of participants was complex and disjointed. Sharing the experiences of many researchers who hoped to conduct offline fieldwork in 2020, my organisation of the focus groups was halted by the first lockdown. I had started to contact schools and colleges across Yorkshire in late January 2020 to arrange focus groups. To ensure a diversity of participants, I contacted both state and private schools, as well as targeting schools that had a high proportion of students from ethnic minority groups. By looking at the websites of schools and colleges in Yorkshire, I either located the email addresses of teachers, or, if these were not available, I found a general email address. Since I theorised that they would be the most interested in the content of the focus groups, I contacted staff who teach sociology, media studies, or health and social care. If these subjects were not available, I contacted headteachers or pastoral staff. By the end of February 2020, three schools had agreed to take part and others had expressed an interest. In contrast to the experiences of other researchers, no schools responded to say that they believed that menstruation was too sensitive a subject (Beausang & Razor, 2000; Burrows & Johnson, 2005). In fact, many schools that expressed an interest were keen to give their pupils a chance to talk about menstruation and learn about menstrual activism. As arrangements were being made, schools began to close

in March 2020 over fears of the spread of COVID-19. These focus groups were postponed with a view to their being rearranged once schools reopened. Once schools reopened in autumn 2020, I contacted the schools and colleges that had already expressed an interest or that had already invited me to visit. All the staff at the state schools with whom I was in contact told me that, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, visitors were not yet allowed back into their school. I therefore suggested conducting the focus groups online. Since their students had received less teaching during lockdown and teachers were under pressure to fill these gaps, most teachers declined my offer of online focus groups. Some teachers and pastoral staff refused to organise online focus groups because they believed that video calls were a safeguarding issue. Believing that face-to-face focus groups would be very beneficial to their students, other teachers asked if I could wait until visitors were once again allowed into their school. Nevertheless, two schools agreed for me to conduct focus groups via video call. Hence, 4 out of the 25 focus groups that form part of this study were conducted via video call. Participants were either in their own homes or using a computer at their school. However, due to the safeguarding measures that were implemented in these two schools, students were instructed by teachers to switch off their cameras. Although some data that I gathered from these focus groups is quoted in this book, the online focus groups were far less interactive than the offline focus groups and therefore yielded fewer responses. As participants were unable to see each other, it was more difficult to facilitate conversations between the students themselves. Since I had to ask the questions one at a time to each student, online focus groups were more like interviews. In contrast, the offline focus groups facilitated engaging conversations between students. These focus groups therefore produced much richer data than the online groups. This data was far more indicative of how young people communicate with each other about menstruation. Furthermore, students were generally more nervous to speak about menstruation via video call than they were in person. This experience resonated with those of the menstrual activists who, during interviews with me in 2020, discussed how online activism was far less effective than offline activism for encouraging young people to speak openly about menstruation (Tomlinson, 2023).¹

¹For example, one activist who ran workshops on reusable products explained: ‘The main appeal of live workshops is people being able to feel the products. As much as you can hold it up on camera and explain how you use it, it’s not the same as them literally holding it,

My first offline focus groups took place in autumn 2020 at an independent grammar school. The other offline focus groups were conducted between June and November 2021 once rules around COVID-19 had relaxed. My focus groups therefore all took place between October 2020 and December 2021. Across this 14-month period, participants were recruited from a total of eight institutions. This included two state colleges, three state schools, one all girls' private school, one mixed-gender private school, and one university. I created a poster that could be shared with potential participants and encouraged teachers to ensure that students of all genders were aware that they could participate. Undergraduate students at the university were recruited via email, whereas the students in the colleges and universities were recruited by the teachers. At one college, I attended a health and social care lesson for which all students had been encouraged by their lecturer to sign a consent form. Students then volunteered on the day by raising their hands. It was encouraging to see that almost all students raised their hands (including all the male students). All students that raised their hands were included in the focus groups. At another college, sociology students were recruited in a similar manner. By offering them a reward for their participation, a teacher in one of the schools encouraged students of all genders to sign up to focus groups.² At the other schools, teachers contacted all students via email or approached students who they thought would be interested in, or would particularly benefit from, participating in focus groups. For safeguarding reasons, at least one teacher was always present while focus groups were conducted. Many teachers enjoyed listening to the focus groups and commented that they were delighted with the positive and supportive atmosphere which these discussions created. Some even expressed surprise that their students were so keen to talk about menstruation. Overall, teachers were pleased that their students had the opportunity to talk openly about menstruation and hoped this would lead to further discussions in their school.

To facilitate an intersectional analysis of young people's knowledge and experiences, consent forms asked participants to provide information on their gender and ethnicity. In total 77 participants took part in the focus groups (including 58 girls, 16 boys, and 3 non-binary students). Students

feeling it. It's harder to establish that trusting connection over a video call. [...] When it's a taboo topic, it's much harder to establish the atmosphere that you would in real life'.

²In this school, students were awarded points for participation in activities or for various academic or extracurricular achievements.

selected the following categories to identify their ethnicities: 49 White, 11 South Asian, 3 East Asian, 3 Arab, 3 Black, 6 Mixed Race Black and White, and 2 Mixed Race South Asian and White. All students in the study were aged between 16 and 19. I selected this age range so that my participants had been exposed to social media for a few years. Although most platforms require users to be at least 13 years of age, research has shown that some young people begin to use social media as early as eight years of age (Strasburger et al., 2009). All participants had lived in the United Kingdom for at least three years, and the majority had lived in England for most of their lives. Participants under the age of 18 required their consent forms to be signed by their parents or guardians, whereas students aged 18 and 19 were able to sign consent forms on their own. As I wanted to observe conversations between boys, girls, and non-binary students about menstruation, I encouraged teachers to organise mixed-gender focus groups. However, as I theorised that some pupils might feel uncomfortable talking openly about menstruation within mixed-gender groups, students had to give consent to be included in a mixed-gender group. I asked teachers to offer students the opportunity to speak in boys-only groups as well as groups with only girls and non-binary students.³ In total, 12 focus groups were mixed gender (including at least one boy and at least one girl or non-binary participant), 11 groups included only girls and non-binary students, and 2 groups included only boys.⁴ Although most focus groups included three participants, some included four participants, and others included five participants.⁵

Focus Group Structure

So that students had the space to think reflexively, engage in interpersonal communication with each other, and raise issues that were important to them, the focus groups were semi-structured (Franks, 2002). Depending on the lengths of participants' answers, focus groups lasted between 25 and 40 minutes. As many participants were enthusiastic to have the opportunity to discuss menstruation, most focus groups were 40 minutes in

³ All non-binary students were assigned female at birth.

⁴ It is important to note that no participants refused to be in a mixed-gender group. The 'single-sex' groups were created to see if they would encourage participants to speak more openly about menstruation.

⁵ Due to some participants needing to isolate because of COVID-19, one focus group included only two participants and others were combined to create groups of four or five.

length. Focus groups were audio recorded. The focus groups began with a warmup exercise in which students were asked to shout out words that they association with ‘periods’, they were then asked open questions, and subsequently shown focus materials. The groups concluded with questions on how the menstrual movement could engage more effectively with young people. The list of questions was designed to ascertain what participants had noticed in the mainstream media and on social media about menstruation and how this had shaped their knowledge and perceptions. They were asked questions about which social media platforms they used and whether they read newspapers or watched the news. To understand their attitudes towards menstruation, they were asked whether they felt comfortable talking about the topic, to whom they spoke about menstruation, and under what circumstances. They were also asked about the aspects of menstrual experience that they would like to see in the mainstream media and on social media. To evaluate their awareness and perceptions of the five key aims of the menstrual movement, students were asked to discuss what they had seen in the media about menstrual stigma, period poverty, menstrual health (endometriosis, PCOS, PMDD), the environmental impact of plastic period products, and the experiences of transgender and non-binary people who menstruate. As some of the activists I interviewed were instrumental in updating the menstrual health curriculum in schools and advocating for free period products in schools, focus group participants were also asked questions about their menstrual education and whether they had access to free products. Participants were also asked if they were aware of menstrual activism, such as any organisations that advocated for women and other people who menstruate. These questions included: ‘Have you noticed anybody in the media trying to raise awareness around periods or change people’s attitudes towards them? If so, who? What were they doing?’ To better understand how they encountered menstrual discourses on social media, participants were asked questions about memes, hashtags, and videos. Once they had finished discussing the focus materials, participants were given more space to raise issues that were important to them. They were asked questions such as, ‘Are you aware of any other kind of issues around periods that we’ve not spoken about yet today?’, ‘What would you like to see in the media about periods?’, and ‘What more can menstrual advocates do to support women and people with periods?’

Due to the embarrassment that young people can feel when asked to talk about menstruation, focus materials were included in the study as an

elicitation technique (Barton, 2015; Chrisler, 2011). They were also included to spark conversation around the aims of the menstrual movement as well as how young people understand and respond to activism. The elicitation materials comprised of a newspaper article, a magazine article, a meme, and some tweets that included photographs. These were printed onto paper and handed to the participants.⁶ So that I could examine participants' initial responses to media that they were unlikely to have seen before or remember clearly, I selected articles and tweets that had been posted online between 2015 and 2019. The newspaper article was taken from the *Telegraph's* coverage of Kiran Gandhi's marathon run in 2015. Students were presented with the headline: 'This woman ran the London Marathon on her period without a tampon: Kiran Gandhi has spoken about "free bleeding" whilst running the London Marathon to break the taboo around periods' (*The Telegraph* 2015). The photograph that accompanies the headline is of Kiran Gandhi running the London Marathon with raised arms and visible menstrual blood at the top of her leggings. She is surrounded by other runners. The caption reads, 'Kiran Gandhi (left) ran the London Marathon whilst bleeding freely on her period'. The second focus material was a brief excerpt from *Glamour* magazine with the headline ' "We have been waiting for this day for a long time": Amika George celebrates free period products in all schools and colleges'. The subtitle reads 'Tampons should be a right, not a privilege' (*Glamour*, 2019). The article includes a photograph of Amika George and a separate image of a banner which includes a drawing of a tampon and the statement 'END PERIOD POVERTY'. The excerpt which was presented to the students, begins with two statistics: 'In the UK, 49% of girls have missed an entire day of school because of their period, whilst 1 in 10 young women (aged 14–21) have been unable to afford period products' (*Glamour*, 2019). After outlining that the Scottish government was the 'first national government ever to provide free access to menstrual products in all schools', the article describes a campaign led by Amika George, the Red Box Project, and Pink Protest for free period products in school (*Glamour*, 2019). The final page of the focus materials displayed screenshots of five tweets that are linked to two different campaigns. The first campaign, '#LiveTweetYourPeriod', was launched by BuzzFeed in December 2014 to encourage women to share their menstrual

⁶For the online focus groups, participants were presented the same focus materials on slides.

experiences on social media (Silva, 2015).⁷ The other campaign, #JustATampon, was launched by Plan International in 2015. The aim of the campaign was to reduce menstrual stigma through encouraging social media users to post images of themselves holding tampons (Harris, 2015). By posting photos of themselves holding tampons and encouraging donations to Plan UK, journalists and celebrities, such as Charlene White, Jon Snow, Jenny Éclair, and Cathy Newman, helped to raise the profile of the campaign (Oakley, 2015). The first tweet in the focus materials juxtaposes the hashtag ‘#LiveTweetYourPeriod’ and includes a meme of Regina George from the film, *Mean Girls* (2004), which incorporates the text: ‘These sweatpants are all that fits me right now’. The other four tweets use the hashtag #JustATampon. All tweets include photographs of people holding tampons. These people include members of the public, Jon Snow, and Charlene White. After looking at each focus material, participants were asked about their initial responses, how they interpreted the messages in the focus materials, and whether the materials had changed their views of menstruation.

Focus Group Analysis

All recordings of focus groups were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo. All transcripts were anonymised.⁸ The codebook was created by a combination of a data-driven inductive approach with a template of pre-established codes that were based on a theoretical framework (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In order that the analysis could adopt an intersectional perspective to the data, codes included the gender and ethnicity of the participants. The other pre-established codes were based on the aims of the menstrual movement (as based on the responses of the interviews that I conducted with menstrual activist) and discourses from existing studies on young people’s attitudes towards menstruation. To examine the impact of the mediated movement on young people’s knowledge and

⁷Some of the tweets that were posted using the hashtag can be found in the following compilation that was created by Laura Silver: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/laurasilver/bleeding-all-over-the-manternet>.

⁸To preserve the anonymity of the participants, conversations that are recorded in this book use the codes ‘F’ (female), ‘M’ (male), and ‘NB’ (non-binary) to specify their gender. These letters are followed with ‘A’, ‘B’, or ‘C’ to indicate different speakers. These letters are repeated and do not distinguish between different focus group participants (e.g., FA, FB, FC, MA, MB, and NB will not always refer to the same individual participants). The code ‘I’ refers to myself as the interviewer.

perceptions of menstrual experience, codes included ‘menstrual stigma’, ‘menstrual education’, ‘misinformation’, ‘period poverty’, ‘sustainability’, ‘menstrual health’, and ‘LGBTQ+’. During a close reading of the transcripts, further codes were added to highlight patterns of meaning that illustrated how my participants’ knowledge and attitudes were shaped by the media (Legard et al., 2003). These themes, which were refined through multiple close readings of the dataset, included ‘offline micro-activism’, ‘mixed gender conversations’, ‘feminism’, ‘inclusion’, and ‘human rights’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006). My thematic analysis of the dataset adopts an intersectional approach to my participants’ own experiences and interpretations of reality (van Zoonen, 1994). In this way, my analysis of the focus groups reveals the complex, nuanced, and diverse, ways in which the mediation of menstruation and the menstrual movement is shaping young people’s knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (both online and offline).

‘THEY DON’T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT BECAUSE IT WILL PUT
PEOPLE OFF THEIR BREAKFAST’: THE ABSENCE
OF MENSTRUATION IN THE NEWS

Before examining my participants’ responses to the news media, it is important to note that only a small number regularly read newspapers (including online or via news apps) or watched broadcasts on television. Although some participants stated that they almost never read news articles, most participants accessed news stories via reading social media posts or clicking the links that are included in them. These patterns of news consumption reflect recent research with young people in the United Kingdom which indicates that young people access 90% of their news via digital platforms (Yanardağoğlu, 2021). When asked whether they had seen menstruation in newspaper articles, news websites, or news broadcasts, participants commented that they had either seen a small amount of coverage or none whatsoever. There was very little difference between the responses of girls, boys, and non-binary students, thereby indicating that the likelihood that participants see, or remember, news stories about menstruation was not linked to their gender or whether they menstruate. For instance, one male participant stated: ‘I use the BBC because I do politics and economics, I need to do quite a lot of extra reading and I can spend quite a long time on it, and there is nothing ever mentioned about periods’. A second male participant reflected: ‘from what I’ve read from

official news articles, very little. Maybe one article on period poverty a few years ago [...] But apart from that, no'. Another boy, who was the participant that read the most newspapers commented, 'I've seen every major newspaper every morning for the past six years and I can't tell you a time when a menstruation story has stood out'. Echoing the responses of the male participants, a girl and a non-binary participant articulated: 'It's not common on the main news', and 'if you were watching the news in the morning or the evening, it's not the usual kind of thing to be brought up'.

Participants who remembered seeing menstruation in newspaper articles, news websites, and magazines commented on the placement, framing, and narrowness of this coverage. They stated stories about menstruation were 'hidden away', 'towards the bottom', and 'you have to go looking for them'. Their struggle to access news about menstruation reflects existing research on the placement of 'so-called women's topics' in the news (Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Sui et al., 2022, p. 3). They expressed, 'I've never seen a headline about periods', 'it's never a front page, grab your attention from it, it might be something towards the bottom, but it's never front page in your face', and 'it won't be on the front cover of magazines, you have to flick through them'. Other participants criticised the way in which the mainstream media frames menstruation: 'it's talked about in quite a clinical way, where it's just statistics [...] There's a lack of empathy' and 'even if it is discussed in the news, it's like, "ooh, I don't want to talk about that, it's too vulgar!"'⁹ My participants' reflections reveal their awareness of, and critical perspective towards, the societal stigmatisation and trivialisation of menstruation that is played out in the mainstream media (Ussher, 2006; Fahs, 2016; McHugh, 2020). In other words, my participants illustrated their awareness that both the marginalisation of menstruation to the most 'hidden' parts of news media and the discourses of concealment and distancing are a product of menstrual stigma and a societal perception of menstruation as a niche topic (Wood, 2020). It is also important to note that, when participants had encountered stories about menstruation in the news, they were almost always articles about the 'tampon tax'. One boy, for example, stated that he'd seen 'occasional stories about the tax on tampons, but that's it'. A girl

⁹To amplify the voices of participants and illustrate how young people's menstrual discourses have been shaped by the media, this book preserves the orality of my participants' discussions. The Yorkshire vernacular that was used by many participants has also been retained.

stated that the only article about menstruation that she'd ever seen in a newspaper was in the *Telegraph*: 'There was one thing about the tax on sanitary products, I feel like there was a debate going on about whether they should get rid of the tax [...] so that the price of them can go down, like petitions against the government'. The fact that participants usually only encountered news about menstruation when it was linked to tax, echoes their views that journalists approach menstruation from a 'distant' or 'clinical' way rather than reporting on personal experiences. Indeed, research on coverage of the tampon tax illustrates that British journalists co-opted activists' campaigns against period poverty to talk about Brexit and party politics rather than to 'speak about menstruation, poverty, or social inequalities' (Chen, 2022; de Benedictis, 2022, p. 10). We can therefore argue that the articles on the tampon tax that were read by my participants were unlikely to have discussed menstruation, menstrual health, or menstrual experience in any depth.

Participants' conversations about how often they had noticed menstruation in the news often developed into critical reflections on why menstruation and menstrual experience are not considered to be newsworthy subjects. Revealing an association between the news and masculinity, participants argued that the lack of visibility of menstruation in the media is linked to the gender and age of news audiences (Sui et al., 2022). My participants' knowledge and experiences of the mainstream news media therefore echo, and add an audience perspective to, feminist research that argues that the masculine culture of newsrooms leads to the privileging of men's issues and the marginalisation of topics that primarily affect women (Byerly & Padovani, 2017; Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Whilst expressing frustration that there is limited coverage of a topic that directly affects them, girls created an image of the target audience of the news as an 'old man' who 'would be upset' if menstruation were discussed. For example, one participant sarcastically criticised the view that menstruation is not newsworthy:

There's always that 50-year-old man who just doesn't want to know about it, and he'll probably put a complaint into the newspaper because he's just mardy.¹⁰ There's always that one person who gets mardy about what's put in, and it's irrelevant or something apparently?

¹⁰Mardy is a colloquial term used in Yorkshire to mean 'grumpy' or 'in a bad mood'.

Also reflecting on the newsworthiness of menstruation and illustrating their appetite for news coverage about menstrual health, two girls in a different focus group had the following conversation:

FA: They don't want to talk about it because ... periods will put people off their breakfast or something.

FB: Well, some women that are sitting down watching the news are on their period too. You think it's going to put them off their dinner? No, it's not. It's more important to talk about it. I know there's other stuff going on in the world, but would you rather listen to Brexit or to listen about your period and how it benefits you?

Although research indicates that news framing and discourses shape 'how societal issues are experienced and solved [alongside] which issues are seen as newsworthy and thus can take off in public debate', it is evident that my participants' perceptions of menstruation as a newsworthy topic are not based on their engagement with the mainstream news media (de Benedictis, 2022, p. 2). Not only are my participants highly critical of the mainstream media's trivialisation, stigmatisation, and marginalisation of menstruation, but they also view menstruation as a newsworthy topic. Furthermore, the comparison between Brexit and menstruation indicates my participants' views that menstruation is as newsworthy, or more newsworthy, to them than broader political issues. My participants' appetite for news about menstruation was indicated both in their dissatisfaction with the mainstream media's limited coverage of this topic, their own efforts to locate news about menstruation, and their praise of magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan*, which place menstruation in a prominent position. For example, one girl stated:

what I like about *Cosmopolitan* [...] [is that] they put their articles on periods on the front page, so you can see straightaway what they're talking about. Whereas I think sometimes with other newspapers and magazines, they hide it right in the middle, so you could only find it if you were looking for it. *Cosmopolitan* and a few other smaller online magazines put it to the centre rather than still making it this PC thing that we shouldn't talk about. But more people *are* talking about it!

It is therefore evident that the lack of visibility of menstruation in the news media has not translated into young people perceiving menstruation as a trivial, taboo, or irrelevant topic. Instead, it is evident that they have a desire for news stories about menstruation that is not met by mainstream news.

‘IT’S ALWAYS JUST HAPPY WOMEN RUNNING ABOUT’: YOUNG PEOPLE’S PERCEPTIONS OF PERIOD PRODUCT ADVERTS

Although only a minority of the participants could recount instances in which they had noticed coverage of menstruation in the news media, almost all the participants, regardless of gender, had seen content on social media about menstruation. The presence of menstruation was therefore a normal aspect of their social media consumption. For girls and non-binary participants, the two most common formats through which they encountered menstruation on social media were via advertisements and memes. Even though some of the boys had noticed influencers promoting menstrual products on social media, they did not encounter any advertisements directly from brands. The girls and non-binary participants recalled seeing a variety of advertisements from traditional brands, social enterprises, and influencers.¹¹ They also mentioned seeing television advertisements about menstrual products. According to some of these participants, menstrual product advertisements were part of their everyday social media consumption. One girl, for example, stated that, on YouTube, ‘every 10 minutes, there’ll be an advert on periods’. For others, they were less frequent, but were the most common way through which they encountered menstruation on social media. One girl, for example, articulated that she only saw advertisements on social media rather than ‘actual people talking about periods’. When asked what advertisements they had noticed, the girls and non-binary participants often recalled traditional stereotypical menstrual product tropes by large brands such as Always and Tampax (Kissling, 2006; Liu et al., 2023). These tropes included such as ‘happy women running about’, playing tennis, wearing white, and the pouring of blue liquid. They also mentioned advertisements about menstrual cups and underwear from social enterprises and influencers. One girl explained: ‘I’ve seen a few YouTubers that really like to promote their menstrual cups and ecological ways of dealing with your period, but most of the stuff that

¹¹ As will be explored in the subsequent chapter, some boys encountered discussions about menstrual products via influencers whom they were following based on interests that were unrelated to menstruation. Since influencers tend to have deals with brands, these influencers may have been speaking about products for marketing purposes.

I see on Instagram is advertising by brands'. A non-binary student recalled seeing an influencer on TikTok who explains how to use cups and pants: 'She just said what [a cup] is and then how you put it in, she folded it or something'. It is therefore evident that young people are still being exposed to menstrual product advertisements that draw on traditional tropes whilst also viewing more informative posts by influencers who speak in a more matter-of-fact manner about the products and how to use them.

As menstrual product advertisements provide a key source of information for young people about menstruation, menstrual health, and menstrual management, it is important to understand how they shape young people's attitudes and knowledge (Merskin, 1999; Agnew & Sandretto, 2016). As few of the pupils had seen, or learned how to use, sustainable products at school, social media advertisements were their primary source of knowledge about reusables such as cups, underwear, and pads. Echoing other participants who had only learned about reusable products via advertisements and influencers, one participant discussed her discovery of cups on social media and the gaps in the menstrual curriculum at her school: 'They never really spoke about [cups]. They only gave us two solid options and that were it'.¹² Another participant, who commented that she had received very limited education about menstruation at her school, shared with her peers that she had learned about blood flow via advertisements. She denounced these advertisements, however, for being misleading:

If they show anything to do with heavy and light flow it's always with clear water, which was always so confusing to me because I didn't know how much blood I was bleeding. [...] That's not the same as blood! So, I was always confused and using the wrong pads for so long, because I didn't know what was counted as normal, heavy, and light.

We can therefore see that a combination of minimal education at school and unclear messages in advertisements had a negative impact on her menstrual management and wellbeing.¹³ As these examples about reusable

¹² Another participant who had learned about reusables via advertisements said the following about a lesson at school that only mentioned single-use pads and tampons: 'They just gave us a little pack thing and that's about it'.

¹³ This experience is not unique and, as indicated in a recent study that is the first ever to use real blood to test the menstrual products, the use of water in advertisements gives an inaccurate impression of the absorbency of the marketed product (De Loughery et al., 2023). This misrepresentation can lead to leakage and a less accurate understanding of blood flow.

products and blood flow indicate, advertisements are filling a gap in young people's menstrual education in schools. My findings illustrate, however, that the information that advertisements provide is not always clear and useful. My focus group findings therefore emphasise the importance of accurate, accessible, and holistic, education in schools that encourages students to ask questions.

Besides being a source of information, studies also argue that young people internalise stigmatising discourses from advertisements and, as a result, experience shame and low self-esteem (Malefyt & McCabe, 2016; Røstvik, 2020; Mucedola & Smith, 2022). Albeit there being evidence of stigma in the awkwardness exhibited by some participants at the beginning of focus groups, a handful of references to menstrual blood as 'gross', and some discussions of hiding products 'in bags' or 'sleeves', it was evident that my participants were critically aware of the stigmatising messages in advertisements. They not only identified these narratives, but they also challenged them and expressed a desire for advertisements to be less stigmatising. Firstly, participants adopted a critical approach to the discourses of hygiene in menstrual product advertisements. One participant, for example, argued that messages around smell or 'freshness' in advertisements could have a negative impact on women: 'I think that makes women very self-conscious. The product has to smell nice so that you don't smell. You don't smell as it is!' Secondly, participants criticised advertisements for upholding the 'menstrual concealment imperative', such as by pouring blue liquid and avoiding mention of menstruation (Wood, 2020). For example, one girl exclaimed 'they never mention actual periods', whilst another stated that advertisements 'never mention the word "period" '. A further participant said, 'why the need to make periods look pretty with the blue liquid?' In a different focus group, three girls engaged in the following conversation about traditional advertisements:

FA: With the pad adverts, they always use blue liquid instead of red.

FB: Yeah, instead of red, because apparently that's too like ...

FA (*sarcastically*): It's too graphic.

FB: Yeah, too graphic, I'm just like ... that's what we see all the time every month!

FC: There should be red! They use blue liquid or *anything* other than red liquid—what’s so bad about blood?

As we can see here, my participants were aware of a societal view that menstrual blood should be concealed, but they were keen to challenge and question this norm. As evidenced by FA’s sarcastic comment and FC’s question, these participants believed that menstrual blood is a harmless bodily substance that should be visually represented in the media. In contrast to studies that argue that viewers internalise negative messaging from advertisements, my participants’ responses across different focus groups indicate that young people are rejecting the stigmatising discourses in advertisements and choosing to conceptualise menstruation differently from how it is portrayed in advertisements (Merskin, 1999; Brown & Dittmar, 2005). As very few studies have conducted interviews with young people to ascertain the impact of advertisements on their perceptions of menstruation, these findings provide a unique insight into how young people are questioning the discourses that advertisements are presenting to them (Mucedola & Smith, 2022).

Besides criticising stigmatising discourses in advertisements, participants were also concerned about advertisements’ lack of realism and their limited representation of women from ethnic minority groups as well as transgender people who menstruate. Although recent studies have suggested that advertisements have become more diverse and inclusive, my participants did not hold this view (Campbell et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2023). For example, one participant explained ‘there’s no diversity [...] it’s always just, women. We need more people of different genders’ whilst another said that ‘we need to see more women of colour’. The most frequent concern, however, was about the unrealistic expectations that advertisements create for menstruating women and transgender people. Girls and non-binary participants expressed concerns such as ‘adverts are not realistic at all’, and ‘not all women want to do massive sports on their period, we just want to curl up in bed and watch a film a lot of the time’. Another participant expressed: ‘it’s just how you can look more presentable to the world. [Advertisements are] like “oh no you can look like a reasonable person, you don’t have to be emotional and messy, you can be nice and clean and go for a walk”’. As these responses indicate, young people believe that the discourses and imagery in advertisements establish unrealistic physical and emotional expectations during menstruation. If we draw on Wood’s ‘concealment imperative’ (2020) and scholarship that

explores expectations for menstruating women to ‘pass’ as non-menstruators (Vostral, 2008; Owen 2022), we can observe that these advertisements encourage their menstruating audiences to behave as if they are not menstruating and therefore could lead to feelings of shame if they are not able to meet these expectations. Although they do not articulate this directly, we can observe my participants’ use of language such as ‘presentable to the world’ that they have a critical awareness that advertisements mediate social norms of ‘passing’, self-surveillance, and a ‘mandate to always be suitably feminine [and] presentable’ (Rosewarne, 2012).

My participants were particularly frustrated at the physical expectations that advertisements promote. They argued that advertisements overlook, erase, and minimise the experiences of women and transgender people who experience menstrual cramps that disrupt their daily lives. This included women and transgender people with, and without, menstrual health conditions. One girl, for example, said that advertisements,

downplay it a lot, it’s like “look what you can accomplish when you’re on your period” and that’s like saying that you should be quite normal on your period and people who aren’t, might feel like there’s something wrong with them.

Another girl, who expressed concern that she may have endometriosis, uttered:

They’re really annoying, you know the Tampax adverts with women playing tennis? [...] I’d like [advertisements] to be realistic. For a lot of us, periods aren’t jumping around being happy. To be honest, it’s difficult getting up in the morning and knowing you have to go to school and just dealing with the pain throughout the whole day, it’s not just jumping around playing with your friends doing tennis. Sometimes it’s leakages on the bed.

These responses illustrate my participants’ critical view of the neoliberal feminist discourses in advertisements that present menstrual products as empowering to all women. In this way, these advertisements ignore health inequalities and the intersectional nature of menstrual experience. My participants’ views therefore resonate with Przybylo and Fahs’ discourse analysis of advertisements which argues that they promote ‘able-bodied fitness as well as obligatory positivity onto those who menstruate, while foregoing questions of menstrual product access and the more painful aspects of

bleeding’ (2020, p. 375). Participants were not only concerned about the impact of these neoliberal discourses on menstruating women, but also on cisgender men who must rely on sources, such as advertisements, to learn about menstrual experience. They expressed the consequences of such advertisements with the following phrases: ‘[adverts] are the only period stuff men see’, ‘men think “why are they being so dramatic?” ’, ‘men will think periods are easy-breezy’, and ‘men will think that women don’t have much pain’. Resonating with studies that women with endometriosis face dismissal of their menstrual cramps as ‘just a bad period’, these comments indicate young people’s views that advertisements perpetuate sexism and a culture that trivialises women’s pain (Holowka, 2022). By calling for advertisements that are diverse, realistic, and inclusive of everyday painful experiences, my participants echo Przybylo and Fahs’ (2020) hypothesis that a discourse of ‘menstrual crankiness’ can reduce social inequalities because it challenges ableism, racism, sexism, and transphobia whilst foregrounding diversity. Hence, although it is evident that my participants are exposed to neoliberal discourses and mediations of menstruation that trivialise menstrual pain, some are actively resisting these messages. Indeed, their critique and rejection of these discourses suggests that they have a strong intersectional feminist consciousness. This suggests that they would be receptive to menstrual activism that is approached from an intersectional feminist perspective.

