Menstruation in a Non-Menstruator's World: Exploring the relationship between Menstruation, Society and Space through the Experiences of People who Menstruate

"Submitted to Swansea University in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Social Theory and Space, MSc by Research"

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Abstract

This research examines the relationship between menstruation, society and space through the experiences of people who menstruate. Data was collected via online survey, interview and focus groups and collage. The study examines menstruator's experiences of formal and informal menstrual education, discussing the social factors influencing their development of knowledge, and the social and infrastructural barriers they face whilst menstruating in public spaces. In addition to this, contemporary changes in menstrual discourse are examined through comparison of traditional disposable period product advertising and newer adverts for reusable products. The research found that menstruation is a multifaceted entity that is a part of the everyday lives of people who menstruate, but that society frames as a 'problem' to be solved. The consequences of this problematisation are seen across formal menstrual education and public facilities, as these are informed and shaped by social narratives of menstruation. The study argues that in order to address the issues faced by people who menstruate, menstruation should be 'deproblematised' in social and academic discourse, and considered as more than a problem requiring solution.

Key Words: Menstruation, Society, Space, Deproblematising, Period-Product Advertising, Menstrual Education.

Declarations and Statements

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed… [redacted]

Date……17/11/2021…….

Statement 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in footnote(s).

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Statement 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

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Acknowledgements

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Illustrations

1. Introduction

Figure 1: Image of Rupi Kaur laid on a bed featuring a small patch of menstrual blood (Kaur 2015)

"we menstruate and they see it as dirty. attention seeking. sick. a burden. as if this process is less natural than breathing. as if it is not a bridge between this universe and the last. as if this process is not love. labour. life. selfless and strikingly beautiful." (Kaur 2015)

Menstruation is a topic unwelcome in many conversations, among many groups and across many spaces. It is a topic which is notoriously shunned, seen as taboo and unmentionable, and which incites reactions of disgust, despite being a part of everyday life for people who menstruate. It is only when this narrative is challenged that the 'hidden' nature of menstruation and the taboos and social expectations it adheres to are brutally exposed.

In 2015, poet and creative Rupi Kaur posted a photo to Instagram which went on to have a much larger impact and reach than she had perhaps ever initially intended. The photo, depicting Kaur laid in bed with a small area of menstrual blood visible on her trousers and bedding, was uploaded as part of a university project but quickly became known as the "period photo that broke the internet" (Rao 2015).

After going 'viral', the post received support from other feminist campaigns and social movements at the time. However, as the topic of menstruation is for some still one of contention and 'taboo', it was also met with a barrage of criticism, ranging from people simply wishing to not see it on their timelines, through to Kaur

receiving death threats (Rao 2015). The post attracted further attention when it was removed from Instagram twice for violating its community guidelines. It was reinstated after Kaur made a heartfelt plea on Facebook – which also went viral – and Instagram apologised, deeming it to be a 'mistake'. It was as a result of this plight to have the image reinstated that Kaur wrote the powerful speech of which the quote above is a small part, and which provided a large source of inspiration for this project. I chose to begin with this quote as I feel it addresses the status of menstruation in modern culture and encapsulates how society views menstruation as a potentially limiting and singular affliction, compared to the potentially deep and rich experience many people who menstruate may have.

Despite being posted six years ago, the photo and the attention it drew remain relevant in 2021, featuring in articles and blog posts in the online menstrual community such as "International Women's Day - 7 Women Who Are Period Proud" (Hunt 2021) and "7 iconic pop culture moments depicting menstruation that are big uterus energy" (Shah 2021). The post remains influential not only as an individual moment, but also symbolically, representing the many times where menstruation has been deemed unsuitable for mainstream viewing and labelled as taboo. It highlights how something so 'everyday' to people who menstruate is unwelcomed in online spaces and society, and leads to me to question why mentioning menstruation in these spaces provokes such vocal reactions. Furthermore, Kaur's identification that those who do not menstruate view it as a problem or "burden" (2015), and that this may differ to the true experiences of people who menstruate, highlights why menstruation as 'problematised' is an issue that should be addressed. Therefore, this thesis addresses a number of central questions:

- How do social factors influence the experiences of people who menstruate?
- What is the relationship between menstruation and space?
- To what extent does society problematise menstruation and how might 'deproblematising' it impact the lives of people who menstruate and how we understand menstruation?

This project aims to offer a greater understanding of the relationship between menstruation and space, and how this impacts the lives of people who menstruate, by considering the topic through the framework of experience. It does this by drawing from existing literature on menstruation as well as feminist geography and sociology scholarship, to bring together the topics of menstruation, society and space, and collating them with participant experiences to convey an integrated and multifaceted dialogue. In doing so, it hopes to offer an alternate perspective of menstruation, situating it as an integral part of everyday life and offering a counter-narrative to issues, such as those raised in Kaur's speech, where menstruation is seen as exclusively problematic by society.

Throughout this thesis, the terms 'menstruator' and 'people who menstruate' are used to refer to people who experience menstruation. These terms provide a gender inclusive way to refer to all those concerned, and are commonplace in contemporary menstrual discourse and literature. For example the term 'menstruator' is frequently used to describe those who menstruate throughout many of the articles featured in '*The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies'* (Bobel et al. 2020). In addition to being inclusive of all genders, the choice to use these terms centres around the idea that "not all people who menstruate are women and not all women menstruate" (Nichols 2017). There are several reasons why a cisgender woman may not menstruate, for example (but not limited to) the menopause, as a result of medication, or conditions such as MRKH, where they are born without a vagina, cervix or uterus. Where it is appropriate, the term 'women' is used to describe those concerned, such as in cases where a referenced study conducted their research purely among cisgender women, however in all other cases gender inclusive language is used as it is suitable to accurately refer to the range of participants as well as to anyone who this research may be relevant to. It is also important to note that throughout this thesis, participants, when quoted or included in the discussion, are referenced as 'ppt'.

Structure of the thesis

Literature Review:

The literature review comprises of four main sections; the first examining a brief history of menstrual literature, detailing its evolution from texts as historic as the Old Testament's Book of Leviticus through to contemporary literatures and exploring how the narratives have changed through time. The second discusses the prominent theme of sex and gender in menstrual studies in the 20th-21st century, examining the gendered nature of menstruation and the approaches of contemporary texts which address menstruation in the context of 'people who menstruate'. The third explores menstruation in the context of space, detailing notions of exclusion, absence and how social expectations are enacted in spaces. The final section explores the notion of 'deproblematising' menstruation and identifies a potential gap in the literature, suggesting directions for future study.

Methodology:

This section discusses studying menstruation using a geographical approach, highlighting the creative practices that have been central to this research, building on my undergraduate degree thesis which similarly worked with collage as a visual story-telling method. It presents the research design, including the research aims, and qualitative method choices. As well as this, it details the navigation of participant recruitment, conducting the chosen methods and the 'move to virtual methodologies' as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Chapter One: Menstruation and Society

Chapter one explores the social factors influencing the experiences of people who menstruate, in the context of their ability to freely and openly discuss and learn about their periods. It examines how society's perception of menstruation impacts the period education people who menstruate receive, considering its overall effect on their menstrual journeys and their relationship with their period. The chapter

concludes by exploring the ways in which people who menstruate find and cultivate community through shared experiences, via informal networks such as online platforms, and the significance of these in sharing experiences, advice and in providing spaces of belonging.

Chapter Two: Menstruation and Space

Chapter two focuses on the relationship between menstruation and space, developing on previous discussions of social narratives of menstruation, and how these are enacted in public space. It considers menstruator's use of space with regards to their everyday experiences and explores the social and infrastructural barriers they face. Foregrounding space is important because menstruation takes place in a spatial context, which makes menstruators feel more or less aware of their periods and more or less comfortable in different situations.

Chapter Three: Menstruation and Change

Chapter three brings together the themes of society and space to discuss contemporary changes in menstrual discourse, and considers ideas of menstruation as 'problematised' through the narratives portrayed in period product advertising. From this, the chapter argues for the consideration of 'deproblematising' menstruation and explores what outcomes this may have. For example, the potential to reduce societal stigma and misunderstanding of menstruation, and improve the information and support available for people who menstruate.

Conclusion:

The conclusion summarises the chapters and contextualises them in relation to the research questions, showing how the aims of the research are addressed. It then outlines the questions raised by this research, and offers potential points for further investigation in future research. Overall, this thesis argues for an experiential

approach to menstruation, that is attentive to questions of space, in order to move away from an understanding of menstruation as a problem, to an appreciation of it as a multifaceted sensory experience.

Literature Review

An Introduction to Menstruation Studies

Menstruation has been documented throughout history, as early as the Old Testament's Book of Leviticus (Grabbe 1993; Newton 2016), as a 'female' affliction, which signifies a separation of the sexes (see Lupton 1993; Newton 2016; Frank 2020). Despite its agreed-upon distinction as a female issue, many have noted the dominance of the male voice in documenting the field, and argued the significance of this in shaping the narratives in menstrual literature (e.g. Martin 1989; Lass 1998; Newton 2016). It is thought that the absence of the female voice is a contributing factor in the prominence of biological determinism as the dominant approach to menstruation studies until the 1980s/90s, as male scientists tried to "create static models that predict women's menstrual experiences" (Lass 1998:1). The implications of this are that female voices were not leading the debates as the centre of menstrual discourse, despite being the group most affected by the outcomes of the studies. The "feminist awakenings" of the 1960s and 70s (Grosz 1994:198), combined with the questioning of the sex/gender binary in the 1990s, were a catalyst in the 'growth' and variation of menstrual literature (Newton 2016), as "academics began to question the confines of normality" (Lass 1998:16). These 'feminist revolutions' meant that not only were more female voices contributing to the narrative, but they began a 'shift' in shaping the way in which menstruation is studied and therefore the ways in which it is understood.

The study of menstruation continues to evolve, as echoes the social discourse, with newly emerging ideas of 'who menstruates' with regard to gender identity (see Frank 2020), and social movements challenging many of the stigmatising beliefs and their consequences in modern society. A recent notable example of this is the social media driven campaign against period poverty in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, led by the hashtag #periodsdontstopforpandemics (see Rodriguez 2020; Goldberg 2020; World Bank Group 2020). Despite the ever-changing nature of menstrual discourse, the history is comprised of many complex and interconnected beliefs and narratives which have formed, been re-enforced and developed over time. As a result of this, some of these key narratives, such as those which depict

menstruation as dirty or taboo, have remained prominent in both academic and social discourses of menstruation in the 20th/21st century, and so it is those narratives I have chosen to focus on in this literature review.

A Brief History

One of the earliest documented beliefs surrounding menstruation is the notion that menstrual blood and those who menstruate are unclean. This is thought to have originated from the Old Testament's Book of Leviticus, which denotes menstruating women as 'unclean' and menstrual blood as "a sign of moral and physical impurity" (Newton 2016:20). This notion has held a strong position in discourses of menstruation throughout history, likely due to the powerful influence of religious material, and developed over time to incorporate ideas of pollution and waste, marking menstruation as an act equivalent to that of urination or excretion – "a defiling substance of the human body" (Frank 2020:374). This belief is thought to be explained by how menstrual blood is seen to defy expectations of control placed on the human body. Bodily functions and their secretions are anticipated to have a level of regulation and control, however due to menstrual blood's "uncontrollable" nature (Grosz 1994; Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Shail and Howie 2005), menstruation is seen to "transgress[] the boundaries of the body" (Newton 2016:34). It is this notion of "seepage" ("a faulty leak in the human boundaries of the body") (Grosz 1994 in Frank 2020:375), in which menstrual blood is not consciously expelled from the body, which it is argued "has led societies around the world to view menstruation as powerful or dangerous" (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Shail and Howie 2005 in Frank 2020:375). Furthermore, the perceived inability to 'manipulate and control' menstrual blood is argued to be a significant factor as to why menstruation was/is viewed "not only as a marker of women's difference from men" but as a "weakness upon female bodies" (Frank 2020:374-5).

Much like ideas of menstruation as unclean, its use as a signifier of women's "subordination to men" (Newton 2016:20) is also argued to have strong biblical connotations, for example in the Book of Genesis, 'pain' and 'discomfort' during

menstruation is seen as “a reflection of the punishment of Eve for her ‘Original Sin’” (ibid). The power of this biblical emphasis of inferiority being placed upon the female sex in the context of menstruation had significant influence on future writings of the topic and how women were perceived. For example, early gynaecological texts such as those of Hippocrates and Aristotle outlined menstruation as a ‘disease of women’ (Hippocrates in Phillips 1973:59) and directly compared semen to menstrual blood, asserting that men had more active souls and therefore while semen was exerted with great energy, women were weaker with less energy, and thus menstrual blood was expelled passively (Aristotle in Hiltmann 2005:27-8). This theme can be seen to continue in the works of Freud, who described menstrual blood as “represent[ing] shame, difference, disease, death, filth and castration to men” (Lupton 1993, in Lass 1998:131-132), as he drew connections between a woman’s lack of penis, and the fact that she menstruates (Lupton 1993:131-132).

What is common among these early texts is that “’women’ were defined in terms of ‘what man is not’. The authors were male, and their science accordingly used menstruation to construct a female body that was inherently weak and in need of regulation” (Newton 2016:22). This notion of regulation of a menstruator’s power is documented in Emily Martin’s (1989) study of menstrual literature from the early twentieth century in which she notes the ‘apparent’ manipulation of data by (typically) male authors to better favour the narrative that portrays women as fragile, lesser and in need of control. Martin notes how the notion of women as unable to work during their periods is a well-documented and dominant narrative in the 19th century, where women were expected to fulfil the role of tending to the home, and how, despite this, the narrative was quickly reshaped once women were needed to replace the male workforce during World War One. Studies began emerging – particularly by female/feminist authors (e.g. Hollingworth 1914) – which portrayed menstruation as an ailment which women were able to ‘overcome’ in order to work just as well as men, a narrative which was also present in some pre-war female author’s work, such as Jacobi (1877) ‘The Question of Rest for Women During Menstruation’.

Martin then goes on to note how during the interwar years, studies began re-emerging with the narrative of menstruation as disruptive and debilitating, coinciding with men's return to the workplace, where women were once again seen to be in competition with men for work. A particularly noteworthy piece from this time was Robert T. Frank's (1931) 'The Hormonal Causes of Premenstrual Tension', which was the first study to introduce the idea of PMT (now more commonly referred to as PMS). The study placed significant emphasis on how PMT would impact a woman's ability to work, suggesting that workplace provisions should be put in place for women as they would be inhibited during their period, an idea supported by other literatures at the time, such as Seward (1934). Whilst very important in inciting further study into PMT/S, Martin notes how the release of this study (soon after the Great Depression) was conveniently timed and "exceedingly significant" (p118) given the future influential power of this study. Martin concludes this manipulation of the narrative to favour men and portray women as weak, when during World War Two women were once again required to fulfil men's roles, studies began to find that "menstruation was not a liability after all" (p120), with some authors even actively revising previous work based on this 'new' knowledge, such as Seward (1944) who had claimed that menstruation was a "debility" in 1934 (Martin 1989:210).

Martin's work is key in highlighting how the narrative of menstruation is believed to have been deliberately shaped and manipulated over time (particularly with influence from male authors) to portray women as weaker and 'subordinate' (Newton 2016:20) to men when it is beneficial to do so. Furthermore, this pattern shows how deeply rooted the initial ideas of menstruation and gender from the Book of Genesis and early gynaecological studies are to have continued so prominently into the twentieth century. However, it is important to note that whilst gender relations clearly play a role in shaping menstrual narratives, authors who followed Martin's pattern were not strictly male, as some female authors had also written of menstruation as making women weak. Furthermore, it is not a fair assumption that all male authors have written of menstruation in this way, it is merely a dominant historical pattern, one which although powerful appears to be

breaking in the 21st century with many male authors (such as Linton 2013) advocating similar values to feminist writers.

The final key theme in this brief history of menstrual literature is the notion of menstruation, menstrual blood and menstruating women as 'taboo'. The narrative of menstruation as taboo is said to incorporate the notions of uncleanliness and gender relations, as well as several other interwoven factors, which is perhaps a suggestion as to why it is still fairly prominent in today's society. As with hygiene and gender relations, many note how the derivations of menstrual taboo are likely to have been as a result of early religious texts, specifically Genesis and Leviticus (Gottlieb 2020). Gottlieb attributes the likely origin of euphemisms and labels like 'the curse' to ideas of Eve's original sin (supporting Newton's (2016:20) ideas of it as a "reflection" or "punishment"), and suggests that the power of such religious texts in western society resulted in the continuation of these ideas and development of a negative 'taboo' discourse (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988) – one which she notes is not consistent across all cultures. Inconsistency in menstrual taboo is something many have highlighted, noting how academic studies have often attempted to universalise menstruation and menstrual taboo across cultures and individuals when many would argue that it is in fact not suitable to do so.

This is particularly visible when considering Young and Bacdayan's (1965) claim of "menstrual taboos as an aspect of social rigidity" (p230) in which they state that "the most obvious interpretation of menstrual taboos is that they are institutionalised ways in which males in primitive society discriminate against females" (p230). This universal interpretation of menstrual taboo is criticised as a "gross oversimplification" (Bock 1967:215), which places too much emphasis on the idea that it is solely "males discriminat[ing] against females" (ibid) and disregards other social and cultural factors which many have argued show that menstrual taboos do not always "represent the oppression of women" (Newton 2016:42). Furthermore, this attempt to universalise individual experiences and cultural differences is something which Lass (1998) and Newton (2016) note is commonplace in the methodologies used to study menstruation, particularly in the field of medicine, and argue that it is "impossible to impose a predefined

framework on menstrual taboos" (Newton 2016:42) as it is a subjective and qualitative phenomenon.

Menstrual taboo is a complex narrative which takes many different forms across different cultures, and has been noted to be suppressive, as well as beneficial or manipulated by females throughout history (see Lawrence 1988, Newton 2016). It is clear to see that the combination of menstruation as unclean, as a signifier of female inferiority and the formation of menstrual taboo are interwoven narratives which have shaped the history of menstruation studies.

Menstruation, Sex and Gender in the 20th-21st Centuries

Definitions and understanding of sex and gender have changed significantly in recent decades, particularly since original ideas of menstruation as a female affliction were first documented. Studies of menstruation have tended to place a particular emphasis on the importance of sex and gender, focusing on menstruation as a uniquely female issue, which is unrelatable to men. Within this, men and women are often pitted against one another, as though the research is actively trying to determine difference rather than pattern. That being said, numerous studies have found significant differences in the ways men and women think about and treat menstruation, most finding that men tend to see menstruation more negatively than women (e.g. Brooks-Gunn and Ruble 1980 and 1986; Chrisler 1988; Heard and Chrisler 1999; Marván et al. 2006), with some attributing menstrual taboo entirely to "men's discomfort" (Lass 1998:69). These findings lead many to argue that gender inequality is still a dominant factor shaping menstrual culture and the narrative (House et al. 2012; Mahon et al. 2015). Steinem (1983) summarises gender inequality and menstruation by suggesting that "if men could menstruate, menstruation would be a celebratory event with noteworthy status" (Steinem 1983 in Stubbs and Costos 2004:48) as men are often praised as the gender with 'more power' and therefore menstruation is a negative experience as it is something "only women do" (Stubbs and Costos 2004:48). Furthermore, these "unequal gender relations between men and women" (Mahon et al. 2015:7) are highlighted in the

significant emphasis which is placed on menarche (the first menstrual cycle) as a marker of transition into womanhood. Debold, Wilson and Malave (1993) discuss how beginning menstruation is a pivotal moment regarding gender-related power issues, as the menstruator has to decide whether to 'opt in' to embracing femininity or renounce it to fit in with expected patriarchal gender norms. With this notion in mind, Stubbs and Costos (2004) set out to suggest a framework which incorporates "how attitudes toward and experience with menstruation contribute to girls' and women's notions of what it means to be female, to be a woman" (p37). The study discusses how the gendered nature of menstruation and the emphasis which is placed on it as a signifier of female or feminine identity is problematic at all stages of menstruation, from menarche to menopause. Stubbs and Costos present the argument that "negative attitudes" and "differing experiences" of something marketed as a universalised experience of womanhood can lead to "disconnection between women" (p38) and suggest that a "biopsychosocial exploration of menstruation" (ibid) is needed to understand the complexities of this.

Whilst this angle of study is appropriate for women who menstruate, there is a notable lack of literature which acknowledges the effects of this on cisgender women who do not menstruate. Furthermore, the same is true for people who menstruate that do not identify as women, as much of menstrual literature is heavily gendered, as opposed to focusing on menstruation itself. A particularly notable contemporary study which considers menstruation beyond the traditional gender binary is Frank's (2020) 'Queering Menstruation: Trans and Non-Binary Identity and Body Politics'. This article seeks to develop an understanding of trans and non-binary experiences of menstruation, with particular focus on how trans and non-binary people experience and navigate actively gendered/sexed spaces. Frank argues that "trans and non-binary menstruation interrupts presumed norms of bodies and interactions" (p371) and identifies three actively gendered/sexed social spheres in which this interruption becomes very "visible": menstrual products, male restrooms and healthcare. Frank draws upon several notable sources (Butler 1990; Grosz 1994; Gillooly 2004; Stubbs and Costos 2004; Cavanagh 2010) on the topic of gender and menstruation to provide a compelling theoretical

framework to their argument. In particular, drawing upon Grosz's (1994) ideas of menstruation as a "contamination of women" (Frank 2020:395) which must be kept separate from men, and Cavanagh's (2010) ideas that bathrooms actively and intentionally uphold, reinforce and create gender rules. Frank brings together these concepts to highlight the polarised nature of menstruation in gender politics, and how menstrual experiences and trans and non-binary bodies contest and challenge this polarisation. From this, Frank concludes that 'queering menstruation' is the solution to this contestation, as it will increase both the visibility of women and trans and non-binary people, but also improve access to products and safety in public spheres.

Spaces of Menstruation

In recent decades, studies of space, embodiment and performance have emerged in social sciences, as a new way of understanding the body and its engagement with space and place; in particular, during the aforementioned 'third wave feminism' of the 1990s, with pivotal works such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) which introduced the concept of gender as performance. These new considerations of the study of space have meant that studies of the body, its use of and engagement with space, have been rethought to incorporate more fluid ideas of these interactions.

In the context of menstruation, space is often thought of as exclusionary. It is seen as something belonging in the private sphere, and not welcome in public. Most commonly in the literature, this manifests itself in two themes: exclusion from religious or spiritual spaces and public facilities, due to cultural and societal stigmas surrounding ideas of impurity, pollution and cleanliness, and as absence from education or the workplace due to conflicts between menstrual management and available facilities, such as lack of access to products, services and amenities (e.g. healthcare, bathrooms and sanitary bins). The first theme is predominantly documented as occurring in non-western cultures, excluding menstruating people from activities and places of worship, public spaces, use of water and sanitation facilities, and places within the home such as where food is prepared (House et al.

2012; Mahon et al. 2015). Most commonly, menstruators are forbidden to enter these spaces during their period for fear of contamination of others or of food and are only allowed to return once bleeding has ceased. For example, in Nepal, George (2014) notes that women and girls are unable to enter the home at all during their period and are forced to sleep outside in specially dedicated shacks or on the ground away from the home due to fears they are polluting and dangerous. This exclusion is predominantly the result of long-held cultural beliefs and traditions which are passed down through generations and deeply instilled in menstruators (WaterAid Nepal 2009). As well as this, in patriarchal societies, gender roles can also play a significant part in defining where a menstruating person can go. For example, in India it is men who are in charge of "decision-making regarding facilities and services needed by women and girls, including access to toilets and the availability of sanitary napkins, and women and girls' participation in awareness raising sessions and community meetings" (Mahon et al. 2015:10).

However, this exclusionary narrative is one which, despite being a prominent source of activism globally, is not written of or experienced the same cross-culturally. It is argued that spaces of menstruation are significantly more complex than simply inclusive or exclusive. In their study of Māori women, August (2005) argues that "Māori women's restriction from certain spaces (during menstruation and pregnancy) can be read not as exclusion, subordination, inability and/or disability but as marking their sacredness and importance" (p118). Māori culture views the menstrual cycle as "powerful, sacred and life-giving" (p117), and the menstruating body as 'tapu', a complex term with debated exact meanings, but one which August emphasises in this context to mean that the menstruating body carries spiritual meaning and should be both protected, and untouched in order to protect others. August studied "Māori bodily rituals, and the impacts of colonization on these bodily rituals", revealing a "'nonwestern' perspective on exclusion" (p117). August presents the argument that binary (Western) ideas of inclusion and exclusion regarding menstruation and space is limiting our understanding of menstrual practices in cultures like Māori as it fails to take into account more complex and interwoven narratives comprising of powerful cultural and spiritual beliefs and

practices. This argument, combined with comparison to other cultures' narratives of exclusion, highlights how the cultural context is important in understanding, studying and critiquing menstrual practices and the spaces which they impact.

As previously mentioned, the second context in which menstrual spaces are usually written is exclusion or 'absenteeism' (WaterAid Nepal 2009; Jewitt and Ryley 2014) from education or the workplace. Studies of this theme note how young menstruators are absent from school due to hygiene, symptoms, lack of access to period products and social taboo (Jewitt and Ryley 201; Astrup 2017; Yaliwal et al. 2020) and note the impact of menstruation on their performance when they are unable to attend (Plan International UK 2017). Tying in with studies of period poverty – referring to the "social, economic, political, and cultural barriers to menstrual products, education, and sanitation" (Geng 2021) – studies of menstruation as exclusionary from spaces of education are commonplace globally, with a plethora of literature focusing on lower-income countries. For example, Jewitt and Ryley (2014) note how girls in Kenya's lack of access to period products, predominantly due to finance, results in many missing out at school or resorting to extreme measures like prostitution to pay for these products, and how improving their access has reduced rates of transactional sex and improved school attendance and performance. This is supported by Yaliwal et al. (2020) which concluded that "menstrual morbidities, menstrual hygiene management, and cultural beliefs all play a role in school absenteeism in adolescent girls" (p1) in India, finding that almost 80% of girls in rural and urban areas of India believed school facilities to be inadequate. From this, the study determined that "improvement of facilities at school and conducting awareness programs can help adolescent girls to attend schools" (p1).

In the UK, absenteeism is documented in a similar way, and studies are usually focused around young menstruators missing education as a result of being forced to choose between menstrual products or other necessities such as food. Astrup (2017) summarises the challenges faced by many of those affected as choosing between going to school "with only a sock to protect you from leaking, or stay[ing] home and miss[ing] school" (p40). As well as the financial factors involved in

absenteeism, recent studies have considered the social influences and factors affecting the choices made by people who menstruate. For example, a study conducted by Opinium Research for Plan International UK in 2017 found that "49 per cent of girls have missed an entire day of school because of their period, of which 59 per cent have made up a lie or an alternate excuse" (Plan International UK 2017). Within the report of this study Plan International UK emphasises that this high statistic is a direct result of multiple factors of failings, including a lack of institutional support from schools, and emphasises that the aforementioned societal stigmas and taboo nature of menstruation are increasing the burden placed on people who menstruate, forcing them to feel as though they have to lie about their absence. Furthermore, for those who are able to attend school, the study found 68% "feel less able to pay attention", once again making alternate excuses to justify why.

Public Space as Exclusionary

As well as the narratives of exclusion from religious spaces or absenteeism from educational spaces, researchers have begun to question whether all public space may be exclusionary, drawing upon many of the themes present in the history section of this literature review. A notable study which argues this point is Moffat and Pickering's (2019) study which develops Laws' (1990) concept of 'menstrual etiquette'. Moffat and Pickering apply this concept – which they define as representing "an intricate set of rules centred around the premise that all evidence of menstruation must be hidden" (2019:787) – to women's use of space in Scotland, and use it to emphasise their exclusion from public spaces. The study argues that the responsibility falls to the person who menstruates to hide their menstruation from society "in order to gain acceptance within the public sphere" (p769), and that this increased responsibility is itself hindered by the facilities and infrastructure found in public spaces. It also presents the argument that people who menstruate are welcome in public spaces as long as they do not represent as visibly menstruating bodies, an argument which provides support for Linton's (2013) identification that "social circumstances and traditions require women to behave as

though they never menstruate" (p61). Moffat and Pickering conclude that examining the consequences of menstrual etiquette and its role in public space "starkly reveals how women continue to face symbolic and material exclusion from the public sphere" (p782). They therefore conclude that all public space is exclusionary to people who menstruate due to the social expectations of menstrual etiquette and the subsequent inadequate means to deal with these.

Contemporary and Future Literature

Menstrual literature in 2020-21 follows and reflects many of the narratives in social discourse. A pivotal work published in 2020 was '*The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies'* (Bobel et al. 2020). This brought together the works of several authors from multiple disciplines to produce a "critical examination of the cultural, psychological, political and social aspects of menstruation" (Springer Nature 2020). The book categorises menstrual literature into six key themes, all beginning 'menstruation as' followed by; Fundamental, Embodied, Rationale, Structural, Material and Narrative. Within these, the authors provide in-depth discussions on topics related to these themes, from Frank's (2020) considerations of Trans and Genderqueer menstruation (Frank and Dellaria 2020), to Gottlieb's (2020) proposal of "moving beyond the curse" of menstrual taboo (p143). This collection of menstruation studies provides a critical overview of contemporary narratives of menstruation and provides an indication of where future studies may lead, and the questions that are still left to ask.

Based on the studies collated in this literature review, in particular drawing on the approaches of literature from the past three years, I suggest that future menstrual literature will continue to explore menstruation through more fluid frameworks and be influenced by changing social discourse. In particular, I think that there will be more studies which focus on gender and menstruation in the context of 'people who menstruate' as this is a topical debate in 2020/21, as well as studies which question the social status of menstruation as an entity beyond taboo, as studies like Gottlieb (2020) and Moffat and Pickering (2019) have begun to do. This research

aims to contribute to this potential future narrative by studying menstruation through the framework of experience, considering it as a multifaceted entity and contextualising it within contemporary social discourse.

Conclusion

Literature on menstruation comprises of a wide range of approaches across several disciplines, including feminist geographies, sociology and medicine. Through time it has evolved to consider multiple different factors which interact with menstruation, and has continued to challenge many of the cultural stigmas present in early menstrual literature. Contemporary studies seem to indicate a further change in the literature that will focus on menstruation as more of a fluid concept and consider new ideas of gender and who menstruates.

Methodology

Introduction

Typically, studies of menstruation have been in the medical or sociological context, focusing on menstruation as a health condition or on the social taboo surrounding it. Many of the older approaches to studying menstruation attempted to create 'static' models to universalise menstruation, trying to predict and quantify what many contemporary authors (see Newton 2016) argue to be a qualitative and subjective experience. Much of the more recent literature, however, is beginning to focus on menstruation beyond ideas of wanting to strictly quantify and control it, instead looking at a more representative angle, including contemporary debates such as gender politics and sustainability. These studies often focus on the voices and stories of people who menstruate, valuing experience and individuality at their core (see Frank 2020; Bobel et al. 2020), and using qualitative methods such as focus groups to study this. Whilst the methodological approaches to studying menstruation have extended beyond a purely quantitative way of thinking to consider the social and everyday factors affecting menstruation, many studies still focus on menstruation as a 'separate issue' rather than an integral factor in everyday life. The geographical angle offers an approach which does not over emphasise or solely focus on menstruation as an isolated issue but instead tries to place it in the world around us. Menstruation can be studied in the context of everyday life, the spaces menstruators use and occupy, and how this differs from those who do not menstruate. This offers a unique perspective from which to understand menstruation as an integral factor in the function of society rather than as an external or excluded phenomenon.

This thesis also advances the use of creative methods, namely collage, with a view of unpacking experiences of menstruation beyond those that may be shared in interviews and focus groups. The use of creative methods follows a significant 'turn' in geographical research (Hawkins 2018) and builds upon my undergraduate thesis that used similar methods, *'Identity in Contemporary Britain: A Study of Brexit and LGBT+ in Relation to how Young People Identify'*.

Researching during a Pandemic: a move to Virtual Methodologies

During the initial stages of this project, I had no intention of establishing any intersection between this project and the Covid-19 pandemic. However, as Roberts et al. point out in discussing the impact of Covid-19 on social research, "it is clear that the pandemic has left little about our society untouched" (2021:6). With this in mind, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which this project has been influenced by the pandemic. Firstly, the restrictions in place regarding social distancing and participant safety meant that I had to design the participant recruitment and data collection to be entirely virtual, using software such as JISC Online Surveys and Zoom. Whilst this presented unique challenges, such as how to obtain digital consent and how to connect with participants without true face-to-face interaction, these were not things I could not overcome. In addition to this, the pandemic has dramatically changed people's use of space, and their relationship with public and private spaces, over the past 18 months. Because space plays a pivotal role in this project, it is important to acknowledge the possible impact of this on people's experiences of menstruation and space. In order to do this, a question was added to understand how the pandemic has interacted with participants menstrual management, both to contextualise this within the current impacts on space, as well as to consider what this may mean for menstrual spaces in a post-pandemic world.