‘IF YOU CAN MAKE JOKES ABOUT IT, IT IS NO LONGER THIS
BIG SERIOUS SCARY TOPIC THAT PEOPLE DON’T REALLY WANT
TO TALK ABOUT’: THE NORMALISING AND STIGMATISING
POWER OF MENSTRUAL MEMES

Across all genders and ages of my participants, memes were the most common way through which participants encountered menstruation online. Not only could almost all girls and non-binary participants recall seeing memes on social media, almost all the boys had come across period memes and could give examples of the themes that these memes portrayed. Since they are often intended to be humorous and are usually only comprised of a short text, one image, or a very short video clip, memes may seem trivial. However, as the growing field of meme studies has demonstrated, they can ‘reflect deep social and cultural structures’ and therefore offer a window into societal norms, values, and expectations (Shifman, 2013, p. 15;

Wells, 2018; Wiggins, 2019). Indeed, although memes were a source of humour to my participants, they were also the most common online format through which they learned about the societal norms, values, and expectations that surround menstruation. As will be explored in more depth in this section, we can understand the significance of menstrual memes when we consider the limited menstrual education that almost all my participants had received at school and their reliance on social media to fill these gaps.¹⁴ This was epitomised by one participant who exclaimed: ‘Most of the information we get is from social media. It educates young people more than their school’. Social media is therefore their main source of information about menstruation itself, societal norms, and the menstrual experiences of people beyond their offline social circles. Furthermore, as memes are a form of ‘political meaning-making’, their humour also has the power to perpetuate, or challenge, societal norms, taboos, and expectations (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016, p. 1997; Urban & Holtzman, 2023). Although she does not refer to memes specifically, Holmes (2000) model of ‘reinforcing’ versus ‘contestive’ humour is useful for analysing the subversive potential of memes. According to Holmes ‘reinforcing humour’ maintains the status quo, whereas ‘contestive humour’ challenges the status quo and provides a socially acceptable manner through which to contest social norms. Hence, by analysing young people’s views of period memes, we can not only identify the societal discourses that they are encountering on social media, but we can also evaluate how memes are shaping their knowledge and perceptions of menstruation, menstrual stigma, menstrual experience, and societal norms, as well as how participants ‘insert themselves into public conversations’ about menstruation (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016, p. 1997).

Illustrating the ubiquitous nature of memes in young people’s social media consumption, one boy observed, ‘I see them on Instagram on meme pages and stuff. Some joke about “that time of the month” and how [...] men haven’t experienced pain like period cramps, which obviously we’ve got no idea about!’ Responding to this assertion, one boy commented ‘yeah, I’ve seen a few like that about difficult days of your period that mean you can get past anything’. By declaring that they had already shared, or would be happy to share, period memes some female participants revealed that this is an acceptable behaviour in their online social circles. Further evidencing the fact that menstruation has become a

¹⁴This will be explored in more depth in Chaps. 5 and 6.

normal theme of the memes with which young people of all genders engage, participants in a mixed-gender focus group discussed period memes on Instagram and the frequency with which they encountered, and liked, memes about menstrual cramps. This conversation was typical of participants' views of period memes as an 'everyday' aspect of their lives:

FA: It's a double tap and a swipe without even thinking about it.¹⁵

FB: Yes, you don't really think about those ones.

FA: Because it's not anything new. [Period] memes aren't really that shocking, you don't see it and ask, what's this?

FB: You don't ask why someone has put that up.

FA: I don't know about you as a boy, but probably if you saw that you wouldn't think anything of it? You'd probably just swipe past it?

MA: Yeah, I would just swipe past it.

As indicated by their phrases such as 'without even thinking', 'not anything new', 'you don't ask why', participants do not question or feel disconcerted by the presence of period memes on social media. Although the boy in the focus group paid little attention to the period memes, his casual response that he would 'just swipe past' period memes indicated his lack of surprise at their presence on social media rather than an aversion towards them. Their unprompted reflections on the potential of memes to shock audiences illustrate their views that these memes would have been considered as provocative or taboo-busting in the past. Thus, the proliferation of period memes has led to their becoming become a normal and even banal aspect of young people's online spaces rather than a political or 'shocking' act to break taboos (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016). This suggests that, at least in online spaces, the 'concealment imperative' has eroded and both visual and textual references to menstruation have become normalised (Wood, 2020).

Illustrating the potential of memes to have a positive or empowering impact on menstruating girls in their offline lives, many of my female participants argued that the humour in period memes frames menstruation as a normal topic of conversation that young people should not be embarrassed to discuss. For this reason, they believed that memes helped to tackle menstrual stigma and empower girls to speak more openly about menstruation. For example, one girl stated, 'the jokes do normalise it'

¹⁵A 'double tap' is a way of 'liking' content on Instagram. This participant was therefore indicating her approval of the period memes by tapping twice on them.

whilst others said, ‘I think it’s good to have jokes about it and stuff, because it makes it more normal’ and ‘I think it makes things easier to talk about’. Another female participant encapsulated the power of memes to break down barriers as follows: ‘If you can make jokes about it, it is no longer this big serious scary topic that people don’t really want to talk about’. Portraying memes as an important vehicle for openly communicating feelings about menstruation, another participant articulated: ‘I think memes normalise [periods] because memes have become what the emoji once was. They’ve become a new means of communication’. These responses not only reveal participants’ awareness of menstrual stigma and the importance of reducing it, but also their views that the humour in memes is not trivial. Indeed, as my participants spoke with confidence in mixed-gender focus groups about the themes in these memes, it is evident that these memes are a form of ‘contestive’ humour that is normalising the topic of menstruation in public mixed-gender spaces (Holmes, 2000). Furthermore, my participants’ responses indicate that these memes are contributing to social change via encouraging more open conversation around menstruation. This view echoes feminist scholarship which theorises that humour facilitates open discussions about taboo topics and leads to the reduction of the power of these taboos and the patriarchal structures that maintain them (Bing, 2004; Dubriwny, 2005).

My participants’ views of memes as ‘relatable’ and a way of ‘laughing with’ other women support feminist scholarship that argues that feminist humour can create solidarity (Bing, 2004; Morrison, 2019).¹⁶ This observation about the normalising power of humour, however, lies in stark contrast to Newton’s findings that jokes about menstruation reinforce ‘existing gendered power structures’, cannot ‘seriously challeng[e] taboos’, and are always made at the expense of menstruating women and girls (2016, pp. 40, 23). This suggests that, perhaps, the discourses used in menstrual humour are changing, such as by better representing the lived experiences of women rather than acting as an insult towards them. By viewing the focus groups through the lens of feminist research on subversive humour, however, we can argue that contemporary period memes can help to reduce gender inequalities. As evident in my focus groups, memes encourage feelings of solidarity amongst young women and

¹⁶One participant, for example, gave the following example of a meme that she found humorous: ‘It was a video game of someone just getting ripped to shreds and someone said, this is what my period feels like, so yeah, I can relate to that!’

empower them to speak more openly about menstruation. This could lead to their having the confidence, for example, to ask for products or seek support for their menstrual health (Seear, 2009; McLaren & Padhee, 2021). By demonstrating that girls view the humour in memes as a way of transforming menstruation from an awkward subject that must be managed in private, to one that can be discussed openly, my focus groups support the theory that humour has the power to disrupt the societal norms that perpetuate gender inequalities (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2013). Indeed, as they normalise the visibility of menstruation in public spaces, these memes are contributing towards menstrual activist work to encourage open dialogue and solidarity around menstruation (Fahs, 2016; Levitt & Barnack-Tavleris, 2020). Furthermore, these findings underscore the value of menstrual activist work, such as that conducted by some of the interviewees in this book, which uses humour to reduce menstrual shame. Finally, we can also theorise that memes could be a powerful vehicle for menstrual activists as they capture the attention and interest of young people.

Besides their perception of memes as an important tool for normalising open discussions about menstruation, participants also praised memes for offering a ‘more realistic’ representation of menstrual experience than the imagery and discourses in mainstream advertisements. Describing memes as a form of ‘realism’, one girl listed some of the main messages of memes which she had found amusing and ‘relatable’, including ‘this is something we all deal with, isn’t it funny?’ and ‘this is painful, that’s the day-to-day reality of it’. Comparing memes and advertisements by companies such as Always and Tampax, another young woman reflected:

I always think [memes] are quite accurate [...] I scroll past them and think, yeah, fair enough. I like how it's a little bit more accurate like than when it's all the staged things like “this woman is on her period and she's on a run”. They are actually saying, yeah, you can be in bed and emotional.

For these participants, these memes validate their behaviours during menstruation that do not conform to the societal norms and expectations on which menstrual product advertisements often draw (Vostral, 2008; Rosewarne, 2012). These participants therefore view the ‘contestive humour’ in these memes as a form of ‘counter-discourse’ to normative mainstream representations of menstruation that compel women to maintain their usual activity levels and mask their symptoms so that it is not

evident that they are menstruating (Holmes, 2000; Clark, 2016; Mucedola & Smith, 2022). We can, therefore, argue that memes that depict women and other people who menstruate resting or experiencing pain not only normalise open conversation about menstruation, but they can also engender young people to feel validated via a sense of shared experience. In this way, memes offer a subversive, more accurate, and more validating representation of lived experiences than do most advertisements.

Nevertheless, although some of my participants believed that all memes they had seen were stigmatising, most argued that they are ‘a bit of a double-edged sword’. As participants highlighted, the potential of memes to normalise menstruation depends on their discourses, creators, and the viewpoint from which their narratives are articulated. According to one participant: ‘they’re either made by women and really relatable to us, or they’re demonising’. Similarly, another young woman highlighted young people’s binary view of memes as follows: ‘It’s either women making fun of themselves, like “when you’re on your period...” or it’s like “when a girl is in a bad mood, period”’. Offering another example of the binary nature of memes, a girl in a different focus group said: ‘when done right, they normalise it. If they’re done wrong, and they continue with the negative stereotypes, then they’re a problem’. As we can see here, my participants believed that if memes are articulated from the perspective of menstruating women, they are a form of ‘contestive’ humour that can effectively reduce menstrual stigma. Their responses suggested, however, that if memes that were presented from the view of someone who does not menstruate, this usually perpetuates menstrual shame and stigma through ‘reinforcing’ humour (Holmes, 2000). Mirroring menstrual scholarship on societal perceptions of menstruation, my participants identified the following stigmatising discourses and themes in memes: ‘moody’, ‘cranky’, ‘lazy’, ‘monsters’, ‘breathing fire’, and ‘eating loads of chocolate’ (Ussher, 2006; King, 2020). Although some of the female participants admitted that they found these exaggerated stereotypes amusing, others found them ‘shaming’, ‘frustrating’, ‘inaccurate’, ‘alienating’, and ‘weird’.¹⁷ This

¹⁷For example, a focus group of girls all laughed about a meme that one girl described as follows: ‘I’ve seen the one where the girlfriend’s is hiding under the quilt, she’s been described as this monster. And then the boyfriend just chucks food onto the bed and then the credit card—her hand just comes out and just grabs it’. The other girls replied, ‘It’s so funny’, and ‘that’s my favourite’.

was explained in more depth by one female participant who drew examples from memes that represent a male point of view of menstruating women:

They'll be loads of really stereotypical [memes] like: when your girl is on her period, and there's that stereotypical girl that wants loads of fast food and she's irritable and she's cranky and she's lazy. And that is just not the case in reality, is it? Every woman is different.

If we combine this response with my participants' other criticisms of memes that reduce women to archetypes, we can argue that young audiences can feel alienated and stigmatised by memes that ignore the individualised nature of menstrual experience. Hence, stereotypes in memes are a form of 'reinforcing' humour that should be avoided by activists who are using memes to encourage conversation about menstruation (Holmes, 2000).

As some of my participants highlighted, the most 'dehumanising' and stigmatising memes are usually those that represent menstruating women through the eyes of a cisgender male social actor. Since most of these memes portray men and women in diametrical opposition, they use 'divisive' humour that stems from societal stereotypes that women are irrational or weak (King, 2020).¹⁸ The same video meme of a boyfriend referring to his menstruating girlfriend as 'it' was given as an example of 'reinforcing' humour by participants across multiple focus groups (Holmes, 2000). This was, for example, discussed at length in one of the mixed-gender groups:

MA: I see period memes from meme accounts.

FA: I see a lot of period memes from the boy's perspective, like 'what I do with my girl?'

FB: Oh, yeah, I hate that, I hate that.

FA: I saw a TikTok, and his girlfriend was sleeping on him. She was on her period, and he was like, 'what do I do with *it*?'. Everyone in the comments section was like, well, don't call her, 'it'.

FB: Cancelled.

I: Was he calling his girlfriend it or her period it?

FA: I think the girlfriend, but he was on about her period. But he didn't call that 'it', he called her 'it' because she was 'in a mood'.

¹⁸See, for example, my article on memes which gives further examples of divisive memes and their impact on societal views about menstruating women (Tomlinson, 2021).

My participants' criticism of the boyfriend for using the pronoun 'it' illustrates the dehumanising nature of this meme on its female audience. Since the meme refers to the girlfriend as 'it' and does not provide her point of view, we can argue that this meme otherises the girlfriend and plays into discourses of the 'monstrous feminine' (Ussher, 2006). Through this otherisation and objectification, this meme places men and women in binary opposition. In this way, it suggests that mutual understanding and non-stigmatising communication between men and menstruating women are impossible. The humour in this meme therefore reinforces patriarchal power structures that place women in an inferior position to men (Holmes, 2000). According to the female participants in one of the mixed-gender focus groups, the potential of 'divisive' memes to perpetuate pejorative attitudes towards menstruating women is often evident in the comments underneath them:

FA: Yeah, I think I've seen like a couple of memes and they would be like, oh, what would you do if your girlfriend bled on your bed or something? And I was reading some of the comments and they were like throwing up faces and stuff like that.

FB: Yeah, some people were like, 'I'd look after them, I'd get them this'. And then there's other ones that were like, 'I'd make them clean it up'.

FC: Yeah, I've seen that.

MA: That's horrible.

As we can see from my participants' discussions, the discourses in divisive memes encourage audiences to 'laugh at', rather than 'laugh with', their menstruating subject. They, therefore, otherise, dehumanise, and shame menstruating women rather than normalising menstruation via providing an amusing insight into a normal bodily experience. Resonating with Holmes' (2000) model of humour, young people believe that memes which draw on normative stereotypes cannot contribute to dismantling menstrual stigma because they do not fulfil their criteria of being relatable, realistic, accurate, and articulated from the menstruating person's point of view.

Although participants were worried that memes which perpetuate stereotypes would cause menstruating women and people who menstruate to feel ashamed, erased, and alienated, they were most concerned about the impact of these memes on men's knowledge of menstruation and how this shapes their attitudes towards women. As the female and non-binary

participants feared that most men have very limited knowledge about menstruation and therefore rely on social media to learn about menstruation, they believed that men are absorbing misinformation, myths, and stereotypes, from memes. Highlighting that men are only seeing memes that include ‘reinforcing’ humour that portrays inaccurate representations of menstruation, one girl lamented:

I’ve seen guys’ memes come up really randomly and they’re of girls when they’re on their period and it’s a really dramatic image of someone breathing fire or eating loads of chocolate. It always makes me really feel weird because they don’t experience periods and those are literally the only memes they see about periods. [Men do not see memes by] women that are making light of the situation they go through.

In another focus group, two girls and a boy engaged in the following conversation about men’s lack of awareness that women and other people who menstruate have diverse experiences:

FA: I’m worried that guys are just going to see these and be like, ‘oh, all periods are like that’, so they’re automatically going to expect that from you as well.

FB: Some people don’t have painful periods at all.

FA: And some people don’t have mood swings.

MA: I agree with what they said, it puts people in the same bucket. Obviously if I didn’t speak to girls outside social media or outside what the biology textbook said, then I’d probably think they’re all the same, yeah.

These participants are, therefore, expressing concern that the stereotypes in memes will significantly inform men’s understanding of menstruation and they will therefore not be able effectively to understand and support their menstruating friends, partners, or family members. As evidenced by the boy’s reference to his ‘biology textbook’, school pupils are not taught about lived experiences of menstruation. Thus, unless they feel able to discuss menstruation with their female friends and family, they must rely on social media to fill these gaps. Since these memes play into patriarchal stereotypes about women, misrepresent their lived experiences of menstruation, and ignore the intersectional nature of menstrual experience, their humour ‘reinforces’ men’s negative perceptions and misunderstanding of menstruation rather than encouraging them to see menstruation as a normal, healthy, and natural experience (Holmes, 2000; Patterson, 2014).

If we consider the conversation above with reference to the responses of the boys from across all the focus groups, we can indeed see the validity and significance of my participants' concerns. Since my male participants had received very limited education at school and encounter menstruation in memes more than in any other format, we can argue that memes are their main source of information about menstruation, menstrual health, and menstrual experiences. This is especially of concern as my male participants had only ever encountered menstrual memes that draw on negative stereotypes or pit women and men against each other. For instance, when asked to give an example of a period meme, most male participants mentioned memes about menstrual cramps and 'being kicked in the testicles'. Echoing many of the other male participants who also found these memes funny, one boy stated: 'There's only one I can ever remember and it's one I wholly stand by. It was women who complain about their cramps, but they've never been kicked in the balls'.¹⁹ As we can see in the boy's approbation of this meme, his attitude towards menstrual cramps is one that minimises women's experiences of pain. The 'reinforcing' humour in this meme therefore puts women 'in their place' and plays into societal stereotypes that menstruating women are irrational and weak (Chrisler, 2011; Holmes, 2000; Newton, 2016, p. 53). Even though such a meme may seem trivial, many of my female and non-binary participants expressed their frustration that divisive memes about menstrual pain are negatively impacting their menstrual experiences at school. This was evident in numerous focus groups, including the two different focus groups that are represented in the two conversations below:

FA: I hate it when you say, 'oh, I've got cramps' or 'my cramps are so bad' or when I say I'm on my period and then guys go, 'well, it's the same pain level as when I get kicked in the balls'. I've thought, I'm not comparing myself to you, I'm just saying it hurts. I can't deny what they're saying

¹⁹There was, however, one boy who was very critical of these memes: 'I've seen videos of people trying to get women to see what it's like to be like kicked in the balls, compared to what it's like to having a period [...] It's about having that male competitiveness to have more pain than a woman and be better than a woman because we get it worse or whatever when it's not like you get kicked in the balls without someone doing it to you. You get a period every month regardless of what you want, whether you want it to happen or not. And I think that is just a bit inappropriate really. It's not something that needs to be said or competed against, if you get what I mean?'

because I don't know what it feels like, but the fact that they would instantly interpret it as a competitive thing..."

FB: It's unnecessary to compare.

FC: You always get one boy when you talk about periods that goes, 'oh, but it's not as painful as getting your balls kicked'. It's just so annoying because I just want to tell them that you don't get your balls kicked consecutively every day for a week. So how can that be the equivalent to having period cramps? [...] And they still don't get it, these boys. When was the last time they've got their balls kicked? Quite a long time ago probably.

FD: We get it seven days out of a month, 12 months a year, for, like, the rest of our life.²⁰

These examples support Rosewarne's (2012) theory that young men are internalising negative attitudes towards menstruating women that are based on stereotypes from popular culture and resemble the jokes that Newton criticises for perpetuating 'existing gendered power structures' (2016, p. 40). By suggesting to boys that menstrual pain is insignificant and something about which girls should not complain, these memes are encouraging boys to be unsympathetic towards their classmates who are experiencing menstrual cramps. They are therefore creating a lack of understanding and compassion in the offline space of schools. As the dismissal of menstrual pain is a cultural phenomenon that can also contribute to more serious health and social issues, such as the long diagnostic delay that endometriosis patients often experience, any perpetuation of this discourse is of concern (Seear, 2009; Sims et al., 2021). These 'divisive' memes are therefore not merely a trivial source of Internet humour. If we examine the focus groups through the lens of recent scholarship on pain and menstrual health, we can see that divisive memes are both reinforcing 'the myth of the irrational female' and a societal dismissal of women's pain (Whelan, 2003; King, 2020; Cole et al., 2021). Activists therefore need to think carefully about the discourses in the memes that they share so that they do not inadvertently contradict their aims to destigmatise menstruation and improve societal knowledge. My findings also indicate, however, that realistic, accurate, and humorous memes that are articulated from the

²⁰In another focus group, the girls and non-binary students criticised these memes for encouraging 'boys to make fun of them'. Developing this conversation further, one girl described a video she had seen on TikTok: 'periods are like equivalent to like, what do you call it, contractions? When a woman told a man that, and he was like, "oh that's not even that bad then" '.

perspective of menstruating women or transgender people, may have a positive impact. As one male participant expressed: ‘I’d love to see an educational period meme!’. Indeed, as evidenced by the popularity of memes amongst my participants, memes that use ‘contestive humour’ may be a powerful vehicle for activists to attract the attention of young people as well as educate, or even empower, them (Holmes, 2000).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this chapter indicates that young people still encounter, and are affected by, pejorative representations of menstruation and menstruating women in the media. Resonating with the concerns of the activists who I interviewed, participants of my focus groups also discussed how the media can perpetuate misinformation, stigma, and a narrow view of lived experiences of menstruation. As evident in some of the focus groups, memes, advertisements, and news stories, can negatively impact young people’s offline experiences. This includes feelings of shame for not living up to the expectations of advertisements or the dismissal of menstrual pain. Furthermore, young people can be more vulnerable to absorbing myth and misinformation due to their receiving little information in schools. Since young people are relying on social media to learn about menstruation and the menstrual experiences of others, representations of menstruation in memes and advertisements are not trivial. This reliance on social media is perhaps even more damaging for boys’ knowledge of menstruation because, unless they have the confidence or space to ask their menstruating friends or family members about their experiences, they have no way of understanding how menstruation impacts every life. In turn, as evidenced by my participants’ discussions of the popular comparison between menstrual cramps and kicking testicles, men’s lack of knowledge or pejorative views of menstruation also harm women and other people who menstruate.

Nevertheless, despite the pejorative discourses that can be found in advertisements, memes, and the news media, it is encouraging to observe that young people are also encountering content that normalises menstruation as well as observing that menstruation is becoming a more normal topic of conversation on social media. The influence of online discourses of normalisation and the increased visibility of menstruation in the media was apparent in my participants’ very frequent use of the term ‘normalisation’ (without being prompted) to celebrate the discourses in certain memes. Indeed, since memes are the most common way through

which young people encounter menstruation in the media, they offer an important insight into how young people are shaped by social norms and stereotypes (Rosewarne, 2012). Due to the pervasiveness of period memes, it is humour, rather than explicitly political or public communication (such as by journalists or charities), that is most significantly contributing to both the normalisation of menstruation as well as young people's perceptions of menstrual experience in general. Even though my female and non-binary participants encountered memes that stigmatise menstruating women and people, they also felt represented and validated by other memes. This finding suggests that if memes are realistic and non-stigmatising, they can reduce menstrual stigma and create a sense of solidarity amongst young women and other people who menstruate. To quote one of my participants, this 'new means of communication' is helping young people openly to discuss menstruation and share the physical and emotional aspects of their lived experiences of menstruation. For these reasons, memes are not merely a trivial form of Internet parlance, but they harbour the potential to reduce gender inequalities via promoting open communication about menstruation and depicting health and social issues that should be addressed.

Furthermore, it is encouraging to see that many of my participants viewed the mediation of menstruation through a critical lens. This suggests that young people may be less vulnerable to internalising pejorative discourses from the media than menstrual activists expect. Even though some participants implied that menstrual product advertisements engendered feelings of shame about not meeting societal expectations (such as maintaining exercise levels during menstruation), they all voiced a strong challenge against such discourses. Participants also demonstrated their critical awareness and rejection of media narratives through highlighting that the mainstream media tends to trivialise or stigmatise menstruation, place stories about menstruation in a less visible position, or frame menstruation as a fiscal problem. This lack of coverage has not, however, caused young people to think menstruation is not newsworthy. In fact, they would like to see news about menstruation that amplifies the lived experiences of women and transgender people from diverse ethnic minority groups. There is a market, therefore, for carefully targeted, accurate, and non-stigmatising journalism that draws on lived experiences about menstruation and can reach young people via social media. This perceived 'newsworthiness' of menstruation also reveals young people's desire for knowledge about menstruation, menstrual health, the lived experiences of

others, and related social issues. Menstruation is therefore a way through which menstruating girls and non-binary teenagers can feel a sense of connection to other individuals as well as political or social issues. Hence, by combining some of my participants' views on adverts, memes, and news media, we can see that they are exhibiting a feminist consciousness through their questioning, challenging, or rejection of this content.

This chapter's analysis of young people's interactions with the media therefore indicates that there has been a significant change in attitudes towards menstruation since Newton (2016) conducted her study in 2008. As participants expressed the 'newsworthiness' of menstruation, discussed the normalisation of menstruation on social media, and celebrated the power of humour by women and other menstruators to reduce menstrual stigma, we can see that the feelings of embarrassment and shame that Newton recorded may have eroded. The findings of this chapter therefore suggest that, due to the normalisation of menstruation in the media, there has been more social change since the year of the period than in the 50 years that preceded Newton's study (Newton, 2016). Furthermore, the findings of this chapter have also indicated how activists can further reduce menstrual stigma and improve young people's knowledge about menstruation. As memes are evidentially very popular amongst young people and are a way of communicating 'serious' topics in an easily accessible format, they could be a powerful tool that activists could use to engage young people of all genders. For example, memes could show young people how the symptoms of endometriosis could affect the daily life of women and others who have the condition. Activists must, however, think carefully before sharing memes. They need, for example, to bear in mind that memes should be realistic, avoid pejorative stereotypes, and frame menstruation from the point of view of women and other people who menstruate. The next chapter builds on these findings through a closer examination of the extent to which mediated menstrual activism has influenced young people's knowledge and attitudes towards menstruation as well as exploring how they understand activism.

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The Impact of the Media and the Mediated Menstrual Movement on Young People's Attitudes Towards Activism, Menstruation, and Menstrual Stigma

During the previous chapter's analysis of young people's engagement with social media and news media, it began to emerge that the increased visibility of menstruation in the media has encouraged young people to view it as a normal topic of conversation that need not be surrounded by shame. Furthermore, several participants indicated their awareness of the continued role that menstrual stigma plays in shaping media discourses. Many of them also discussed the importance of further normalisation. The findings in Chap. 4 already suggest that, thanks to young people's encounters with menstruation on social media, the menstrual movement's goal to destigmatise menstruation is beginning to be realised. By examining young people's perceptions of menstruation, the language that they use to discuss it, and their social interactions about menstruation, this chapter takes a more in-depth look at the extent to which menstrual activism and the media have destigmatised menstruation and encouraged more open conversation. This chapter also considers which platforms and what kind of social media accounts are having the largest impact on young people's views of menstruation. This also includes a reflection on their perceptions of who is a menstrual activist and what constitutes menstrual activism. As her focus groups were conducted in schools prior to 'the year of the period' and the ubiquity of social media in young people's daily lives, this chapter draws on Newton's (2016) book as a baseline to examine the

extent to which the mediation of the menstrual movement, as well as content that echoes their aims of destigmatising menstruation, has transformed young people's attitudes towards menstruation.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS ON YOUNG PEOPLE

As this chapter examines young people's perceptions of menstrual activists, it is also important to consider what constitutes an activist. There is little consensus within academic research as to what constitutes an activist or activism. This also includes debates over whether influencers, TikTokers with a moderate following, or even individuals who use social media for awareness-raising can be defined as activists. Traditionally, studies have defined activism as a form of collective action that aims to influence political matters and entities such as elections, policies, and institutions (Desrués, 2012; Norris, 2004; Tarrow, 2022). Smith (2005, p. 5), for example, defines activism as a 'process by which groups of people exert pressure on organizations or other institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions the activists find problematic'. Sociological research on activism also emphasises collective action and collective identities (Pauwels, 2003; Smith, 2005; Snow & McAdam, 2000). Some sociological researchers, however, have broadened their definitions of activism to include counter-discourses or contentious action by ordinary people who are striving to change social issues (Yin & Sun, 2021; Raby et al., 2018). Also offering a broader approach to activism, Blackwood and Lewis define it as a 'shared vision of an alternative future' (2012, p. 88). As some sociological studies have underscored, the act of information sharing and efforts to 'solve problems using communication' can also be characterised as activism (Clark, 2016; Diani, 1992; Chon & Park, 2020, p. 75). Studies on social media activism have therefore emphasised the value of social media as a platform for activism due to its facilitation of knowledge-sharing and the creation of communities (Ma & Zhang, 2022; Miladi, 2016). For example, in Chon and Park's study of social media activism, they provide the following useful definition of social media activism as 'a fundamentally communicative process that involves individuals' communicative actions to collectively solve problems' (2020, p. 75). This definition of activism is therefore one that could encompass the actions of influencers, TikTokers, or individuals with small followings on social media who are adopting a 'communicative' approach to destigmatising menstruation, encouraging their followers to use reusables, or awareness-raising around menstrual inequities. It is important, however, to bear in mind that the 'activism' of

influencers is likely to be funded by brands. Their communicative actions may therefore be rooted in neoliberalism and may not be based on an authentic desire for social change (Thomas & Fowler, 2023). Very few studies have conducted focus groups with young people to examine how their views of activism or feminism have been shaped by influencers (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019). Nevertheless, Silvia Semenzin's study offers a relevant theoretical discussion of how activist-influencers could impact their audiences' perceptions of feminism and empowerment:

Activist-influencers become the expression of the entanglement between neoliberal feminism and platform affordances that encourage self-branding and consumer activities. In so doing, digital feminism reinforces a culture of competition, individual empowerment and depoliticisation, which could be detrimental to feminist solidarity and the urgency of creating shared political agendas to implement feminist policies and push for structural socio-political changes. (2022, p. 113)

If we draw on Semenzin's (2022) research on 'activist-influencers', we can hypothesise that activist-influencers could encourage young people to view products and individual empowerment, rather than structural changes, as solutions to menstrual inequities. These neoliberal discourses could therefore undermine work by activists to encourage collective action that targets structural inequalities (Archer, 2019).

Even though the field of critical menstrual studies has grown significantly in the past few years, there is no previous research on the impact of the menstrual movement on which this chapter can draw. There is, however, a body of research that investigates young people's participation in other online social movements such as those centred on sustainability, poverty, gender equality, and health (Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Knupfer et al., 2023). Some of these studies have investigated the extent to which young people's online engagement in social movements can lead to offline political acts such as voting, boycotts, sit-ins, and marches. In contrast to multiple studies that conclude that online activism, or 'slacktivism', does not lead to offline social change, this small body of literature argues that social media can be an effective gateway to offline activism (Chen et al., 2018; Leyva, 2017; Seelig & Deng, 2022). These studies highlight that there is a correlation between young people's online engagement in social issues and offline participation in political action (Lin et al., 2010; Xenos et al., 2014). One study, which is based on qualitative surveys, indicates

that Generation Z's engagement with digital activism 'has a positive effect on motivating offline' activism (Seelig & Deng, 2022, p. 20). Similarly, participants in Guillard's (2016) study who were exposed to digital feminist activism felt a sense of social justice and wished to conduct offline feminist activism. Another study argues that social media creates 'the kinds of collective experiences that are necessary conditions for successful protest movements' (Bennett, 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2012, p. 303). Taking this idea further, the authors comment on reciprocity of online and offline activism. They note: '[A]ctivism does not confine itself to separate online and offline spheres, but instead online interactions can aid offline forms of citizen participation' (Valenzuela et al., 2012 p. 311). We can therefore see that the relationship between online and offline activism is not solely causal, but it can be fluid, reciprocal, and iterative (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020).