Despite being conducted entirely during the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the rest of the project remained largely unaffected, as all necessary resources (such as the library) were available to access remotely, and all necessary adaptations (such as virtual methodologies) were accounted for from the beginning of the project.

Ethics

Because this study does not directly ask about the health of participants, the biological aspects of menstruation, or the more sensitive conditions associated with the womb (such as issues with fertility), no immediate ethical issues were present. However, when speaking to participants, some topics which may be considered

sensitive were brought up by the participants themselves, and with their approval these details were included within the thesis. These potentially sensitive topics included experiences with PMDD (Pre-Menstrual Dysphoric Disorder), Endometriosis, and navigating mental health as a Trans-masculine person with periods. Ultimately, due to the nature of the current ongoing discourse concerning 'who menstruates', care and consideration was taken when constructing the questions and undertaking conversations with participants to be inclusive and respectful to all, for example through the use of phrases such as 'people with periods'.

Consent

As previously mentioned, the issue of digital consent was initially a concern, however this was combatted by combining digital and verbal consent via the survey and interviews/focus groups. At the start of the survey, participants were required to read a consent statement (see appendix 1) and click 'continue' to consent and begin the survey. This statement included:

- Right to withdraw
- Agree to use data in scientific research
- Ensured anonymity

The data rights and right to withdraw were also included again at the end of the survey where participants could choose to 'opt in' or 'out' of further participation. Consent was then re-affirmed at the beginning of each interview or focus group by explaining to participants the purpose and context of this project, the data collected and their right to withdraw from it. As well as this, consent to record and transcribe the calls using Zoom's built-in features for the purpose of aiding in the analysis process was explained, and participants were assured these would not be featured in the final thesis.

Furthermore, participants were reassured that they did not have to answer any questions which they felt uncomfortable or unable to answer and reminded that

the group was a safe space in which they must be respectful to one another. During communication prior to the focus groups, it was explained to participants that their name on Zoom must be appropriate and be the name they feel comfortable sharing as it would be visible to all members of the group, and all participants were emailed separately so that no contact details were shared. It was also made clear during the survey and throughout further communication that there was no obligation to be part of a focus group and that interviews were an equal alternative option if participants would not feel comfortable in a group.

Research Design

The aims of this research are:

1. To explore the relationship between menstruation and space
2. To gain an understanding of people's experiences of menstruation, and how these interact with society and space
3. To examine the contemporary narratives of menstruation and the role of 'deproblematising' menstruation in society and menstruator's lives

In order to achieve these aims, the methods chosen for this study were an online survey, interviews/focus groups and collage. The use of multiple qualitative methods was appropriate as each aim lends itself to a different approach. For example, gaining an overview of the interaction between menstruation and space lends itself to the survey as data can be collected from a large number of participants with different experiences and without geographical limitation, which allows for a clear visualisation of the bigger picture. Whereas, gaining an in-depth understanding of participants lived experiences lends itself to the more open and interactive discussion of the focus groups/interviews, as well as the expressive element of the collages, as these allow the exploration of experience on an individual level. Therefore, collectively these methods allow for a wide range of data to be collected.

Participant Recruitment

Participant recruitment was conducted predominantly through social media, in particular through the online menstrual community of educators and activists on Instagram. This method was particularly successful, and the project was well received among the community. This can be attributed to the 10 months I had spent networking and relationship building within this community, gaining an understanding of the language used and the social dynamics of the space. It is important to note that details of the study were shared beyond Instagram and therefore advertising only in this community initially was not a limitation to the variety of data or participants.

The project was advertised as a study of menstruation which looked at how menstruators and non-menstruators perceive, experience and interact with menstruation. The following criteria were outlined to participants:

- UK resident
- Aged 18-35
- All genders

These criteria were used to narrow participants to the chosen place of study (UK) and a definitive age range which incorporates those most impacted by recent changes in the menstrual narrative (e.g. those who have menstruated for over 10 years or who have begun menstruating in the last 10 years). The term 'all genders' was employed to specify that this study of menstruation was not *only* aimed at the traditional demographic of cisgender women, but also to menstruators of all genders and those who do not menstruate. However, after conducting initial data collection it became clear that including the data of participants who did not menstruate would not be viable for this project. Participant recruitment gathered 78 total responses, comprising of 74 people who menstruate and 4 non-menstruators. As a result of the relatively low response rate from non-menstruators and the extensive response rate and data collected from people who menstruate, I decided it was more appropriate to focus on the 74 menstruating participants and exclude the non-menstruator data.

The project was explained in further detail once participants clicked the link to the survey, and, upon completion, further participation opportunities (focus group and collage) were explained and participants were given the opportunity to 'opt in' or 'opt out'.

Survey

The first stage of data collection was in the form of an online questionnaire distributed via JISC Online Surveys. The survey was designed to produce an overview of people's experiences of menstruation, to contextualise menstruation in the contemporary world. It also served the purpose of a tool for informing further elements of the research, such as follow-up questions based on emerging themes from the survey in the focus groups/interviews and in the designing the collage question, as emotion was something difficult to ask about in the survey.

The survey was designed to ask two slightly differing paths of questioning dependent on whether respondents menstruated or not. Both sets of questions covered the same main topics and only differed in wording or perspective, so as not to ask a non-menstruator a question they were unable to answer. The questions were divided into four main sections entitled:

- Menstruation and Space
- Society and Environment
- Menstruation and Gender
- Experience and Perception

Within these sections, questions covered topics such as participant's use of space and their associated feelings or experiences, societal discourse, inclusivity and education. These questions were a mix of closed and open-ended, as well as some 'word association' exercises in which participants chose words they associated with the topic of the question and explained the reasoning for their choices. A copy of the survey questions is available in the appendices (see appendix 4).

As mentioned previously, at the end of the survey participants were re-informed of their data rights and right to withdraw, as well as given the option to 'opt in' or 'out' of further participation and register their interest in hearing more about the project by leaving contact details (in the form of an email address).

Focus Groups

Whilst the survey provided a valuable data source, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of people's experiences, a more discussion-based method was needed. Focus groups were chosen as a main discursive method given that a topic such as menstruation, which can be viewed as taboo among some groups, is often bonded over with shared experience (see McHugh 2020). Groups were originally planned as 5-6 people due to the initial interest in further participation being just over 50% of the total survey response. However, after conducting the first group with three participants, it became clear that if all future participants were as enthusiastic in sharing their experiences and discussing menstruation, a larger group may become restrictive in allowing all participants to speak freely. Upon completing data collection, a total of 17 participants were interviewed, 10 as part of the 4 focus groups and 7 as individual interviews.

At the start of each focus group, I explained my role as the researcher, what the project entailed and talked them through the process of the group. Participants were then reminded of their rights and consent, and given the opportunity to ask questions about the group or the research as a whole. Once it was established that everyone participating understood the purpose and proceedings of the group, I began asking the focus group questions. These were divided into four sections:

- Early experiences with menstruation
- Menstruation in public
- The role of re-usable products in menstrual narratives and menstruators lives
- Current menstrual narratives through adverts for re-usable products (visual elicitation)

The sessions lasted approximately one hour, and there was a natural and balanced flow of conversation among participants when answering each question despite the added challenges of the groups being conducted virtually. The only time this could be considered to have been limiting was during the visual elicitation where participants were not able to give immediate reactions, but instead took turns to express their initial thoughts before re-engaging in conversation about the topic.

Interviews

Interviews were initially offered to those who would not feel comfortable speaking or sharing their experiences within a group, but also became an option for those whose schedules made focus groups difficult to organise. This worked well for data collection as the combination of small focus groups and individual interviews allowed for a greater depth of conversation than may have been possible with larger groups. The questions asked in the interview were similar to those in the focus group and were simply tailored to asking an individual rather than a group. Whilst the interviews were not able to rely on the same potential shared experiences as the focus groups, a relationship was built between researcher and participant – myself being a person who menstruates – that allowed an element of shared experience, as well as relatability to encourage natural conversation.

Both the interviews and focus groups were conducted in a semi-structured manner, with some questions being responsive to participants answers to drive forward or encourage further conversation.

Visual Elicitation

The interviews and focus groups were combined with an element of visual elicitation in which participants were shown two advertisements for re-usable period products. They were then asked questions about their initial reactions and how the adverts made them feel or what they made them think. The adverts were used as a way into the conversation on how the media portrayal of menstruation

(public sphere) and lived experience of menstruation (private sphere) may differ or relate.

The adverts shown were:

- Modibodi – The New Way to Period (2020)
- Bodyform – New Period Underwear (2021)

Both adverts are freely available on YouTube, and it was made clear to participants that neither I nor the research project were in any way affiliated with the brands or the products.

Collage

In addition to traditional methods, the collage was offered as an optional element for those who were interested in further participation. This method lends itself to exploring experience as it allows participants creative and expressive freedom to convey thoughts beyond the boundaries of a verbal/discursive based methodology. Much recent literature has debated the status of emotion, feeling and embodiment in social research, with many authors of feminist and interpretive approaches emphasising the importance of emotion in knowledge as "people make sense of the social world through emotions as well as cognition or intellect" (Edwards and Holland 2013:84). In this study, drawing upon emotive experiences of space in the context of menstruation is important in understanding how social dynamics, such as the theory of 'menstrual etiquette' (Laws 1990, Moffat and Pickering 2019), interact with menstruator's use of space, how they navigate and experience it. Participants were asked to create a collage based around their experiences and emotions when menstruating in public spaces. This task was given to participants during the interviews/focus groups to be completed individually and emailed to me as a photo (JPEG) or pdf document. Initially I had planned to conduct creative workshops for these collages, however with the limitations of virtual methodologies as well as participant schedules it proved simpler to be completed separately.

Chapter One: Menstruation and Society

Introduction

Menstruation has been notoriously associated with social and cultural taboo throughout history, however much of the literature has given voice to the taboos and expectations themselves, and has not often focused on how these social interactions may influence the life of a person who menstruates. It is as a result of this that Moffat and Pickering deem menstruation to be an "historically overlooked dimension of social life, and thus of social research" (2019:767). With this in mind, chapter one focuses on the impact of social factors on the experiences of people who menstruate, and how the social status of menstruation affects their access to peer support and impacts their ability to share stories and converse about menstruation with others.

The chapter is structured in four main sections, discussing period education, beginning menstruation, the school environment, and the role of informal networks. The first section explores participant's experiences with formal period education, examining the information they were given, the way in which this was presented, and the impact of this on their individual understanding of menstruation. The second section explores the role of the emphasis on beginning menstruation as a signifier of entering 'womanhood' or 'adulthood' in a menstruator's life, and the impact this external social pressure may have had on their individual journeys with menstruation. The third section examines the school environment in which participants received their period education and discusses the impact of peer pressures and stigmas surrounding menstruation on their ability to openly discuss menstruation with others. The final section discusses the importance of informal networks in menstrual education and the consequences for people who menstruate when this network is missing.

Period Education

"I remember that was the first time that anybody had actually mentioned menstruation to me" (ppt 51)

A key foundation in the beginning of many people's menstrual journeys is the formal period education they receive at school. As demonstrated by participant 51's quote, this is often the first time many people learn or even hear about menstruation, and should form an important and informative basis for their knowledge and education. However, despite being part of the curriculum across most of the UK, Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) is not compulsory in schools across Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and has only been compulsory in England since 2017 (Sellgren 2017). Education on menstrual health and wellbeing was not included within this, but it was announced by the UK Government in 2019 that education on menstrual wellbeing would be introduced for all genders in primary and secondary schools by 2020 after the success of a petition founded by Endometriosis UK Trustee Alice Smith entitled 'Stop Treating Periods Like a Dirty Secret' which gained over 100,000 signatures (Endometriosis UK 2019). The result of this is that many young people, including 23% of the participants in this study, missed out on menstrual education entirely. This is concurrent with the findings of a survey by the Sex Education Forum in 2016, which found that 15% of young people learnt nothing about menstruation in school (p9). Furthermore, for those who did receive it, many sources (see Plan International UK 2018) report menstrual education in the UK to be severely lacking, leaving many people who menstruate feeling unprepared for the journey ahead. This is an experience shared by all 17 interview/focus group participants in this study, many of whom criticised their formal education as being basic and the 'bare minimum'. The key issues identified by participants were the basic and brief nature of the information they were given, the over-focus on scientific and biological factors (and consequent under-emphasis on everyday life aspects), and the age at which they were taught being 'too late' for many.

It is widely agreed upon that menstrual education should be balanced and informative. However, participants' experiences did not reflect this. Most were

taught about menstruation almost solely in the context of Biology, relating the menstrual cycle to fertility, and weren't educated about any other aspects of menstruation, such as pain management, product types and Pre-Menstrual Syndrome (PMS). This is evidenced in this participant's statement:

> *"Not once when learning about periods was I ever told about pain, how to manage this pain or the stigma around periods" (ppt 60)*

When speaking to participants it was clear that receiving useful and informative period education was important to them, and many felt disappointed and frustrated with what they were taught and how they were taught about periods, and the impact of this on their menstrual journeys. They felt that the education they received did not prepare them for what was to come, and in some cases, left them with damaging ideas of what periods should and should not be. For example, several participants shared experiences of being taught that certain elements of menstruation would be a certainty, rather than explained the reality that there is variation in experience. This included being told that all menstrual cycles were 28 days long, and that you "only lose a tablespoon of blood" (ppt 57). Despite being incredibly universalised and in fact not true for all people who menstruate, participants recalled these as bits of information which "stuck" with them, and which they began questioning when they encountered variation in their cycles and amount of blood loss which contradicted what they had been taught. This resulted in many initially left wondering if there was something "wrong" with them for not fitting this model that they had been sold. Addressing this universalisation was something participants identified as important to them, as they felt it had impacted on their menstrual journeys negatively, and they wished for an emphasis highlighting that everyone's experience with menstruation is unique. This supports Lass' (1998:57) findings, as their results showed that people felt it was "important that a young girl be aware that each woman's menstrual experience is different".

This consistent reluctance to encourage deeper conversation and exploration of menstruation suggests that formal education still treats menstruation as a stigmatised topic, which should not be spoken of outside the Biology curriculum. Expanding the scope of what is taught in formal menstrual education will not only

go some way in removing some of the stigma surrounding the topic, but will also help better educate people who do not menstruate, and help those who do menstruate build a clearer idea of what they may experience. Participant's passion for better menstrual education in the future shows the power of shared experience and community as they wish for better experiences for future generations of people who menstruate. As well as this, it highlights the importance of the new menstrual wellbeing education being introduced in the UK, as the issue of universalisation is one of the main things it aims to tackle.

The effects of this universalisation are exacerbated further through the period product options taught to young people. Many participants were not taught about period products at all, and those who were taught about them were only shown disposable pads and tampons, and told these were the only two options available. This not only assumes that each person's period will fit a standard model which these products will complement, but it also disregards the elements of variation and choice which come with a menstrual cycle and its management. Reusable menstrual products, although only having risen to popularity in the last six years (Jones 2018), have been widely commercially available in the UK since the early 2000s, with the creation of the popular Mooncup in 2002, "the first menstrual cup made from medical-grade silicone" (Mooncup 2021). Despite being available, participants – who received their period education between five and twenty years ago – did not receive any information about reusable products. This leaves a question as regards to why even as little as five years ago reusable menstrual products were not included in their education, and whether they will be included in the newly reformed menstrual education in the UK. Furthermore, those who were shown pads and tampons were shown them in a non-relatable manner, such as on diagrams, in a glass of water or by attaching them to a piece of paper. This can be seen in the following quote:

> *"The only thing I can remember was the teacher trying to show us how to put a pad with wings on – but she didn't show us using a pair of pants, but a piece of paper. At the time, I did not understand what was going on" (ppt 60)*

Experiences similar to the participant above are unfortunately replicated in previous studies, for example, Pasha-Robinson (2017) found that almost 60% of women felt their menstrual education lessons were “old-fashioned and unrelatable”. This separation from notions of the body, and unrelatable manner in which much of menstrual education is taught, poses serious issues for young menstruators in their understanding of menstruation and how they are able to apply this to their own experiences. As a result, participants spoke of a feeling of disconnection with what they were told would be their experience, and what they were actually feeling and experiencing. This was further exacerbated by the social pressures and expectations which come with reaching menarche (the beginning of menstruation).

The Social Pressures of Reaching Menarche: “a little bit empowering, a little bit daunting and a little bit new” (ppt 51).

Part of the reason many participants wished they had received period education which better prepared them for the future revolves around ideas of menarche as a defining point in a young person’s life, most commonly associated with ‘entering womanhood’. This notion typically emphasises menarche as a pivotal point between childhood and ‘womanhood’ based on the social meanings as well as the physical changes that happen. Previous studies have tended to conclude that menstruators themselves think menstruation is a “transformative experience” (Stubbs and Costos 2004:39) that signifies maturity and a significant change or shift in their lives. However, whilst some participants highlighted ideas of “crossing over that threshold” (ppt 13) and seeing menstruation as a “gateway” to adulthood (ppt 21), many felt that this notion is more of a portrayal of social narratives and pressures surrounding beginning menstruation rather than their own experience of menarche. Many indicated that the change was notable as they “lost a freedom” and gained the “responsibility of periods and dealing with them” (ppt 33) but that the transition was not so much symbolic, as previous studies suggest, but more of the beginning of an “annoyance” (ppt 11) or just this ‘new thing’ they had to ‘deal with’.

For some, this social narrative was portrayed through elder female family members approaching them and saying things like “welcome to the rest of your life as a woman now” (ppt 50). One participant spoke of their grandma pulling them aside and saying, “wow you’re a woman now, ‘in some cultures you’d have a party’” which they were confused about as they did not “feel more like a woman because of it” and were “just annoyed because now there’s blood coming out of me” (ppt 57). This confusion when faced with the social narrative of menarche as ‘womanly’ was a common theme among participants, as many acknowledged the presence and pressure of this narrative but did not feel it applied to them. Many felt a disconnect with how they were being told to feel about their womanhood and maturity, with one participant stating, “I don’t think I was emotionally there, but this thing was happening to my body that meant ‘oh you’re a woman now’, I don’t think I connected the two together” (ppt 10). This quote in particular emphasises the failure of much of menstrual discourse to address child menstruators. The narrative assumes that because the body is biologically transitioning into a ‘new’ stage that the person has also socially developed from childhood to adolescence or adulthood, despite the fact they may be as young as eight years old (NHS 2019). The consequences of this are shown in participants feelings of disconnect and confusion between society’s emphasis on ‘womanhood’ and their own experiences.

Participants also highlighted that these uncertainties were contributed to further by the role of these social ideas among their peers, suggesting that these ideas around menarche in part contributed to a social divide between girls who had and who had not begun menstruating. This is an idea supported by Newton’s (2016:90) findings, as they discuss “menarche as a status changer with respect to the social standing and behaviour of girls ‘who had started’, as against those who ‘had not’”. Participants found that the perceived status which beginning menstruation carried meant that they felt excluded from something which their peers were part of and wondered things like “am I not mature enough as a person?” (ppt 68). This shows how potentially harmful forcing notions of ‘womanhood’ or ‘adulthood’ on young menstruators can be as it made them begin to question their place among their peers, their own identification with menstruation and their bodies, and whether

they were valid enough in their femininity/womanhood when their feelings didn't match what they were being told they should.

The School Environment

Alongside trying to navigate the social pressures and expectations of menarche and the limited period education they received, participants spoke of the unique social environment created in schools as a result of the way in which menstruation is taught and treated. Many participants were given their first period education around year 8 (aged 13), which despite being only one year later than the 'average' age to begin your period (NHS 2019), can be argued to be 'too late' to begin this education as people can begin to menstruate from the age of eight. This means that, whilst the 'average' age is twelve years old, many young people may begin their periods before this, and therefore can be menstruating for up to five years before any form of formal education. This was the experience of participant 13 who stated:

> *"Most people had already started their periods, I was like 'this is pointless'" (ppt 13)*

The result of this is many young people beginning menstruation entirely unaware of what to expect unless they have had informal conversations previously. This is illustrated in the Sex Education Forum's (2016:9) survey which found that 24% of respondents did not learn about periods before reaching menarche. This was also the case for some participants, and many – like the quote above – acknowledged that even if they themselves had not yet begun menstruating, many of their peers had, and felt disappointed that this conversation had not begun earlier. Waiting until children are thirteen seems, in part, to be in an attempt to shield them from menstruation as though it is something shameful that children should not see – despite the fact that some children menstruate. In 'shielding' young people from menstruation this continues to reinforce the idea that it is an adult or mature thing that shouldn't be spoken of instead of being a natural and encouraged conversation. This attempt to shield people from menstruation extends to the

exclusion of boys from period education. 79.7% of participants received period education at school, however of this percentage, 86.4% said that this education was not given to all genders. By not teaching boys about menstruation schools are actively encouraging a social divide between menstruators and non-menstruators, as it alienates them from the concept, and reinforces the idea that menstruation is something which "men must not know" about (Laws 1990:19, Moffat and Pickering 2019:770). In light of this, all participants felt it is 'very' (97.3%) or 'quite' (2.7%) important that all genders have a basic knowledge of menstruation as they believe it would reduce societal stigmas and increase positive experiences for menstruators. When speaking about it in interviews, many participants put a heavy emphasis on education as a key factor in addressing issues concerning menstruation, believing that by improving the status of menstruation in social narratives, this would reduce period poverty, and misunderstanding or miscommunication about menstrual needs in schools and workplaces.

Informal Networks

In addition to the period education participants did (or in some cases did not) receive, they individually took it upon themselves to find out more about menstruation and their bodies by turning to family and friends or alternative resources such as books and websites or social media. 94.6% of participants said that their knowledge has developed since their formal education at school. This knowledge was gained through:

- 74.3% - Own experiences
- 60% - Online via social media
- 57.1% - Online searches (e.g. via Google)
- 55.7% - Asking other menstruators
- 27.1% - Reading books and online by accident

These informal networks and sources of information tended to be used in combination rather than individually. When talking to participants, the majority found informal means of education vital in their menstrual journeys, educating

them about different product types, variations in experience and allowing them to find comfort in community. These informal networks can be split into two categories – communication with friends and family, and online resources, communities and networks.

Friends and Family

The first informal network discussed with participants was communication with friends and family. Initially, for some this took the form of a talk with their mothers or another elder female figure who guided them through which products to use and what to do to manage menstruation. This relationship and conversation about periods around the time of menarche is frequently documented in menstrual literature (see Costos et al. 2002; Stubbs and Costos 2004; Gillooly 2004). It is important to note that these studies exclusively detail the relationship between 'mothers' and 'daughters' and are therefore not gender-inclusive, but elements of their conclusions are equally applicable between any elder and younger figure in this context. These studies place emphasis on these conversations as being definitive moments in a young menstruator's life, and in the formation of their relationship with menstruation, therefore it is important that the messages given in these conversations are positive and informative. However, the studies found these messages to be primarily negative and potentially harmful, citing the continuation of negative messages being passed through generations to be as a result of the taboo surrounding menstruation as a topic (Costos et al. 2002). Stubbs and Costos (2004) argue that the way to combat this is through encouraging "more constructive talk between mothers and daughters", ensuring that mothers are aware of the "extent to which negative messages exist in our society about menstruation and the impact that these messages can have on their daughter's psychological experience at puberty and beyond" (p44).

With this being said, within this research the role of these conversations and their importance to participants appears to be more complex. For some participants, these conversations were very open and positive, cited as a pivotal point for setting up their product choice and learning how to manage pain and hygiene. This was the experience of participant 57 who stated, "my mum's always been very open with

periods and all that sort of stuff, so when I started she sorted me out". However for others, the experience was much more neutral. The conversation was very brief, containing the basics and explaining what was deemed necessary, but was often rarely spoken of again. One participant summarised this by saying "mum wasn't overly open about periods but she also wasn't overly 'don't talk about them', kind of neutral" (ppt 10). In addition to (or sometimes in place of) these conversations with family, many participants were given books as a resource to further explain menstruation. They described these books as 'typical' books that explained 'the change' and "becoming a woman" (ppt 13). One participant recalled a book being named something similar to "everything you want to know but didn't want to ask" (ppt 10), and that it symbolically marked the end of period conversations with their mum. Participants emphasised that these books were very basic and limiting in their ability to question and engage with what they were learning, and often carried stigmatising narratives, much like the secrecy the title of participant 10's book would suggest. As well as this, for those whose only source of information came from the books given to them, some felt that this missing communication negatively impacted their relationship with their period. This was true for participant 11 who stated:

> *"I was definitely really uncomfortable around periods when I was younger but I think it's because no one really had a normal conversation about it. My mum never really sat me down… there was never any line of real communication" (ppt 11)*

It seems that, although present in some way in most participant's lives, these conversations hold differing levels of significance to them, mostly presenting as a neutral or brief interaction. These conversations appear to act as a catalyst for further learning and discovery about menstruation, but themselves do not hold much depth. This builds upon the findings of Costos et al. (2002) and Costos (2004), in suggesting that the taboos surrounding menstruation are potentially still a limiting factor in these interactions, but that the messages exchanged are not inherently negative and instead more neutral. This is not to say however, that these 'neutral' messages were not in some way harmful as they did not encourage further conversation, and it is possible that some of the more 'negative' messages were

implicit in the way that much of the social expectations of menstrual etiquette are, and therefore they did not stand out to participants. Furthermore, the consequences of when these conversations are missing for participants serve as an example of how although they may only act as a catalyst or first step, they still play an important role in menstruator's lives.

Participants also spoke of the role of their peers in learning about menstruation. Initially, around the time of menarche, most participants found it difficult to navigate conversations with their peers as there was uncertainty as to who had and who had not started their period, and concern over people 'finding out' their menstrual status. Those who did engage in conversation with their peers about menstruation emphasised that exchanges tended not to be anatomically accurate or particularly informative. Instead, these interactions formed more of a support network, used to share jokes and relatable experiences and borrow products. Participant 64 describes these unique interactions and the transition from uncertainty to support network by stating:

> *"When I first started you weren't sure who had and who hadn't started, and you didn't want to talk to someone who hadn't in case they thought it was gross. But after that everyone was open and chatty about it once they realised we were all going through the same thing" (ppt 64)*

Whilst providing an outlet for shared experiences, participants also highlighted how the unique workings of these conversations within the school environment altered how they talked about the topic. For example, participant 61 states:

> *"I think for me peers were quite important but probably also in shaping what we couldn't talk about as well… in school we would always talk about it in secretive terms like 'riding the crimson wave'" (ppt 61)*

Despite the school environment limiting the specific choice of words or terms that participants could use, they emphasised that these 'secretive' or alternate terms were not limiting to their ability to converse and share menstrual experiences. Instead these terms facilitated these conversations as they allowed participants to bypass any awkwardness or taboo associated with certain words. It seems that for most participants, conversations with family and friends although present throughout their menstrual journeys in some way, form a larger part of their

support networks and education for menstruation once they had left the school environment. Participants who are now open about their menstruation and experiences said that these conversations and interactions developed once they had begun researching for themselves via other sources, and continue to be a support network with the addition of more open conversation, sharing reusable product experiences and discussing cycles.

Online Resources

For many participants, online resources became vital in expanding their knowledge of menstruation and finding a sense of community. This is true for both those who received family and peer support, as well as those who did not. For those without family and peer support in particular, the use of search engines and social media provided an important source of information and offered an opportunity to access support networks, finding community in the wide range of shared experiences available online. From speaking to participants it became clear that their consumption of these online resources took two forms: actively researching and seeking out knowledge, and 'passively' absorbing content through what was suggested to them or randomly showed up on their feeds. Whilst the methods of consumption were consistent across all participants, within the age range of this study (18-35) there were notable differences in the role of online resources between 18-25 and 25-35 year olds, with those in the younger age group having access to these resources earlier in their menstrual journeys than those in the older group. Therefore, I will initially discuss these age groups separately.

For some of the participants in the first group (18-25), the internet and social media were a widely accessible resource around the time of menarche. These participants felt the need to increase their understanding of their own bodies beyond what formal education or informal conversations had taught them, and turned to the internet to extend this knowledge. One participant explained that they began researching and following pages on Instagram to learn about menstruation and puberty after they began dating and realised "I don't really know how my own body

works" (ppt 68). It was common among participants that the drive to search online came from a feeling of the unknown about their own bodies and wanting to have a better understanding to help them navigate menstruation and other aspects of life relating to this that they felt unprepared for. This corresponds with the feelings of disconnect and confusion many were left feeling after their formal period education, and shows how having access to resources like these can help combat these feelings by contributing to their knowledge and understanding.

The second way in which participants used online resources was through engaging with posts that were 'randomly' suggested to them rather than searching for content, at least initially. This was predominantly via social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, as these have 'feed' pages which use algorithms to suggest content to users. Participant 2 said that this was their experience of beginning to use online resources for menstruation, as "a lot" of their education "came from YouTube" because content creators spoke openly about their experiences with menstruation and reusable products. The creators of online menstrual content and the pages they run allow menstruation to be visible on a mainstream platform and provide accessible education and support for people who menstruate. For participants, having these resources around the time of menarche meant that they were able to consume this information in a way that is comfortable and relatable to them, counteracting the uncertainty and unfamiliarity of the biological and social changes associated with menarche.

For participants who did not have access to these resources around the time of menarche, but began using them later in their menstrual journeys, online community and education also plays an important, albeit slightly different, role in their relationship with menstruation. These participants, mostly comprising of the second age group (25-35) but also some of the 18-25 year olds, expressed that online resources for menstruation are something which they wished they had had access to earlier in their menstrual journeys. This was predominantly due to the fact that they have since provided them with an entire network of information and support they feel would have been helpful in easing their feelings of confusion and disconnect when they were younger. Based on these experiences, the online

menstrual community appears to be a welcoming and positive space, however participants also highlighted that the representation of menstruation online is not always one which follows and shares the narratives they wish to encourage, particularly when it comes to social engagement with posts. Participant 50 spoke of seeing a video on the social media platform TikTok which showed a bride who had bought clear bags for their bridesmaids, and the comments on the video were filled with people saying things like 'you can't give them clear bags, what if people see their pads or tampons'. It is interesting to see how social media, this virtual extension of our society, can form both such a positive and engaging space for people who menstruate, as well as provide a platform for the societal stigmas much of the online menstrual community aims to deplete. The role of online resources in the lives of people who menstruate, particularly around the time of menarche, is something which offers direction for future research, as it is a relatively contemporary influence or addition to people's menstrual journeys and will likely have a significant long-term impact on their understanding and relationship with menstruation.

Missing Informal Networks

Whilst online resources provide a plethora of information and support for people who menstruate, for some these informal networks are missing. In this research, some participants shared their experiences of Endometriosis, Pre-Menstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) and of managing periods as a Transmasculine person. Whilst each of their experiences was unique and incredibly personal, there were several elements of shared experience concerning the lack of available resources and education in order for them to receive the help they needed in their situations or to be diagnosed with and manage their respective conditions.

Three participants shared their experiences with Endometriosis, a condition which affects 1 in 10 women who menstruate in the UK (Endometriosis UK 2021). It is a notoriously misunderstood and under-researched condition which has resulted in the average time for diagnosis being eight years (All Party Parliamentary Group

2020:6). For participants with Endometriosis, formal period education provided even less information which pertained to their experiences than those without the condition. They recall not being taught about any conditions that can be associated with menstruation, nor how to spot if any symptoms they may be experiencing are not 'normal'. Throughout their experiences in the school environment, participants emphasised that peer support was not necessarily there as their experiences were not relatable to those around them. Participant 21 explained this as their friends having "'three-day periods' whereas I had heavy to the point there was nothing left in me and I would pass out… it was three-weeks long".

Something which participants themselves wanted to emphasise is that there is a strong, harmful narrative around conditions like Endometriosis that it is 'just a bad period'. As a result of the missing education and social awareness of menstrual conditions like Endometriosis, this narrative has followed them through period education and the school environment, into the healthcare environment where participant 21 recalls being told they "needed to get used to it because that's what being a woman is", and being "laughed at" in A&E and sent home. When discussing the impact of this on their life, they expressed the pain of wanting their experience to be "valid" and wishing people did not have to "fear" talking about it because they are worried they will not be believed. Participant 21 summarised their experience by stating: "we kind of just muddled through. But I had no education and I wasn't diagnosed until I was 21, so it was kind of a blind fight to manage it really".

With the stigma and misinformation present in social discourse and the healthcare profession, participants identified online spaces, in particular Instagram accounts documenting people's journeys with Endometriosis, as one of the few informal networks which they felt provided tailored information and a sense of community and support. This network was however threatened in early 2021 when the hashtag #Endometriosis and related hashtags were temporarily banned on Instagram and Facebook. The ban prevented users from uploading content using the hashtags and also restricted or blocked some accounts for posting or engaging with Endometriosis related content (Buchan and Peddie; Dzinzi 2021). Instagram later apologised, stating an issue with spam detection software as the cause of this

(Wardill 2021), however the damage caused by this was significant, with participant 51 referring to it as “a big thing” for the community, particularly as this ban occurred during Endometriosis Awareness Month.