Most of this literature, however, focuses on explicitly political or 'high-effort activism', such as voting, sit-ins, and protests (Bennett, 2007; Knupfer et al., 2023, p. 3; Naderer, 2023; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). Many fewer studies focus on the influence of digital activism on young people's everyday social interactions, their self-esteem, or smaller acts of activism such as consciousness-raising amongst offline networks (Fullam, 2017; Roy et al., 2019). Nevertheless, some studies indicate that digital engagement can lead to young people developing a sense of shared 'citizen values', feelings of collective identity, and a critical consciousness that can lead to small acts of activism (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021, p. 11; De Choudhury et al., 2021). For instance, a study on digital environmental activism demonstrates that young people's engagement with 'greenfluencers' on social media can even inspire those who were not previously interested in the climate crisis to undertake offline environmental activism such as encouraging their friends to be more environmentally conscious (Knupfer et al., 2023). Although their article about health activism is neither explicitly about digital activism nor about young people, John Horton and Peter Kraftl's model of 'implicit activism' is useful for analysing 'modest' acts of advocacy that 'leave little representational trace' and are not overtly political (2009, p. 21). This concept includes gestures, words, and interpersonal conversations that do not create 'too much fuss' but can lead to social and political change (Horton & Kraftl, 2009, p. 11). Since menstrual activists aim to encourage both 'high-effort activism' and inspire behaviours that contribute to the destigmatisation of menstruation, this chapter considers multiple ways in which young people might have been

influenced by, or be contributing towards, this central aim of the menstrual movement (Knupfer et al., 2023, p. 3). As most research on the impact of influencers considers their influence on consumerism, this chapter also contributes to limited existing research that examines the impact of influencers and TikTokers on young people's everyday attitudes and behaviours as well as their conceptualisation of activism (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Harff & Schmuck, 2023). The first section of this chapter, which includes my participants' responses to the question '[H]ave you seen any activism about menstruation in the media?', will therefore explore how Generation Z understands activism and which voices are influencing, or politicising them, with regards to menstruation, menstrual health, and related social issues. It will then be followed by a discussion on the extent to which social media has reduced menstrual stigma amongst young people and, more specifically, how it has impacted the menstrual experiences of young women and others who menstruate.

‘A LOT OF THE CONTENT IS CREATED BY YOUNGER PEOPLE
FOR YOUNGER PEOPLE, SO IT’S A LOT MORE REAL’: YOUNG
PEOPLE’S CONCEPTUALISATION OF MENSTRUAL ACTIVISM

When asked, '[H]ave you seen any activism around menstruation in the media?', almost all female and non-binary participants replied affirmatively. Around half of the male participants also responded 'yes'.¹ All but two of these participants who stated that they had encountered 'menstrual activism' in the media spoke about social, rather than traditional, media such as newspapers or television. When asked to share examples of menstrual activism, only six participants directly mentioned or named non-profit organisations. Five of these participants gave examples of organisations that were tackling period poverty or that had campaigned to remove the 'Tampon Tax'. One girl said, 'Yes, I've seen some of the stuff the charity "Period" has posted [...] on reducing the tax'. Another girl reflected, '[I]n the adverts by charities there are always third world countries that you see and they're asking for you to help them'. Another female participant exclaimed, 'I've seen campaigns [by charities] to try to get donations to bring pads and tampons into schools for people or girls who can't afford them'. Two students from the same private school, who had

¹ Most of the male participants who responded 'yes' were aged 18 or older.

both donated products, named ‘The Red Box Project’ as an example of menstrual activism. Five participants referred to campaigns by brands, including Always, Bodyform, Ohne, and Tampax, as ‘menstrual activism’. These participants referred to advertisements that mentioned that these companies would donate some of their products, or profits, to charities that support women. One girl, for example, stated: ‘[S]ometimes I’ll be walking through [the living room], and my mum and dad are watching TV and there’s an advert that says, “10 per cent of all profits will be donated to a charity”’. In another focus group, a girl answered, ‘Always have their things with period poverty in UK schools’. In a different focus group, a girl tried to remember a campaign by Bodyform: ‘I forgot what it was that Bodyform did? [...] and I can’t think of any more main period brands that are actually period charities?’. We can therefore see that most young people do not envisage menstrual activism as a movement that is led by large charitable organisations which are working together to create political and social change (Smith, 2005). This suggests that young women and others who menstruate may also be unaware of where they can seek support for their menstrual health and wellbeing. Furthermore, the fact that some of the participants perceived menstrual activism as something that is led by brands suggests that their conceptualisation of activism may be influenced by neoliberal discourses that encourage a ‘culture of competition’ and position products and positive thinking as solutions to menstrual inequities (Semenzin, 2022, p. 113). Certainly, this conflation between brands and activism has the potential to undermine the efforts of menstrual activists to politicise young people and educate them about the structural issues that perpetuate menstrual inequities.

Indeed, when asked to give examples of menstrual activism, an overwhelming majority of participants of all genders mentioned influencers, YouTubers, and TikTokers, thereby indicating that their conceptualisation of menstrual activism has been formed through their online engagements with these popular accounts. Discussing her engagement with influencers, one participant said, ‘I’ve seen Zoella’s blog, she does loads of activism around periods’. A male participant, who followed various YouTubers for their ‘study tips’, recalled: ‘YouTubers I watch talk about how to deal with the hormonal stress and everything that comes with it’. Demonstrating the ubiquitous and memorable nature of ‘influencer-activism’, many participants were able to recall the names of influencers who speak about menstruation on TikTok, YouTube, and/or Instagram (Semenzin, 2022,

p. 113).² Indeed, across all the focus groups, more than 15 influencers were mentioned by name. For example, when talking about campaigns to end the ‘Tampon Tax’, one participant said: ‘Bella Thorne [...] I think she had tampons in the background [of her post]. Clearly, she was just trying to get the message across’. It is important to note that most of the ‘influencer-activists’ that my participants mentioned, such as Bella Thorne and Ashley Graham, are known as ‘body positive’ influencers. Their discussions about menstruation are part of their ‘body positive’ discourses. Often whilst promoting beauty products or clothes that can sculpt the body into a societally ‘acceptable image’, ‘body positive’ influencers often seek to ‘normalise’ or celebrate ‘imperfections’ such as cellulite, stretch marks, scars, back rolls, and bloating (Brathwaite & DeAndrea, 2022; Harriger et al., 2023). This normalisation and celebration is aimed at improving audiences’ self-esteem and confidence. Body positive discourses therefore frame ‘self-empowerment’, which is made possible via the adoption of a more positive attitude and the purchase of products, as a feminist solution to societal norms and expectations (Baer, 2016; Vivienne, 2020). Taking Malin Andersson as an example, one participant said: ‘Malin from Love Island a couple of years ago, she’s been posting loads of stuff about body positivity, periods and things like that’. If we examine Malin Andersson’s Instagram page, which combines her promotion of clothing brands with photographs of her stretchmarks and other ‘bodily imperfections’, we can see that she is a typical ‘body positive’ influencer (Archer, 2019). As my participants’ understanding of menstrual activism is defined by their engagement with body positive influencers, we can argue that their views of menstrual activism are likely to have been shaped by neoliberal ideas of empowerment as an individual endeavour. These findings therefore indicate that young people’s perceptions of menstrual activism have been more strongly influenced by the neoliberal discourses of ‘activist-influencers’ than by organisations that are tackling structural inequalities (Semenzin, 2022, p. 113).

Furthermore, the fact that most of the posts about menstruation that participants see from ‘activist-influencers’ are only a small part of their body positive campaigns or other content also suggests that my

²Influencers and celebrities who were mentioned by participants included: Jameela Jamil, Hannah Whitten, Molly Mae, Chrissy Teigen, Bella Thorne, Zoe Sugg (Zoella), Ashley Graham, Emma Chamberlain, Ruby Red, Lucy Moon, Michelle Elman, and Malin Andersson.

participants' everyday interactions with social media have not given them the impression that menstrual activism is a cohesive movement in its own right (Semenzin, 2022). Providing more explicit evidence that young people view menstrual activism as an individual and sporadic act, rather than a cohesive and long-term form of collective action, some participants commented directly on the fragmented nature of menstrual activism. This view was particularly apparent in the following conversation:

FA: I think there's been attempts of a movement in that certain people are doing a lot themselves, but I don't think enough people are with them on that.

FB: Yeah, I don't think it's a big thing.

FA: It's just one person making an effort and everybody else ...

FB: I don't think that can really be classified as a movement, it's just someone's personal efforts.

FA: And a few people join in, but not enough to *actually* make a solid difference.³

Indicating their understanding that collective action is vital for the success of a movement, the participants in this focus group believed that individual efforts to inspire collective action on a large scale had not yet been successful. Further indicating that participants believed that a coherent menstrual movement is yet to emerge, other participants highlighted the fleeting nature of menstrual activism through commenting that its visibility on their feeds is usually dependent on which topics are trending. For instance, one girl stated, '[I]t becomes a trend, but it isn't taken seriously', whilst a boy claimed that he had only seen one example of online menstrual activism because 'it was trending one day'. Drawing together all these comments, we can see that my participants view the menstrual movement as something fragmented, sporadic, and transient. Hence, for these young people, menstrual activism is something that is conducted by individuals on an ad-hoc basis rather than an organised long-term collective movement that strives for social or political changes.

Nevertheless, when asked about menstrual activism, many of the female and non-binary participants enthusiastically described 'feminist accounts' that post about menstruation, menstrual health, and related social issues. This indicated their perception of menstrual activism as an important, but

³ Italics indicate the participant's own emphasis.

small, part of a wider online feminist movement. When using the term ‘feminist accounts’ participants were referring to any social media account that explicitly stated that its purpose was ‘feminist’ and that engaged with a variety of feminist issues rather than, for example, only focussing on body positivity. These accounts were run by either an influencer or a group of anonymous people who shared ‘feminist’ content from other accounts. One girl, for example, mentioned that she did not know of any accounts that were dedicated to menstruation, but that she had encountered menstrual activism via feminist accounts: ‘[T]here’s a lot of feminists who are trying to promote acceptance and stuff, but not specifically [focussed on] periods’. Another indicated that feminist accounts provide the only social media posts that she sees about menstruation: ‘[I]t’s mentioned a lot on Instagram on feminist accounts, but I tend to not see it anywhere else’. Indicating the popularity of these so-called feminist accounts amongst young people, 16 of the female and non-binary participants mentioned that they followed these accounts or frequently came across their posts. Some of these participants gave the example of an account on Instagram that is simply named ‘Feminist’, which has shared posts about menstruation amongst posts about female empowerment, successful women entrepreneurs, and feminist activism. Discussing the increased visibility of menstruation on feminist accounts in recent years, one participant expressed: ‘I follow some feminist accounts and they’re always advocating a positive spread of periods’. Another participant remembered a feminist account that posted ‘a little animation that said [menstruation] should be normalised’. In another focus group, two participants mentioned that they followed ‘Refinery 29’ for its ‘feminist content’. One of the girls said: ‘[T]heir Snapchat story has a lot of very open like female-forward discussions. And they have an email newsletter—they talk about periods quite a lot on there’. During a conversation about feminist accounts in a different focus group, one participant declared: ‘I follow this self-love account [...] because it’s all about acceptance and self-acceptance, it does touch on periods’. Other participants emphasised their active engagement with these accounts, such as through sharing and commenting on their posts: ‘I love the feminist pages that I follow [...] they talk about removing stigmas. It’s stuff you can share. Occasionally, I might share the odd post on my story if I think it is something important’. As these findings indicate, feminist accounts are providing young people with an accessible and engaging introduction to one of the central aims of the menstrual movement: destigmatising menstruation (Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). Since

some of the participants happily shared posts that discussed menstrual stigma and others praised feminist accounts for promoting ‘period positivity’, this indicates that the messages of the menstrual movement are filtering through these accounts and are encouraging their young audience to view menstruation as a topic that should be destigmatised and openly discussed.

Besides indicating that feminist accounts are an accessible way to raise awareness of menstrual stigma and the importance of tackling it amongst girls and young non-binary people, my participants’ responses also revealed that they embrace feminism as a movement, ideology, and identity. One girl declared that she ‘actively’ followed feminist pages because she was ‘very interested’ in feminism. Another expressed that she followed feminist pages because she wants to learn about women’s activism, ‘female entrepreneurs’, and ‘women’s health’. Illustrating that her engagement with feminist accounts and their posts about menstruation validated and nurtured her feminist consciousness, another participant explained that ‘feminist accounts’ had ‘strengthen[ed]’ her feminist ideas. When comparing my findings with studies that explored young people’s attitudes towards feminism and women’s bodies in previous generations, we can understand the significant nature of my ‘Gen Z’ participants’ positive views of feminism, their self-identification as feminists, and their confidence in talking about menstruation as a feminist subject (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016; Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Newton, 2016). Indeed, my findings echo limited emerging research that demonstrates that, because of the visibility of feminism on social media, Generation Z is far more open about being feminist than previous generations were when they were teenagers (Mori et al., 2023; Jackson, 2018; Turley & Fisher, 2018). If we take Semona Pillay’s study of Generation Z as an example, most of her participants had recently ‘started regarding themselves as feminists [...] which they attributed to the growing social acceptance of feminism and its visibility on social media’ (2020, pp. 12–13). She adds: ‘[P]articipants suggested that social media made it easier to be vocal and open about their views on feminism, as they discovered communities among other feminists who shared the same values and beliefs’ (2020, p. 13). Hence, as my findings and the limited existing research on Generation Z suggest, there exists a captive audience of young people which would be receptive to the menstrual movement because these young people view feminism in a positive light, celebrate discourses that challenge normative expectations around women’s bodies, and want to learn more about empowerment.

Since this audience is already engaging with content about menstruation via ‘feminist accounts’ and body positive influencers, activists in the menstrual movement may easily be able to reach these young people via collaborating with these types of accounts.

Finally, when asked about menstrual activism that they encounter on social media, a handful of my participants mentioned friends, friends of friends, TikTok accounts with a ‘small following’, or more distant acquaintances.⁴ This also included my male participants, such as one young man who had a friend who spoke about her endometriosis on social media. My participants of all genders, who often mentioned that their narrow menstrual education in school only included the ‘biological’ aspects of menstruation, viewed these accounts as a very valuable way of learning about a diversity of menstrual experiences, hearing narratives to which they can relate, and receiving a more in-depth menstrual education than they are offered at school. As one girl emphatically declared, ‘I’m sick of not having enough information about periods!’ Describing these accounts as a way of filling gaps in formal education, another young woman said: ‘I’ve got family friends who have older siblings, and they have friends who have started pages on Instagram about their experiences [of endometriosis]. So, I’ve learnt a lot from those’. Illustrating her view that sharing experiences of menstruation is a form of activism, another young woman praised ‘the good informational videos that sometimes pop up’ on TikTok. She explained that these videos offer a more in-depth and ‘personal’ view of menstruation than she learned about in school:

You can just film it yourself. So, it’s just women actually being like, “this was my really bad period story and talking about actual facts and statistics and just going in depth”. Your, “For You” page is tailored to you, so I see stuff that, as a woman, is good for me to watch.

Thus, we can see that young women, men, and non-binary people value these personal narratives about menstruation on social media because they fill a gap in their formal menstrual education which is usually neither considered lived experience nor offered information about menstrual health (including conditions such as endometriosis).

⁴To describe one of these ‘small accounts’ one participant said, ‘They have quite small platforms, maybe just 600 followers. But people do repost their posts a lot’.

Many girls and non-binary participants emphasised the power of posts by smaller accounts for being ‘relatable’ and ‘realistic’. As one participant underscored, TikTok videos and Instagram reels in which young women and trans people share their menstrual experiences offer relatability and realism that is absent from the mainstream media: ‘[I]t’s different because a lot of the content is created by younger people for younger people, so it’s a lot more real’. This response was particularly indicative of my participants’ desires to learn about menstruation, menstrual health, and menstrual experiences from people of a similar age. Other participants gave examples of ‘social experiments’ on TikTok and Instagram as a form of activism because these experiments revealed the ubiquitous and absurd nature of menstrual stigma. In a mixed gender focus group, for example, a male and female participant remembered viewing a video by a girl on TikTok who wanted to see how the platform would respond to menstrual blood. The female participant explained:

[T]his girl posted this video of blood, and it was nothing ... no one cared, and then as soon as she put it on a pad [...], the video got blocked and taken down immediately by TikTok. It was this whole thing—she tried to raise awareness about how hypocritical that is.

This response indicates that any act that challenges the deep-seated structural issue of menstrual stigma, which has contributed both to limited formal menstrual education and to menstrual shame in Great Britain, is a form of activism (Bowen-Viner et al., 2022; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2020). As more famously evidenced by Rupi Kaur’s public criticism of Instagram for removing her photograph of menstrual blood on her sheets, any public representation of menstrual blood can contribute towards revealing and dismantling menstrual stigma (McHugh, 2020). Hence, for the young people in these focus groups, youth-led discussions about menstruation that are relatable, realistic, and informative are an important form of menstrual activism because they offer a personal, in-depth, diverse view of menstruation that is not available to them in mainstream education. Thus, for these young people, any act of providing menstrual education, openly discussing menstruation, depicting menstrual products in everyday settings, or showcasing diverse experiences is a form of menstrual activism.

Participants’ views that images or open discussions about menstruation on social media and in the news can lead to social change were also

reflected in discussions about two of the elicitation materials. The newspaper article about Kiran Gandhi running the London Marathon whilst free bleeding opened conversations about menstruation, menstrual stigma, and women's sport, whilst also encouraging participants to think critically about societal norms and their own internalisations of these norms. When asked why they thought she decided to free bleed during the marathon, most participants thought that she was aiming to reduce menstrual stigma. After identifying this aim, many participants emphasised that menstruation is 'normal' and 'natural' and that it should not be something about which people should feel ashamed.⁵ Explaining Kiran Gandhi's message, a boy said, '[I]t's a normal thing. No point keeping it a secret'. Another boy declared, '[I]t's a natural thing', and a girl stated, '[S]he's saying not to be embarrassed about periods or leaking'. Another girl summarised Gandhi's message as follows: '[I]t's natural. As women, we are confined to hygiene and femininity constraints that free bleeding doesn't form part of—it's outside that. So, it's considered disgusting, when it's normal'. Echoing this, one girl argued that Gandhi's free bleeding 'brings attention to something you are not supposed to bring attention to' and added that 'women are just expected to not tell anyone and act normal. It is normal, but you don't feel great'. The image also engendered participants to question their own internalised menstrual stigma. This was evident in their reflections on why they felt 'shocked' or 'repelled' by a photograph of menstrual blood. For instance, one girl mused, 'I think my immediate response, sadly, was that it is a bit icky. I think that's based on all the media we see about women being unhygienic on their periods'. Another girl expressed, 'My immediate internal reaction is that it just seems unnecessary and repellent. But then, thinking about it more, I don't really have a problem with what she's doing. It's just unusual to see'. By encouraging them to question societal expectations to conceal menstruation and their own feelings of embarrassment, it was therefore apparent that, within the context of the focus groups, the image of Gandhi was already influencing the participants' attitudes towards menstruation. Indeed, one participant noticed this change and commented that this image of Gandhi would likely have the same impact elsewhere. Indicating the power of Gandhi's activism to

⁵As the focus material included only a photograph and the headline 'This Woman ran the London Marathon on her Period without a Tampon', participants were left to infer the reasons behind Gandhi's choice. After participants guessed why she was free bleeding, they were then told that Gandhi hoped to both challenge stigma and raise awareness of period poverty.

contribute to social change, a non-binary participant expressed: ‘She’s changing the way that other people might see periods and creating a discussion around it. [...] Discussion leads to difference, eventually’. It is important to note, however, that not all initial responses to Gandhi’s act of free bleeding were positive. One boy, for example, said, ‘[T]hat’s a bit grim’, whilst another girl stated, ‘I understand what she’s trying to do but it is a bit gross’. Others also believed that any representation of blood was inappropriate because it could be ‘triggering’. Nevertheless, when her act was framed as raising awareness of period poverty, almost all of those who initially responded negatively expressed a more positive comprehension of Gandhi’s message. For instance, one young woman expressed, ‘[W]hen you know it is about period poverty, you look at it differently, you wouldn’t be disgusted at her doing that, you’re disgusted that people can’t afford those products’. Although these responses arguably indicate some internalised stigma, they also suggest that some young people view free bleeding as an effective form of activism if it is for raising awareness of social inequalities.

Once again indicating the power of images about menstruation, similar themes emerged in responses to the #JustATampon and #LiveTweetYourPeriod campaigns. Almost all participants, including the boys, confidently declared that the aim of these campaigns was to ‘normalise periods’ and ‘reduce the stigma’. One boy, for example, stated, ‘[I]t’s good to raise awareness and not be shy of the topic [...] it’s just a normal thing that happens to most women’. The campaign also prompted some participants to question the menstrual concealment imperative (Wood, 2020). For example, one young woman expressed, ‘Why is it that we don’t talk about it?’, to which another girl replied, ‘[I]t’s not a couple of people that have to use [menstrual products], it’s literally more than 50% of the population’. For many participants, the most impactful element of the #JustATampon were the photographs of people holding tampons. A girl expressed,

[I]t’s something that you should be able to pull out of your bag without having to be afraid of, I have a tampon in my hand kind of situation. In my head it’s kind of similar to, I don’t know, holding up a toilet roll or something like that. I think that’s how it should be seen, because it’s just a normal bathroom product that a lot of people have to use.

Encapsulating the power of visual representations, one young woman expressed with enthusiasm, ‘I think visual things are *really important*. Obviously, social media is great for connecting with so many young people. [...] To *actually* see a tampon is brilliant’. Others believed the simple hashtag would be effective in destigmatising menstruation. According to one young woman, ‘The hashtag says, this is nothing special, a tampon shouldn’t be “ooooooooo, it is a tampon, shhhhhhhh!”’. We can walk around with it, it is fine, no need to hide it up your sleeve!’. Hence, as the responses to these elicitation materials demonstrate, visual representations of menstrual blood and menstrual products can have the power to reduce menstrual stigma via encouraging discussion and inspiring critical reflection.

Furthermore, the photograph of Gandhi’s activism and the two hashtag campaigns not only engendered critical reflection about ‘the concealment imperative’ but also created a sense of solidarity amongst the participants and other women (Wood, 2020). The young women and non-binary participants believed that #LiveTweetYourPeriod was a ‘welcoming’ way to promote solidarity amongst young people who menstruate and reassure them that they are not alone in their experiences.⁶ Expressing the power of hashtags to foster solidarity and self-confidence, one young woman exclaimed, ‘With hashtags you find a community of people that you relate to, so it’s just very easy to talk to other people within that community’. This was echoed by a participant in another focus group who stated, ‘It can connect people who are in a similar situation, you’re not alone!’. Another girl explained, ‘[I]t would give people something to relate to. [I]f you feel insecure about bloating on your period, knowing that other women go through the same thing, helps you think it’s just natural’. Building on these ideas further, a young woman discussed the value of campaigns such as #LiveTweetYourPeriod for girls who have recently reached menarche and have no one in their offline lives with whom they feel they can share their menstrual experiences:

It unites women and makes them feel free to bond over the fact that we all have periods. I always think about if a young girl lives in a household, say

⁶The word ‘welcoming’ is taken from the following quote by a young woman in this study: ‘If everyone posted their experience, and then if someone says something that happens to them, they might think it’s out of the ordinary or something is wrong. But then someone else might relate to them and then they don’t feel by themselves. It’s welcoming, those are the type of people that you could speak to about it’.

they don't have a mum present, they might not have any female representation, they might feel a bit alienated and not actually sure what to do when it comes to their periods. So, knowing that other women have them is always a good thing. It makes them want to share their experiences of it.

The Kiran Gandhi elicitation material also inspired girls and non-binary participants to feel more confident about their own menstrual bleeding. Participants described Gandhi's message as 'empowering' and 'inspiring' and believed that it would have the same impact on others. For example, a girl expressed, '[I]t just shows that you should be more confident about yourself when you're on your period, you shouldn't feel so insecure about what people are seeing or how you look. Just do what you enjoy!' Another young woman articulated, '[T]his is really empowering for women. The runner is covered in blood, and it doesn't bother her. That's cool. She is saying it's natural. She asks, "why is this taboo?" and "why should this be taboo?"'. My analysis of these elicitation materials therefore highlights the value of simple acts of menstrual activism that defy the 'menstrual concealment imperative' and create a sense of collective identity (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021; Wood, 2020). By rendering menstruation more visible, these small acts create conversation, spark critical reflection, foster solidarity, and inspire confidence. Thus, activism, such as Gandhi's, and hashtag campaigns, such as #LiveTweetYourPeriod or #JustATampon, contribute to social change that benefits women and others who menstruate.

Illustrating that Gandhi's efforts to tackle menstrual stigma are even more powerful due to their being expressed whilst she is engaging in a sporting activity, one girl exclaimed, 'Even running a marathon in the first place is pretty impressive, but the fact that she can do that while highlighting the topic, which would take a lot of confidence and courage to do, impresses me a hell of a lot!'. Indeed, other participants' responses indicated that mediations of menstruating women exercising could encourage women and other people who menstruate to participate in sport and feel more confident when doing so. For instance, one girl explained that the image led her to question why she is so fearful of leaking whilst playing hockey: 'When I've been playing hockey and I am on my period, I'm always asking my friend, "Have I bled through?" [...] So maybe I shouldn't be worried so much if this woman can do that'. Another girl stated,

I'm always stressed out when I've got my pads and stuff, if they've curled up and then you can see the lining and stuff through my leggings. I think she's

trying to say that you can do whatever you want on your period as long as you're enjoying yourself and doing something you think is worthwhile. You don't need to let your period hold you back! Don't let panty lines from your pad or anything restrict you!

As these responses suggest, media coverage of women menstruating whilst exercising could encourage women and others who menstruate to participate in sport and to feel more confident whilst doing so. This finding therefore shows the value of more recent mediations of menstruation in sport. For example, in 2023, the mainstream media reported the decision to change the shorts of the England women's football team from light to dark shorts so that the footballers feel more confident to play whilst menstruating (Pinel et al., 2022).⁷ As studies have demonstrated, it is common for girls to stop participating in sport after puberty (Harvey et al., 2020; Zipp et al., 2022). Hence, my participants' responses to Gandhi suggest that one way of reversing this trend is via media representations of menstruating women taking part in sport.

It is also very important to note that the elicitation material of Gandhi raised questions about the lack of mainstream media representation of menstrual activists, as well as activists more generally, from ethnic minority backgrounds (Montagno et al., 2021). The reactions of participants from ethnic minority backgrounds, which were some of the most enthusiastic responses to Gandhi's activism from across all focus groups, illustrated that contributions by activists of colour are often overlooked in the mainstream media. Male and female participants from ethnic minority groups expressed surprise, pride, and excitement when they noticed that Gandhi is a woman of colour. As one Black young woman commented, '[I]t's great to see a woman of colour involved in activism'. A young man who identified as mixed race expressed, 'It's great that she is normalizing this for all ethnicities'. Indeed, almost all South Asian girls who saw this image of Gandhi felt 'inspired' or 'happy' to see it. One young South Asian woman referred to her as 'a Queen!', another referred to her as 'an absolute legend', whilst another celebrated her for taking 'a step [...] in the right direction'. The elicitation material sparked two South Asian

⁷ See, for example, Taylor, L. (2023, April 3). 'England Lionesses unveil new kit with blue shorts amid player period concerns'. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2023/apr/03/england-lionesses-new-kit-blue-shorts-player-period-concerns>

participants to reflect on their own menstrual experiences. For example, one of these young women explained:

I just love that she's also a woman of colour because I just find that really inspiring. Because especially in Asian households, from personal experience, there can be so much stigma attached to being on your period. And if you're religious too, like in my house, I'm not allowed in the prayer room if I'm on my period. And at my cousin's wedding, I wasn't allowed to actually touch my cousin's clothes or anything. It was superstitious stuff. So, to be an Asian woman and to do that is really inspiring for a lot of us, I think, it's really cool.

Due to her understanding of the cultural barriers that Gandhi had to overcome to run the marathon whilst free bleeding, this elicitation material was very relatable and meaningful to this young woman. Thus, my findings demonstrate that including activists of colour in media coverage can have a profound impact on young people from ethnic minority groups. Mediating the activism of women of colour, such as Gandhi, not only validates the efforts and achievements of women from ethnic minority groups but also serves as a powerful means to raise awareness of, and perhaps challenge stereotypes about, their experiences (De Choudhury et al., 2021). This coverage also has the potential to inspire young people from ethnic minority backgrounds to undertake activism that would lead to positive social change in their communities.

Not only did the elicitation materials underscore the importance of ensuring that activists from ethnic minority backgrounds are visible in the menstrual movement, but they also underscored that youth-led menstrual activism is far more likely to engage young people than campaigns that do not centre the voices and experiences of young people. The value of youth-led activism was particularly evident in participants' responses to the elicitation material about Amika George who was a teenager when she began the 'Free Periods' campaign. A young woman and non-binary participant engaged in the following conversation about Amika George

NB: There is an amount of bravery to it. Especially because when you're a teenager, you're quite focussed on how other people see you. So, for her to break the stigma around menstruation, something she is living, it's commendable.

F: It's extremely brave, even for an adult, never mind a teenager. [...] I can imagine the online hate from people. I admire the grit it took to go all

the way. We have to be grateful because if it weren't for people like her, we wouldn't be able to be how we are in society now.

A young woman in another group emphasised the importance of youth-led activism by illustrating that Generation Z prefer to learn about menstruation from people their own age because they are less imbued by menstrual stigma than older adults. She added:

I think women who are older than us treat it in the same way as men and boys do. Even though they have periods, they tell you not to talk about it outside. I think it's good that teenagers are having more of a voice, participating in activism and making change.

These findings, which indicate that Generation Z responds best to menstrual activism that is youth-led, therefore echo limited existing scholarship about youth-led activism in areas such as climate justice and social justice (Dodson & Papoutsaki, 2017; Jmal & Ladisch, 2022). Nevertheless, this research also raised concerns about burnout within Generation Z. Although they applauded George's hard work, participants criticised older generations, including activists and government officials, for not effectively tackling menstrual inequities alongside young people or supporting young people in doing so. One girl, for instance, questioned, '[W]hy aren't we allowed to be kids? Why do we have to grow up quicker because the older generations can't sort out the problems themselves?'. Two other girls stated, '[T]hey're throwing young people under the bus', and 'they sweep it under the rug'. Another young woman exclaimed, 'Why is everyone in parliament so unsympathetic to what teenagers want and we have to force it ourselves? This girl probably had to sacrifice time that she could have spent doing revision or having a social life'. Another girl expressed, '[I]t's impressive what that girl did, but she shouldn't have needed to do it in the first place'. Hence, my participants demonstrate that youth-led activism is only of benefit to young people if it is adequately recognised and supported by older generations. These findings therefore have implications for the current menstrual movement. They indicate that if their campaigns amplify and centre the voices of young people, they are more likely to influence young audiences. Nevertheless, it is vital that organisations support these young people effectively by ensuring that they are not overburdened and are adequately rewarded for their time.