Instagram also formed a vital resource for participant 11, who shared their experiences with PMDD. This participant’s experiences of menstrual education were very similar to participants with Endometriosis, and they feel that the poor quality of their education, in part, contributed to their disconnect with their cycle which led them to ignore symptoms and “pretend it wasn’t happening” (ppt 11). As a result of the lack of information available on the condition in social discourse and healthcare, they faced almost ten years of misdiagnosis, and reflected on their experiences rather poignantly, stating:

> *“looking back, it’s heartbreaking that no one knew what PMDD was, someone should have noticed” (ppt 11)*

It was through Instagram that this participant was able to kickstart their journey to diagnosis after viewing a post which shared someone else’s experiences with PMDD. They state:

> *“it’s only because of a random Instagram post where this girl was like ‘I’ve got something called PMDD’, and I read it, and I was like ‘that’s me. That’s my situation’” (ppt 11)*

This participant’s experience highlights the importance of these informal networks to exist in some shape or form, and why silencing hashtags like that of Endometriosis is incredibly harmful, as without this information on these platforms, people like participant 11 may continue to be misdiagnosed.

The importance of these networks is also highlighted in the experiences of participant 5, a Transmasculine person with periods. Almost all of participants’ formal and informal education about periods is written and aimed at cisgender women, using language and referencing experiences which are not inclusive to all people who menstruate. This reflects the social discourse around menstruation, which predominantly still uses this gendered language rather than terms like ‘people with periods’ or ‘people who menstruate’. As a result, there are very limited educational resources and support aimed specifically at supporting trans people

with periods. Whilst this is beginning to change with increasing research into trans and genderqueer menstruation (see Chrisler et al. 2016; Frank 2020), and the release of resources such as *'Red Moon Gang: An Inclusive Guide to Periods'* (Costello 2021), available resources are still limited, particularly in comparison to those available for cisgender women.

For participant 5, trans menstruators not being as widely acknowledged as cisgender menstruators meant that they often felt unable to be part of the conversation and gain social support. They expressed that when friends who are female are discussing periods, although they can relate to their experiences, they are hesitant to participate in the conversation because "it's not that well known that some men have periods, you kind of worry about how you'll be perceived if you join in" (ppt 5). This builds upon Chrisler et al.'s (2016) findings which suggest that transmasculine menstruators may have "concerns about how people outside the circle of intimacy react to masculine menstruators" (p1248), finding these concerns to be present within the 'circle'. Furthermore, it also provides support for their findings that "not feeling able to talk to friends about menstruating feels uncomfortable and isolating for some" (2016:1246) as participant 5 felt uncomfortable participating in the conversation as they felt they did not have the right to contribute as "people who have periods who are women have more authority over the subject" (ppt 5). The consequences of this support and information being unavailable were significant for participant 5, as they poignantly explained being unable to get support from anywhere which related to their experiences:

> *"I was a trans person who was so overwhelmed when I was on my period that I would self-harm. And there was nobody who understood that, nobody understood the despair and how painful it was for me because there was no recognition of my situation" (ppt 5)*

To summarise, the experiences of people who menstruate, particularly where these informal networks are missing, emphasise the importance of increasing informative and inclusive education and support across formal and informal means. The social status of menstruation informs much of what and how formal period education is

taught, resulting in menstruation being portrayed as a universal and taboo subject, which limits the extent to which menstruation can be explored and engaged with as a topic. To develop their understanding further, many participants looked to online resources and social media to provide them with the information formal period education did not. However, it is important to note that informal networks are not just 'filling in the gap' left by formal education, but instead play an important and unique role in allowing people who menstruate to expand their understanding of menstruation and find community and belonging. They form a vital part of how people who menstruate learn about their periods and build upon what they have learnt in formal period education. With that being said, the issues raised in this chapter concerning the quality of formal period education should be addressed, as improving it will likely reduce the feelings of disconnection between information and experience faced by participants.

Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the influence of social factors on the experiences of people who menstruate, and the extent to which social ideas of menstruation inform and shape formal and informal menstrual education. It has done so through examining participants experiences of formal menstrual education in the school environment, the social pressures surrounding menarche, and informal networks as a source of information and community. From this, it is concluded that social factors, including taboos, stigmas and etiquettes surrounding menstruation, inform and shape a large part of learning and communication for people who menstruate. As a result, formal menstrual education is seen to be inadequate and in need of improvement to better suit the information people who menstruate need, and informal networks are a relied upon source to develop menstruators knowledge and provide a sense of community. The next section moves to discuss the impact of these social factors on people who menstruates use of space.

Chapter Two: Menstruation and Space

Introduction

Chapter two moves on to examine menstruation in the context of space. Building upon the discussions of chapter one, it addresses the relation between the experiences of people who menstruate and their interactions with dominant social narratives surrounding menstruation, the spaces which they occupy and the social expectations of these spaces. This chapter focuses in particular on how public spaces are not designed for people who menstruate, and the consequences of this, which leave people who menstruate feeling 'out of place' when navigating menstruation in public spaces.

The chapter is structured in three main sections, 'Where Menstruators See Menstruation', 'Menstruate Everywhere', and 'Public Toilets – Designed with Menstruation in Mind?'.

The first section explores the spaces which menstruators associate with menstruation and the reasons why they feel these spaces are important. The second section expands upon these associations to examine the notion of 'menstruating everywhere'; the idea that menstruation is not bound by the particular spaces in which it is seen, but moves through and is carried with the menstruator. The third section investigates the complexities of menstruators' experiences of public bathroom facilities and public spaces generally, in the particular context of Moffat and Pickering's (2019) interpretation of Laws' (1990) concept of 'menstrual etiquette'. Finally the chapter closes by introducing my own proposed idea of menstruation being seen as a problem to be solved, setting up the topic of the third chapter.

Where Menstruators See Menstruation

To date, the link between menstruation and space has mostly been studied with an almost entirely quantitative approach, focussing on patterns in geographical areas (see Lass 1998) and in relation to individual factors such as period poverty or access

to healthcare services. As a result it has rarely been considered linking directly to the experiences of people who menstruate and the relationship between these and the spaces themselves. By focusing on experience in this way, this research allows for a deeper consideration of the complex interactions between menstruators, menstruation and space, and the factors which may influence this relationship, including menstruator's patterns of movement, their thought processes between spaces, infrastructural limitations and their perception of the relationship itself. With this in mind, it is first important to gain an understanding of where participants place menstruation in the world around them.

When asked which spaces they associated with menstruation, participants identified the following as the most associated spaces:

- Bathroom at Home – (98.6%)
- Bedroom – (71.6%)
- Public Bathroom – (63.5%)
- School – (51.4%)
- Workplace – (50%)

These were identified by participants as the spaces where they spend the most time when on their periods, and in which they felt they managed them the most, for example through changing products or resting. The fact that over 50% or more all associated these spaces shows a similarity in how participants view their periods in relation to the world around them and gives an indication of both their mental associations as well as their physical patterns of movement whilst on their period. However, whilst these were all spaces in which participants dealt with their periods, there were distinct differences in how and why they associated with each space, with regards to their feelings and emotions whilst menstruating in those spaces, in particular between public and private spaces. Participants' reasons behind these associations would tend to suggest a preference for dealing with periods in private spaces, due to the comfort and lack of anxiety felt in comparison to public spaces. Participants emphasised ideas of comfort in relation to private spaces such as the bedroom or bathroom at home, as they offer privacy and give participants the

opportunity to manage their periods in a more relaxed and flexible manner. This preference for menstruating in private spaces appears to be routed predominantly in the logistics and practicalities of being able to access toilets, period products, and comfort without restraints or limitations. For participants, the home is seen as a place they can "comfortably deal with menstruation" (ppt 7) without the added pressure of navigating access to these necessary factors.

Interestingly, this poses a counter point to what previous literature would suggest is the cause of this pattern of menstruation in private spaces. As explored in the literature review, space in the context of menstruation is often portrayed as exclusionary and therefore most studies present the idea that menstruation is something experienced predominantly in private as something routed in the social and cultural expectations of menstruation as a private matter which should be hidden from others. However, upon speaking to participants it is clear that for them this is not necessarily the case, and their motivations for wanting to menstruate in private seem driven by their desire to do what is best for their own menstrual experience, regardless of social or cultural expectations. This can be seen in responses such as those of participant 11 who prefers menstruating at home as they can "be insular and focus on [their] heightened intuition" and participant 26 who felt that "the bathroom and bedroom represents a more personal experience with menstruation". This is not to say that this is true of all people who menstruate nor that participants are not influenced by the negatives of menstruating in public, but it offers insight into participants internally driven motivations to menstruate privately.

Public spaces on the other hand, were spaces which participants associated with experiencing increased anxiety and worry surrounding their period. This would often revolve around how they would be able to manage it outside of the convenience and comfort of their home, and what would happen if they were to 'leak'. This presented itself in participants feeling "100% more aware" (ppt 13) of the fact that they are on their period when in public, finding those spaces more difficult to manage their period, both due to the logistics of access to facilities as well as fear of judgement and breaking societal expectations by leaking. Those who

were more concerned about leaking from a logistical point of view emphasised their feelings of empowerment and pride in menstruation as a natural bodily process, and were therefore more focused on the annoyance of getting rid of stains from their clothing when they leaked and timing to access facilities to change their products than on social expectations. However, those who were concerned about leaking due to fear of being judged by others whilst menstruating in public were very driven by the thought of keeping their menstruation concealed, and worried about embarrassment if their leak were to be seen. Participants described this fear in very distinct language, concerned about being "found out" (ppt 5) or "exposed" (ppt 19), and revealing themselves as menstruating to the rest of the world. This follows the trend of what much literature surrounding menstruation and social taboos would suggest. As explored in the literature review, there is a strong historical narrative associating menstruation and menstrual blood with unequal gender and body boundaries which pose menstrual blood as 'matter out of place', signifying that the person who is menstruating has now revealed themselves as 'weaker' (See Newton 2016; Frank 2020) and their "bod[y] as out of place in public spaces" (Moffat and Pickering 2019:771). The result of this is the argument that female bodies are only accepted and respected publicly when their menstruation is not obvious and remains hidden.

In the 21st century this has translated into menstrual etiquette ideas about remaining hidden and fear of judgement and embarrassment from others for something considered 'dirty' which they should be 'in control of'. The consequences of this fear not only play out in increasing the 'burden' placed upon people who menstruate (a concept which will be explored later in the chapter); it also shapes people's daily lives. This is apparent in public institutions such as schools and workplaces. Participants expressed that they associated menstruation with these spaces in particular because they are spaces in which managing their menstruation is not a passive interaction and in which they have to adapt according to the environment. These spaces do not accommodate for bodies which are not the expected norm, as public institutions "assume a 'standard' non-menstruating body" (Moffat and Pickering 2019:771) in both social and infrastructural aspects.

As a result of this, 61.6% of participants identified the workplace as somewhere that is more difficult to manage their period and related symptoms. Many discussed how the work environment was not accommodating of menstruation both practically and socially, with bathroom breaks being difficult to take as frequently as needed and feeling "weird about carrying products to the toilet", particularly when working in a male-dominated field (ppt 46). As well as this, participants felt there was an "atmosphere that discussions about it are unprofessional" in the workplace (ppt 9) and so, many felt they were unable to voice their concerns about menstruation in the workplace and were not comfortable sharing details about their menstruation with their employers. These experiences are a clear example of the long-term consequences of the toxic school environment surrounding menstruation explored in chapter one, as the social norms which were allowed to form there have translated into the workplace. Where in school participants were expected to manage their menstruation between lessons and during lunch breaks, this has translated to the pre-decided time slots of meetings and work hours which menstruation itself does not and cannot adhere to.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the limitations and anxieties of public menstruation and menstruating in the workplace were reduced as many participants worked from home for a large portion of 2020-2021. Participants emphasised that within the comfort of their own homes, they experience "much less stress" (ppts 74 & 75) when managing their periods as it allowed them to have "more flexibility" in choice of outfit, use of hot water bottles or in navigating using the toilet or changing products and their work schedule (ppt 47). Managing menstruation predominantly in private spaces for the best part of 12-18 months has meant that many participants have become accustomed to this new routine and are hesitant about returning to menstruating in public and the workplace 'post-covid'. This concern is evidenced in participant 33's quote:

> *"I do wonder what things are going to be like once stuff starts getting more normal, because actually being at home the last year and dealing with periods has been quite nice. And I do kind of worry a bit about going out again and having to deal with it" (ppt 33)*

Participants concern over returning to menstruating in public, particularly the workplace, highlights the true extent of the impact these environments and their unsuitability for people who menstruate have on their experiences. There is definitely scope for further research into the relationship between menstruation and space 'post-covid', as their reluctancy brings into question what can be done to improve the experiences of people who menstruate in the workplace and whether future changes will be modelled around the precedent set by working from home during menstruation. However, as it stands, with the social pressures of feeling unable to raise this conversation in the workplace – an issue also documented in Moffat and Pickering's (2019) study – it seems that people who menstruate are set to continue to carry the weight of menstruation alone.

The result of this is menstruators having to "change [their] approach to spaces" (ppt 55) and adapt their period and its management around "unavoidable environments" (ppt 49) such as the workplace or school. The notion that participants recognise certain spaces as 'unavoidable' highlights the fact that menstruation is something which is carried with the body of the person who menstruates and is not a static entity which can be switched off or hidden in certain spaces – despite the expectations of centuries-old social narratives. It highlights what I call the (in)visible nature of menstruation, a term drawn from Wood's (2020) '(In)visible Bleeding: The Menstrual Concealment Imperative'. Wood discusses the social control behind ideas that menstruation should remain hidden, detailing how the medical and menstrual hygiene industries re-enforce these ideas whilst creating the illusion that the choice to conceal menstruation is entirely the menstruator's. With reference to Houppert's (1999) idea of a 'culture of concealment', Wood emphasises how "sociocultural influences construct menstruation not just as taboo, shameful, and debilitating but also as invisible" (2020:322). This thesis moves to question the subjectivity of the terms 'visible' and 'invisible' in the context of menstruation and considers this (in)visibility in relation to space. Therefore in this research, the (in)visible nature of menstruation refers to the fact that it is something those who menstruate are aware of across all spaces as it is happening to them, but that society chooses to see as visible only when it is physically visible,

such as through leaking or in public toilets. The failings of institutions such as workplaces to acknowledge the menstruating body is an example of how menstruation is viewed socially as invisible, and only allowed to become visible in limited spaces.

Menstruate Everywhere

The (in)visible nature of menstruation is something that was further emphasised by participants in the survey which associated all spaces with menstruation. Many pointed out that they "menstruate everywhere" (ppt 25) and therefore cannot limit their associations to just a few spaces. Acknowledging the phrase and associative concept of "menstruat[ing] everywhere" is something which I think is important in validating the experience of people who menstruate as something which is constant and across space, and not limited to the spaces in which society chooses to acknowledge it as 'visible'. Whilst the notion that menstruation is carried with the person who menstruates may be a seemingly obvious one, it is one which discourse around menstruation and space generally ignores. Past literature tends to talk of menstruation as either 'visible' or 'invisible', according to how society perceives it. For example, focusing either on examples where menstruation is visible such as period poverty (economically visible) or menstrual blood and its management (physically visible), or examples where it is perceived as 'invisible', mostly in discussions around social taboos, expectations and etiquettes.

Few studies acknowledge that whilst menstruation may be able to move between the states of 'visible' and 'invisible' to society, this is not an option for those who menstruate. Whilst it may not always be physically visible it is a constant and ongoing phenomenon and sensation that cannot be understood as simply as 'visible' or 'invisible'. Hearing the experiences of people who menstruate emphasise this shows that there are no spatial boundaries to where menstruation occurs, only to how 'visible' society allows/enables it to be. This point is perhaps best summarised by a participant who stated: "menstruation is not limited to space. Space can, sometimes, be limited by menstruation" (ppt 7). Here menstruation is

viewed as the limiting factor by participant 7 as they used the example of being unable to access swimming pools because they did not use tampons (a practical limitation) – however, this quote can be applied to situations where the limitation is societal. Whilst this quote is open to a certain amount of interpretation, I believe it emphasises the limitations placed on people who menstruate by how menstruation is viewed in relation to this idea of (in)visibility. Whilst menstruation is not limited to any specific spaces, the experiences of people who menstruate are limited 'by' those spaces. As a result of the way in which menstruation is viewed, access to and use of certain spaces are limited for menstruators. This point was similarly demonstrated earlier in the chapter in the discussion of adapting to 'unavoidable' spaces such as the workplace.

The notion of 'menstruating everywhere' is also well illustrated across the participant's collages (see figures 2-6). In these, participants communicated their feelings and thought processes regarding menstruating in public spaces through the use of images and words they felt best expressed them. Collectively these collages visualise the transferal nature of menstruation across space, delving deeper into the thought processes behind and forward planning involved in navigating menstruation in public spaces. Whilst individually, they tell of the personal perspectives of these interactions, and provide an extension to participant's verbal accounts of experience increasing the richness of our understanding.

Figure 2: Collage 1 created by participant 13

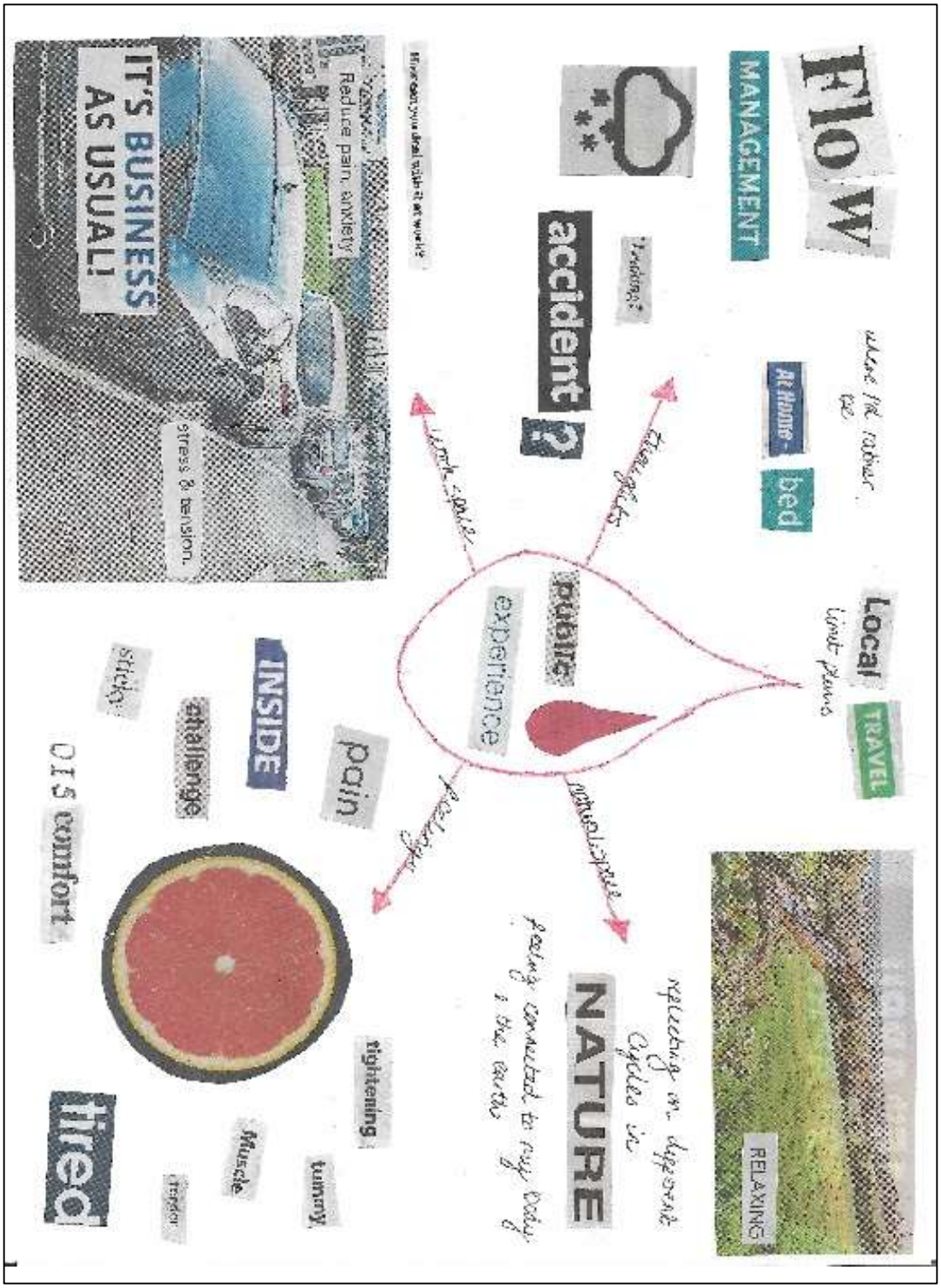

Figure 3: Collage 2 created by participant 33

Figure 4: Collage 3 created by participant 34

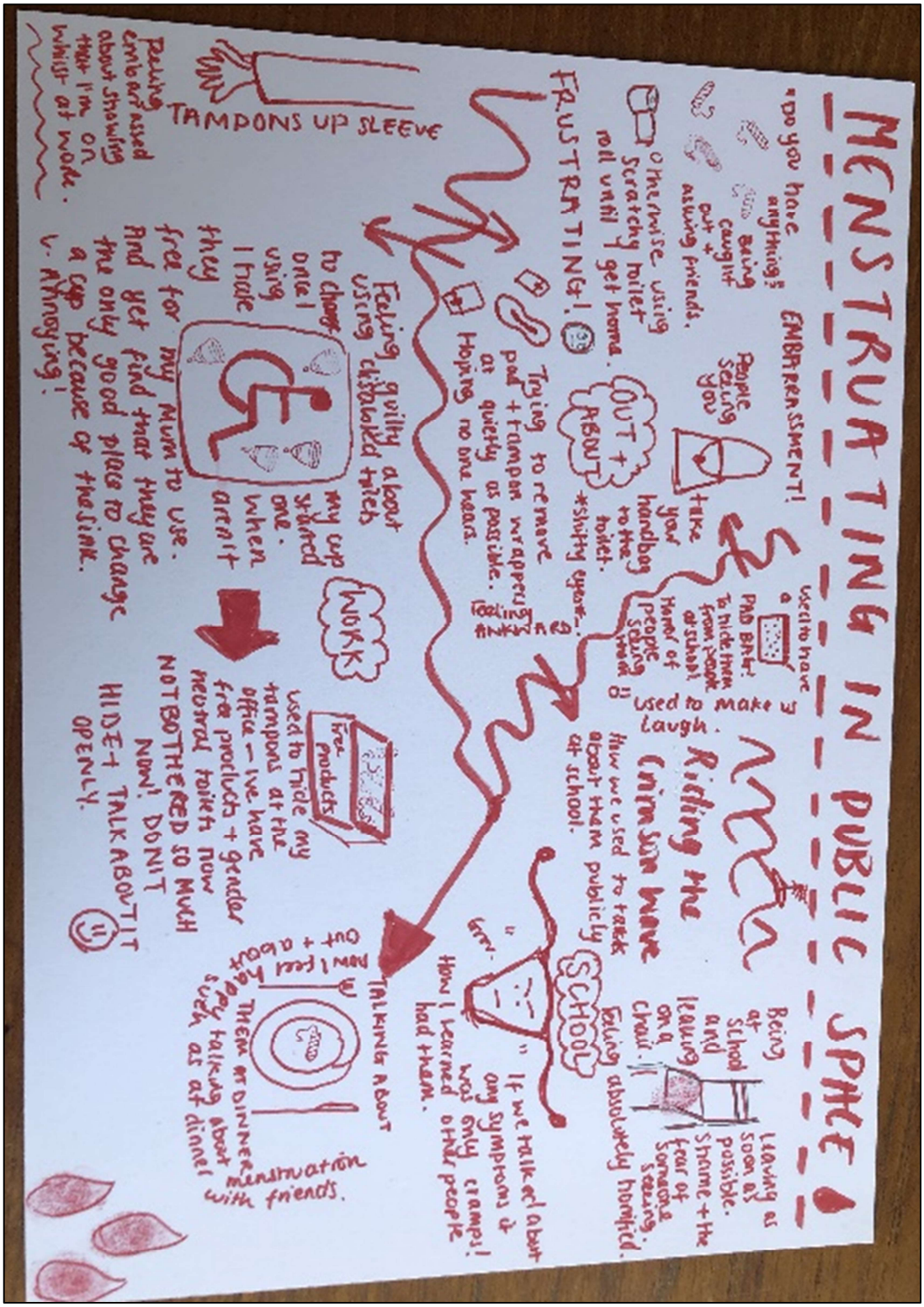

Figure 5: Collage 4 created by participant 61

Figure 6: Collage 5 created by participant 68

Within all five collages created by participants, there were clear references to being "prepared and organised" (ppt 34) either through ensuring they had spare period products or a "supply of painkillers" (ppt 68) in their bags before leaving the house. This complements participants' descriptions of public experience in the survey and interviews, which highlighted the increased "anxiety", "worry" and "stress" many felt at menstruating in public spaces. The presence of this narrative so strongly in the collages indicates that this increased level of preparation is something participants feel is necessary but also central to their thoughts around public menstruation. Furthermore, these thought processes once again emphasise how menstruation transcends spatial boundaries as much of these thoughts focus around "planning ahead" for menstruating in public spaces whilst occupying private spaces. This can also be seen where participants have indicated their thoughts whilst menstruating in public spaces as thinking of 'home' as a place they would "rather be" menstruating (collages 1 & 2, ppts 13 & 33).

Both the thoughts centred on forward planning and the ideas of where they would rather be menstruating are another indication of how "menstruation is not limited to space". They further serve as an example of how space can therefore be limited by menstruation, as these participants approach public spaces differently to private spaces with regards to menstruation, to the point where they are thinking about it in spaces other than public. This idea is also reflected in the collages through their distinct definitions of different spaces, for example in collage 2, participant 33 polarises 'natural space' and 'work space' as two defining but separate public spaces in their experiences of public menstruation. When discussing natural space, participant 33 uses passive language such as "relaxing" and "reflecting" to emphasise the freeing nature of these particular spaces, which allow them to feel "connected to [their] body and the earth" suggesting that to this participant these spaces are not limiting to or limited by menstruation. Whereas, when discussing work spaces, this participant indicates them as potentially limiting through the use of language such as "stress and tension" and the phrase "how can you deal with it at work?". Based on discussions in the interviews around menstruation as something that cannot be 'switched off', I interpret "it's business as usual" to be a

reference to ideas of how people who menstruate are expected to continue as though they are not affected by it. This can also be seen in collage 4, where participant 61 also clearly defined public spaces into 'out and about', 'school' and 'work'. Whilst these categories are not definitively opposed, the collage expresses ideas of limiting boundaries even through its illustrations of arrows and lines separating the categories. When discussing all three public spaces, participant 61 expresses their frustrations concerning similar limitations – as well as emphasises the transitional nature of some of these issues (and thus illustrating once again how menstruation is not limited to space) as the cross arrows indicate the interwoven nature of their experiences. For example, how their use of a pad bag to hide products at school developed into hiding tampons up their sleeve at work and taking their bag to the toilet in public spaces generally.

Overall, the collages serve as an alternative visualisation of much of the themes identified in participants' discussions in the survey and interview surrounding menstruation in public spaces. In addition to showing the notion of 'menstruating everywhere' very well, they are also applicable to several other areas of discussion, for example when discussing public toilets.

Public Toilets – Designed With Menstruation in Mind?

> *"Actively avoiding public toilets unless necessary (I don't feel comfortable changing my pads there)" (ppt 13, collage 1)*

One phrase which particularly stood out of the collages was the quote above. It stood out because it uses such clear and emotive language to describe a space in which the majority of participants spend time managing their periods. Interestingly, this identification also pairs with what participants said in the survey and interviews. Over half of participants (57.5%) identified public bathrooms, the main designated public space for people who menstruate to manage their periods, as one of the most difficult spaces to do this. This is significant as it puts the quality and value of the public facility specifically allocated to people who menstruate into question. Participants often referred to public bathrooms as providing the "bare

minimum (ppt 13) and being clearly designed without “menstruation in mind” (ppt 68).

The biggest issues raised by participants concerned both the availability of facilities as well as their efficiency. For example, many recall that the majority of public bathrooms they have used often have overflowing or missing ‘sanitary’ bins, and those that are provided are awkwardly positioned, and “crammed” (ppt 57) in the corner where the foot pedal is inaccessible from the seated position. The concept of ‘sanitary’ bins – both in name and function – was contentious among participants, and it was a commonly shared opinion that there is somewhat of an irony in naming them ‘sanitary’ as participant experience of them would suggest they are far from so. Some felt that the bins were generally “disgusting” (ppt 10) and that they add to the shame and stigma around periods and hygiene due to their unhygienic nature being associated with periods (ppt 10). Issues with ‘sanitary’ bins and disposal of used period products is complicated further when those facilities are not provided or are overflowing. This is because the responsibility of the disposal is transferred entirely back to the menstruator to find an alternative place, often resulting in participants being forced to carry them in their bags or wrap them extensively in toilet paper to disguise them as they placed them in a conventional bin.

Furthermore, when dispensers (if provided) are outside the cubicle, it means that people have to exit the privacy of the cubicle to access products. The consequences of this became clear when participants spoke of occasions where they had to source emergency products from elsewhere or create an imitation pad using toilet paper, which many participants referred to as the “classic toilet paper situation” (ppt 61) or phrases similar, indicating how often this occurs and how routine it has become to participants. As well as this, cubicles are often small, without shelves or hooks to put bags down, which can make changing products difficult. As stated by participant 57 “it can be a little cramped in public toilets; even if you’re just changing a pad it feels like there is not enough space to put everything, especially when you bring your bag in”. When reflecting on their experiences, many participants summarised these issues as indicators of when you can “tell when a bathroom is just not designed with periods in mind at all” (ppt 58).

The difficulties encountered by menstruators when using these facilities can be considered a practical example of what Moffat and Pickering discuss as the 'burden of menstrual etiquette', and supports their findings that "Not only must women work to mask menstruation both discursively and practically to maintain the invisibility central to Laws' (1990) conception of menstrual etiquette, but the social and material infrastructure to enable them to do this is often inadequate" (2019:781). This means that people who menstruate are expected to maintain the illusion of presenting as a non-menstruating body when occupying public spaces with minimal or ineffective aid from the facilities supposedly provided to help them achieve this. As a result of this, the 'burden' of menstrual etiquette is once again placed solely upon the person who menstruates, and in some cases actually increases the 'weight' carried by those who menstruate as they are forced to use alternate facilities to those specifically designated to them, such as disabled toilet facilities. An example of this extra 'burden' is illustrated in participant 61's collage (figure 5), where they talk about having to use the disabled toilet facilities to empty their menstrual cups as they are the only cubicles available with sinks. This is evidenced in the following quote:

> *"Feeling guilty about using disabled toilets to change my cup once I started using one. I hate when they aren't free for my mum to use. And yet find that they are the only good place to change a cup because of the sink. V[ery] annoying!" (ppt 61, collage 4)*

This participant accompanied this account with a very poignant image (see figure 7) which depicts the traditional disability logo found on toilets surrounded by menstrual cups. I think this statement and illustration collectively illuminate the moving point of the unnecessary guilt and burden placed on people who menstruate when they have no other choice but to use facilities which although are suitable for them, they feel

Figure 7: image taken from collage 4 illustrated by participant 61 which depicts the disability logo surrounded by menstrual cups

guilty for using. It is of course particularly highlighted in the participant's personal circumstance how this also puts pressure on removing a resource from disabled people temporarily, which is not a choice a person who menstruates should have to make.

Collectively, these design flaws and infrastructural oversights are a practical example of how even in the facilities designated to them in society, people who menstruate are overlooked. As emphasised by participants, facilities are usually "the bare minimum" (ppt 13) and result in not only the practical difficulties faced by menstruators but also in them feeling as though their needs are not important enough to be recognised. This is something which one of Moffat and Pickering's (2019) participants noted, as the 'burden' of menstrual etiquette, which "dictates that menstruation cannot be mentioned", results in "the apparent pointlessness of challenging the neglect of facilities designed to facilitate women's equal inclusion in public spaces because, 'nobody would care about tampons'" (2019:775-776). The feeling that provisions are an "afterthought" (ppts 10 & 11) placed only to 'tick the boxes' of what a place is required to provide is a prime example of the consequences of menstruation being treated as a problem to be solved (a concept I will explore further in chapter three).