The participants' responses to the elicitation materials also raised questions about how activists can engage boys and men. It became evident during the focus groups that men would be more likely to engage in menstrual activism if it is framed within a context to which they could relate and if male allies are visible in the mediation of the menstrual movement. Many of the female participants assumed that men would react negatively to Gandhi's activism. For example, one young woman explained, 'I can see boys being, like, "ugh, why would you do that?" It's generalising, but, as girls, we think a lot about what boys think of girls' issues. I don't think young boys will see this picture and understand it. They won't know there is a reason behind what she is doing'. Three other girls expressed: '[M]y immediate response was not great, I don't think men would have reacted any differently', 'If anything, [men] would have probably been like "ergh what's she doing? keep that to yourself!"', and '[men] would all be saying words to the effect of, she's undesirable because she's done this'. However, although some male participants initially disapproved of her choice to free bleed because they found it to be too affrontive, the fact that she was menstruating whilst running a marathon was well received by five male participants. As these young men viewed completing a marathon as an impressive feat, this familiar sporting context within which Gandhi's activism was situated rendered her message more impactful and inspiring. For example, one young man stated:

[W]hen you think of girls and women on their period, you think of a stereotype, you think of complaining about pains, going through a lot, and the fact that she's ran a marathon (which is one of the hardest things to do) while being on her period is inspiring.

Another boy uttered, 'Well done to her! It's enough to run a marathon and it's without any other kind of hindrance, so it's a very good achievement'. After listening to the girls in his focus group express admiration at Gandhi for running whilst potentially experiencing menstrual cramps, another young man expressed, 'I didn't realise how much of an achievement this would have been'. The impactful nature of framing menstrual activist messages within a context to which boys and men can relate was also evident in how male participants responded to the elicitation material about Amika George's campaign for free menstrual products in schools. For many of the boys, the 'key takeaway' from this elicitation material was the fact that some girls frequently miss school due to their not being able

to afford menstrual products or due to their suffering debilitating menstrual symptoms. This framing of menstruation within the familiar context of school encouraged male participants to respond to this elicitation material with interest and compassion. For instance, one young man said, ‘I knew that sometimes girls don’t come in for the day, but I didn’t really think much about why until now’. Others stated, ‘[I]t raises awareness of the actual seriousness of having periods—it can mean a day off school’, ‘I didn’t know about this, I feel like I’ve learned something really important today’, and ‘I’ve now realised how serious this is. The statistics are way more drastic than I expected’. As these responses show, by framing period poverty and menstrual symptoms within the familiar context of school absenteeism, boys were effectively engaged in menstrual activism about social inequalities. These elicitation materials therefore highlighted that, in order that the menstrual movement can effectively raise awareness of menstrual inequities amongst male audiences, they must frame their messages or aims within contexts to which men can relate.

The importance of media representations of male allies or activists within campaigns to tackle menstrual inequities also emerged in participants’ responses to the elicitation materials. The focus material about the #JustATampon campaign, which included photographs of celebrities and other individuals holding tampons, engendered conversations about how to raise awareness of menstrual inequities amongst men and encourage them to be allies. Almost all male, female, and non-binary participants responded with enthusiasm to the photograph of journalist Jon Snow holding a tampon. For the male participants, seeing Jon Snow holding a tampon encouraged them to see menstrual inequities as an issue with which men should be engaged. One young man, for example, commented, ‘Really good to see men are supporting this. Jon Snow is famous and people will see what he is doing. Great to see that men are involved and see this is an important issue. More men should support the period movement’. In a different focus group, a boy uttered, ‘Some men will look at [Jon Snow] and think, hey, I can relate to this’. For the girls and non-binary participants, seeing a man involved in the menstrual movement was very meaningful. Illustrating that the visibility of men in the menstrual movement indicates that anyone, regardless of gender, has the power to reduce menstrual stigma, one young woman articulated:

I really like that the man’s holding a tampon because like, he’s quite an elderly man. Usually you think in that generation, there’d be so much

stigma around it, and you'd think they'd be quite reserved. But the fact that he's involved I think is really, really, good because it shows that anyone can help break down the stigma around periods.

Indeed, this sentiment was echoed by other participants who highlighted that they were impressed that someone of Jon Snow's generation was involved in a social media campaign about menstruation. For instance, a girl expressed, 'I'm a bit shocked with Jon Snow posting about it but I'm nice shocked, like, "oh, that's cool". It's quite nice to see an old white man doing it'. Another girl commented, 'I feel like it would have been a taboo for his generation'. Participants expressed that, without the inclusion of male allies such as Jon Snow, men would likely have ignored this campaign. For example, one girl stated that it is 'helpful to have a man holding [a tampon] because men listen to men more than they listen to women'. Another young woman shared the following view of the campaign:

I like it. I like that they included men. I feel like sometimes men feel that periods are just exclusive to women, that only we talk about it. But anybody can talk about it, it should just be in general conversation. Getting male celebrities to do that as well really destigmatises it. It's so good.

Concurring with this statement, a girl responded, '[Y]eah. That one man makes it seem like it could be normal'. Arguing that Jon Snow's participation could reduce menstrual stigma, another girl stated, 'Jon Snow is holding it without the packet as well, so he's not hiding anything, which I think is quite an important message'. Celebrating Jon Snow's involvement, another young woman argued that, to engage male audiences, other campaigns about menstrual inequities need to ensure that 'influential men get involved'. Nevertheless, the importance that male allies appear genuinely interested in taking part in menstrual activism was underscored by some participants who thought that Jon Snow looked 'uncomfortable'. For instance, one boy expressed, 'It looks like a PR campaign to make him look better as a person more than ... I don't know, he doesn't look the most interested really. It looks like it's been placed in his hand by a PR representative'. In a different focus group, a girl stated, 'I feel like he's just doing it to look good, or else you'd be more comfortable about it'. My findings therefore indicate that the mediation of male activists or allies is important, and perhaps necessary, for engaging men in discussions about

menstruation and menstrual inequities. Furthermore, the inclusion of male allies demonstrates how male audiences can reduce menstrual stigma and support women and others who menstruate. The visibility of men in the menstrual movement is also important for women and others who menstruate because it is more powerful in reducing menstrual stigma than campaigns that only include women. Furthermore, since these mediations of male allies can reduce the embarrassment boys and men feel about menstruation, this could have a positive knock-on effect for women and others who menstruate because it is easier for them to discuss menstruation in mixed gender settings if men are also at ease. These responses from participants of all genders therefore indicate that, without visible male allies or activists, the menstrual movement is unlikely effective to reduce menstrual stigma and other menstrual inequities across British society. Thus, collaborations with male allies, as long as they appear to be authentic, could provide a way significantly to improve the impact of the menstrual movement on young people of all genders.

My findings therefore suggest that, even though most young people are unaware that there is an organised menstrual movement, they are, however, aware that influencers and other individuals are using social media to advocate for women and other menstruating people. For my participants, the everyday act of talking about menstruation on social media is a form of menstrual activism. Influencers, TikTokers, YouTubers, and other individuals on social media who provide menstrual education reflect on the diversity of menstrual experience, talk in a personable and relatable way, or question the ‘menstrual concealment imperative’ are therefore, in the eyes of my Gen Z participants, menstrual activists (Wood, 2020). Hence, my participants view talking about menstruation and sharing knowledge about menstrual health as forms of activism in themselves. Even though some of my participants view these acts of menstrual advocacy as fragmented, sporadic, and transient, it is important to note that a significant number of participants could remember the messages of these everyday acts of activism, as well as how these messages made them feel. This suggests that, cumulatively, these small acts of everyday online activism are helping young women and others who menstruate to feel less alone and better informed. Although young people’s lack of awareness about the existence of a cohesive or organised menstrual movement may be disheartening to the participants who were interviewed in Chaps. 2 and 3 of this book, this fact does not necessarily prevent the messages of the menstrual movement from reaching young people. Indeed, as it has already begun to

emerge in this section, teenagers in Great Britain are aware of, and very receptive of, some of the ideas, beliefs, and aims that characterise the menstrual movement. This is evident in the value that they ascribe to open communication about menstruation and menstrual education. In addition, many of my participants valued the sense of connection and collective identity that is created by those who share their menstrual experiences on social media. My participants' interest in learning about the diverse nature of menstrual experiences also indicates an awareness and appreciation for intersectional approaches to menstruation. Furthermore, this section also gives some important insights into how the menstrual movement could more effectively engage with young people. This includes increasing the visibility of menstrual activists of colour and male allies, ensuring that activism is youth-led but not to the expense of young people, and framing menstrual activism within contexts to which men can relate. By examining the extent to which the mediation of menstruation has reduced menstrual stigma amongst young people, the next section of this chapter provides a more in-depth exploration of the extent to which one of the central aims of the menstrual movement has been realised.

‘ONCE YOU’RE FREE TO TALK ABOUT IT, IT WON’T BE SEEN
AS AN AWKWARD TOPIC’: THE NORMALISATION
AND DESTIGMATISATION OF MENSTRUATION

As discussed in Chap. 2 of this book, most menstrual activists, whether their main aim is to encourage open conversation about menstruation or to raise awareness of another aspect of menstrual experience, try to reduce menstrual stigma and the feelings of shame that girls and other people who menstruate can experience. Menstrual activists, including those who were interviewed for this book, raise awareness of the negative impact of menstrual stigma (Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). Girls and non-binary focus group participants demonstrated their awareness of menstrual stigma and its impact on their own and other people's menstrual experiences through speaking about 'taboos', their own feelings of embarrassment around leaking, and a culture of concealment around menstruation (Houppert, 2000). One non-binary student summarised these points by saying, '[P]eople treat it as a bit of a taboo. They tend to hide it'. In a different focus group, a girl expressed, '[A]s women, we are confined to hygiene and femininity constraints that free-bleeding is not a

part of—it's outside [these constraints] and so it is considered disgusting, when it's normal'. Although perceptions of menstruation as 'gross' or 'unhygienic' were extremely uncommon within the focus groups, and most participants who experienced internalised menstrual stigma were very critical of it, two female students expressed a disgust towards menstruation. One, for example, said, '[I]t's a disgusting topic. I don't really talk about it' and the other referred to menstruation as 'gross'. Furthermore, even in participants who were very critical of their internalised menstrual shame or embarrassment, behaviours of self-surveillance, anxieties about leaking, and a reluctance to discuss menstruation with men were still common. For instance, one young woman expressed, 'I talk about it to my mum but not to my family or any other boys. I wouldn't mention it in a mixed group ever'. As exams are usually longer than lessons, they were a particular concern to students. One girl explained:

You don't want to sit there as well for two hours in an exam whilst you're on your period because you end up thinking, "am I going to leak?" I need to focus on my exam but am I going to leak and leave a mark on the chair? I constantly worried about that during my exams.

This was echoed by a young woman in another focus group who said, '[I]t is so hard to concentrate when you are in that much pain and you're constantly thinking about whether you have leaked. Are you going to stand up and there will be loads of blood?'⁸ As we can see in these examples in which fears of leaking were affecting concentration during exams, menstrual stigma is still having a negative impact on the education of young women and others who menstruate. Other participants also mentioned that fears of leaking prevented them from taking part in sports. For instance, one girl said the following about missing swimming once a month: 'You just can't do it. You have to sit on the side, it is not fair'. As we can see in these examples, menstrual stigma still impacts the daily lives of girls and other young people who menstruate. This includes their education, sporting activities, and interpersonal relationships.

Resonating with studies that argue that menstrual stigma is most prevalent amongst South Asian women, two South Asian girls stated that they

⁸This comment that menstrual cramps could affect concentration in exams was echoed by other participants. One girl stated, for example, '[I]t's going to make your exam 10 times harder because you're only focussing on your pain'.

never spoke about menstruation, including to their female friends or fathers (Zaman & Mohiuddin, 2023). One of them expressed a strong sense of discomfort when recalling a conversation about menstruation that had occurred amongst the girls in her college: ‘[T]hey all started speaking about it and I sat with my head down. I was like, “I don’t want to be here”’. Indicating the prevalence of menstrual stigma amongst South Asian communities, a South Asian girl in a different school expressed: ‘[I]n Asian households, from personal experience, there can be so much stigma attached to them’. This girl, however, was very confident when speaking about menstruation and made a point of openly discussing it with male family and friends to normalise it. In a different focus group, another young South Asian woman was similarly proactive in trying to dismantle menstrual stigma. By drawing on the conflict at the Sabarimala temple in India as an example, she criticised the menstrual stigma that is prevalent within her Hindu community:

Cultural stigma with periods is a huge thing [...] in Hinduism there is a huge stigma attached to them because, even though they’re a sign of fertility, they think periods are dirty. [...] They used to ban women from going to Sabarimala. They took away the ban and women tried to go. All these men were just jeering at them, trying to beat them up, trying to stop them. It was horrible. I don’t want to go against what my culture or religion dictates, but, to be honest, I don’t agree with this. Women should be given the same rights as men in the religion—they should never be held back because of their periods!

As we can see, these two participants had a very different attitude towards menstrual stigma than did the two girls at the college. It is also important to note that their confidence in speaking about menstruation in mixed gender groups and their desire to reduce menstrual stigma were also echoed by a South Asian boy in a different focus group. He said, ‘I try to help my sister during her period with cramps and stuff. I buy pads. I can run a bath. It’s important to just speak you get me? Be nice. I want her to feel ok’. The South Asian students in my focus groups were, therefore, very divided in their attitudes towards menstruation. Some of them experienced the highest level of menstrual shame across this entire study, whereas the others were some of the most proactive participants in dismantling it. This finding therefore contradicts existing studies on the internalisation of menstrual shame within South Asian communities which

ignore the strong passion for eradicating this stigma that exists within this community. Although it is difficult to determine the influence of cultural factors on a sample of this size, it is important to note that there was no correlation between the ethnicity, cultural, or religious background of any the participants and the extent to which they were affected by menstrual shame.

Including the South Asian girls, many young women and non-binary people who spoke about their own feelings of embarrassment around menstruation were also quick to question their behaviour or demonstrate that it is a product of menstrual stigma. Many revealed that their current or former school created a culture of concealment or embarrassment around menstruation. One girl, for example, questioned the menstrual concealment imperative as follows: 'I hide my tampon under my blazer when I go to the toilet. It's a whole thing. You should just be able to walk about and walk to the toilet with it in your hand' (Wood, 2020). Another girl, who was part of a focus group at an all-girls school, mentioned her reluctance to notify male teachers that her she needs to go to the bathroom during lessons because of her heavy bleeding. She revealed, 'In my head, I wouldn't want to say that because I wouldn't want to embarrass the male teacher but at the same time, I don't know why I feel like that?'. Demonstrating that the school environment can perpetuate and reinforce menstrual stigma, some participants gave examples of teachers at primary and secondary level who appeared too embarrassed to talk about menstruation or even refused to tackle bullying around menstruation. For example, one young woman recalled, '[I]t was made into this massive taboo subject and that wasn't really dispelled by teachers'. Another spoke about a teacher at her primary school whose awkward approach to menstruation created an uncomfortable classroom environment: 'I had a male teacher talk to my class about it. I just felt very awkward. He kept asking everyone questions. He made it awkward'. According to one young woman, she had never received any menstrual education because, rather than addressing bullying around menstruation, her primary school cancelled their menstrual education: 'They said our group was too immature for period lessons and we just weren't allowed to do it'. In a different focus group, one young man criticised his school's culture around menstruation. He gave the example of a girl who had leaked whilst playing sport:

I know a girl who is in PE, and she ended up leaking halfway through. And she got absolutely rinsed by everyone for it. I thought it was unfair. She is already embarrassed, why embarrass her even more? It is so unfair. It is a natural thing [...] nobody ever told them off for it or told them that you shouldn't treat periods like this.⁹

His repetition of the word 'unfair' reveals a strong sense of injustice. As his remarks show, he was aware of the negative impact of menstrual stigma on girls and recognised that this is a socially constructed response to a completely natural and common bodily experience. Furthermore, his criticism at teachers for not tackling this bullying indicates the importance that teachers are able to contribute towards creating a culture in which issues around menstruation can be openly addressed. As these responses indicate, young people's experiences and social interactions can still be negatively shaped by menstrual stigma, especially if their school has a culture of embarrassment around menstruation. It is therefore important that staff help to foster an inclusive and open culture around menstruation in school. Nevertheless, in contrast to earlier research, it is promising to see that young people are developing a critical awareness of menstrual stigma and they believe that menstrual stigma should, and can be, challenged (Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Kissling, 2006; Newton, 2016). Hence, once Generation Z enter the workplace, or even become teachers themselves, they may create a more open and supportive culture around menstruation.

Although very few of my teenaged participants were aware of the existence of a menstrual movement, most girls and non-binary participants used the term 'normalise' to characterise posts that openly communicate about menstruation (such as those posted by influencers and feminist accounts) as well as their own beliefs that we should be able to talk about menstruation without feeling embarrassed. One young woman articulated that the influencers she encounters on social media approach menstruation in different ways, but they all contribute to reducing menstrual stigma: '[T]hey're all aiming to normalise periods a bit more, make it more known that this is what happens, and it should be spoken about more, it shouldn't be this thing'. By presenting Olivia Duffin's videos as an example, another young woman demonstrated her awareness of the importance of normalising menstruation for all audiences:

⁹In this context, 'rinsed' refers to being bullied or mocked.

She was explaining how it were normal and how you shouldn't be embarrassed about it. Because she has a mix of genders on her platform, she was trying to normalise it. [...] I think it were good. I wouldn't be able to sit there and do that so, like, credit to her. I feel like she made it seem more normal.¹⁰

Here, my participant indicates her awareness that menstruation is a stigmatised topic and acknowledges the importance of normalising it. By praising Duffin's efforts and emphasising that she would struggle to replicate them, my participant indicates her views that resisting this stigma can be uncomfortable but a worthwhile endeavour. Finally, her comment that Duffin's video helped to normalise menstruation also echoes a key belief of the menstrual movement. This belief is that open and frank conversations about menstruation encourage audiences to view it as a normal everyday topic and therefore experience less shame whilst speaking about, or experiencing, menstruation. My participants' final comment that Duffin 'made it seem more normal' shows that this video also helped her to feel more at ease. Hence, although girls and non-binary students are primarily engaging with influencers, YouTubers, TikTokers, and 'feminist accounts' rather than NGOs or more radical activists, we can see that the menstrual movement's discourses about normalisation are filtering through these social media pages. As they are helping girls and other young people who menstruate to view menstruation as a normal topic of conversation, these accounts are contributing to the menstrual movement's work to destigmatise menstruation. Indeed, discourses of menstruation as 'natural' and 'normal', which are words that are prevalent in the work of menstrual activists, were frequent and largely unprompted across the duration of the focus groups. For example, during a word association exercise in which participants had to shout out anything that they connected with the word 'period', the words 'normal' and 'natural' were frequently uttered. Seeing that these words were far less common in research with young people prior to 2015, we could argue, therefore, that young people are increasingly internalising these affirmative discourses (Newton, 2016).

It is important to build on my participant's celebration of the fact that Duffin's platform attracts a 'mix of genders'. This was echoed by many other participants who emphasised the importance that efforts to

¹⁰Olivia Duffin is a singer and TikTok video creator who is based in Manchester and known for her 'body positive' content (*The Mirror*, May 2022).

normalise menstruation are targeted at men. Reflecting some of the themes that emerged during discussions of Gandhi's activism, all participants believed that the menstrual movement and menstruation-focused social media account are yet to engage directly with men. One girl, for example, declared that activists need to 'talk to [cisgender men] about [menstruation] and make them feel comfortable'. Another girl criticised the menstrual movement for not directly addressing men and for not indicating how menstrual inequities are 'a product of gender inequalities'. She stated that activists should 'get the message across to young people and get guys involved. It's not just about getting women involved, talking about their periods, because most of us are comfortable with talking about our periods'. Furthermore, a male and a female university student both criticised some menstrual activists for 'putting men off' by posting content that was radical in tone. They argued that, in order to indicate to men that menstruation is a normal topic to discuss, activists should instead frame menstruation within audiences' 'everyday lives'. The female student explained this phenomenon as follows:

A lot of the times when people do campaigns, they make it seem like "periods, periods, periods". Honestly, I don't want to see that, [...] when you make it such a big deal, maybe that one time like everybody would be on it, but then after that it's like no one cares. If you put it in everyone's normal everyday life, an advert here, a billboard here, of just girls or people being on their period, then that's what will make it better.

According to the young man, menstrual campaigns can be 'a bit too politicised sometimes, so that turns off half the men from getting involved or really caring about it'. Comments made by most of the boys in the focus groups suggested that, thus far, they had not been addressed, or engaged, by influencers or others who aim to destigmatise menstruation. For instance, one boy stated that he'd seen videos in which influencers are trying to normalise menstruation: 'They're just explaining how it's natural if you're a woman, but I find it hard to pay attention when it's not really affecting me directly'. Another boy said that posts about menstruation were not 'relevant' to him and that, because 'men are not the one's having periods, there's not much that men can do'. Based on these responses, we can see that most of my male participants neither felt included nor effectively engaged by online efforts to normalise menstruation in the media. We can also see that female participants felt that the menstrual movement

should target men more directly. This suggests that the menstrual movement is not yet targeting, reaching, or successfully engaging men (Semenzin, 2022, p. 113).

Nevertheless, albeit the fact that none of the male participants believed that efforts on social media to destigmatise or normalise menstruation were targeted at them, most boys were not only aware of menstrual stigma but wanted to feel included, and find a way to take part in efforts to destigmatise menstruation. One boy, who enthusiastically participated throughout his focus group, not only indicated his knowledge about menstrual stigma but also advocated for the normalisation of menstruation:

Let's just reduce stigma of it, less shame, so just to open it, because once it becomes more open, as it becomes more open, that's what'll really reduce the stigma, won't it? Once you're free to talk about it, it won't be seen as an awkward topic.

As we can see here, this young man echoes the belief of menstrual activists that open conversations about menstruation can reduce stigma (Koskenniemi, 2021). Similarly, during the section of the focus group that focussed on instances of menstrual activism, three boys explicitly used the term 'normalise' to describe why Kiran Gandhi chose to free-bleed during the London marathon. These reactions indicated their understanding that the visibility of menstrual blood can help to break taboos (Doshi, 2021). Moreover, four boys not only expressed a strong belief that talking about menstruation is very important but also took advantage of the focus group format to ask their friends about their menstrual experiences alongside other more general questions.¹¹ One of these participants stated, '[I]t's just a normal thing, so there's no point keeping it secret', whilst another expressed, 'I think it's important not to have a stigma around periods'. Furthermore, another boy emphasised that it is, indeed, possible to engage men in conversations about menstruation, as long as they are targeted effectively. He exclaimed: '[Y]ou need to give them a reason to want to listen'. He gave the example of the 'We Believe' advertisement by Gillette as a way in which men can be engaged in issues that primarily affect women. Although he acknowledged that the advertisement, which aimed to educate men about sexual harassment, received significant backlash as well as praise, he claimed that this advertisement, which aimed to

¹¹ This included questions about symptoms, menstrual cups, and the price of products.

challenge ‘toxic masculinity’, had some success in engaging men in topics such as sexual harassment (Trott, 2022). Indeed, it was evident that the atmosphere of the focus groups was beneficial to the male participants because it gave them the opportunity to be included in conversations about menstruation, learn about the menstrual experiences of their classmates, and feel comfortable to ask questions. One young man who asked questions about menstrual symptoms and menarche expressed enthusiasm every time he heard something new. During the focus groups he made exclamations such as ‘Going to impress some girls with my new knowledge’, ‘I’ve learned so much today’, and ‘I’ll tell my rugby team about this!’ These responses were very well received by the female members of the focus group. As the responses and enthusiasm of my male participants suggest, young men are aware of menstrual stigma and are interested in contributing towards the destigmatisation of menstruation in an informed manner. Hence, if menstrual activists can include young men, address them effectively, and educate them on how they can best support women and other people who menstruate, they are likely to find a receptive male audience.

Indeed, the importance of ensuring that young men are addressed and educated by the menstrual movement was evident in one of the main themes that emerged in the mixed gender focus groups: that boys often did not feel comfortable to talk about menstruation because they were concerned about accidentally causing offence, discomfort, or harm. They also did not know when it was appropriate to begin a conversation about menstruation or when they could interject in an ongoing conversation. Most boys either completely avoided discussions about menstruation or saw their role as active listeners. For instance, one boy said, ‘[I]t is a bit too sensitive to talk about periods as a man’. Another boy explained that, although he was happy to listen to his female classmates talking about menstruation, he would feel uncomfortable if he had to speak to them about it: ‘[I]t’s the stigma [...] it’s an embarrassing thing to talk about’. One young man also reflected on menstrual stigma by questioning why he was comfortable to talk to his friends about menstruation but not his mother: ‘I don’t feel uncomfortable when someone my age mentions it, but last night I had to call up my mum to ask her to sign the consent form and it was awkward to say it was about periods’. According to another young man, ‘I wouldn’t open the conversation with it though, if it’s broad, then I’m happy to talk about it’. In a different focus group, another boy stated, ‘[W]hen girls are having conversations around me, it doesn’t

really bother me, but when you get to a level of detail and when I have to then participate in the conversation, that makes me more uncomfortable, I think'. A lack of education was the main reason behind their reluctance to engage in mixed gender conversations about menstruation. The male participants argued that the very limited menstrual education that they received in school did not teach them how to communicate about menstruation or how they can support their menstruating peers. They criticised their schools for either excluding them from lessons about menstruation or 'just' teaching them about 'the biology' of menstruation. A young man explained, 'I did triple science, and I did learn more about the menstrual cycle than most people did, but it doesn't mean I'm completely educated on the topic itself. ... And there's people who know even less than me, there's men who know nothing at all'. Developing this further, he continued to explain the negative impact of this lack of education on men's ability to communicate about menstruation and support women and other people who menstruate. Due to this lack of education, he felt unable to ask questions, join in conversations, or offer verbal support:

Men should be [educated] so that they can offer support to women and people who menstruate. I don't know how people who menstruate want men to interfere with something that a man can't relate to—or people who don't menstruate can't relate to [...] men should be educated as much as women. There's probably a line, but men should still feel free to talk about it and women should feel free to talk to a man as much as a woman.

Similarly, another boy criticised his limited education in school and argued that boys would benefit from learning about how menstruation impacts lived experience: 'If you understand how girls feel you can support them. I think everyone should know about them'. Illustrating the importance of learning about the individualistic and intersectional nature of menstrual experience, another young man revealed that he had benefited from joining in with offline mixed gender conversations: '[I]f I didn't speak to girls outside social media or what the biology textbook said, then I'd probably think they're all the same'. We can therefore see that menstrual stigma and a lack of menstrual education in schools are key barriers to mixed gender conversations about menstruation. We can also see that if boys received education about how menstruation is experienced and impacts daily lives, they would be better equipped to support their menstruating peers.

Indicating that reluctance to instigate or take part in mixed gender conversations about menstruation is not limited to young men, half of the young women and non-binary participants in the study stated that they tried to avoid speaking about menstruation in front of their male peers and family members. These participants were concerned that their male peers or teachers would neither understand their menstrual experiences nor know how to discuss menstruation. For example, one girl revealed: ‘I knew a man once who thought that you could hold in your period’. One young woman expressed with horror, ‘In year 7, the teacher was a male and this girl asked if she could go to the toilet, and he said no. Then she explained, “I’m on my period”. He just told her to hold it in!’ Another girl explained that mixed gender conversations were not possible because boys were too embarrassed and could only say euphemisms such as ‘that time of the month’. She laughed, ‘[T]hey can’t even say “periods”!’. This was echoed during a different focus group in which a girl laughed, ‘I’ve known guys before that fully don’t even want to say the word “period”. What do they call it? The blob?’ Illustrating the role played by men in perpetuating menstrual stigma and therefore rendering mixed gender conversations difficult, one female participant stated, ‘[M]en are to blame for all this stigma’. The most common reason that girls were unwilling to discuss menstruation in front of male peers was because they feared that boys would mock, dismiss, or try to embarrass them.¹² One girl, for example, stated: ‘Boys say it’s not that bad and we’re just being over the top and they say you’re being a wuss for it’. According to my participants, their anxiety was rooted in past experiences of bullying and derogatory language. One young woman articulated: ‘I would feel awkward speaking about it. I think the reason a lot of boys are, like, “that’s so disgusting”, is because they don’t know anything about it. So, you just get told, girls bleed and it’s a bit messy, you’re obviously going to think “that’s gross”’. In a different group, one young woman explained why she felt a ‘change in atmosphere’ when boys overheard her and her friends talking about menstruation, ‘You don’t want to say all men because obviously it’s not ... but because of past experiences with what boys have said to you, you already have it in your head that something will be said’. In a different group, a young girl recalled feeling ashamed when she dropped a tampon in front of the boys in her class: ‘In high school, I dropped one on the

¹²It is important to note here, however, that some of these girls said that they would occasionally make an exception for ‘very close’ and ‘mature’ male friends.

floor and it got passed around the entire classroom by all the lads and they were all taking the piss and it was awful'. If we compare these responses to the male participants' concerns about accidentally causing offence as well as their eagerness to learn and support their menstruating peers, we can see that this lack of engagement on both sides is based on misunderstanding and false assumptions. This 'gender communication gap' is therefore hindering mixed gender conversations (Mohindra et al., 2013).¹³ The nature of this 'gender communication gap' was revealed in the mixed gender focus groups which provided participants a rare opportunity to understand why their peers were also avoiding mixed gender conversations. For instance, the exchange below followed immediately after two female participants discussed the 'change in atmosphere' when boys are present in conversations about menstruation:

FA: We're very chilled and then [boys] come over and it's a bit tense, a change in atmosphere changes the conversation.

FB: I haven't really had any conversations with boys about it

MA: I think in the past, I've asked people questions about things like this and sometimes girls immediately assume that you're taking the mick, even if you try and sound earnest. Presumably because they've had people take the mick out of them so much in the past.

FA: I can see that, yeah.

MA: I then would, you know, get a hostile response.

FB: Then you're not exactly going to ask ... you're not just going around to find someone.

MA: I mean, obviously I wouldn't just ask a random person, you know, someone that I'm friends with, but even then.

This conversation therefore highlights the importance of mixed gender conversations in reducing menstrual stigma and creating an inclusive environment that is conducive to knowledge exchange, openness, and compassion that will not only benefit girls and other menstruating young people but also those who can support them (Peranovic & Bentley, 2017).

¹³In this book, I use this term to refer to a misunderstanding between boys and girls (as well as other young people who menstruate) as to the communicative intentions of the other. This term has previously only been used in the context of the workplace. In a study about the financial cost of the 'gender communication gap' to organisations, the authors explain: 'As the face of business transforms with more women occupying key management positions, the requirement of reducing the gender communication gap is growing: miscommunication can cost money, opportunities, and jobs' (Mohindra et al., 2013, p. 2).

Thus, the existence of this ‘gender communication gap’ not only means that young men are missing opportunities to support or even bond with their menstruating peers, but that young women and other people who menstruate are also not receiving support from young men who would like to offer it but are unsure as to how. As my male participants suggest, teaching young men in school about lived experiences of menstruation and how they can be allies will help to address this gap. Furthermore, as other participants theorised, the menstrual movement can also reduce its communication gap by communicating with men and including them in their advocacy.

Nevertheless, despite the hesitance of many of the boys and over half of the girls in this study to engage in mixed gender conversations about menstruation, most girls and non-binary students commented that online efforts to destigmatise menstruation had positively impacted their menstrual experiences. Most girls and non-binary participants who actively followed, or had encountered, online efforts to normalise menstruation commented that these accounts had not only helped them to view menstruation as ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ but also reduced their feelings of menstrual shame. These participants explained that, thanks to this new perception of menstruation as normal, they felt less ‘embarrassed’, ‘ashamed’, or ‘awkward’ during their menses. One young woman mentioned that influencers had encouraged her to ‘embrace’ her menstrual cycle ‘because it’s natural and it happens to every woman’. In a different focus group, another participant stated that she felt ‘reassured’ by one of her favourite TikTokers who posts videos of her body, underwear, and menstrual products during her menstrual bleeds:

A woman takes pictures where you can see the pad’s wings on her knickers, and all that kind of stuff [...] it’s nice and refreshing. [...] You see the tampon string hanging down out the side of her knickers, just to show, this is normal, this looks alright.

In yet another focus group, one girl explained that she had ‘learned a lot about how to be comfortable about periods’ thanks to social media. She discussed how Emma Chamberlain, an American influencer and model, had inspired her to feel less embarrassed about menstruation and to talk more openly about it with her friends:

Emma Chamberlain is like, “oh, I’ve got a tampon, do you want it?” People instantly bond over that. It just made me realise that it’s something not to be ashamed of and you can talk to a random person about it, or you can talk to another female about it, and it shouldn’t be taboo.

When asked how these videos made her feel, she replied: ‘I felt a lot better, to be honest because she’s very open about it’. We can see that Chamberlain’s act of offering a tampon to a stranger, which frames menstruation as a casual topic of conversation that is appropriate for a public space and menstrual products as items that can be publicly visible, reduced my participant’s feelings of menstrual shame. The participant’s use of the word ‘oh’, and the tone in which she articulated the question, suggests that the casual way that Chamberlain talks about menstruation encouraged my participant to see it as a ‘matter of fact’ aspect of daily life. Hence, as my participants illustrate, the informal and candid ways that ‘influencer-activists’ and TikTokers share their lived experiences are encouraging young women and others who menstruate to see menstruation as a normal bodily process than can openly be discussed (Semenzin, 2022, p. 113). This is leading to more open conversations and increased wellbeing amongst women and other young people who menstruate.

Furthermore, as is emphasised in my participant’s reflections about Chamberlain, social media is reducing young people’s feelings of menstrual stigma through creating a sense of solidarity or collective identity (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021; Fominaya, 2010). This idea was echoed by many girls and non-binary participants who explained that, thanks to the sharing of lived menstrual experiences on social media, they feel less alone and have begun to understand that their own experiences are normal. For example, one girl said the following about a TikTok account she followed: ‘[S]he’s very, very open about discussing trying to break the stigma with discharge and periods, and stuff like that. I enjoy watching her videos because it just makes you feel a bit more you have a bit more solidarity with people’. By exclaiming ‘TikTok is very much the big sister you don’t have. You can just click on so many different videos nonstop and you’ll get all this information that you probably never would have had from formal education’, another participant emphasised the importance of social media as a source of comfort, information, and support for young girls. Two other young women talked about the importance of social media for girls who experience menarche at a young age. They argued that social media helps them to feel less alone and fills gaps in formal education:

FA: If you come on early, you start before your friends, no one can relate to you

FB: You're just out on your own

FA: A lot of young people now have phones, so they'll obviously be on social media even though they're not old enough, and they'll see it so it will educate them more than their school. Or if they don't talk to their parents about it, or if you live with your dad and you've not got another woman in the house.

The idea that social media provides young women with a vital sense of solidarity was also repeated by other participants in different focus groups. For instance, one girl expressed:

When people try and make it relatable and do hashtags ... it unites women and makes them feel free to bond over the fact that we all have periods. [...] I always think about if a young girl lives in a household, say, they don't have a mum present, they might not have any female representation, they might feel a bit alienated and not actually sure what to do when it comes to their periods. So, knowing that other women have them is always a good thing.

If we draw together all these comments from my participants, we can see that, by openly sharing their menstrual experiences on social media, influencers and other individuals on social media are encouraging young people to view menstruation as a natural bodily experience. In so doing, they are creating a sense of connection with young women on others who menstruate and providing an important source of information that is not available to young people in their school and offline social circles. These findings echo studies on shame which argue that open discussion about a topic creates a sense of connection between those who experience it, and this leads to individuals feeling less ashamed when experiencing or discussing it (Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 2023). Furthermore, these findings confirm activists' views that the very simple acts of speaking about menstruation and sharing menstrual experiences help others to feel less ashamed (Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021; Weiss-Wolf, 2017). Hence, even if these messages of normalisation are being filtered through the neoliberal lens of influencers, it is evident that the proliferation of online content about menstruation is reducing young people's feelings of menstrual shame through strongly encouraging them to view menstruation as a normal topic of conversation that can be discussed when needed or desired. Furthermore, these posts instil a sense of 'collective identity' that is an

important basis to the success of social movements (Fominaya, 2010). Thus, my findings suggest that, thanks to influencers and other social media accounts, there already exists a strong sense of feminist solidarity on which the menstrual movement can build.

My participants' perceptions of menstruation as a normal bodily experience that should be openly discussed were evident not only in their comments on how social media has reduced their feelings of shame but also in the language they used throughout the focus groups to describe menstruation and criticise societal norms. The messages of normalisation that they had encountered on social media had an ongoing effect on their long-term menstrual experiences and social interactions. Although menstrual stigma was still reflected in some of my participants' discourses, such as describing menstrual blood as 'gross' or talking about fears of leaking, for the most part, participants critically examined their own stigmatised responses or used language that evoked their perceptions of menstruation as a natural bodily process (McHugh, 2020).¹⁴ Furthermore, very few used euphemisms such as 'monthlies', 'time of the month', or 'on the blob'. During a group discussion in which all girls agreed that they felt comfortable to talk about menstruation, one girl exclaimed: 'It's a natural thing, isn't it?'. During an exercise at the beginning of the focus groups in which participants were asked to shout out words that they associated with menstruation, some participants used the words 'normal' and 'natural'. One young woman celebrated menstruation through referring to it as 'god-gifted'. These discourses also came up unprompted in other topics of conversation, especially in those that criticised social norms or political decisions. For instance, one young woman commented about the 'Tampon Tax', 'I don't understand why we as women have to pay for something that happens naturally every single month'. Echoing arguments in critical menstruation studies that have questioned the societal approaches to different types of blood (Rosewarne, 2012), two girls questioned why menstrual blood is not shown in the media but blood that results from violence is commonly depicted:

FA: I feel like a lot of people associate blood with just violence, but period blood is not violent blood, like I don't know how to explain it, it's just the natural thing ...

¹⁴One participant, for example, said: 'I'm a woman and I find it disgusting, as well'.

FB: It's the only kind of blood that doesn't come from any kind of violence ...

FA: It really is, but I feel like because it's from women, everyone feels like it's such a big deal because—I could talk about this all day!

As this conversation demonstrates, these participants have a critical understanding of menstrual stigma, its historical link to misogyny, and how it is reflected in societal views of menstrual blood. They are both critiquing a 'culture of concealment' and enthusiastically articulating their own views of menstruation as something 'natural' that should not provoke horror (Houppert, 2000). If we compare these multiple instances in which my participants referred to menstruation as 'normal' and 'natural' as well as their criticisms of the 'menstrual concealment imperative', we can see a stark change from the focus groups that Newton (2016) conducted prior to the 'Year of the Period' (Wood, 2020). Drawing together my participants' menstrual discourses throughout the focus groups and their comments about the impact of social media posts that seek to normalise menstruation, we can observe that girls' attitudes towards menstruation have changed significantly over the last few years. My findings therefore indicate that social media has played an enormous role in shaping young women's attitudes towards menstruation. Thanks to social media, there is now a new generation of young women who feel less menstrual shame and feel more comfortable to talk about menstruation than the generation who preceded them (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2013).¹⁵

This significant change, however, is not solely reflected in the language that my participants used to discuss menstruation during focus groups, but also in the everyday social interactions that they described. Almost all girls stated without hesitation that they were comfortable to talk about menstruation with other women, including friends and family. Most of these girls also did not feel embarrassed when talking to teachers, or, in some cases, women who they had never met before. Many of these participants argued that they did not feel embarrassed to discuss menstruation if only women were present because it was a normal experience that they shared. It was evident that these instances in which they broke free from a culture of concealment, such as by sharing details about their menstrual

¹⁵Although non-binary participants also stated that social media had helped them to feel more comfortable to talk about menstruation, there are no past UK studies that openly include non-binary people to which I can compare my participants' responses.

bleeding or throwing products to each other, created a sense of collective identity and solidarity (Houppert, 2000). One of the schools in this study consisted only of girls. Some of the pupils who were previously in mixed gender schools and had recently moved into this school felt emboldened to disclose to their classmates when they were menstruating. As part of a conversation in which they praised a TikTok video in which young men ‘carry pads in their bag in case’ their female friend begins to menstruate, two girls celebrated their school’s open culture around menstruation:

FA: I don’t know if it’s because we go to an all-girls school, but the idea that we’re more comfortable changing our pads in the bathroom. Before, I’d get really worried or self-conscious about the rustling noise ... but here, I just go full out. I remember, I don’t know who it was, but someone in our year, I was changing my pad, and I was in the toilet, and they were, like, “oh my gosh, I’m on my period too!” It’s things like that, it can be very little, but it’s enlightening, is that the right word to use? It was very freeing, and I felt comfortable. You shouldn’t be embarrassed about your period!

FB: It makes the whole situation a lot easier if you can talk about it. Like you say, if you’re having mood swings, if you’re feeling really grumpy, that you’d just be able to talk to your friend, like, “oh, I’m on my period, this is what I’m dealing with”.

As we can see, here, these two girls are strongly aware of the benefits of frank communication about menstruation. They have learned that open discussion about menstruation and related symptoms reduces menstrual stigma and enhances interpersonal relationships between women.

What is perhaps more striking, however, is that almost half of the girls and non-binary participants across this entire study stated that they already talk to men about menstruation and around a third felt comfortable doing so. This included friends, fathers, brothers, and, on occasion, male teachers. One participant, for example, framed her need for rest and distraction as a valuable moment for bonding with her father: ‘I talk to my dad more than my mum about periods. My dad’s quite understanding about these things, so if I have cramps or anything, we do baking and [other] stuff together’.¹⁶ By describing conversations as ‘easy’, ‘pretty chilled’, and ‘normal’, girls emphasised the casual nature of discussing menstruation

¹⁶ It is important to note, here, that the British vernacular use of ‘quite’ means ‘completely’ and is used for emphasis. The participant, here, is therefore stating that her father is very supportive.

with male friends in particular. One girl stated: ‘With friends it’s just normal. Everyone just speaks about it’. Many of these participants also argued that once boys were over the age of 16, they had become much more mature and supportive. For example, one girl declared: ‘Most of them now are right understanding [...] they’re more mature about it’. In contrast to participants who were under 18, of whom only one-third felt able to engage in mixed gender conversations about menstruation, all 13 participants who were aged 18 or over (of whom 4 were men and 9 were women) stated that they felt comfortable talking about menstruation in mixed gender groups. They gave multiple examples of when they had engaged in such conversations. Illustrating the normal and banal nature of these conversations, one female participant said, ‘[W]e speak to the guys in detail’, whilst another explained, ‘[Y]ou can literally just bring up periods to any of the guys, no one cares, no one really bats an eyelid, you just say “oh, I’m on my period”’. Indicating that they practiced boundary maintenance, other girls explained that they were selective about which boys they spoke to about menstruation (Bhatt et al., 2022). For example, one girl who was part of a mixed gender focus group criticised men for perpetuating menstrual stigma. She then turned to her male friend, with whom she had already discussed menstruation prior to the research, and said jovially, ‘[N]ot you, you’re fine!’. These responses indicate that teenagers in Generation Z not only communicate more frequently about menstruation in mixed gender groups than previous generations of teenagers, but that they feel more at ease when doing so (Newton, 2016; Rubinsky et al., 2020). It is therefore evident that, for young people, a culture of menstrual concealment is eroding and is less of a barrier to their social interactions than previous generations of teenagers (Houppert, 2000; Peranovic & Bentley, 2017).

If we examine the themes of these mixed gender conversations about menstruation, we can observe that my participants of all ages were most at ease in conversations about pain and menstrual products. These topics provided an easy way to instigate natural conversations about menstruation that illustrated how it impacts daily routines and behaviours. It was also a way for the girls to openly indicate to a mixed gender audience that they were currently menstruating. One girl explained that openly asking for products in mixed gender groups had become commonplace in her school: ‘I think people have started to realise that it’s just normal, like “why should I care?” Now girls shout across the classroom, “[Y]ou got a tampon? you got a pad?”’. The question, ‘why should I care?’, indicates

that the girls in her school have begun to question and challenge the ‘menstrual concealment imperative’ (Wood, 2020). This sense of ease was also echoed by a girl in a different focus group who proudly declared that, when she feels her menses begin during lessons, she explicitly informs male teachers so that she can go to the bathroom: ‘[T]here’s me like, sir, I think blood’s coming out of me’. Many girls emphasised the casual nature of their conversations with boys about cramps. For instance, one participant explained that she often openly shares that she is in pain while she experiences menstrual cramps: ‘If I have a cramp, I’d be like oh, I’ve got a cramp’. Another girl stated that she often spoke to boys about her ‘period pains’ and ‘how bad’ they are. By exclaiming, ‘I talk to boys to moan about it’, another girl illustrated that ‘menstrual moaning’ is a commonly accepted discourse in mixed gender conversations (McHugh, 2020). One young man also recollected conversations about menstrual pain in his school: ‘I know some girls have taken days off school because the pain can be that bad’. Recounting conversations in which girls had spoken to him about menstrual pain, one boy said: ‘They’ve just said how bad their experiences are, and I say I’m glad we don’t have them. [...] I don’t mind talking about it. Got to be open about it and just get on with life’. Here, we can see that this young man expresses compassion for his female friends, recognises that menstrual symptoms can be challenging, and is keen to support his friends through engaging in their conversations about menstruation. By emphasising that menstruation merits discussion because it is a normal bodily function that impacts everyday lived experience, he also indicates his support for the normalisation of menstruation. If we draw together these comments about mixed gender conversations from across the focus groups, we can see that participants’ discourses about menstrual stigma echo those of ‘activist-influencers’ who typically normalise open discussion through references to products and pain (Gaybor, 2022; Semenzin, 2022). We can see that my participants’ increasing openness around menstruation has resulted from their critical approach to menstrual stigma and their recognition that menstruation is a normal bodily function that impacts on their lived experiences and thus can, or even should, be discussed. Hence, as some of my participants deliberately reveal to others when they are menstruating, their behaviours completely contrast Newton’s participants who experienced anxiety due to ‘a consistent fear of exposure, leaking, and being “found out”’ (2016, p. 182). We can observe, therefore, that some young people are reversing this narrative and reaping the benefits. Indeed, this increased openness around

menstruation has already improved some of my participants' wellbeing, strengthened their interpersonal relationships, and given them the confidence to ask for menstrual products.

The most frequent reason, however, for why the girls and non-binary participants in this study instigated mixed gender conversations was to improve men's knowledge about menstruation. For example, one girl said: '[T]hey don't know much so they're happy to ask, "what does that mean?"' Some girls also mentioned that boys were 'keen' to learn about menstruation and had asked them 'a lot of questions'. Another described a conversation between a male and female student in her university accommodation: '[M]y flatmate was explaining to my other flatmate how pads work. I was shocked that guys just didn't know how they work—some guys think that they just stick on to your vagina!' A different young woman described a conversation with a male friend as follows: '[H]e was actually *really* interested and asking loads of questions about it. Once he'd got over the initial, "oh my God, it's blood, it's coming out of somewhere personal" ... he was really curious'.¹⁷ Male participants also revealed that they had started, or actively engaged in, conversations about menstruation to improve their knowledge of menstruation and their understanding of menstrual experience. Reflecting on his experiences in his sixth-form college, one university student explained:

[P]eriods would just randomly come up. All the guys just wanted to know how it worked and the girls were just explaining how it worked and about their feelings, and guys would be like what? that's crazy! We knew that girls would bleed every month, but they would tell us about how pads worked. We had no idea how they worked, so we just wanted to know. [...] It was pretty chilled; we were all friends.

As we can see here, the boys in his college were not only keen to learn about menstrual products and menstrual experiences but also actively listening, acknowledging, and validating the difficult experiences of their female peers. Many other male participants in the study also said that they would actively listen, ask questions, and offer support to their menstruating friends. One young man stated: 'I've spoken quite openly with them. I like to help them a bit with their mental health', whilst another declared: '[M]en and boys should just ask questions'. Indicating that social media

¹⁷ Italics replicating emphasis of participant.

had facilitated these instances of learning, participants across three different focus groups mentioned that TikTok videos had inspired them to ask questions or educate others about menstrual products. For example, one university student described how he and his friends had copied a TikTok video in which young men and women were testing the absorbency of tampons in water. He recounted an entire conversation about toxic shock syndrome and the absorbency of menstrual products that had been prompted when he asked his female flatmates why there were worried about leaving in a tampon overnight:

We [copied] it in our apartment, putting tampons in water and seeing them blow up [...] we're a flat of four guys and two girls and then one of the girls was explaining how tampons worked, so she pulled out a tampon and she was putting it in water, and it just started to expand and that was mind blowing, what the heck? So cool!

As we can see here, and in my other participants' recollections about knowledge sharing, social media is influencing young people's offline behaviour, such as by encouraging them to educate each other. Since all the participants in my study criticised their insufficient education in school, we can see that these conversations are a way that young people can fill gaps in each other's knowledge about menstruation and their understanding of menstrual experience. Furthermore, as these exchanges are often focused on the sharing and acknowledgement of lived experiences, we can see that these conversations are positively impacting interpersonal relationships. These moments of education therefore provided an important source of connection that allow men to better understand the lived experiences of their menstruating friends and therefore be able to demonstrate greater awareness, compassion, and support.

Perhaps the most explicit way in which teenagers in this study are emulating the work of the menstrual movement and 'influencer-activists' is in their deliberate attempts to normalise open discussions about menstruation in their offline lives (Semenzin, 2022). A handful of participants demonstrated a strong commitment to creating a more supportive and open culture around menstruation. Ten young women spoke about their efforts to speak about menstruation in a frank manner to their male friends, and four young women mentioned their efforts to normalise menstruation for their male relatives. Topics of these conversations included bleeding, menstrual pain, mood changes, and challenges to stigmatising attitudes. This

included, for example, one participant who expressed her frustration that her brother thinks that menstruation is ‘icky’. She explained, ‘I always try to bring up the conversation so he knows, and he can tell his friends as well, periods aren’t an icky thing’. A different teenaged girl described her efforts to normalise menstruation through discussing it with her brother at mealtimes: ‘I openly talk about it at the table with my brother. My mum and I always say to him, one day, you’ve got to do this for your girlfriend, or whatever. So, I try to be quite open with him about it, to normalise it for him’. Describing one of her tactics for destigmatising menstruation, another young woman explained that she ‘makes an effort to talk about menstruation in front of’ her male friends ‘to destigmatise it a little bit’. This includes informing her male friends when she is menstruating: ‘I say “oh, I’m on my period now, deal with it”. But not in an aggressive way, just slipping it into the conversation, to say “I’m uncomfortable, you should respect that”’. In another focus group, two girls discussed their efforts to normalise menstruation through giving detailed accounts about their menstrual experiences to their male friends and relatives:

FA: It’s just a normal thing and it should not be taboo!

FB: I think it’s important to talk to them again and again. [...] If they get personal experience and questions, it becomes more of a human thing in their mind, rather than just, “oh my God, it’s your time of the month, you’re bleeding”. They get the real human impact and the nuances of it that they don’t necessarily understand.

This participant not only expresses an intersectional view of menstruation, but she is also aware that menstrual stigma is fuelled by misunderstanding, a lack of empathy, and negative stereotypes about menstruation (Urban & Holtzman, 2023). She is therefore tackling some of the stereotypical views of her male peers through sharing her own menstrual experiences and highlighting to them that menstruation is a normal, but highly individual, human experience. Another participant explicitly linked her efforts to destigmatise menstruation to the content with which she engages on social media:

Social media is really good for trying to normalise periods, just to encourage conversation. [...] It’s more uncomfortable talking about it with guys or men, but I think I try to do the opposite. I try to be even more comfortable in talking about it, even more overt. It’s to prove a point when I’m talking

to guys. I'm trying to normalise it, just by talking to them even more overtly than I would with women.

We can see here that, despite her own feelings of discomfort, she so strongly valorises the normalisation of menstruation and the improvement of men's knowledge that she is willing to endure her feelings of embarrassment. It is evident that this participant, as well as others across the study, recognise the benefits of dismantling menstrual stigma and understand that open communication in mixed gender groups is a way through which this can be achieved. Due to the intent of these activities to reduce menstrual stigma, we can therefore conceptualise this behaviour as 'everyday acts of menstrual activism'.¹⁸ Indeed, these behaviours resonate strongly with Rosewarne's argument that girls can be 'menstrual activists' simply by 'advocating for such normalisation' (2012, p. 165) and Guillard's (2016) research that indicates that digital feminism can encourage young women to be activists in their offline lives. We can therefore see that some young people are contributing to the menstrual movement in their daily lives by emphatically talking about menstruation and striving to improve young men's knowledge about it. They are therefore filling a gap that some of my participants identified in online menstrual activism: directly engaging men in issues of menstrual justice and gender equality.

As the findings in this section demonstrate, the increased visibility of menstruation in the media has significantly impacted young people's attitudes towards menstruation and their experiences of menstrual stigma (Fingerson, 2005; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Newton, 2016). This significant change has, however, affected some young people more than others. We therefore need to ensure that our approaches to menstrual stigma and normalisation are informed by an intersectional understanding of menstruation. Even though menstrual stigma still negatively impacts many young people's wellbeing, social interactions, and other behaviours, it is evident that this visibility has produced a new generation of young people who, combined, experience less menstrual shame than the generations that preceded them. Indeed, five participants argued that Generation Z's exposure to menstruation on social media had encouraged them to see it as a normal topic of conversation. Addressing me directly in my role as focus group facilitator, one young man expressed that Generation Z are far

¹⁸This is a term I have coined for this book to describe the phenomenon of young people conducting small-scale acts of activism that could contribute to reducing social inequalities.

more accustomed to seeing menstruation in their everyday lives than older generations such as millennials: ‘[O]ur parent’s generation, or your generation are a lot stricter and more uptight and have so many social rules. ... They don’t say how they experienced any of this. Gen Z is more casual, I’ll just be scrolling on TikTok, and I’ll see period TikToks and think, oh, ok, that’s cool’.¹⁹ Echoing this, a young woman in a different focus group celebrated this generational change as follows: ‘[I]t’s not a secret as much, so it makes it less of a big deal’. These participants also argued that, by actively using social media to create a culture of openness around menstruation, Generation Z are the main drivers behind this change. One girl, for example, stated, ‘[Y]ears ago, you wouldn’t speak about periods, but our generation has changed that’. Another young woman stated quite simply, ‘[I]t’s a generational thing’. Another explained, ‘[Y]ou learn more stuff on Instagram, it breaks the ice because everyone becomes aware of it. I think that’s why people are more comfortable talking about it now’. If we compare these responses and the general confidence of my participants to speak about menstruation in their everyday lives to Newton’s findings from 2008, it is evident that there has, indeed, been a generational shift that has been engendered by the visibility of menstruation in the media (Newton, 2016). The ‘anxieties’, ‘secrecy and shame’ that Newton observed are certainly starting to erode (2016, p. 182). The lack of change that Newton accounted for over the ‘five decades’ prior to 2015 has now, thanks to social media, been followed with over five years of significant change (2016, p. 182).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, social media has played an enormous role in reducing menstrual stigma amongst Generation Z. For the young women and non-binary teenagers in this study, and even for some young male participants, it has become normal to see menstruation appear on their social media feeds. For many of the young people in this research, the ‘everyday’ presence of menstruation in their virtual worlds is encouraging them to view menstruation as a natural bodily experience about which they can speak openly offline with family, friends, and, increasingly, within mixed gender groups. Since the menstrual movement has catalysed and sustained this increased visibility, these findings offer a very strong indicator of the

¹⁹ By saying to ‘your generation’ the participant is referring to millennials.

success of the movement's central aim of destigmatising menstruation. Nevertheless, as this study also indicates, menstrual stigma still has a negative impact on the lives of many young people. For instance, menstrual stigma in school can be an obstacle for supportive, effective, and open communication about menstruation. This can lead to bullying, low self-esteem, and an overreliance on social media for education. According to my findings, the most impactful way in which menstrual activists can further reduce menstrual stigma is to better engage men and help them to become allies. The menstrual movement would also resonate better with young people through amplifying the voices of activists from ethnic minority groups and increasing the visibility of their work. Engaging more effectively with these groups would make a significant contribution to gender equality. Furthermore, as social media provides a space for non-traditional and smaller acts of activism, it has transformed how young people understand, appreciate, and conduct activism. The views of Generation Z therefore lie in stark contrast to how previous generations perceived and carried out activism. The characteristics of social media have therefore influenced how young people conceptualise menstrual activism. Although they still value 'high effort activism', they also appreciate smaller 'everyday' acts of activism (Knupfer et al., 2023, p. 3). Thus, they view influencers, feminist accounts, and other individuals as making small, but very important, 'everyday acts of menstrual activism' that contribute to a wider goal of eroding menstrual stigma across British society. Thus, as Generation Z conceptualise activism, menstrual stigma, and other aspects of menstruation differently from previous generations, it is important that organisations facilitate youth-led activism. The next chapter will explore the impact of the four other main aims of the menstrual movement on young people in Great Britain.

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The Impact of the Media and the Mediated Menstrual Movement on Young People's Awareness and Perceptions of Menstrual Inequities

Even though menstrual stigma still shapes how girls and other young people experience menstruation and is still prevalent within certain communities, Chap. 5 demonstrated that the menstrual movement's endeavours to reduce menstrual stigma are already succeeding. It also revealed that, unless the menstrual movement can engage men, and ensure that activists from ethnic minority groups are represented in the media, the aim of eradicating menstrual stigma will not be fully realised. To further understand the impact of the menstrual movement and the mediation of its key areas of focus, this chapter explores young people's awareness and perceptions of period poverty, menstrual health conditions, reusable products, and transgender people who menstruate. This chapter will identify from which organisations, accounts, influencers, or TikTokers, they encounter these topics. This chapter will also consider the extent to which their awareness of these four themes has led to a change in their attitudes and offline behaviours. Furthermore, through this in-depth exploration of these four aspects of the menstrual movement, this chapter identifies areas which require greater attention from menstrual activists.

‘IF YOU’RE LETTING THIS HAPPEN TO WOMEN, THEN YOU’RE
NOT DEVELOPED’: PERIOD POVERTY IN GREAT BRITAIN
AND BEYOND

Although menstrual activists in Great Britain usually prefer the term ‘menstrual equity’ to ‘period poverty’, this term is not widely understood by people in Great Britain who are not part of the menstrual movement (Gomez & Karin, 2021). Instead, thanks to the media’s popularisation of the term ‘period poverty’, this term remains the easiest way to engage young people in conversations about unequal access to menstrual products (de Benedictis, 2022). Hence, to assess the impact of the media on my participants’ knowledge and perceptions of menstrual equity, they were asked what they understood by the term ‘period poverty’, what they had seen in the media on this topic, and if they had noticed any efforts to tackle it. Demonstrating the impact of the media’s popularisation of this term, almost all participants were able to provide a definition for ‘period poverty’. Most defined it as the inability of individuals to access or afford to buy menstrual products. For example, one girl replied, ‘I know that there are quite a lot of people who can't afford tampons or whatever they need, so they have to use whatever they can at the time’. Participants had not only learned about period poverty from mainstream media. Indeed, their knowledge was shaped by a variety of online and offline sources, including social media, posters in bathrooms, and information that accompanies donation boxes. One girl, for example, described a donation box in the toilets at school whilst another recalled seeing a box in a supermarket: ‘at ASDA they do boxes of collections where you can put pads. I think they’re for deprived areas in the UK’. Three other young people spoke about the ‘Red Box Project’.¹ One said,

In the six form toilets, there is a poster saying to donate products. I remember when we had the charity where we donate period products and then they’d send it out to different people because they couldn’t have access to pads and tampons. It was the Red Box Project.

¹Prior to the government’s provision of free period products in schools, the ‘Red Box Project’ used to provide these products to certain schools with a high proportion of students from low-income households (Røstvik et al., 2022).

As we can see in these participants' frequent mention of 'pads and tampons', none of the participants who discussed the solutions to period poverty mentioned reusables. It was therefore evident that most participants had come across the term 'period poverty' and had at least a basic level of awareness of the phenomenon. However, the solutions of which they spoke were only limited to single-use products, thereby suggesting that they have not encountered or remembered efforts by activists to provide more sustainable solutions.

Whilst many participants were unable to give examples of activism around period poverty, those who did, recalled campaigns by brands, charities, or individual activists. Only a handful of these participants gave examples of activism that was linked to neither brands nor influencers. Participants indicated that period poverty had only ever appeared intermittently on their social media pages. They emphasised, however, that these posts only offered limited information such as the odd statistic or fact. One girl stated, 'I think I've seen a fact about period poverty, and I don't know what it was, but, for example, it could be just like a poster with really bold letters, saying, "period poverty affects 30 per cent of women in the UK, full stop"². The few participants who recalled activism around period poverty that was not linked to brands had encountered these posts because they had interests in feminist activism or had chosen to follow relevant accounts. For example, one girl stated, 'I follow quite a lot of activism accounts so period poverty does come up every so often, but I can't really remember from who or where'. Another explained that she had only read posts about period poverty because she clicked on a hashtag that an influencer used in her video about the Tampon Tax:

At that time there were some celebrities such as Bella Thorne [...] She had tampons in the background [of her post]. [...] I think I clicked on one of the hashtags, one of them was pink tax, one of them was period poverty. Unless you really search the hashtag – you're not going to see any of it'

It is also important to note here that this participant was not unique in learning about period poverty via social media posts and factual news media about 'The Tampon Tax'. Indeed, most participants had only seen

² Similarly, another girl stated that the social media posts she encounters usually contain 'informational stuff about how period poverty affects certain people and how it's not very cool'.

mention of period poverty on social media or in the mainstream media in relation to campaigns to remove ‘The Tampon Tax’.³ This finding would certainly be of concern for menstrual activists who are tackling menstrual inequities. Indeed, narratives that frame the removal of the Tampon Tax as a solution for period poverty erase the underlying structural and social inequalities, such as stigma, austerity, poor education, or a lack of access to cleaning facilities, which cannot be resolved with a reduction in the price of menstrual products (Crawford & Waldman, 2019; de Benedictis, 2022; Miller et al., 2023). We can therefore see that young people’s knowledge about period poverty and associated activism is comprised of fragmented information from social media, the mainstream media, and offline spaces, and therefore does not echo the more nuanced approach through which activists approach the topic. Furthermore, they have very limited awareness of there being a menstrual movement or organisations that are tackling period poverty through more sustainable and long-term solutions, such as through providing period underwear and education about menstrual health.