To summarise, menstruation is seen as a problem rather than just another factor to incorporate in public bathroom design. This means that the provisions often fall short of menstruators needs and expectations. In the few instances where participants' needs were met by an institution's facilities, they were amazed by the thought and care which had gone into the provisions, despite identifying the fact that this is all they had wished other bathrooms could be. One participant described their visit to an institution in London where they encountered more appropriate facilities:

> *"It felt like they really did get the fact that it was a space a menstruator has to use, because you had all gender neutral with lots of cubicles, and each cubicle has a sink you can reach from the toilet and a bin" (ppt 61)*

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the relationship between menstruation and space, looking at how people who menstruate perceive this relationship, how they experience menstruation across space, and the infrastructural and societal barriers they face in public spaces. It has done so through three main sections exploring participant experience in detail and from these it is concluded that for people who menstruate navigating menstruation in public space is significantly more complex than it is in private spaces. This is due to the increased social pressure from menstrual etiquette, as well as maintaining the practicalities of menstruation when infrastructural provisions are inadequate. The next section will now turn to further developing upon the point of menstruation being seen as a 'problem' and the consequences of this.

Chapter Three: Menstruation and Change

Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis brings together the themes of society and space from the previous chapters to discuss contemporary changes in menstrual discourse, with a particular emphasis on the narrative of 'deproblematising' menstruation, and viewing menstruation as more than a problem to be solved. It does this by first exploring period products as an intersection between menstruation, society and space, discussing how their advertisement and marketing in society and space relay a certain narrative of menstruation and how this relates to or does no relate to participants' experience, with a particular focus on the comparison between traditional disposable products and reusable or more sustainable products. Building on these discussions, the chapter argues that the multifaceted nature of menstruation is often ignored in society and as a result menstruation is treated as a problem to be solved, rather than a part of menstruators' everyday life. By paying attention to the different aspects of menstruation, we can arrive at a fuller understanding of what this experience involves, and how it impacts people's relationship to society and space. The chapter closes by discussing the notion of 'deproblematising' menstruation and what this may mean for the future.

Period Products

As well as being physical barriers between menstrual blood and the outside world, period products also act as a vessel for communicating social narratives and facilitate a way into what is often considered a taboo conversation. Period products perfectly encompass the themes of society and space as they are carried with the person who menstruates, are present in stores and public bathrooms, and their advertisements are used to share narratives with both people who do and do not menstruate. They play an important role in menstruators' lives, facilitating their ability to use and interact with spaces and society, and for many, their choice of products influences their relationship with their period. It should be acknowledged that there is an element of privilege associated with being able to choose the period

products that are most suited to their needs, as is often highlighted in discussions of period poverty. Certain products, mainly traditional disposable pads and tampons, are often the cheapest and most accessible option. However, amongst those who are able to have this freedom of choice, there is an increasing awareness of the environmental impacts and quality of life concerns with many traditional disposable products.

Indeed, 11 of the 17 interview/focus group participants use reusable or sustainable period products such as menstrual cups, period pants, cloth pads or organic tampons. The main reasons that participants swapped to more sustainable options revolved around improving their quality of life with regards to menstruation, as well as increased awareness of environmental impact and reducing costs in the long term. Participant 13 summarised their swap with the phrase “periods are a fact of life, we can’t change it, or at least in my life I can’t change the fact that I have a period. And I think, with how much awareness is coming out about climate change, I’ve started to realise how much plastic is used for such a necessity”. They recognise that menstruation for them is a constant factor they are unable to change, but they are able to do something about their environmental impact, as well as improve their comfort, identifying traditional pads as “super uncomfortable”.

As participant 13 indicates, menstruation is something most people experience for a large portion of their life, with the average person experiencing 456 periods in their lifetime (Kane 2015). The charity Bloody Good Period estimates that this amounts to people who menstruate spending up to £4800 on period products alone (Bloody Good Period 2020). The cost of managing menstruation is of course not limited to just the value of the period products themselves, but also includes the recently abolished ‘tampon tax’, which added a further 5% tax to menstrual products. This tax, as well as its recent ‘abolishment’, has fuelled debates into the value society places on period products and what this means for people who menstruate, as it defines products which many would argue to be a necessity as non-essential. The ‘abolishment’, finalised in January 2021, whilst generally agreed to be good news for those purchasing period products, was not well received across the entire menstrual community, as it did not apply to reusable period pants, which are still

taxed at 20%. The newly renamed 'period pants tax' has led to a number of petitions and campaigns, including a collaborative effort between menstrual activist Chella Quint, environmental activist Ella Daish, and the founder of period pant company WUKA Ruby Raut, called #AxeThePeriodPantsTax. The campaign aims to gather 100,000 signatures for the government to consider the debate in parliament, and emphasises how the tax is an issue of inequality and discrimination against sustainable products, with taglines such as "I support the end of Period Pants Tax, because having a sustainable period is not a luxury" (Periodpants.org 2021).

As well as reducing financial costs for people who menstruate and preventing 200,000 tonnes a year of waste ending up in landfill (Women's Environmental Network 2018), reusable products are also desirable due to their concerns over the chemicals and plastics used in traditional disposable products, both for their potential damage to the planet when decomposing, and for their own health, concerned over absorption into the body. These concerns are particularly shocking when put into the context that currently companies that produce period products are not legally required to list their ingredients on the packaging, and many disposable pads can contain up to 90% plastic (Cooper 2018), as well as "harsh chemicals such as chlorine and dioxin" (WUKA 2021).

Period Product Advertising

Period product advertising, as previously mentioned, is a way for social narratives around menstruation to be communicated to wider audiences. They act as a vessel for both selling the product and for continuing to 'sell' the specific narratives they want to portray. Alongside the emergence of reusable products as increasingly popular came a shift in advertising, a "new era" of menstrual product ads (Przybylo and Fahs 2020:375), from period products being exclusively represented by adverts for traditional disposable products using the infamous blue liquid, to adverts presenting reusable alternatives, often using or at least inferring the presence of natural red menstrual blood. These newer adverts are said to move away from traditional adverts' "relian[ce] on misogynist discourses around menstruation"

(Przybylo and Fahs 2020:375) and focus on 'liberating' and 'empowering' people who menstruate (p379). For this dissertation, in order to understand the importance of this shift to people who menstruate, participants were shown two adverts for reusable products and discussed them in comparison to traditional adverts for disposables.

Modibodi – 'The New Way to Period'

The first advert was for Modibodi, an Australian-based period pant company founded in 2013. The advert, entitled 'The New Way to Period', features five different people with periods using Modibodi period pants, and shows small segments of their journeys, from changing disposable products in a public bathroom, to be being curled up in pain. The overarching message of the advert directly addresses existing narratives which try to put limitations on a person who menstruates, and emphasises that periods are normal, and people who menstruate should be allowed to 'feel however they want to feel' about their period.

This is the audio narration of the advert:

> *"When it comes to our periods, we've always been made to feel a certain way. We've been made to feel gross. Made to feel like we had no choice. Made to feel uncomfortable and unnatural in our own bodies. Modibodi period underwear are made for you to feel better about your period. They're made for you to feel normal. Because that's what periods are. Modibodi are made for you to feel… however you want to feel." (Modibodi 2020a)*

This message is not one typical of period product adverts, as to an extent its focus is placed more on the people who menstruate than the product itself. By speaking directly to those who experience menstruation and encouraging them that their experiences are normal and valid, this message led to some participants feeling "empowered" (ppts 13, 33 & 60) by the advert and that they are 'not alone' (ppt 21). The message is particularly important and empowering because it expresses a message that participant 2 believes "the society we live in doesn't really allow for", as much previous advertising and menstrual discourse pushes a stricter mould of expectations for people who menstruate. As a result of this advert understanding

this and emphasising the freedom people should have when it comes to periods, the empowerment felt by participants was strengthened, as participant 60 emphasises, “it came across that the company knew what it was realistically like to have a period”.

As well as the overarching message, the response to the advert as a whole was incredibly positive. In particular, participants connected with the relatability and representation offered by the advert, as it portrayed multiple different aspects of menstruation and people who menstruate. Much of what the advert portrayed was aspects of menstruation which participants felt were not often widely acknowledged or shown, such as stains on bedsheets, washing pants and overflowing public bins. As a result participants felt that the advert came close to being an authentic representation of their experiences as menstruators, as it does not shy away from showing elements of menstruation which do not fit a neat and utopian narrative, like many adverts for disposables have previously attempted to portray. This point is well illustrated by two participants, who stated:

> *“I think there’s certain imagery in adverts which makes you feel like you have to be like the people in those adverts like at their best during your period, whereas in this advert, you literally see someone cry and in pain, or in bed, it’s probably more realistic of you being on your period than others” (ppt 61)*

> *“The main thing I liked was how it portrayed the realistic experience of having a period. Unlike other adverts I have seen which portray women on their periods as happy go lucky this advert showed the more raw emotional side of periods by showing women looking ashamed and sad” (ppt 60)*

This realism and relatability was a further source of empowerment for participants, as it made them feel “heard” (ppt 68) and that their experiences and struggles were seen. This point was poignantly demonstrated by one participant who upon viewing the advert excitedly exclaimed “that’s how I wash my period pants, in the shower!” (ppt 61). The advert was also realistic and relatable in its use of true-to-colour menstrual blood. Although this is not the first period product advert to feature this (see Bodyform’s 2017 ‘Blood Normal’ campaign), the use of red liquid – despite being an obvious choice to depict menstrual blood – is typically not commonplace in period product adverts, and instead the infamous ‘blue liquid’ is used to demonstrate product absorbency. This was something that participants felt strongly

was a negative aspect of much of traditional period advertising, as the use of blue liquid is both alienating to actual menstrual blood, and presents menstruation by over-emphasising hygiene and cleanliness, for example one participant compared the blue liquid to “something out of a toilet pod” (ppt 68). Furthermore, it contributes to the common narrative in period advertising that portrays menstruation in a very “clinical” (ppt 10) manner that disconnects the ‘person’ from menstruation and encourages that it is something “you don’t want to tell anyone about” (ppt 68) as they can’t even show accurate colour blood.

In Modibodi’s advert, red liquid very similar in appearance to menstrual blood was featured several times throughout, most notably on discarded used products, on bedsheets and when rinsing the underwear in the shower (see figure 8).

Figure 8: screenshots taken from Modibodi's 'The New Way to Period' advert available on YouTube (Modibodi 2020a)

This choice was welcomed by participants who showed excitement that “they actually showed blood” (ppt 13) and were appreciative of the accurate depiction, stating “that’s what blood looks like, and they don’t shy away from it” (ppt 61). However, the choice was not welcomed by everyone, and drew a lot of attention across social media when it was banned from Facebook, violating its guidelines for “shocking, sensational, disrespectful or excessively violent content” for its depiction of period blood (Modibodi 2020b). The advert was eventually reinstated after online backlash and campaigning by Modibodi themselves, but the social impact of the ban cannot be undone. When informed of this, participants’ reactions were understandably very emotive, most commonly expressing anger and disappointment at the ban, and perhaps most poignantly, many stated that they

were simply “not surprised” (ppts 2, 11, 57, 58 & 64). It was in discussing this ban that participants gave incredibly moving responses that highlighted just how important accurate representation of menstruation is in society and space. Because, what may seem like a surface level debate over whether an advert should use blue or red liquid, is ultimately part of a very intricate and multifaceted ongoing battle for menstruation to be an accepted and normalised part of everyday life.

For participants, it was vital for this representation to not only exist, but to provide accurate and non-misleading information surrounding menstruation, particularly when shown on a mainstream platform. For example, participant 57 highlighted the importance of showing that “no one leaks blue blood” as there is “such a lack of period information, especially for people who don’t get periods, so it’s possible people will think you bleed blue blood”. Taking into account participants criticisms of their institutional period education in chapter one, if people who menstruate are turning to virtual or media sources for education, it is likely to be a main source for those who do not menstruate too.

Furthermore, in banning this advert participants felt it contributed to the narrative of shame around periods by symbolising that menstruation and period blood weren’t welcome in this space and should remain hidden or out of sight. Participant 13 summarised their thoughts on this by stating:

> *“I understand that there is a stigma around blood and I understand why because you know, it needs to stay in the body, but period blood is different. It has to come out the body, so screw them for trying to ban it because I know I personally felt very empowered by that. It was nice to feel acknowledged” (ppt 13)*

The removal of this advert threatened the empowerment and acknowledgement felt in viewing the advert, and had it not been reinstated, could have prevented other people who menstruate from feeling and experiencing these emotions. As well as this, the banning of adverts like this and other menstruation-related content online felt “offensive” (ppt 21) to some participants, as it sends out the message to people who menstruate that their experiences are not worth or even allowed to be shared, and should remain private.

Bodyform – 'New Period Underwear'

The second advert for a reusable product shown to participants was for Bodyform, one of the UK's leading brands known for making disposable products who have recently launched their own reusable pants. Bodyform's advert, simply entitled 'New Period Underwear', features several different people who menstruate in varying scenarios, from breastfeeding to represent their use in postpartum bleeding, to using a hot-water bottle for pain or lying in bed. It takes a different approach to advertising than Modibodi, choosing to feature no audio-dialogue and instead focus heavily on imagery, overlaying the scenes with short phrases (see figure 9) and visual effects.

Figure 9: screenshots taken from Bodyform's 'New Period Underwear' advert available on YouTube (Bodyform 2021)

These phrases were mostly well-received by participants, who appreciated the blunt nature of words such as 'clotty-clumpy', and the power evoked by the phrase 'never sorry' (ppt 11). One participant said that they felt "empowered" by these words as they "described a very relatable experience" (ppt 60) and described a range of

different menstrual experiences. Furthermore, it seems that it is the simplicity of these words that participants related to the most, as participant 11 states: “I like that they played into the fact no one really ever told us what’s going on with our periods and we used to make words up, by using words like ‘clotty-clumpy’ instead of technical terms”. The terms describe periods in a way that was relatable to most participants and did not overcomplicate the point they were trying to make. Some participants, however, did find the use of ‘clotty-clumpy’ in particular a little graphic or suggestive of the menstrual blood itself and felt it may be a little ‘too much’ for an advert for everyday viewing (ppts 10 & 21). This emphasises the difficulty of balancing content so it is suited to everybody.

Despite being released less than six months after the Modibodi advert and advertising a similar product, Bodyform faced seemingly no controversy online or in the media for this advert, and it was not banned. This is likely due to their more abstract approach of representing menstrual blood, however as participants pointed out, the advert is still heavily focused around the colour red – so it raises the question is it truly the fact that the advert shows ‘red’ menstrual blood, or is the explanation more complex? In discussions around how Bodyform’s advert was received by participants, they noted the advert to be less relatable and realistic, and felt that perhaps the faster-paced more abstract nature of the advert is what allowed it to be more mainstream and accessible, thus going under the radar of those who may find period blood offensive. Whereas, the Modibodi advert contained very neutral colours and lighting, and was slow paced, meaning that the red of the blood stood out more noticeably. Therefore it is perhaps suggesting that society is willing to ‘accept’ or ‘tolerate’ menstruation if it remains subtle and in the background, much like the concept of menstrual etiquette (Laws 1990; Moffat and Pickering 2019) would suggest, and rejects it if it is displayed boldly. Interestingly, this offers insight into the possible explanation as to why Rupi Kaur’s (2015) photo incited the attention and responses that it did, as there are definitive parallels with her image (see figure 1) and Modibodi’s neutral visual approach.

Despite the controversy over one being banned and the other being acceptable, after viewing both these adverts and discussing their approaches to advertising

period products, participants tended to agree that this new era of menstrual advertising was a positive step forward for integrating menstruation and menstrual experiences into conversation. In spite of society's negative responses to adverts like Modibodi's, participants remained positive, highlighting that "you can't make a way forward without breaking down the barrier first" (ppt 13). They felt it was important to emphasise that a negative response is still a response, and that it speaks volumes louder than just a negative opinion, "opening up that conversation" (ppt 10). Participant 13 summarises this by stating:

> *"If there is backlash that also shows that there's a positive change, because it's getting people to talk about it, and you know, if they say 'that's wrong' then it brings up a conversation, 'well why do you think it's wrong'?" (ppt 13)*

'Deproblematising' Menstruation

In summary, participants felt that the narratives being portrayed in newer reusable adverts tend to move away from the traditional narratives of discretion and secrecy often present in adverts for disposables, which are compliant with the expectations noted in menstrual etiquette, and emphasise that people who menstruate should present as though nothing is happening. This shift highlights a point which participants wanted to emphasise which is that menstruation IS happening, and it is a whole spectrum of experience, including "messy", "natural", "uncomfortable" and a "relief" – it is more than just a problem which period products are designed to solve. This 'problem' narrative contributes to ideas of menstruation as dirty or shameful by reducing the value of people's experiences into one universalised narrative and making periods into a burden that individuals carry alone. In contrast, these participants are demonstrating their appreciation for sharing experiences, validating difference and publicly emphasising the multifaceted nature of menstruation. The range and depth of their experiences of menstruation can be visualised in the words participants used when describing their period throughout this research. These have been collated into a 'word cloud' (see figure 10) and

incorporate words participants associate with menstruation or which they used to describe their experiences and relationship with menstruation.