Indeed, when asked to give examples of activism around period poverty in the media, participants were either unable to recall any instances or only remembered content by influencers or brands. Most commonly, they recalled campaigns by brands that were donating some of their single-use products to women experiencing period poverty in the UK or overseas. One participant explained that she had ‘only’ learned about period poverty and related activism ‘from TV adverts’. She explained, ‘My mum and dad will be watching TV and there’s an advert that says that 10 per cent of all profits will be donated to a charity’.⁴ Recollecting a sponsored post on Instagram by OHNE, a different participant stated: ‘It’s a small company but I think for every purchase or subscription you make, they donate to a period poverty charity’. One young woman recalled an influencer who was sponsored by ‘Always’ to talk about their period poverty campaign whilst another remembered a hashtag campaign by a brand: ‘It was about how

³To give other example, one girl said the following when asked to give an example of period poverty that she had seen in the media: ‘There is the pink tax, isn’t there? I came across it on Instagram. There was an ad talking about campaigning against it a while ago’. Another girl stated: ‘I saw period poverty on Instagram when the tax was taken off, a lot of people would [...] design posters that were celebrating that. That was the only way I found out’.

⁴Another young woman recalled advertisements by brands who donated products to ‘third world countries’.

people can't afford sanitary products. We take it for granted that people can afford it. People who can't afford it are having to go back to things like cloths which are quite unhygienic and giving them infections'. We can therefore see that the dominant narratives about period poverty to which young people are exposed are rooted in neoliberal discourses that frame single-use products as a hygienic solution to period poverty, rather than the more intersectional and inclusive narratives that we observe in the menstrual movement (Thomson et al., 2019). According to Bobel and Fahs, this product-focused, neoliberal framing is 'dangerous' because it frames 'menstrual activism as very, very small in focus' rather than grounding it within a broader movement for gender equality (2020, p. 972). Indeed, we can see the impact of these neoliberal discourses in my participants' responses that not only focus entirely on single-use products, but also position campaigns by brands as activism. Thus, the dominant narrative to which young people are exposed is undermining the work of menstrual activists in Great Britain because this neoliberal view of period poverty masks the sustainable solutions, systemic changes, 'menstrual justice' and government intervention for which activists are calling. Furthermore, it masks the existence of an entire movement of activists who are aligned with other movements, such as Black Lives Matter, that are fighting for social justice (Bobel & Fahs, 2020).

Nevertheless, since the male participants in the study were almost never targeted by menstrual product marketing campaigns on social media, the posts that they encountered online about period poverty were usually from celebrities or organisations that do not focus on menstruation. Although the young men could recall very few examples of period poverty or activism linked to it, the examples they gave situated period poverty within broader social inequalities or contexts. Thus, in comparison with the young women and non-binary participants, their answers were less influenced by the neoliberal discourses of menstrual product brands (Baer, 2016; Campbell et al., 2021). When asked to give an example from social media, one young man mentioned that the 'only thing' he had ever seen was the charitable work of a Brazilian footballer:

There's one footballer I follow. He's Brazilian and his name's Richarlison. He does a lot with charities to help fund things in Brazil. [...] There was one time where he did a massive [...] supply package for loads of different people across the town, and in it was food, period products, and other things.

As we can see here, this young man frames period poverty as just one manifestation of poverty and menstrual products as a necessity alongside other items such as food. Indicating that football is an effective way to engage young men in discussions around menstrual inequities, one boy praised Barnsley Football Club for providing free menstrual products for all women that visit the Oakwood stadium: ‘I support Barnsley Football Club. Every time I look on Facebook the women are amazed that Barnsley provide free sanitary products for all the fans [...] I’ve also seen away fans comment that they’ve come to Barnsley games and women’s toilets have got products’. He also commented that he ‘was not sure’ whether these products were supplied ‘to women who cannot afford them’ or because the club just wanted to make sure that women could enjoy the matches without worrying about accessing menstrual products. Another boy mentioned that he had learned about period poverty from a BBC comedy show in which Russell Howard was criticising the UK government for taxing menstrual products. He praised Howard for talking about menstruation in an informative, understated, and engaging way and for encouraging men to take part ‘in conversations’ about menstruation:

He’s done sections on his shows that include periods [...] He said it’s ridiculous that a lot of schoolgirls were having to use socks instead of tampons. Because they couldn’t afford tampons, and things like that. [...] Because he is a funny guy, he presents it in a funny way, and he is a lot more comfortable to talk about it. I think he just made it a bit more interesting.

As this boy’s statement underscores, comedy can be an effective way of normalising more open discussion around menstruation as well as educating non-menstruating people in an accessible way.⁵ We can therefore see that, although the boys were far less aware of period poverty than the girls and non-binary participants, the activism that they encountered was not linked to brands. They were therefore less exposed to the neoliberal discourses in advertising and more influenced by instances of activism that were part of broader efforts to address social and gendered inequalities

⁵It is important to note, here, that comedy is also an effective way of engaging girls and other young people who menstruate. For instance, girls in the study also specifically mentioned learning about period poverty from Russell Howard. One said that she learned from his show, ‘Period products are taxed but lots of other things are not. Jaffa cakes, they are not taxed as luxury. Nor those little pink flowers you put on cakes. And other ridiculous things like private jet maintenance’.

(Liu et al., 2023; Malefyt & McCabe, 2016). Furthermore, as they traversed topics such as football, food insecurity, and political satire, the mediated examples of period poverty that they encountered were more varied and demonstrated how period poverty could influence, and be influenced by, broader factors such as politics, sport, and the cost-of-living crisis.

Furthermore, my male participants' understanding, and perceptions of period poverty, also demonstrate that young men are more receptive to learning about menstruation and related issues when it is framed within broader contexts and discussed by people or by organisations that are not solely focussed on menstrual activism. For example, the participant who discussed Russell Howard's comedy praised his awareness-raising around period poverty for being understated: 'It's not being pushed in my face; do you get what I mean?' Hence, for this participant, comedy is an effective form of 'implicit activism' because it delivers political messages in a manner that is not too overbearing (Horton & Kraftl, 2009, p.11). This idea was echoed by other boys who criticised menstrual activism for being 'too politicised' or 'too flashy'. As one young man stated, this kind of menstrual activism can 'turn off half the men from getting involved or really caring about it'. Indeed, we can see that all the content that these young men had encountered about period poverty could be characterised as forms of 'implicit activism' because they are understated in how they raise awareness of menstrual inequities. Rather than being solely focussed on menstruation, these mediations of period poverty frame it within familiar contexts, such as football or stand-up comedy, thereby normalising open discussion around menstrual inequities and indicating their relevance to broader social issues with which mixed gender audiences can relate. Hence, these findings suggest that young men may be more receptive to menstrual activism if those within the menstrual movement create content that links menstruation to broader social issues or topics which young men find interesting. This therefore highlights the value of partnerships with organisations outside the menstrual movement, such as those focussed on men's health, fitness, or interests.

Despite the ubiquity of social media in the everyday lives of young people, the most common medium through which the female and non-binary participants remembered learning about period poverty was from posters in bathrooms that ask for donations towards providing women in the Global South with single-use products. Indicating the memorable nature of these posters, often participants would either only mention these

posters or discuss these posters before drawing on examples from social media. For many of the participants at the private schools, these posters were their only source of information about period poverty. Many girls emphasised the frequency with which they came across these posters. Across different focus groups, girls uttered responses such as, ‘At service stations, I feel there’s always posters about it’ and ‘it’s often something in service stations on the door. There’s some campaign about it’. Another explained, ‘You know when you’re in service stations and they have the poster on the door about people in war-torn countries and they can’t afford period products? Those posters are trying to get money for that’. Participants from state schools and colleges developed their answers further to express their frustrations about the language of these posters and the fact that they frame period poverty as an issue that is only present in the Global South. One young woman exclaimed: ‘Obviously it’s not just in developing countries, we still have it here!’ Another young woman reflected, ‘It’s never the UK, which I think is interesting because I know for a fact that in my town there’s girls who can’t afford basic products’. Resonating with criticisms within critical menstruation studies that campaigns from the Global North use stigmatising and catastrophising language to describe menstrual experience in the Global South, one girl stated: ‘I want to see stuff that’s not making periods a big deal. Like those posters in the service stations, it doesn’t create a good picture of periods, it makes them seem disgusting and like something you have to cover up’ (Rajagopal & Kanchan, 2017; Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). These neo-colonial discourses in these posters, which are also evident in the British mainstream news media, position the Global North as a purveyor of empowerment to women in the Global South whilst also perpetuating a ‘dangerous aesthetic and ideological stereotypes for the feminine subject’ (Daily, 2019, p. 152). Whilst existing studies focus on how MHM campaigns from the Global North frame women in the Global South as ‘deficient and in need of correction’ (Bobel, 2019, p. 232), my participants’ responses also suggest that these posters are stigmatising for women outside this context. These posters are not only stigmatising because they frame menstruation as a catastrophe, but they also, by positioning period poverty as something that only happens to women in the Global South, silence women’s experiences of period poverty in the Global North.

Indeed, the focus groups in the two private schools demonstrated the validity of my participants’ concerns that the media, brands, and large NGOs are taking attention away from the fact that period poverty exists in

Great Britain (Briggs, 2021). When asked to give examples of period poverty, only three participants in the private schools spoke about Great Britain. In response to discussions in his group about period poverty in the Global South, one of these participants explained why he thought that the other pupils at his school were unaware of local menstrual inequities: ‘I don’t think the media perceives it as so much of a problem here, because we’re a developed country. I think if I was to see anything it would be about the developing world instead of us’. Here, he is criticising the British media for an inaccurate framing of period poverty that is based on a privileged assumption that everyone in Great Britain has sufficient funds for necessities. Furthermore, not only did almost all the pupils in the private school speak about the Global South when asked to define period poverty, many were surprised to learn that there are people in Great Britain who struggle to access products.⁶ Participants at the private schools often defined period poverty with discourses that are typical of news stories about menstruating women in the Global South (Bobel, 2019). Expressing surprise at one of the girls in the focus group that spoke about period poverty in Yorkshire, one boy responded, ‘I thought it was just a third world country thing’. In a different group, a girl said, ‘I read in the newspaper about, I think it was an African country? When the women have periods, they have to leave the village and go to a hut somewhere’.⁷ Another young woman gave the following definition of ‘period poverty’:

Some people can’t afford sanitary products in Asia or Africa or places like that where, because of the stigma attached to periods, they don’t really have much access to proper sanitary care. Sometimes in Asia when you’re on your period, you’re actually put in a separate room – so you don’t have actually access to the products you need for hygiene.

Here, we can see that the participants’ responses perpetuate certain neocolonial stereotypes that characterise women in the Global South as a ‘primitive’ and continents, such as Africa, as homogenous entities rather than a

⁶ Before being shown the focus materials about period poverty in Great Britain, only three young people at the private schools spoke about period poverty on a national level. One, who had just moved from a state school, said: ‘There’s quite a lot of poverty in the middle of our city, it’s known for that, so I can imagine there will be some forms of period poverty here’.

⁷ In another group, a girl tried to recollect a news story she had read about women in South Asia: ‘They have to live in a tent or something? They can’t stay in a household. What religion is that?’

collection of heterogeneous cultures. Although the last response is more nuanced as it also considers the role played by menstrual stigma, it still draws on stereotypes and discourses of hygiene. These participants' responses therefore reflect common neocolonial discourses that we can find in British media coverage that frame women in the Global South as helpless and in need of empowerment from the Global North (Daily, 2019). However, once the private school participants were presented with the focus material about period poverty in schools, they began to think critically about neocolonial discourses in the British media as well as expressing frustration that the UK government had not adequately addressed menstrual inequities. They uttered phrases such as, 'the fact that the UK prides themselves on being a developed country and then allowing 50 percent of girls to amiss a day of school; that's disgusting to be honest', 'it's devastating that these products have only been free in the UK for the last few years', 'we see the UK as a modern country, but that just isn't true', and 'if you're letting this happen to women, then you're not developed'. This focus material also led some participants to realise and question their own privilege. For example, one girl stated, 'Because I come from a very privileged background where it's been available to me, it's shocking'. A young man uttered, 'The fact that 10% of women can't afford a product that helps them in daily life is quite shocking'. At a state school, one young woman responded to the statistic about period poverty by remembering, 'This is sad. I didn't realise that it happened. One day the school put tampons on a table, and they didn't actively say anything'. The participants' internalisation of these discourses and their critical responses to the focus material about Amika George demonstrate the importance of raising awareness of the social issues that fuel period poverty, dispelling stereotypes about the Global South, and promoting an intersectional understanding of menstrual inequities. This understanding is necessary for fostering transnational empathy and advocating for the rights of menstruating women and other people across the globe (Rossouw & Ross, 2021; Vora, 2020).

In contrast, in all the focus groups that were conducted in the university, state schools, and state colleges, all participants were aware of period poverty in Great Britain. When asked to define period poverty, they gave examples from Great Britain, the United States, and the Global South. These included homeless women, young people in schools, and those from low-income backgrounds. Indicating that the mainstream media has had more of an impact on their understanding of period poverty than has social media, only five were able to recall encountering period poverty on

social media. These were almost all about the Global North: ‘I’ve seen quite a few YouTube videos that are interviewing women who suffer from period poverty. It was quite shocking because they were just going into these really disgusting public toilets and trying to sort themselves out. Obviously, it’s not hygienic or safe for them’. The examples they gave from the mainstream media were usually about the Global South, but they also remembered coverage of period poverty at local and national levels. Commenting on the mediation of period poverty, one girl stated: ‘Definitely low-income households in the UK and people living in poverty but also poorer countries as well’. A non-binary participant explained that they had only noticed mainstream media coverage of period poverty that was specific to Yorkshire: ‘I’ve read that it’s more common here in Yorkshire, but other than that, I’ve not really seen anything’. Echoing the neocolonial framing of period poverty in the British media which ignores impactful local grassroots activism in the Global South, one girl explained: ‘There’s lots of campaigns in Kenya about how girls before were using rags because they couldn’t afford pads, but now there’s lots of celebrities and lots of campaigns to get pads in those kinds of areas’ (Bobel, 2019; Daily, 2019). Another girl could not recall any news about period poverty but remembered a documentary: ‘I haven’t read anything, but I’ve watched a documentary about period poverty in Africa where tampons and pads aren’t readily accessible’. Many of the participants, however, spoke about how they had learned about period poverty from their own offline experiences or those of their friends. These participants often had a more nuanced understanding of menstrual inequities. One girl explained: ‘I’ve not seen anything online, but I’ve heard about personal experiences about people who have suffered from period poverty and how they weren’t able to afford pads or anything’. Others commented that they had seen free menstrual products in their college or school which had information on them: ‘I can’t remember the specific number of girls that can’t afford pads or tampons and that’s why we have them at college in the bathrooms for everybody’. One girl drew on her own experiences to compare period poverty in the Global North and Global South:

You can find in the UK to be honest, you can literally find it anywhere. It’s quite common in Morocco as well. I am Moroccan so I’ve seen it with my own eyes. [...] I think schools are trying to battle it by giving free sanitary products because I know that our school does that as well. But there’s still so many places where you have to go into the toilet, and it says a pound for

one tampon in an emergency. That's just ridiculous because, at the end of the day, the only situation you can do there is put toilet paper in your pants. But even that's quite dirty because God knows where that's been.

By using the second person and stating that period poverty 'literally' exists everywhere, this participant is creating a sense of transnational collective identity amongst women and people who menstruate and framing menstrual inequities as a significant global issue. She acknowledges that progress has been made with the free provision of products in schools. Nevertheless, by expressing her distress at the idea of having to use toilet paper, she is also implicitly calling for universal free access to menstrual products. As we can see, the young people in the university, state schools, and colleges held a diverse range of perspectives about period poverty in Great Britain and the Global South that were informed by personal experiences, social media, and mainstream media. Although we can see that they are still subject to internalising neocolonial discourses from the mainstream media, we can see that, for many, their personal offline experiences have provided them with a more critical perspective of social inequalities and how to address them.

Indeed, when talking about period poverty, many participants, without being prompted, fervently argued that there should be free universal provision of menstrual products because they are 'essential'.⁸ Their responses indicated their views that menstrual products should not only be free due to social inequalities but also as a matter of convenience. They highlighted, however, that this free provision will only be effective if products are kept in easily accessible and appropriate places. As one participant expressed succinctly: 'We need more accessible period products, because even if they're free, they're not always the easiest to get hold of'. The young women and non-binary students shared stories of not being able to access menstrual products during exams or between lessons because they were stored far away from classrooms and exam halls, such as in libraries or at reception, or they were in dispensers in bathrooms that required coins. At one of the private schools, many of the young women expressed frustration that products were stored in dispensers:

⁸ One girl referred to menstrual products as 'survival needs' and many used terms such as 'essential items'.

I went to the nurse, and she said, “We don’t have any period products. You can use the machines”, and I said, “I don’t have any money”. But what do I do at that point? I can’t walk around – if I walked around free bleeding, I’m sure school would not be impressed in any sort of way, but if you don’t give me a solution for it, what do you expect me to do?

Here, we can see her strong sense of injustice that a barrier exists to her accessing a product that society expects her to use. Her response, and those of others who discussed the dispensers, therefore reveal that inadequate access to menstrual products does not only negatively impact girls from low-income households but also those who start menstruating unexpectedly. Further demonstrating the importance of taking a more intersectional and contextual approach to menstrual product access, the stress of menstruating during exams was a recurring theme across many focus groups. Since they were not allowed to keep their bags with them in exam halls, participants argued that products should be kept in toilet cubicles so they ‘can just grab them’. They illustrated that not only can it be difficult to remember to bring menstrual products when they are ‘stressed’ about exams, but also that having menstrual products in their pencil cases would arouse suspicions:

They’re just going to think you’re cheating but you’re not, you just need to change yourself. The fact that in exams you can’t really bring anything in. I feel like you could probably bring a pad in, but I’ve not really tried to do that. It might look like a phone, but at the end of the day it’s just a pad and the fact that you get searched for that as well, and they find it’s just a pad, it’s just a bit embarrassing and awkward.⁹

A participant who experienced heavy bleeding noted the anxiety she felt about ‘changing her pad’ multiple times during an exam, not remembering to bring enough pads with her, and not knowing where to keep them during the exam. She stated, ‘exams are stressful enough and then you put bleeding on to that and getting your pads and painkillers sorted. It is another thing us girls have to worry about that boys don’t. They just need to remember what they revised, we need to remember that and our pads and maybe be in pain too’.

⁹Also talking about the stressful nature of menstruating during exams, one girl explained: ‘It’s really stressful having a period during exams [...]. I’m sure every girl got their period at some point during their GCSE exams. That was horrible because stress just elevated that.’

Further indicating the importance that products are placed in appropriate, as well as accessible, places, five girls expressed their discomfort with the placement of a box of free products in their school. According to one of these girls:

If you're from a low-income household, you feel really awkward to go and pick them out, especially because the box is in the middle of the common room. So, to walk all the way there just to pick out some products... I wouldn't say anyone is going to look at you weirdly, but obviously people have got that mindset of 'oh they're going to stare at me because I can't afford it'.

This was echoed by another girl who spoke about how the stigma that exists around poverty can actually dissuade people from accessing necessities: 'There's so much shame thrown on to it. There are so many labels around the whole concept of not being able to afford these things'. Similarly, one girl spoke about the reluctance of pupils in her school to ask for products from staff, 'People won't go and ask because you're made to think it's a bad thing. So, they won't go and ask for the help when they need it'. As these three young women reveal, the stigma around poverty itself is also a factor that influences how women and other menstruating people access menstrual products. My participants' wide-ranging comments about the placement of products in schools and colleges therefore reveal a lived experience that is strikingly absent from the mainstream media's narrow focus on period poverty (de Benedictis, 2022; Gomez & Karin, 2021). It reveals that access to free menstrual products is not only important for all young women and people who menstruate, but also that these products must be stored in places where those who need them can, and will feel comfortable to, access them. This includes ensuring that products are accessible during exams which can often be held in locations that are far from where pupils usually access menstrual products during lessons. Hence, we can see that the success of government schemes that provide free menstrual products will be limited if consideration is not given as to how and when young people want to access these products. My findings therefore suggest that conversations between staff and pupils about the placement and provision of products could really benefit the health and wellbeing of girls and other young people who menstruate. Since exams can have a significant impact on the future of girls and other young people who menstruate, it is of utmost importance that they have access to the menstrual products that they need so that they can

concentrate during their examinations. It is important to bear in mind that, for those with heavy bleeding, this can mean needing to change products multiple times during an exam.

As we can see in many of these comments about the placement of products, participants felt a strong sense of injustice when they could not, or felt uncomfortable to, access a product which is a necessity for them. Thus, even though none of the young people in this study used the terms ‘menstrual justice’ or ‘menstrual equity’, the language that some of them used to characterise ‘period poverty’ or their own experiences of accessing menstrual products reflected activist discourses about these two concepts. Participants used the terms ‘unfair’ and ‘wrong’ as well as demonstrating their view that the government should be responsible for eradicating period poverty. Some even referred to accessing menstrual products as a ‘human right’. For example, one girl stated: ‘There shouldn’t be a tax on something that we get every month. It’s a human right, to have the access’. Arguing that it is unfair that financial constraints can prevent women and other gender minority groups from accessing an essential item, one girl stated passionately: ‘products should not be limited to those who can afford them. Everyone should be getting them regardless of if they can afford them or not’. Another expressed with passion, ‘Tampons are a right, not a privilege’. Illustrating the detrimental impact of not being able to attend school due to period poverty, another girl expressed,

It’s unfair that [there is] a monetary barrier in place for some girls to get an education, which is a legal requirement – you legally have to get an education up until the age of sixteen – but then, you’re being prevented from doing that to your fullest ability because of period poverty.

In a different focus group, a young woman stated: ‘It’s wrong for people not being able to access something that they desperately need’. Discussing the injustice of period poverty, a young man also expressed: ‘It is wrong that girls miss days at school because they’re on their period’. Echoing many other participants at the state schools and colleges, one girl demonstrated her frustration that the UK government had not done more to alleviate period poverty: ‘With working-class people, there’s going to be period poverty, which sucks, because it’s important, but it’s not important enough for the government, apparently’. Another young woman also criticised the government for not offering more support to homeless women and transgender people: ‘People are literally on the streets, and they have

to use stuff like toilet paper from public bathrooms when they're on their periods. I think periods are hard enough as they are, so to have to go to these extremes, it's really not fair'. These findings indicate that young people share menstrual activists' views of 'period poverty' as a form of social inequality that can be a significant barrier for women and other people who menstruate (Brinkley & Niebuhr, 2023; McKay, 2021). These young people's sense of justice therefore indicates that, despite the neoliberal discourses that they encounter in the news media and advertisements, Generation Z are a receptive audience to the movement's message that period poverty is a serious structural and social issue.

'I'M OPEN TO USING IT IN FUTURE, IT'S JUST GETTING OVER THAT FEAR': SUSTAINABILITY AND REUSABLE PRODUCTS

Limited existing research suggests that, although reusable products have been on the market for decades, awareness has only started significantly to increase over the last few years (Ballal & Bhandary, 2020; Medina-Perucha et al., 2022; Ramsay et al., 2023).¹⁰ Studies have hypothesised that social media has been instrumental to an increased awareness of the detrimental impact of single-use products on the environment alongside more sustainable alternatives (Gaybor, 2019; Peberdy et al., 2019). This hypothesis is confirmed by my focus group findings. For the young people in this research, it is evident that social media has had a significant impact on their awareness of the plastic in menstrual products and the existence of plastic free and reusable alternatives. Thanks to social media, and the odd example from mainstream media, almost all participants, regardless of gender, were conscious of the environmental impact of single-use menstrual products on the environment. One boy, for example, commented that he had learned about the plastic in menstrual products from a combination of social media and television:

I know, just from watching, like, David Attenborough programmes and other things. He said these types of products can be something that not everyone realises have a massive impact. [...] They get used and thrown away and then that's the last people think of them.

¹⁰The first menstrual cup, for example, was patented in 1937 in the United States (North & Oldham, 2011).

Another boy mentioned that his girlfriend had switched to using tampons with cardboard applicators after seeing them advertised on social media: 'Her friends don't like the cardboard ones, so they don't get them, and also I want to say cardboard ones cost more, but [...] obviously the plastic's bad for the environment'. Most girls and non-binary participants could name at least one sustainable alternative (usually cups), whereas only a minority of the male participants were aware of the existence of reusables. Participants' knowledge about the impact of plastic products and sustainable solutions arose from a variety of online sources, such as advertisements, influencers, TikTokers, feminist accounts, websites, blogs and social media accounts that are focussed on sustainability or the climate crisis. One girl, for example, said that she learned about the negative environmental impact of single-use products from a post on social media: 'There was a break-down of how much people go through in their life, just one person was an astonishing number'. In another focus group, a girl explained: 'It is definitely better for environmental reasons to use stuff like menstrual cups, because anything reusable is better. It's a lot easier to use pads and tampons and stuff, but they are very bad'. Another young woman, who followed social media accounts about sustainability, recalled, 'During the environmental protests, I saw a little thing about how specific brands are really good'. Once again demonstrating the power of educating men about menstruation within a context to which they can relate, one young man learned about menstrual cups and menstrual symptoms whilst watching a YouTuber who gives advice on how to prepare for, and succeed in, exams. He explained, 'I follow Unjaded Jade, she's a study YouTuber. I follow a lot of female YouTubers, and they always talk about periods. Unjaded Jade, she talks about cups and how she uses them to be more sustainable'. Building on his comment, a young woman praised Jade for speaking to a mixed gender audience on sustainability as well as the impact of menstruation on students: 'So it's nice that she mentions periods, and that, because it does distract you when you're trying to revise, when you just want to curl up in bed'. As this exchange indicates, by showing how menstruation can affect preparing for exams and how cups can help to avoid changing products during an exam, Unjaded Jade's video has improved a young man's knowledge of menstruation which has led to a moment of empathy and bonding with a female friend. Hence, social media and traditional media have played a crucial role in informing young people in Great Britain about the impact of single-use menstrual products on the environment and the existence of sustainable solutions. My focus

group findings therefore support the hypotheses of previous research on the growing awareness around reusables (Gaybor, 2019; Peberdy et al., 2019).

The most common way through which girls and non-binary participants learned about the environmental impact of menstruation and reusable products was through advertising. This was either via more traditional advertisements on their social media feeds, during Youtube videos, or via influencers on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. One girl, for example, recalled: ‘A lot of [menstrual products] are made with plastic and they are really bad for the environment. I’ve seen some reusable ones that are advertised that aren’t bad for the environment, but they are a lot more expensive’. Indicating that their ideas about sustainability had been more shaped by advertisements for cups than any other reusable, far more participants mentioned menstrual cups than underwear or reusable pads when asked to give examples of reusable products they had seen in the media. This included the male participants who were also far more aware of cups than any other sustainable menstrual products. One girl expressed, ‘I’ve seen advertising for... I can’t remember what they’re called but they are like cup things’ During a conversation about menstrual cups, another girl emphasised the frequency with which she saw advertisements on Youtube: ‘Every 10 minutes they’ll be an advert’. The young women also recalled advertisements for cups in magazines, such as *Hello*, and newspapers, such as *The Times*.¹¹ Some mentioned specific brands such as ‘Diva Cup’ and ‘Moon Cup’. For instance, one girl recollected an advertisement for Diva Cup in *Vogue* magazine whilst another recalled Youtubers who had been ‘sponsored [by] Mooncup’. These findings suggest that young women and other young people who menstruate have a stronger awareness of menstrual cups than any other sustainable products. Since they aim to reduce climate change via encouraging all people who menstruate to switch to sustainable products, this finding will likely be of concern to ‘environmenstrual’ activists. As not all young people are able to use internal products, for reasons such as disability or neurodiversity, and others choose not to use them, this suggests that menstrual activists, social enterprises, and educators need to ensure that young people are aware of the diversity of reusable products that are available so that anyone, regardless

¹¹For example, one young woman said that cups were ‘in the Times 2 once. They had something on environmental products’.

of gender, age, ability, or religion, can access sustainable products (Alserhan, 2011; Khasnis et al., 2022; Rydström, 2020).

Resonating with studies that have celebrated Generation Z for being environmentally conscious, the young people in this research praised reusables as a sustainable alternative (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Zaman, 2022). Numerous participants, including the young men, celebrated sustainable products for being ‘very environmentally friendly’. One girl, whose comments about period poverty lay in stark contrast to the other participants’ focus on single-use products as a solution, praised reusable products for being a ‘more sustainable’ way of tackling menstrual inequities. The handful of participants who used reusables had decided to try them after seeing advertisements on social media, and then doing some online research to choose which product to buy or to learn how to use them. A young woman recalled, ‘Cups are advertised a lot on social media, so I did a bit of research and switched’. Reasons for buying reusables included their health, financial, and environmental benefits. Some young women explained that the guilt that they had felt for throwing away so many single-use products was a strong motivating factor for switching to reusables. One stated: ‘I feel so bad every time I put a pad in the bin. I hate it’. Another young woman explained that she had started to use a cup for health, wellbeing, and financial reasons:

I stopped using pads because [...] it’s a lot of money when you think about it. I know that every month I’d have to spend £10 on [pads] and £10 every month for a year is already £120, whereas if you buy a cup, that’s only like £10-£20 but it’s reusable, and I feel like comfort-wise it’s definitely better. [...] Plus, I’ve heard that in pads they’ve got like chemical things on them which [are] bad for you. Those are really the main reasons that made me change to cups.

Echoing studies about the advertisements of reusables, three girls explained that they had chosen to buy a reusable product from a social enterprise because the advertising was less stigmatising and ‘more genuine’ than those of bigger brands (Liu et al., 2023; Mucedola & Smith, 2022). One, for example, exclaimed, ‘They are more open than Tampax and Always adverts, which I hate’. Resonating with this aversion to the stigmatising messaging and lack of environmental responsibility of many large brands, another young woman asked, ‘You can get reusable pads, can’t you? Primark was selling them at one point. And I can remember them saying

like they were trying to look as if they are being eco-friendly. But really they are not'. For these three participants, a consideration of the authenticity of brand's messages is therefore very important in deciding which products to buy. Their attitudes echo comments made in other focus groups that young people are suspicious of collaborations between influencers and brands if they appear disingenuous. This resonates with recent studies that indicate that authenticity plays a key role in Generation Z's purchasing decisions (Campagna et al., 2023; Audrezet et al., 2020). Echoing existing research, all participants who had tried reusable menstrual products were very satisfied with them and some linked them to an increased sense of wellbeing (Shihata & Brody, 2019). One girl, who was very enthusiastic about environmental activism and had tried to encourage others to use reusable products, exhibited a sense of pride in her sole use of reusables: 'I'm an environmental nut job, everyone knows!' To which her friend replied, 'You're not a nut job, we all respect you for that'. Overall, my findings suggest that, for Generation Z, the idea of a 'sustainable period' is appealing because they are aware of the financial, health, and ecological benefits of reusable products. In addition, my findings suggest that young people are receptive to the messaging in reusable products advertisements as long as it is non-stigmatising and 'authentic'. Nevertheless, as only a minority of the female and non-binary teenagers had tried reusables, my findings illustrate that awareness of the benefits of reusables does not always translate to uptake, even if reusables are available for free.

Participants gave numerous reasons for being reticent to try reusables, which often linked to social and structural inequalities. Drawing on research which indicates that an aversion to touching menstrual blood is an internalisation of a societal perception of this blood as unhygienic, it was evident that menstrual stigma was one of the most significant barriers to uptake that my participants faced (Lamont et al., 2019; Owen, 2022; Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2013). Indeed, as all reusable products need to be washed or rinsed, users must handle their own menstrual blood. The thought of touching menstrual blood was unappealing to many participants who expressed that this was 'gross', 'awkward', and 'grim'. The word 'squeamish' was also used. Others expressed an aversion to trying menstrual cups because of the need to insert their fingers into their vaginas. Almost all these participants expressed a frustration at their own internalised menstrual stigma alongside a strong desire to overcome it so that they could use a product that aligns with their environmental

consciousness. One young woman, for instance, shuddered at the thought of inserting a cup:

It's hard because, obviously, I care so much about the environment, that's something that I really stand for, but period products that are good for the environment are *so invasive*, like the prospect of using one of those cups, it's just... you know, I'm fine with a tampon but beyond that I feel it's just too, I don't know, really...¹²

To give another example, a university student expressed admiration for her friends for using menstrual cups and wished she could also have a 'more sustainable period':

A lot of my friends use cups, I haven't yet, maybe I will, it's definitely better for the environment [...] I can't imagine going into – if I'm at uni – a public bathroom and tipping it out. I know this sounds so dumb, but I'm quite squeamish, I just don't know if I could deal with that. I know it's my own stigma, and it isn't like that!

As we can see, here, this student was aware of her own internalised menstrual shame and how this is a barrier to using a product that would benefit the environment and therefore fulfil her desire to be more environmentally conscious. Another girl explained that her aversion towards washing reusables was shared by her friends: 'I know there's more stigma around the cups. I've discussed this with my friends. People think it's a bit of a gross thing because, apparently, you have to wash them in the sink – all that sounds a bit gross to me!'. Indicating that parents' internalised menstrual stigma can also play a role in young people's access to reusable products, one environmentally conscious participant expressed her disappointment that her parents would not buy period underwear for her:

I try to talk to my parents about it, but they pushed back a bit just the thought of me having to handwash it. And I was like, "I don't mind handwashing them because period blood's not any different really to the blood in your veins, it's just the same, it just comes out a different place". In terms of hygiene, if you just wash it well and wash your hands well, there shouldn't really be any stigma attached to that. [...] I think one thing people get dis-

¹² Italics are used to indicate words that participants emphasised.

gusted by is that they have to wash the blood off themselves but if we break down that stigma and try and encourage that more, I think people would understand more.

In her reflection on her parents' attitudes and, as we can infer from her last sentence, those of society more broadly, this young woman perfectly encapsulated why menstrual stigma remains a barrier to the uptake of reusable products. If we combine her response with those of the participants who were reticent to try reusables because of their aversion to handling blood, we can argue that, unless menstrual stigma continues to decrease, many young people will still be reticent to try a product that not only benefits the planet, but also their own health, wellbeing, and finances (Hait & Powers, 2019; Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2013; Shihata & Brody, 2019). Thus, these findings underscore that the work conducted by those within the menstrual movement to reduce menstrual stigma is of utmost importance on a societal and environmental level. In addition, these findings demonstrate that their efforts to reduce menstrual stigma also cut across other health and social issues.

Besides menstrual stigma, other key concerns included the upfront cost of reusables, the built environment, a lack of knowledge on how to use them, and the perception that they are difficult to use. For example, one young woman expressed: 'When you're on your period you just kind of want to die anyway so you don't want a faff, you just want to curl up into a ball'. When asked why they were reticent to try reusable products, some young people explained that they did not know how to use them because they had never received formal education about them. This was typified by one participant who bemoaned: 'They never really spoke about [menstrual cups] or other ones that help with the environment. They only gave us two solid options and that were it'. Due to this lack of formal education, participants therefore feared leaking or, in the case of menstrual cups, accidentally spilling the blood everywhere, or hurting themselves when inserting or removing them. One participant, for example, found the prospect of using reusable underwear as 'quite scary' due to their not knowing how often to change them. Another participant, who was worried that she would leak if she used a cup, articulated, 'I'm open to using it in future, it's just getting over that fear'. Although some had seen videos on how to use menstrual cups, their responses indicated that it was difficult to apply these videos to actual usage. This was particularly apparent in

the following conversation in which two girls recounted a video in which a woman demonstrated how to use a menstrual cup:

FA: It just looked right awkward, like hard to use.

FB: I was going to say, I'd be scared...

FA: I don't get how it works.

Consequently, participants were unwilling to risk at least £15 on a product that they may struggle to use effectively. For instance, one girl stated that she had never tried a cup because she did not want to risk money on a product that might be too large: 'you can't send them back if they don't fit'. In schools and colleges that did not provide sinks within toilet cubicles, my participants explained that they felt too uncomfortable using sustainable products because they required rinsing during the day. One girl expressed horror at the thought of her classmates seeing her clean a cup in the communal sinks at school. Another stated: 'If you've got to nip out of the cubicle to wash [your cup] in the sink, and then there are other people in the toilet, it's a bit awkward'.¹³ Hence, young people are facing numerous, and often intersecting, obstacles to using reusable products which are based on inadequate education, facilities, and access to free reusable products. As these findings suggest, although social media has been invaluable in terms of awareness raising, it has not been as effective in encouraging people to try or switch to reusables. This is due to the existence of offline social inequalities and other obstacles such as the difficulty in translating instructions of a video into an offline use of a product. It is therefore evident that these are obstacles that cannot be addressed by the menstrual movement alone. Although menstrual activists can play a large role in awareness-raising and lobbying, a significant increase in the uptake of reusables is only possible with support from the government and educational institutions themselves.

Despite these numerous obstacles, however, there was also evidence within the focus groups that, if these obstacles are addressed, uptake of reusable products will likely increase. Indeed, almost all the participants who did not use reusables were enthusiastic to learn about them and

¹³ On the flip side, a greater percentage of participants at the university, in which accessible bathrooms included sinks, used cups than within any of the schools and colleges. Although age may be a factor in their willingness to use cups, some specifically mentioned that the existence of sinks within cubicles meant that using cups on campus was 'not a problem'.

would consider using them in the future. Many participants, regardless of gender, took advantage of the safe space offered by the focus group to ask questions about reusables. These included questions about usage, materials, and absorbency. For example, one girl asked the following questions about cups: ‘What are they made out of?’ and ‘How long do they last?’ Furthermore, the enthusiasm of some of the male participants to learn about sustainable menstrual products suggests that they could be powerful allies in supporting their friends and family members who would like to try reusables. Recalling a conversation he had in a mixed gender group of friends prior to the focus group, one young man recalled: ‘That’s why cups have come out which I think are interesting, because they’re reusable, but I’ve no idea how they work [...] I’ve asked many questions because I really think it must defy science!’ It is important to note, here, that these obstacles must be addressed from an intersectional perspective. It is important that young people are aware of the existence of, but also have access to, both internal and external products. As my focus groups and existing research demonstrates, some young people do not wish to use internal products due to personal, religious, ability, or cultural reasons (Alserhan, 2011; Khasnis et al., 2022). One participant expressed a personal preference for external products as follows, ‘It’s just the idea of me having something *in me*’. Some of the South Asian women in the study discussed why they, or their family, would not use internal products. For example, one explained:

From being Muslim, it does say, which is up to interpretation, putting something inside of you practically breaks your seal so the men will know you’re not a virgin. I don’t understand how that works whatsoever but a lot of traditional older people will have that perspective. If they wouldn’t want to do that, I wouldn’t put it against them, it’s their belief. So that could be one of the possible things where some ethnic minorities might not want to, if that makes sense?

Hence, as my findings suggest, if school and colleges offer a range of free internal and external reusable products (such as via the government’s free products scheme) alongside teaching young people how to use these products and answering their questions, the uptake of reusables is likely to increase significantly. Although this may be more complex to resolve, ensuring that young people have access to a sink inside a cubicle will also increase the likelihood of them switching to reusables. A combination of

continued awareness-raising from menstrual activists alongside the participation of schools and other institutions is therefore key to ensuring that Generation Z feel able to, and comfortable to, use a reusable product of their choice. Such success would have a significant and positive impact on young people's health, wellbeing, relationships, and access to education (Hait & Powers, 2019; Shihata & Brody, 2019; Zaman, 2022).

‘A LOT OF THE TIME PEOPLE DON’T KNOW WHAT’S NORMAL
AND WHAT’S ABNORMAL’: MENSTRUAL HEALTH, MENSTRUAL
EDUCATION, AND MENSTRUAL MISINFORMATION

As is evident in the interviews with menstrual activists that were conducted for this book, as well as in limited existing scholarship about the menstrual movement, educating audiences about menstrual health is a central element of the menstrual movement (Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). This not only includes broader education about menstrual pain and other menstrual symptoms, but also awareness-raising around related health conditions such as endometriosis, PCOS, and PMDD (Holowka, 2022; Stanek et al., 2023). It is important to note that the terms ‘menstrual health’ or ‘menstrual health conditions’, which are often used by activists within the menstrual movement, were not understood by all participants. Indicating that activists perhaps need to use more accessible language or include definitions in their work, participants often asked questions such as ‘what is menstrual health?’ or stated, ‘I’ve never heard that term before’. Before being asked to draw on any specific examples from the media, participants were also asked if they could name any menstrual health conditions. Echoing limited existing research on young people’s awareness of menstrual health conditions, most participants were unaware of endometriosis and the vast majority were unaware of PMDD or PCOS (Guidone, 2020; Randhawa et al., 2021). Two girls in the study, however, were very knowledgeable about menstrual health conditions, and, without prompting, mentioned PMDD and endometriosis. These participants, of whom one was at university and the other was at school, had seen these conditions mentioned on social media or had friends with these conditions and had, therefore, conducted online research to learn more about them. They could describe some symptoms of these conditions and correctly explain the acronyms. Another had heard of PMDD but could not recall the name of the condition: ‘There is PMS, but there

is also a more severe form of it where you can get quite severe depression beforehand'. Other participants responded to the question with general discussions about anxiety, depression, and PMS. For instance, one girl stated, 'Other than stress, anxiety and depression, that can come with being on your period, I don't really know about anything else'. Indicating that young people today are still aware of toxic shock syndrome (TSS), TSS was a popular topic of discussion. Many identified the cause as 'leaving in tampons for too long'. Two girls, for example, shared their experiences of being taught about TSS at school:

FA: Toxic Shock Syndrome!

FB: We get taught the danger very early on.

FA: I think that's one of the first things we did in PHSE at school. Before we even spoke about relationships and stuff, it was like 'don't leave your tampon in too long' – priorities!

In a different focus group, a young woman described a celebrity who had 'lost her arm' due to TSS. She added, 'People don't realise the dangers [...] if you're not conscious of when you're putting it in and when you're taking it out'. At the university, young women expressed a sense of solidarity and care for their friends by explaining that, to avoid TSS, they would remind each other to remove tampons when returning home after a party or staying out late. As TSS has been widely recognised by the medical profession for decades, printed warnings can be found on tampon packets, and awareness amongst teachers (who are likely to be millennials or older) is strong, it is therefore unsurprising that young people have learned more about TSS in school than other health conditions (Reame, 2020; Vostral, 2011). Indeed, as indicated by these examples, these simple messages around TSS are memorable and are helping young women and other people who menstruate to use products safely (Meyer et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, in contrast to the visibility of the three aspects of the menstrual movement that have already been explored in this chapter, only a minority of participants could remember seeing anything in the news media or on social media about endometriosis or other menstrual health conditions. Nine participants remembered seeing social media posts about menstrual health by organisations, 'influencer-activists', or Tiktokers (Semenzin, 2022). Apart from two examples of TSS, all the examples given were about endometriosis. These examples often focused on the long diagnostic delay that endometriosis patients can experience (Stanek

et al., 2023). For example, one young woman recalled seeing a video by an influencer who was encouraging her audience to persistently seek medical care if they were experiencing unbearable menstrual pain: ‘There was this Molly-Mae video. She got diagnosed with endometriosis and she told people to get checked out and push for the doctors to keep going’. One girl recalled, ‘I see [endometriosis] mentioned on feminist and body positive accounts’. Another stated, ‘On TikTok there’s been a few videos. I’ve heard people say that they might have got it, and they’re getting tested for it.’ A non-binary participant commented that they had seen endometriosis mentioned in the following context: ‘I’ve seen this a lot on social media, it’s quite relatable that they blame your hefty periods and your really bad period pains on the fact that you eat the wrong things and that you’re overweight. And they don’t then investigate why you’re in pain’. At the university, a young man and woman remembered signing a petition that called for schools to teach young people about endometriosis.

FA: There was a petition going around about endometriosis that I signed. It was popular in our college. That did bring a bit of awareness. I didn’t know about it before. The aim was to bring endometriosis into the sex ed curriculum. I learned a bit about endometriosis from this, but it didn’t lead to government changes. You sign it and you think things will change, but they didn’t.

MA: That petition was a pretty big thing. I remember that all my friends were posting about it. I read about endometriosis then, but I don’t remember it well now.

Others gave examples of friends and family with endometriosis who share their experiences on social media. For instance, one young woman articulated, ‘I don’t see anyone posting about endometriosis, other than my friend, but she has quite a small platform, maybe just 600 followers’ and another mentioned her aunt who posts about endometriosis on Facebook. Some participants stated that they had never seen anything in the media about endometriosis but had learned about it from family or friends. A young woman said, ‘I only know [about endometriosis] from friends telling me’, whilst a young man, who was one of three male participants who had heard of the condition, commented, ‘I only know about it because my friend is going through it and so I did some personal research’. As these examples indicate, the reduction of menstrual stigma has opened offline and online conversations about endometriosis (Holowka, 2022).

Furthermore, those who are encountering endometriosis on social media are also being exposed to conversations about dysmenorrhea and social norms around it.

Echoing the more frequent appearance of endometriosis in their social media feeds and during their interpersonal communications, participants had greater awareness of endometriosis than any other condition. When asked to list menstrual health conditions, endometriosis was by far the most common answer. Twenty-eight participants either mentioned or, if they could not remember the word, described endometriosis in response to being asked to name a menstrual health condition. Utterances such as, ‘Endo...endo... How do you say it? I know 1 in 10 women has it’ and ‘it’s called endo something’ were common. Even though most participants knew that endometriosis is a painful condition, some could not name any symptoms whatsoever: ‘I’ve heard of endometriosis, but I don’t remember what it is’. Two participants were able to recall that endometriosis is a condition in which tissue grows outside the uterus. Others tried to define the condition but made some inaccurate statements or did not finish their explanation. One girl, for example, stated: ‘Endometriosis, it is like tumours in your uterus, and the period doesn’t come as often, so it is harder to get pregnant’. Another young woman tried to define endometriosis but stopped as she was unsure, ‘It’s where... Isn’t it where you build...? I actually don’t know’. Others explained that they were aware of a condition that was ‘very painful’ and that was ‘very common’ but could ‘not quite remember the name’. Often, these discussions about the pain experienced by people with endometriosis drew on examples of friends or family with the condition. One girl, for example, exclaimed, ‘My cousin has endometriosis, it’s quite common but it’s not looked into. They make women feel like they’re being overdramatic’. The term ‘overdramatic’ was also used by a young woman in a different focus group to speak about endometriosis and other conditions that cause dysmenorrhea: ‘They’re really hard to diagnose, because people think that you’re just being overdramatic’. These conversations about endometriosis subsequently developed into conversations about a societal disregard for women’s pain. Echoing studies about women and other people with endometriosis, these conversations about pain included the difficulties patients experience in convincing doctors that their pain is atypical and requires investigation (Holowka, 2022; Randhawa et al., 2021). Two participants drew on their own experiences of dysmenorrhea and criticised the medical care they had received. For example, a non-binary participant shared their experience of

being disregarded by doctors: ‘Once I *actually* passed out because of the pain and then they realised how bad my pains were. Only then did they start to take me more seriously’. Another conversation about endometriosis culminated with a criticism of men for underestimating the severity of menstrual pain: ‘Boys say it’s not that bad and we’re just being over the top and they say you’re being a wuss for it’.¹⁴ Another participant said the following about doctors: ‘Instead of trying to help, they put you on birth control to stop the pain instead of looking further into it’. Although some boys in the focus groups had made dismissive comments about menstrual pain, two young men in the study were critical of societal norms around menstrual pain. One had learned about this from social media and the other had learned from a combination of offline conversations and online research. In response to a young woman in his focus group who named endometriosis as a menstrual health condition, one of the young men expressed compassion for his friend with endometriosis and criticised a societal disregard for strong menstrual pain:

I’ve heard that word, yeah, that’s when you have really, really bad periods, isn’t it? One of my friends has got it because they couldn’t pronounce it, that’s why I remember it, and I was like, “what does that mean?” I looked it up on Google. [...] You can have really painful ones [...] Obviously there’s a generic of periods are not a valid excuse to have a day off work type of thing, then [my friend] was like, “I’ve got this endo thing, where it’s actually really painful, it’s medically painful”.

As we can see, here, the openness of his friend about their experiences of endometriosis led to this young man conducting research to find out how he could support them. This example of compassion therefore indicates the powerful impact of speaking openly around menstrual health. Conversations such as this, which were recurring across the focus groups, therefore indicated a critical awareness of societal norms and expectations around pain. In this way, participants who expressed these views were echoing the messages of menstrual activists who are raising awareness of endometriosis, campaigning to reduce diagnostic delay, and supporting those with the condition (Buonaguidi & Perin, 2023; Stanek et al., 2023). Hence, even though my findings echo existing studies that demonstrate

¹⁴ Similarly, another young woman said with exasperation, ‘Men don’t know the amount of pain we are in’. Across numerous groups young women also mimicked men who they had heard saying ‘periods are not that bad’.

that most young people cannot accurately define endometriosis, they do, however, present a more positive outlook (Guidone, 2020; Randhawa et al., 2021). Indeed, my findings suggest not only that general awareness around endometriosis is growing, but also that some young people are becoming increasingly critical of a societal disregard for women's pain and increasingly aware that severe menstrual pain is not normal (Ten, 2018; Whelan, 2003). This awareness, which has been facilitated by the efforts of activists and others who are using social media to reduce menstrual stigma, could therefore lead more young people to seek medical attention or encourage their friends and family members to visit their general practitioner (Leeners et al., 2018; Seear, 2009).

One of the most alarming findings of this study is the widespread nature of mis/disinformation about menstrual health on social media. Many of the participants had encountered, and some had evidentially internalised, this mis/disinformation. Conversations revealed that they often encounter inaccurate or misleading information from influencers and TikTokers. In one focus group, for example, a conversation between two girls indicated that a menstrual myth on social media had rapidly spread disinformation and confusion amongst their school:

FA: You know that thing where they talk about people peeling? Is that real or fake?

FB: I don't know if it was real or fake.

FA: It's like, when you get sunburnt and your skin peels [...] People are saying that they experience that while on their periods and it's not normal if you don't. I can't tell if it's a massive insider joke to prank men and scare them, or if it's genuine. It's scary how water-tight it is, because there's not been any slip-up about it. But if anyone is talking about it, there are no comments saying this is fake.

FB: Most of them are, like "yeah, this is real". Is it? Why am I not peeling then?

FA: When you Google it, you don't really get any clear answer [...] Everyone believes it. If you see one of them videos, all the comments of people on the internet.

FB: Even like [boy's name redacted] came up to me, and asked, 'when you've been having your period, have you peeled before? And I'm like, "I'm so confused, I don't know who told you?"

As this example indicates, the 'peeling' myth that was circulated on social media not only reached young women but also spread to those who do

not menstruate and may, therefore, be more likely to believe it.¹⁵ Other examples of misinformation that young people had encountered on social media were linked to dysmenorrhea, endometriosis (including pregnancy as a cure for the condition), and how much bleeding to expect during menstruation. As evident in the ‘peeling’ example, online misinformation and disinformation about health from social media can engender anxiety amongst people if they do not have access to accurate information that dispels these myths (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022; Oh & Lee, 2019). Another example included scaremongering about the risks associated with menstrual cups.¹⁶ One young woman explained why she is too scared to use menstrual cups, ‘They can cause vaginal prolapse. It’s when your uterus falls out. [...] I was just scare mongered by that, it might have just been a random article, you know one of those pop-ups that just try to scare you’. Hence, although my findings suggest that social media has helped to improve knowledge about menstrual health to some extent, they also alarmingly indicate that young people’s overreliance on social media has also led to them internalising misinformation, myths, and fear. Thus, the disinformation and misinformation which young people encounter on social media can have a negative impact on their wellbeing and self-esteem.

Indeed, as we have already explored in this book, my findings indicate that young people are relying on social media to fill gaps in their knowledge because they are not receiving adequate menstrual health education in school (Bowen-Viner et al., 2022; Guidone, 2020). Thus, as we see in their struggles to identify misinformation on social media, they are unable to draw on their formal education to decide what they should or should not believe. For instance, one girl highlighted that social media does not give a clear impression of ‘what a typical period looks like’ and criticised the lack of menstrual education she had received at primary and secondary school. She then emphatically explained why she followed accounts about menstrual health: ‘I’m sick of not having enough info about periods!’ As their formal education had not provided them with the tools to judge

¹⁵This myth was created by Dakota Fink and was recreated by ‘haleybaylee’ who has over 10 million followers on TikTok. They tried to convince men that women’s skin ‘shed’ during menstruation. According to an online news article, this prank went viral on TikTok and highlighted the low levels of menstrual literacy amongst the general population (*News 18*, 13th May 2021).

¹⁶No research has identified a link between menstrual cup usage and uterine prolapse (Nunes-Carneiro et al., 2018).

which symptoms or menstrual experiences are atypical or typical, participants often relied on social media and search engines to find out about menstrual symptoms such as cramps, bleeding, and mood changes and menstrual health conditions such as endometriosis and PCOS. One non-binary participant who had lived with severe menstrual pain for a few years without realising this was not typical, explained why it took them so long to realise that they needed medical attention:

Periods aren't taught very well; a lot of the time people don't know what's normal and what's abnormal. It's not just bleeding for a week, sometimes it's bloating and headaches and hormonal changes that people who haven't experienced a period before might not know about.

It was evident in the responses of some participants that this lack of education was compounded by a school culture in which menstrual pain is minimised. As the example below indicates, this dismissal of menstrual pain perpetuates the social norm that women and other people who menstruate should be able to tolerate, or continue normal daily routines, with any level of menstrual pain (Hintz, 2022).

FA: I think that wouldn't happen if there was more support in schools. I know I've definitely done it in high school, not come in, if I have PE or something, just because it's been a bit too painful. If I've told the teacher, they've generally just been, like, "eugh, just bare through it", even female teachers, which is weird because you'd think they'd understand.

FB: Yeah, touching on that, I feel like schools don't understand. If you ring up and say, "I'm in a lot of pain, I'm on my period, I feel really, really sick", they're like, "well, it's just your period". But if you were sick because you had food poisoning, they'd be like, "don't come to school, stay at home". But because you feel sick and you're in pain because of your period, you basically need to toughen up and get on with it - but periods can be really painful.

FA: You usually lie, don't you? I've never said I'm not coming in because of that and usually I make up an excuse like I'm ill or sick.

FB: I just feel like schools don't understand that it's still pain.

FC: They don't take you seriously.

When we examine my female and non-binary participants' lack of surprise at the statistic that 50% of girls in the United Kingdom have missed school due to menstrual pain alongside the young men's lack of awareness about

this fact, we can understand the far-reaching consequences of such a culture (*Glamour*, 2019).¹⁷ Indeed, after reading this statistic in the article about Amika George, participants uttered: ‘it’s sad that I expect this’, ‘some people I know missed a full day of school because they couldn’t get out of bed because their cramps were so bad’, ‘my first response would be that it is shocking, but then, when you think about it more, it isn’t. I know people that can’t deal with it some days, so they stay at home’, and ‘I take this as so normal. If one of my friends was off school because she’s on her period, I wouldn’t blink about it. It’s too normal’. Others shared their own experiences, ‘I’ve done it before’, and ‘it’s relatable because I’ve missed quite a lot of school’. Hence, my findings indicate that the lack of menstrual health education in school and a societal dismissal of women’s pain that materialises in a school setting, are leaving young people ill equipped to identify misinformation on social media as well as understand whether their menstrual cycles are typical. Thus, this study demonstrates the vital importance that schools provide young people with accurate and non-stigmatising menstrual education and foster an environment in which they can ask questions about menstrual health. Finally, it is important that schools develop young people’s media and digital literacy skills so that they can think critically about the menstrual health content they see on social media. Only under these circumstances, will young people be less prone to absorbing myths, internalising anxieties, and spreading misinformation.

‘IT’S NOT JUST GIRLS WHO HAVE PERIODS’: THE INCLUSION OF TRANSGENDER MEN AND NON-BINARY PEOPLE WITHIN THE MENSTRUAL MOVEMENT AND THE MEDIA

The most common way through which menstrual activists demonstrate their support for transgender and non-binary people who menstruate is to use gender inclusive language (Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Kosher et al., 2023). As evident in Chaps. 2 and 3 of this book, most menstrual activists in the United Kingdom use inclusive language such as, ‘menstruating women and people’, ‘women and transgender people who menstruate’, or

¹⁷ Examples of young men’s lack of awareness about the impact of menstrual pain on absenteeism were given in the previous chapter. They included, ‘I knew that sometimes girls don’t come in for the day, but I didn’t really think much about why until now’ and ‘I’ve now realised how serious this is. The statistics are way more drastic than I expected’.

‘menstruators’.¹⁸ Although the majority of participants only spoke about women when discussing menstruation, a third of the participants used gender inclusive language. Two participants from the private schools (both of whom had seen transgender people talking about menstruation on social media) used gender inclusive language. At two of the colleges (in which there were three non-binary participants) and at the university (in which all participants were cisgender), almost all participants used gender inclusive language. In these groups, phrases such as ‘women and people who menstruate’, ‘people who have periods’, and ‘someone who has a period’, were used with ease. Some participants also corrected themselves when they accidentally forgot to use gender inclusive language. Others politely interjected into discussions that solely referred to women through encouraging others in the focus group to use inclusive language. One girl, for example, explained to the others, ‘It’s not just girls who have periods’. Another young woman said, ‘You don’t need to be a woman to have periods’. By uttering, ‘I mean anyone who menstruates’, a further participant corrected herself after she mentioned only women. One young woman expressed her allyship through recounting that she encourages friends to use the phrase ‘women and people who menstruate’. Framing this as an easy way to be an ally, she expressed, ‘It’s just a little add on!’ Male participants at the college and university also made careful distinctions between transgender men and cisgender men through phrases such as ‘as a boy who doesn’t menstruate’. As previous research from the United Kingdom suggests that young people perceive menstruation as an experience that is unique to women, my findings indicate that young people are becoming increasingly aware that not everyone who menstruates is a cisgender woman and that this should be recognised in how we communicate about menstruation (Newton, 2016; Fingerson, 2005). Furthermore, it suggests that, for many young people, changing how they communicate about menstruation is a simple way to be an ally to transgender and non-binary people.

Since the participants who used gender inclusive language about menstrual experience usually mentioned friends who were transgender or non-binary and/or stated that they engaged with LGBTQ+ content on social media, my findings suggest that the increasing visibility of transgender

¹⁸ In order not to influence my participants’ linguistic choices and to observe whether they automatically used inclusive language, questions about transgender and non-binary people’s menstrual experiences were left until the end of the focus groups.

people both offline and online is helping to create a more equitable society for Generation Z (Gales, 2023; Razavi, 2024;). In a focus group that included four girls and one non-binary college student, all participants used inclusive language and were keen to advocate for trans and non-binary people. This was, for example, evident in a story that two of these participants shared about raising money for people experiencing period poverty. One of the girls stated that they chose to fundraise for ‘Bloody Good Period’ because they ‘wanted to find [an organisation] that was trans-inclusive and used “people” instead of just women’. Furthermore, when asked what they knew about the experiences of transgender people who menstruate, two young people in one focus group and two girls in a different school expressed their views that all bathrooms, including those for men, should have bins. As one girl illustrated, this would not only benefit transgender men who want to throw away menstrual products but also any men who need to throw away absorbent products or other items. She stated: ‘Bins are just nice, you know, it’s always nice to have a bin there, I think. It doesn’t *have* to be for menstrual products but, obviously, it would help if it was there for people who need to use it for that’. Agreeing that bins are an unassuming way to support transgender men, her friend explained, ‘it wouldn’t cause a big problem to put a bin in the toilet’. At one of the colleges in the study, a male and female participant praised the fact that their college supplied menstrual products in a gender-neutral bathroom and expressed the importance that these products should also be available in men’s bathrooms. A girl linked the lack of products in men’s bathrooms to a general societal disregard for, and a mainstream media erasure of, trans men:

In college, we have a unisex bathroom. And we have period products in those bathrooms. A lot of the time those won’t be in men’s bathrooms. If the bathrooms aren’t unisex, people don’t really take in consideration trans men who do have periods. They are just ignored. Usually, when period products are being advertised as well, it is usually to a specific group, and they are made very feminine.

These findings therefore provide further evidence that young people are becoming increasingly aware of how language and physical spaces can be adapted to include transgender people. Furthermore, by criticising environments and discourses that exclude transgender people and by encouraging others to use inclusive language, cisgender teenagers are

demonstrating their allyship. Thus, in contrast to previous generations of young people, thanks to the increasing visibility of transgender people both online and offline, teenagers are much less likely to view menstruation as a uniquely female experience (Fingerson, 2005; Kosher et al., 2023). This erosion of gender essentialism over the last 15 years is significant. It demonstrates that this generation of young people is less likely to perpetuate harmful gendered stereotypes, less likely to conform to gendered expectations, and less willing to accept gender inequities (Atwood et al., 2024; Gales, 2023; Saguy et al., 2021). Indeed, as the previous chapter of this book illustrates, the teenaged participants use less stigmatising language and fewer gendered stereotypes than previous generations of young people (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2013; Newton, 2016). Hence, both my participants' use of inclusive language and their rejection of gender stereotypes and stigmatising language indicate a gradual positive societal shift in youth attitudes towards gender equality as well as Generation Z's commitment to building a more equitable society that will benefit both cisgender and transgender people (Razavi, 2024; Roy et al., 2019).

Although some participants personally knew transgender and non-binary people who shared their experiences, social media was the most common source of information about trans and non-binary menstrual experiences across all focus groups. When asked what they had seen on social media about transgender people who menstruate, participants spoke about gender dysphoria, activism to encourage organisations to use gender inclusive language, and the lack of bins in men's bathrooms. A young woman recounted that she saw an online campaign about inclusive language that was led by a transgender man. She finished her description of his posts by exclaiming, 'products in Boots etc. should stop being labelled as "feminine hygiene" so that they apply to anyone who menstruates rather than just someone who identifies as female'. Other participants gave examples of TikTokers or influencers who had discussed their experience of gender dysphoria. One young woman explained,

I know that a lot of trans men they get...is it gender dysphoria? Where they feel a little bit like they're not the gender that they want to be. I know that a lot of trans men experience that if they still get periods. When they bleed it just feels like they're still a woman when obviously you don't need to be a woman to have periods. They hate it when it's that time of the month,

because it just feels like they're taking two steps back and they're not fully in the gender identity they want to be.

Thus, as we can see in this girl's simple explanation of gender dysphoria and in other participants' discussions of this topic, social media has helped to raise awareness of trans experiences amongst young people of all genders. Furthermore, her comment 'obviously you don't need to be a woman to have periods' illustrates that, for her, it is normal for people to recognise that menstruation is not an experience that is unique to women (Fingerson, 2005). Nevertheless, although a non-binary participant praised social media for raising some awareness about gender dysphoria, they also illustrated that, to achieve gender equality, young people should also receive formal education about this topic in schools. They argued that it should be taught alongside other menstrual symptoms. They said,

nobody really talks about other symptoms you might have while you're on your period, like pre-menstrual depression. Or even gender dysphoria from having your period, which can really affect people. Because people aren't educated on what that is, they don't know what's normal and what they can talk about.

Echoing findings in the previous chapter about young people's views of menstrual education in schools and the potential for social media to spread misinformation, this participant underscores the importance that young people receive accurate and inclusive information about how the menstrual cycle can affect mood (Guidone, 2020; Kochhar & Kaur, 2023). Furthermore, their suggestion of including gender dysphoria alongside other menstrual symptoms indicates that this would help to normalise more open discussion of trans issues. Indeed, their belief that many young people are unaware of gender dysphoria or how transgender people experience menstruation was confirmed by the responses of participants in different schools who, for example, were unaware that not all people who menstruate identify as women or confused transgender men with transgender women. It is therefore evident that young people are able, to some extent, to fill gaps in their education about transgender and non-binary people's menstrual experiences via engaging with social media. However, as existing research and my focus groups have illustrated, this can lead to their internalising misinformation and believing that gender dysphoria is a topic that should not be discussed (Kausar et al., 2023; Selkie et al., 2020).

Thus, as evident in the section about menstrual health, it is important that the knowledge that young people have gained on social media about menstruation is complemented by accurate and non-stigmatising formal education about menstrual symptoms and how to manage them.

Even though no explicitly transphobic views were expressed in the focus groups, it was evident that all participants who were aware that transgender men and other gender minority groups can menstruate had been exposed to transphobia on social media. These participants commented on, and condemned, the online transphobia they had witnessed. Sharing her thoughts about a non-binary TikToker, a young woman reflected, ‘They were quite comfortable saying, “I’m still happy with my period even though I don’t identify as a girl”’. The people commenting had a really big problem with that and I don’t know why, because it doesn’t affect them’. Another young woman illustrated how transphobic ‘backlash’ on social media can also harm cisgender women. She criticised these transphobic comments not only for ‘invalidating’ transgender people but also ‘cis women who do not bleed’. This was echoed in a different focus group in which a girl stated, ‘not all women have periods, but that doesn’t mean they are not women’. A different young woman condemned online transphobia as follows: ‘People disregard [transgender men] because they still have periods. It’s disgusting’. A non-binary student added to these discussions by considering the erasure that non-binary people experience in online spaces:

I’ve seen it become a lot more normal. A lot of people do drawings of trans men on their periods and a lot of trans men are doing talks on their periods. Non-binary people, I see that as well. I see quite a lot of hate towards non-binary people, especially people that are feminine presenting, who talk about it and say that they face dysphoria. A lot of people say, “well you can’t, because you’re like a woman anyway”. Usually that’s by trans men or what some people would call “TERFs”, people who gate-keep the trans community.

Although this non-binary participant celebrated the fact that transgender people are becoming increasingly visible online, their response reveals that ‘non-binary people face constant questioning of their identity’ on social media both from within and outside the trans community (Box, 2020; Sharp & Shannon, 2020, p. 137). The views of the focus group participants reveal that young people are unable to learn about trans identity, or,

in the case of transgender and non-binary teenagers, unable to explore their own identities without being exposed to transphobia. Nevertheless, despite the potential of such content to perpetuate gendered and other social inequities, my research reveals a strong and emerging sense of allyship within Generation Z that, as long as it is supported with formal education, could lead to a more equitable society (Razavi, 2024; Roy et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this chapter explored young people's awareness of, and attitudes towards, four areas on which the menstrual movement in Great Britain is focussed. This chapter indicates that, thanks to social media in particular, young people in Great Britain are becoming increasingly aware of issues around menstrual equity including health inequalities, period poverty, the menstrual experiences of transgender and non-binary people, and the negative impact of single-use menstrual products on the environment. Indeed, despite the neoliberal discourses they encounter on social media, it is evident that many young people view 'period poverty' as a collective rather than individual concern. Nevertheless, there are many areas in which young people would benefit from further support, awareness-raising, education, and advocacy. As the young men in this research indicated, to attract their attention, improve their attitudes towards menstruation, and improve their knowledge about menstrual health, it is important that the menstrual movement creates social media content that better engages men. This could involve collaborations between menstrual activists and social media accounts with large male audiences and the framing of menstruation within contexts to which men can relate. Ultimately, as my findings demonstrate, the change that will have the greatest impact on young people is improved access to high-quality menstrual education. Young people of all genders would benefit significantly from more comprehensive menstrual health lessons at school which include accurate, inclusive, and relevant information that is conveyed in a non-stigmatising manner. Topics should include information about menstrual pain and pain management, a variety of menstrual symptoms, common menstrual health conditions, and how to use a variety of menstrual products (including internal, external, reusable, and disposable products). Considering that some pupils are unable to, or do not want to, use certain products due to their disabilities, cultural backgrounds, and/

or religions, menstrual education lessons are a great way to encourage young people to try reusables. As my findings indicate, it is important that these lessons include opportunities for tactile engagement with the products such as folding cups and pouring red liquid onto menstrual underwear. Furthermore, it is vital that schools develop young people's media and digital literacy skills so that they can think critically about the menstrual health information that they encounter online. Only under these circumstances will young people be less prone to absorbing myths and internalising anxieties about menstruation. Finally, it is vital that boys feel included in conversations about menstruation and learn, such as via menstrual education in primary school, how they can be allies. Activists must therefore continue to work with the UK government and directly with schools to enhance the menstrual education curriculum and the effectiveness of the free period product scheme. This work should ensure that teachers are effectively supported so that they can educate their pupils about menstruation in an informed and non-stigmatising manner. In addition, it is imperative that staff and students discuss which menstrual products should be ordered and, making sure that both normal timetables and exams are taken into consideration, where they should be stored. These changes would ensure that the next generation of pupils feel confident to discuss menstruation and related topics with each other and with staff in their schools. This cultural change could enhance interpersonal communication and lead to improved access to products, medical care, and other forms of support, as well as enhancing the health and wellbeing of young women and others who menstruate.

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Conclusion

The Menstrual Movement in the Media is the first study to provide empirical evidence that the menstrual movement is having a positive impact on young people in Great Britain. This includes shaping their attitudes, behaviours, interpersonal relationships, and wellbeing. Overall, menstrual stigma has decreased, awareness around related health and social issues has increased, and girls as well as other young people who menstruate are feeling an increased sense of connection and solidarity with each other. Menstruation is shifting from a very private experience to one of collective concern. It is evident that social media, and, to some extent, news media, have played a key role in disseminating the discourses and aims of menstrual activists that have engendered some of these changes. Nevertheless, as this conclusion illustrates, some aims of the menstrual movement have been realised to a greater extent than others. Combining my interviews with activists and focus groups with teenagers, this chapter also concludes on whether activists' fears about the negative impact of the media on young people have been realised. Furthermore, drawing on my findings from across *The Menstrual Movement in the Media*, this conclusion provides recommendations as to how activists, organisations, and institutions can better support young people and on which areas they should focus their attention (Tomlinson & Young, 2023).¹

¹ Some of these recommendations have emerged from consultation with menstrual health advocate and educator Acushla Young. Our recommendations on how to communicate

The normalisation of menstruation, as evident in young people's increasing comfort in discussing this topic with family, friends, classmates (of all genders), and teachers, has been the movement's greatest influence so far. *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* therefore provides empirical evidence that the menstrual movement has, by encouraging open and frank conversations about menstruation, improved young people's confidence, wellbeing, and self-esteem. As compared with research that was conducted prior to the 'Year of the Period' (2015), the teenagers of Generation Z are far more confident to speak about menstruation than previous generations of teenagers (Newton, 2016). Influencers, TikTokers, Youtubers, and memes have all contributed to the creation of a public space in which menstruation has become far more visible than ever before. As a result of the increased mediation of menstruation on social media and in news media, menstruation has become a more matter of fact aspect of daily life in Great Britain. It has become a topic about which many young people feel able to speak for reasons of either necessity or desire. Far more young people than ever before are openly discussing menstruation with their family and female (and other menstruating) friends. For some girls and non-binary teenagers, the increased presence of menstruation in the media has even emboldened them to have conversations with male friends and male teachers with the intention of further reducing menstrual stigma and improving men's knowledge of menstrual experiences. Young men have become more accustomed to hearing conversations about menstruation and many recognise that it is a topic about which they should learn and with which they should engage. Some of the young men in my focus groups viewed their role as one of active listening and, when their friends mentioned their menstrual cramps, responded with supportive comments. Even though bullying still occurs and derogatory comments are still made, my findings indicate that, overall, the attitudes of young men in Generation Z are significantly more positive and supportive than previous generations (Newton, 2016; Peranovic & Bentley, 2017). In addition, my participants' deconstruction, dismissal, and challenge to stigmatising discourse on social media indicate that Generation Z has become increasingly critical of menstrual stigma and less likely to internalise it than previous generations of teenagers. Although speaking about menstruation or actively listening to other people's experiences may appear as a trivial

effectively with young people about menstruation via social media can be found here: <https://www.mariatomlinson.co.uk/advocacy>

outcome to many outside the menstrual movement or feminist scholarship, this is certainly not the case. My original finding that young people are more confident to talk about menstruation than ever before and that this is leading to positive outcomes for their wellbeing is evidence that the menstrual movement has inspired a significant step towards gender equality. If women and others who menstruate can speak openly about menstruation and feel confident to do so, this will help them to access information about menstruation (such as being able to ask questions about menstrual health during class, seek advice from trusted adults, or articulate their concerns to medical professionals). It can also lead to their experiencing greater inclusion in the workplace (such as by speaking with line managers about adjustments or flexible working), to their receiving better medical care (such as for PMDD and endometriosis), and to their accessing products (such as by asking teachers to order certain products that will benefit them). Furthermore, increased confidence to speak about menstruation could encourage young people to engage in menstrual advocacy and therefore strengthen the menstrual movement.

It is important to acknowledge that there is still more work to be done to reduce menstrual stigma, shame, and embarrassment. According to activists and participants in my research, women from faith and ethnic minority groups continue to experience greater social inequalities due to menstrual stigma as well as a broader lack of visibility in mainstream media. The groups that were mentioned the most across both datasets were Muslim women and South Asian women as well as those who are part of both groups. Based on my interviews and focus groups, we can argue that the lack of representation of activists from these minority groups, alongside the limited mediation of the menstrual experiences of women and other people from these groups, perpetuates this stigma. This silence is damaging because it falsely implies that women from these groups neither speak about menstruation nor are involved in advocacy. It also positions the experiences of these groups as less important or less recognised within British society. Furthermore, this silence perpetuates the social inequalities that women from these groups face because their experiences and views will receive less consideration in government policy, health care practices, and the menstrual education curriculum. More diverse media coverage would not only help to reduce menstrual stigma and other inequalities amongst these communities, but it would also provide role models and examples of lived experience to which young people could relate. It would also help those from outside these groups to better understand and empathise with the

experiences of their friends, colleagues, or others with whom they interact. It is important to note that a wish for greater diversity in the news media, and to some extent on social media, was not solely expressed by my participants from minority groups. Due to an appreciation for collective responsibility, this change was desired by participants of all ethnicities. Based on my findings, I therefore recommend that activists continue to amplify the voices of people from marginalised groups on social media as well as encourage journalists to interview or foreground the menstrual experiences and advocacy of women and other people from ethnic minority and faith groups. Furthermore, children from faith groups would benefit from a school curriculum which considers their experiences and beliefs. This could be part of a more intersectional and inclusive approach to menstrual education that, as demonstrated by my teenaged participants, would be of interest to young people of all faiths and backgrounds. In the meantime, these groups would benefit from accurate, inclusive, and faith informed menstrual education within community settings and other safe spaces. This could include education for women of all ages in spaces such as temples or community centres that might include topics such as how to use sustainable products and how to advocate for yourself in a medical setting.

Other minority groups that interviewees and focus group participants chose to highlight included working-class women and people who menstruate, women and other menstruating people with disabilities, transgender men, and non-binary people. Although chronic illnesses that are associated with menstrual health were frequently explored by interviewees, very few spoke about how their advocacy addresses neurodiversity and other disabilities or impairments. The limited evidence from my study suggests that more research is needed to fully understand the intersections between gender, menstruation, and disability. It is then vital that recommendations from this research feed into health, education, and workplace policies. As the interviews and focus groups indicate, transgender and non-binary people who menstruate face numerous barriers. Social media is a double-edged sword for transgender and non-binary people. Although social media has led to greater awareness of the needs of this community and has encouraged some young people to use inclusive language, feel empathy, and express solidarity, it is also rife with derogatory discourses that position trans people as a threat, question their legitimacy, and marginalise their needs and experiences. This discrimination against transgender people, which has been perpetuated by discourses that position the inclusion of trans people as a form of erasure for cisgender women, is not solely having negative repercussions for transgender people: it is also

harming women. Women within the menstrual movement who are allies continue to be subject to harassment for using inclusive language or supporting transgender communities. The issue of language is also continuing to disrupt, complicate, and diminish the activities and outcomes of menstrual activism. There are therefore added obstacles and less time in which to undertake effective collective action. In this way, women, who are by far the largest audience and beneficiaries of menstrual activism, are receiving less support. My research is therefore original in its evidencing of the negative impact of transphobia and trans-exclusionary radical feminism on trans people, cisgender women, and the feminist movement itself. Since I conducted my fieldwork for this book in 2020 and 2021, the climate of transphobia in Great Britain has significantly heightened. We are witnessing increasing attacks on transgender and non-binary people alongside the women who support and advocate for them. J.K. Rowling, journalists, and other powerful individuals have continued to question the legitimacy of trans people and argue that their inclusion is a threat to women's rights and safety. These discourses have had an increasing influence on, and visibility within, political communication in Great Britain. This was evident, for example, in a speech by the Conservative prime minister Rishi Sunak in October 2023 and during campaigns for the 2024 election.² Feminism as a movement is being undermined and some of those who are trans-inclusive fear to identify as 'feminists' in case they are seen as transphobic. Feminism as a movement is therefore becoming increasingly polarised and fractured. Unless the differences between these aspects of the feminist movement are reconciled and journalists stop fueling this divide, menstrual activists will continue to exist in an environment that disrupts and undermines their work.

When comparing my focus groups and interviews, it is evident that there has been an enormous oversight within the menstrual movement. When asked about their aims and target audiences, very few of the activists whom I interviewed mentioned engaging with cisgender men. Besides indicating the importance that children of all genders are educated about menstrual health, no participants outlined strategies to improve men's knowledge and perceptions of menstruation or strategies that encourage male allyship. Demonstrating that there is a disconnect between the

² He stated, 'We shouldn't get bullied into believing that people can be any sex they want to be. They can't. A man is a man and a woman is a woman—that's just common sense' (*The Independent* 2023) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/rishi-sunak-gender-speech-transphobic-b2424369.html>.

menstrual movement's tactics and young people's experiences, needs, and desires, the focus groups revealed that young men are a captive audience but are not yet effectively being targeted or engaged by mediations of menstruation and menstrual advocacy. My focus groups revealed that young men are keen to support girls and other people who menstruate but often do not know how to do so. They not only want to learn when they can, or should, speak about menstruation, but they also want to know how to communicate about menstruation in a manner that neither embarrasses nor upsets girls and others who menstruate. To address this gap, organisations (such as educational settings and workplaces) need to include men in conversations about menstruation and menstrual health. For children in schools, this could include teaching and discussion on how boys can be allies. In workplaces, this could include integrating menstruation and menstrual health conditions into broader policies, training, or events on health and wellbeing. As visual communication can help to create conversation and normalise stigmatised topics, workplaces and schools could place posters about menstrual products and other forms of support in spaces that are accessed by people of all genders. Increased discussion and visibility of menstruation and related health conditions, such as PMDD, will benefit all members of society such as by emboldening people to seek support for their mental health. These conversations are therefore an important step towards tackling ableism and other forms of inequalities in schools and workplaces.³ It is necessary to emphasise that unless men, such as fathers, brothers, friends, classmates, colleagues, managers, and teachers feel able to speak about menstruation and know how to be allies, menstrual inequities will continue negatively to impact the lives of girls and others who menstruate.

Although women, girls, and others who menstruate must remain the focus of the menstrual movement, it is imperative that activists devise strategies to encourage and inform male allyship. Since the male participants with the most knowledge about menstruation and menstrual equity had learned about these topics from mediated content that is not primarily focussed on menstruation, such as videos about studying, sport, or

³For more recommendations on how to create a more inclusive workplace for employees who menstruate please see BS30416 Menstruation, Menstrual Health and Menopause in the Workplace (<https://knowledge.bsigroup.com/articles/bs-30416-menstrual-and-menopausal-health-matters-in-your-workplace>). The research findings from this book shaped some of the recommendations in this guidance including those related to inclusion, communication, and male allyship.

comedy, my findings suggest that this is an effective way to engage men in conversations about menstruation. Hence, to better engage men, activists could create content that frames menstruation within contexts to which men can easily relate. This could include collaboration with organisations, groups, or individuals (such as comedians, influencers, and athletes) that have a large and engaged male following. Indeed, as my focus groups elucidate, comedy that is based on accurate information and lived experiences can be an effective way to destigmatise menstruation and improve audiences' knowledge of related health and social issues. Although my research demonstrates that activists' fears that period memes spread derogatory stereotypes about women are not unfounded, my research has surprisingly uncovered that memes are playing an important role in destigmatising menstruation, creating a sense of solidarity amongst women and people who menstruate, and encouraging light-hearted conversation within mixed gender groups. As young men primarily encounter menstruation via memes and remember their messages, activists could use this format to share engaging and accurate information about menstruation, menstrual health, and allyship.

One of the most alarming findings from my focus groups is that most young people still have limited knowledge about menstrual health. This includes confusion over which symptoms are typical or atypical and limited awareness and understanding of conditions such as endometriosis, PCOS, or PMDD. As pupils are not learning about these topics at their schools (or are not being taught effectively about menstrual health), they often must rely on social media to fill the gaps in their knowledge. Although menstrual advocates disseminate accurate, informative, and useful information about menstrual health on platforms that young people access, my interviewees feared that young people would still be influenced by misinformation and stigma in these online spaces. Indeed, my findings demonstrate that not only do young people encounter misinformation and content that aims to engender anxiety, but, due to a lack of media literacy skills, they also struggle to identify mis/disinformation. As a result, they are internalising inaccurate information that can be detrimental to their health and wellbeing. Even though it is important that activists continue to share accurate information via social media and news media, it is vital that they continue to work with the government and schools to ensure that all pupils receive inclusive, accurate, holistic, and non-stigmatising education that fills the gaps that were identified during my focus groups. This includes teaching young people about menstrual pain

(including how to identify when it is typical or atypical), mood-related symptoms of menstruation, menstrual health conditions, menstrual equity, and a range of reusable and single-use menstrual products. As the young people in my focus groups appreciated seeing images of people (especially women of colour) taking part in the menstrual movement and many felt empowered by these focus materials, lessons could also include examples of menstrual activism by people from a range of gender, faith, and ethnic minority groups. As evidenced by my male participants' concerns about speaking about menstruation as well as the hesitation of many female and non-binary participants to speak about menstruation in front of men, lessons about menstruation should not just allow boys to attend but should also provide them with the tools to understand when and how they can communicate about menstruation without causing shame or anxiety. Teachers could therefore show examples of male allies as well as facilitate discussions amongst pupils that lead to the establishment of ground rules around inclusive and supportive communication about menstruation. In order that lessons do not perpetuate stigma, it is also important that teachers are effectively trained and supported so that they can teach about menstruation in a non-stigmatising, sympathetic, and accurate manner. Furthermore, it would also be highly beneficial for media literacy skills to be woven into menstrual education as well as more broadly across the entire school curriculum. Without the skills to critically evaluate social media and news content, young people may continue to absorb inaccurate information about menstrual health as well as reproductive health more broadly.

My research indicates that although social media has improved awareness of reusable menstrual products, this awareness only rarely translates into uptake. The menstrual movement has played a role in this, but it is usually via advertising that young people are learning about these products. Nevertheless, as indicated by my interviews and focus groups, some young people are still unaware of their existence or have only heard of menstrual cups. Even though most young women and non-binary people in my study had seen reusable products on social media, very few had tried them. Reasons for low uptake included a lack of knowledge about how to use them, views of them requiring greater effort than single-use products, a lack of awareness of the existence of external reusable products, fears that they would leak, and an aversion towards touching menstrual blood. It is also important to note that even when young people had seen videos of how to use sustainable products or videos about their absorbency, they

still felt ill-prepared to use them. These findings therefore suggest that offline tactile demonstrations, such as inserting a menstrual cup into a tube, pouring liquid on period underwear, and fitting reusable pads into underwear, would likely lead to greater uptake of reusable products. The usage of these products could improve their health, wellbeing, and offer a more sustainable solution to menstrual inequities. Young people will benefit most when reusable products are part of their menstrual education in schools but could also benefit from workshops led by activists. It is imperative, however, that schools continue to order, and teach pupils about, a variety of menstrual products, including those which are single-use, so that young people can make informed choices that best suit their preferences, beliefs, and (dis)abilities.

Besides ensuring that pupils are shown a variety of menstrual products during classes, my research indicates that schools and colleges could also reduce menstrual inequities through the creation of a more supportive and open culture in which students can raise concerns or ask for change that benefits them. According to my participants, some schools and colleges do not have free products available, others only order single-use products, and others place products in places that are difficult to access or in spaces in which young people feel too embarrassed to take them. Due to anxieties about leaking, consequences of poor access to menstrual products include reduced concentration during exams or classes. This can have a detrimental impact on their education and future prospects. No pupils in this research had raised these concerns with staff and, when approached after the focus groups, teachers were generally unaware but were keen to find a solution. It is therefore important that staff involve pupils in decisions over which products to order and where they should be stored. This must consider any changes to the usual routines of pupils such as during exam season. If young men are also included in these conversations, they may also be more aware of how they can support girls and other classmates. An improved culture around menstruation and increased access to menstrual products would reduce menstrual inequities within educational settings.

Although accurate and inclusive menstrual education and a supportive culture around menstruation are vital for the health and wellbeing of young people, the findings of my focus groups and interviews indicate that, to improve the lives of young people with conditions such as PMDD, endometriosis, and PCOS, this must be combined with activities that target practitioners, services, and those who can fund research on menstrual health. Due to myths and misinformation, such as those that were

mentioned during the focus groups and were criticised by my interviewees from the menstrual movement, it is important that medical practitioners receive training that debunks myths around these conditions (such as menopause and pregnancy being ‘cures’ for endometriosis). Furthermore, as participants across the focus groups and interviews shared their own lived experiences of their pain being dismissed, ignored, or undermined by teachers, doctors, and others, it is important that medical training incorporates lived experiences of menstrual health conditions. As my findings emphasise, change is required on a societal level so that those who experience atypical menstrual pain are believed, supported, and treated effectively. This dismissal is rooted in patriarchal attitudes that dismiss and minimise women’s pain, frame severe menstrual pain as something ‘normal’ that can be ignored, stigmatise mental health, frame women as irrational, and deny their understanding of the needs of their own bodies. A more feminist approach within society that values the experiences of women (as well as others who were assigned female at birth) and acknowledges the realities of their pain or mental health concerns would not solely benefit individuals with menstrual health conditions. It would also benefit those with other painful conditions, such as fibromyalgia, and those with energy-limiting conditions, including chronic fatigue syndrome, long-covid, lupus, and Ehlers-Danlos syndrome.

In addition to providing empirical evidence that will benefit the menstrual movement, critical menstruation studies, and young people, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* has made an original contribution to research in the areas of health communication, public health, feminism, queer identity, social movement studies as well as the fields of sociology and communication more broadly. This book is the very first significant piece of research to examine the impact of menstrual activism on intended beneficiaries. Even though there exists a limited body of research that has examined activism via social media analysis, website analysis, or interviews, no studies have interviewed the audiences of this activism to see if it is, indeed, achieving intended outcomes such as improved wellbeing, increased knowledge, and other forms of empowerment (Bobel, 2007; Koskenniemi, 2021). In fact, this book is not only the first study to consider the impact of the menstrual movement in Great Britain, but it is also a world-leading piece of research because it marks the first study to determine the impact of the transnational menstrual movement on young people anywhere in the world. Furthermore, since this research project is a very rare example of an empirical study that examines the impact of an online feminist social

movement via focus groups with its audiences, it also makes a significant contribution to social movement studies and feminist studies (Williamson et al., 2020). As the menstrual movement is transnational in scope and this book only focuses on its impact in Great Britain, it is important that future research examines the impact of menstrual activism (both online and offline) in countries outside Great Britain. In this way, we could develop a deeper understanding of the global reach and impact of this transnational movement. For instance, since there are very active menstrual movements in India, Kenya, Uganda, France, the United States, Japan, and Taiwan, research on these areas, including national and transnational comparative studies, is likely to produce rich findings. Future research could adapt the methodologies and approach of *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* when designing and undertaking in-depth explorations as to the impact of their national menstrual movements on their population.

Even though *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* does not explore societal views of the menopause in Great Britain, there has also been significant increase in the visibility of this topic in mainstream news media and social media since 2018. Although menopause activism is arguably an aspect of the menstrual movement, few organisations and individuals focus on both menstruation and menopause at the same time. Scholars have begun to explore these recent mediations of menopause in newspapers in the United Kingdom and in other countries. Nevertheless, research is yet to examine the impact of this mediation of menopause or mediated menopause activism on society or politics (Jermyn, 2023; Orgad & Rottenberg, 2023). Future research could examine how the mediation of menopause and associated activism have shaped societal perceptions, experiences, and norms in Great Britain and beyond. Similar methodologies to those used in this book could also be used to evaluate the online and offline impact of other digital feminist movements that seek to improve the knowledge, health, and wellbeing of women (as well as other people who were assigned female at birth). This could include current online movements on bodily experiences such as miscarriage, abortion, breastfeeding (or chest feeding), body image, and chronic illness.

Since online movements usually aim to have a real-world impact on the attitudes, behaviours, health, or wellbeing of their audiences, it initially seems surprising that few scholars have explored the extent to which these outcomes have been achieved. One key reason that scholars have hesitated to analyse the offline influence of these movements is that they can be ambiguous (Amenta & Polletta, 2019). Thus, it can be hard to identify

and untangle the original sources of impact. Nevertheless, as *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* illuminates, by combining interviews with activists and audiences, it is possible to demonstrate the extent to which a movement's aims have been realised as well as identify areas in which they need to focus their attention. Thus, it is not imperative to trace the exact sources of this influence. The methodology and findings of *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* therefore open a path for future research that analyses the impact of any social movement, feminist or otherwise, on societal attitudes, behaviours, norms, and wellbeing.

Another area into which *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* has made a significant intervention is queer studies as well as research on the intersections between feminism and queer identity. By indicating that trans-exclusive movements, discourses, and approaches are harming transgender people, feminism as a movement, women who are allies, and, indirectly, women who are beneficiaries of organisations that support menstruating people, this book makes an original contribution to feminist scholarship. Since the findings in this book are specific to menstrual activism, it is important that future research explores the impact of trans-exclusive discourses on organisations that support both women and people who were assigned female at birth. By interviewing feminist activists about their experiences of trans-inclusive activism, this research could compare various feminist movements and organisations.

Besides this book's contribution to social movement studies, my analysis of both interviews with activists and focus groups with young people reveal that the pain and other symptoms of women, as well as other young people who menstruate, are still being dismissed, ignored, and undermined on a societal level that spans education, medicine, and the media. Even though I did not ask participants any questions about their individual experiences of menstrual pain or other menstrual symptoms, participants spontaneously shared stories about how their pain has disrupted their education and how teachers and doctors did not take their pain seriously. Common themes included not being believed, not knowing when pain is atypical, being told that their level of pain was normal and thus that they should bear it. Over the last few years, an increasing number of studies have highlighted that this dismissal is commonly experienced by patients with endometriosis and other gynaecological conditions (Guidone, 2020). Others have explored how patients have used social media to create epistemological communities (Holowka, 2022; Stanek et al., 2023). Nevertheless, there is very little research on the experiences of women

with energy-limiting conditions that disproportionately, rather than solely, affect women or others who were assigned female at birth. This includes conditions such as chronic fatigue syndrome, long covid, fibromyalgia, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, Lyme disease, and lupus. Studies on these conditions are largely scientific and rarely consider them from a gendered or sociological perspective. Nevertheless, limited studies suggest that women's chronic pain and chronic fatigue is frequently dismissed or not believed (Sannon et al., 2019). Similar to menstruation, there also exists stigma around these chronic conditions (Meyerson & Hoyle, 2023). Traditionally, as is the case with menstruation, stigma has also been perpetuated about these conditions by the news media (Hossenbaccus & White, 2013). Many people with chronic conditions feel obliged to mask these conditions in workplaces, school, and in other social settings. Although there is growing social media advocacy that raises awareness of these conditions and tries to break the stigma around them, there are no in-depth studies that explore whether this advocacy has led to greater empathy or greater support for people with these conditions from friends, family, employers, or educators. Hence, through my contributions to the field of health communication and research on chronic conditions, I also hope to inspire more research on gendered experiences of chronic health conditions and how these are shaped by gender inequalities.

Above all, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media* has highlighted that the menstrual movement has played a significant role in reducing menstrual stigma and raising awareness of menstrual inequities in Great Britain. The attitudes of the young participants in this research are encouraging evidence that, overall, Generation Z experiences much less stigma and is far more confident and willing to discuss menstruation and menstrual inequities than any previous generation. As this book demonstrates, social media has been revolutionary in this regard because it has created a public space in which menstruation has become much more visible and normalised. This has even inspired some young women and transgender people to undertake everyday acts of activism such as speaking in mixed gender groups about their menstrual symptoms. Even though many young men still feel uncomfortable to discuss menstruation and are unsure how they can help women as well as other people who menstruate, their desire to be allies provides hope that, if educational settings and workplaces include them in conversations about menstruation, they will contribute towards reducing menstrual inequities. Nevertheless, to eradicate all obstacles that are faced by young menstruating women and people,

broader social, political, and educational change is required. It is important that an intersectional approach is embedded into these changes so that women and other people from ethnic minority and faith groups also benefit. Otherwise, the gap between privileged and marginalised groups will continue to increase. Key areas of improvement include inclusive education about menstrual health for people of all genders, ethnicities, and faiths, centring the voices of ethnic minority groups in media coverage of menstruation, investment in menstrual health care and research, increasing the uptake of reusable products, eliminating a societal disregard for severe menstrual pain, alongside encouraging male allyship. Without these changes, women and gender minority groups in Great Britain and beyond will continue to face gender inequalities that have a negative impact on their interpersonal relationships, economic potential, health, and wellbeing.

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