The variety of language encompasses many of the different ways in which menstruation forms a part of their everyday lives, and when combined with their responses to the examples of 'deproblematising' menstruation in the adverts,

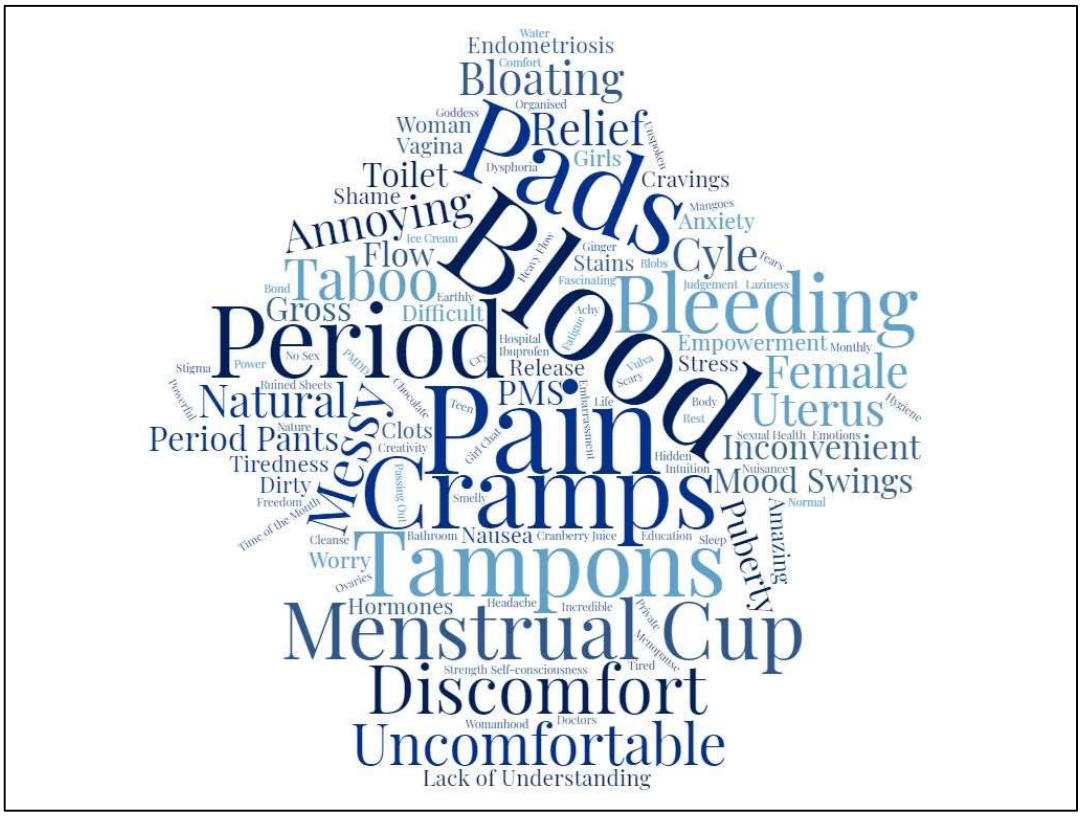

Figure 10: image of a 'word cloud' which displays the words used by participants when referencing or describing their period with size corresponding to frequency

advocates for changing this narrative being a positive thing for people who menstruate. 'Deproblematising' menstruation involves discussing how periods are felt, experienced, managed, and fit with menstruators' everyday lives without shame, stigma or universalisation. It can be seen to be a newly emerging narrative through the examples of the reusable adverts shown here and in much of what participants promote in their own language and expression of menstruation. Furthermore, it is slowly beginning to develop in menstrual literature and discourse, after recent consideration of the accuracy and appropriateness of the term 'menstrual hygiene' was called into question. This resulted in a new term and

definition to encompass menstrual wellbeing and hygiene, 'menstrual health'. Menstrual health is defined as:

> *"a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle" (Hennegan et al. 2021:2)*

This term recognises menstruation to be more than just an issue of 'hygiene' like the previous term suggests, and also acknowledges many of the factors involved in menstruation which are often overlooked, such as the 'mental and social well-being' of people who menstruate.

Based on the discussions of all three chapters, I suggest that for people who menstruate, 'deproblematising' menstruation and treating it as more than a problem to be solved across all aspects of life, social and academic discourse will prove beneficial in improving their experiences and quality of life regarding menstruation. Reshaping the problem narrative has the potential to improve education and increase conversations and community for those who menstruate, as it will better communicate the needs and experiences of people who menstruate and allow informed decisions to be made about provisions and curriculums. Furthermore, if better informed resources, studies and education are available, it could lead to reduced stigma and misunderstanding of menstruation in social discourse, which could in turn lead to better informed policies and provisions in schools, workplaces and menstrual healthcare.

Conclusion

Chapter three has explored contemporary changes in menstrual discourse, examining the social narratives portrayed in period product advertising and examining the 'shift' in advertising from notably stigmatising menstruation to trying to empower people who menstruate. It has done so through the examples of adverts from Modibodi and Bodyform, exploring how these adverts were received by participants and comparing them to traditional adverts for disposable products,

discussing the impacts of the narratives these portray. From this, it is concluded that traditional product advertising reinforces damaging narratives and that adverts which adopt the newer approach, like the examples in this thesis, encourage menstruation as a normal part of everyday life and try to empower and relate to the experiences of people who menstruate. These adverts serve as examples of the notion of 'deproblematising' menstruation as they deconstruct past stigmatising narratives to portray menstruation as more than a problem to be solved. Considering menstruation in this way across social discourse has the potential to reshape how society views menstruation, incorporating a more representative and holistic understanding which reflects the experiences of people who menstruate.

Conclusion

Having examined experiences of menstruation in the context of society and space, it is clear to see that menstruation and the experiences of people who menstruate are influenced and shaped by a multitude of social and spatial factors. In particular, the social expectations of 'menstrual etiquette' play a large role in governing how menstruation is spoken of in social discourse, and how people who menstruate are able to navigate public spaces. This research aimed to study menstruation through the framework of experience to better understand the relationship between menstruation, society and space. It achieved this aim by exploring the research questions in depth throughout three empirical chapters, investigating the impact of social factors on the lives of people who menstruate, the interaction between menstruation and space, and evolving contemporary menstrual discourses.

The research questions addressed in these chapters are:

- How do social factors influence the experiences of people who menstruate?
- What is the relationship between menstruation and space?
- To what extent does society problematise menstruation and how might 'deproblematising' it impact the lives of people who menstruate and how we understand menstruation?

Chapter one addressed the interaction between society and menstruation, exploring the social factors influencing the experiences of people who menstruate. This was done through an examination of how people who menstruate learn and develop knowledge about menstruation, through formal and informal means of education. From this, it was found that the social status of menstruation appears to inform much of what and how formal menstrual education is taught. Societal stigmas and etiquettes around menstruation which frame it as taboo and shameful are seen to shape the way in which menstruation is portrayed in this context, as it is taught as a universal model which does not consider individual factors or encourage further inquisition and conversations around periods. As well as this, by not being taught to people who do not menstruate, formal menstrual education was seen to encourage the continuation of stigmatising narratives which suggest that

menstruation must remain hidden and “men must not know” (Laws 1990:19, Moffat and Pickering 2019:770). However, informal networks play an important role in how people who menstruate learn about menstruation. These means of education were influenced by the social status of menstruation, as conversations with family and friends were limited by the taboo surrounding menstruation. Online resources provided a source of information and a space to question menstruation, as well as a source of community, brought together by shared experience and often promoting period positivity. Access to these resources was found not to be equal for all people who menstruate as there is less information and social awareness of menstruation for people with menstrual conditions or who do not identify as cisgender women.

Chapter two built upon discussions of menstruation and society to address the question of the relationship between menstruation and space. This relationship was explored through the experiences of people who menstruate, attempting to visualise and understand how they navigate space in the context of menstruation. In doing so, it was found that the social status of menstruation, in particular the notion of ‘menstrual etiquette’, plays a significant role in informing spatial provisions and governing how people who menstruate are able to navigate space. Menstruation is present across all spaces, carried by the person who menstruates, but it is society (menstrual etiquette) which rules where it is ‘allowed’ to be ‘visible’ and where it must remain ‘invisible’. For the person who menstruates, menstruation is never truly ‘invisible’ and instead the ‘burden’ of maintaining the illusion of this across public spaces remains theirs to carry. As a result, the thought and act of menstruating in public was seen to cause increased worry and anxiety for participants. This is further exacerbated when the public facilities designated for menstruators to manage menstruation do not meet the needs required to continue menstruation’s ‘invisibility’. It was through these discussions that the narrative of menstruation as a ‘problem’ was first explicitly introduced. The workplace and public toilets were identified as spaces which made managing menstruation more difficult, as they were seen only to provide ‘solutions’ to menstruation to the extent

to which society perceived it to be a problem, described as the 'bare minimum' by participants.

In chapter three this theme was developed further through discussions of the social narratives which are portrayed through period product advertising. Through the examples of adverts for Modibodi and Bodyform, period product advertising was shown to be a powerful vessel for social narratives, with older 'traditional' adverts for disposable products often portraying stigmatising narratives, whilst newer adverts for reusables tend to promote more positive messages. These adverts served as examples of 'deproblematising' menstruation, the idea of considering menstruation as more than a 'problem', in mainstream media. They did this through encouraging messages of empowerment, comfort and unashamed embracing of menstruation, detailing factors of all areas of life which menstruation affects, on a mainstream platform/virtual space, where menstruation has previously been, and in many cases still remains, hidden due to the expectations of menstrual etiquette.

Combining the conclusions of all three chapters, this thesis concludes that society treats menstruation as a problem requiring solution, and the consequences of this can be seen across education, public facilities and social discourse. However, the research also indicated that people navigate menstruation as part of their everyday lives, this includes sharing knowledge informally, and making multiple decisions on a daily basis about how to navigate work, study and travel in and around public and private spaces. Whilst there are current examples of campaigns that aim to empower menstruators, most menstrual advertisement continues to treat it as a 'problem' to be solved, hindering a more multifaceted, sensual understanding of how people who menstruate experience their periods.

The way in which society views and treats menstruation is seen to play a large and influential role in many aspects of a menstruator's life. Therefore, in 'deproblematising' menstruation, there is potential to improve upon many of the issues raised in education and public facilities, as it would allow for menstruation to be seen as a normal and integral part of everyday life to society, much like it is for those who menstruate. The findings of this research have shown that menstruation is viewed differently by society than it is by people who menstruate, and as a result

the world is not designed for menstruators. The consequences of this were seen to play out both socially and spatially, with unsuitable workplace schedules and inadequate public facilities, which are constructed around the 'non-menstruating' body.

By exploring menstruation through the framework of experience, this thesis was able to gather a rich and detailed account of menstruation from the perspective of people who menstruate. Without studying it through the lens of an already established problem or debate, it was able to focus on the voices of the people at the centre of the discourse. In addition to this, by bringing together the discipline of geography and the topic of menstruation, this research has been able to make key contributions to both geographical scholarship and critical menstruation studies. This study contributes to and builds upon longstanding work in feminist geographies, such as the works of Elizabeth Grosz, Gillian Rose and Doreen Massey. By combining many of the values at the core of traditional and contemporary feminist geography, this research is able to question and go beyond the universal frameworks defined by the dominance of the masculine voice in geography and in menstruation studies. In doing so, it places experience, feeling and emotion at the centre of the research, and therefore not only challenges our existing ideas of a universalised menstrual experience, but also drives for a reconsideration of how we approach and study menstruation and similar topics in geography.

Building upon the works of authors such as Lewis Holloway and Phil Hubbard, Gill Valentine, and Anoop Nayak, this research also makes contributions to the study of 'everyday life' in geography. This area of study focuses on exploring and questioning the 'mundane' nature of the everyday to uncover the wider meaning and patterns present in previously overlooked aspects of people's lives. In choosing to move away from a universal approach, this research makes contributions to this area of study by placing focus on participants everyday experiences, emotions and interactions, within everyday spaces. In doing so, it demonstrates the importance and meaning of the everyday in understanding menstruation and the experiences of people who menstruate.

Furthermore, in bringing together feminist geographies, the geographies of everyday life and the topic of menstruation this research is able to make innovative contributions to critical menstruation studies. Developing upon the ideas of key authors such as Natalie Moffat and Lucy Pickering, Sophie Laws, Sarah Frank and Jill Wood, this research incorporates many of the concepts and ideas at the forefront of menstrual literature (many of which are also seen throughout the articles featured in Bobel et al 2020) to offer an alternative way of approaching menstruation as a topic. Through the use of a geographical approach, in combination with key menstrual ideas, this research is able to consider menstruation in the context of society and space, and as a phenomenon which is influenced and shaped by multiple factors, as opposed to treating it as a singular entity. In doing so, it is able to emphasise the rich and complex nature of menstruation that Bobel et al's (2020) collation of articles implies and in turn is able to confidently argue that 'deproblematising' menstruation and expanding the depth to which we consider it as a topic would encourage a more conscious and expansive understanding of menstruation as a whole.

Future Research

In addition to offering a new perspective on menstruation in the contemporary world, this thesis and its conclusions hope to provide inspiration for further research and critical consideration of the ways in which menstruation is studied. Throughout the discussions of menstruation, society and space, this research uncovered many areas which incite questions for further investigation. Firstly, having discussed the role of online resources in the lives of people who menstruate, it would seem that the impact of access to these resources at and around menarche is an under-researched area. Whilst this is a relatively recent thing, the prominence of social media and the internet in modern society would suggest it is an area of importance to research. In the same regard, I think there is sufficient scope for research to be conducted into the online menstrual community, its place in modern menstrual activism, education and the impact of this on the lives of people who menstruate. The concerns identified when discussing where these networks are

missing also provides an opportunity to further investigate their importance and what could be done to improve provisions for people with menstrual conditions or those who menstruate who do not identify as cisgender women.

Secondly, the identifications by participants in chapter two that the return to menstruation in public post-covid were a concern suggest further investigation should be done into the relationship between menstruation and space post-covid, as well as the impacts of this on people who menstruate. In addition to this, future research could also consider investigating the impacts of limited menstrual education and the social discourses around menstrual etiquette on the understanding of menstruation for people who do not menstruate. This has the potential to offer further reason for improving these provisions, particularly when accompanied with studies which advocate improving them for people who menstruate. Finally, there is certainly scope for further research into the notion of 'deproblematising' menstruation. This narrative is continuously evolving and will likely have large impacts on future social discourse around menstruation. It seems that the future of menstrual conversation continues to be in de-stigmatising it and removing taboo, but instead of the narratives focusing on these taboos and stigmas themselves, it focuses on menstruation and the people who menstruate. Giving voice to these experiences means no longer giving voice to the stigmas and etiquettes that have dominated menstrual literature for centuries. People who menstruate are rewriting the discourse and campaigning for change, because menstruation is so much more than society perceives it to be. It is not simply a word, a problem, an affliction – there is no 'solution' to menstruation.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Copy of ethics statement provided to participants at the beginning of the survey

Welcome to this survey!

I am a Postgraduate student currently studying a Masters by Research at Swansea University. My research focuses on exploring people's perceptions and experiences of Menstruation in the UK in relation to factors such as Society and Environment.

This survey will take **approximately** 10 minutes. At the end of the survey, there will be an opportunity to register your interest in participating in more aspects of this study.

Please click 'next' to continue.

Important things to note:

- By choosing to complete this survey you are agreeing to the use of your data in scientific research – the results will be anonymous, therefore any personal data collected which could be traced back to you (e.g. your name or contact details) will **not** be used, published or shared with anyone.
- You have the right to withdraw your responses and participation in this research at **any time** by contacting myperiodresearch@outlook.com

For more information please see this **privacy statement** or contact myperiodresearch@outlook.com

Please click 'next' to begin the survey.

Appendix 2: Privacy statement

PROTECTING YOUR PRIVACY

Participation in this activity is completely voluntary and you have the right to end your participation at any time.

Should you choose to participate you will be asked to provide some personal information that will only be used for the purpose for which it was collected. Swansea University is the Data Controller and is committed to protecting the rights of individuals in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018.

The principal investigator would like to collect one or more of the following in order to arrange for survey respondents to participate in further research: email address.

The principal investigator would like to collect one or more of the following in order to facilitate a more detailed analysis of the results: age, gender.

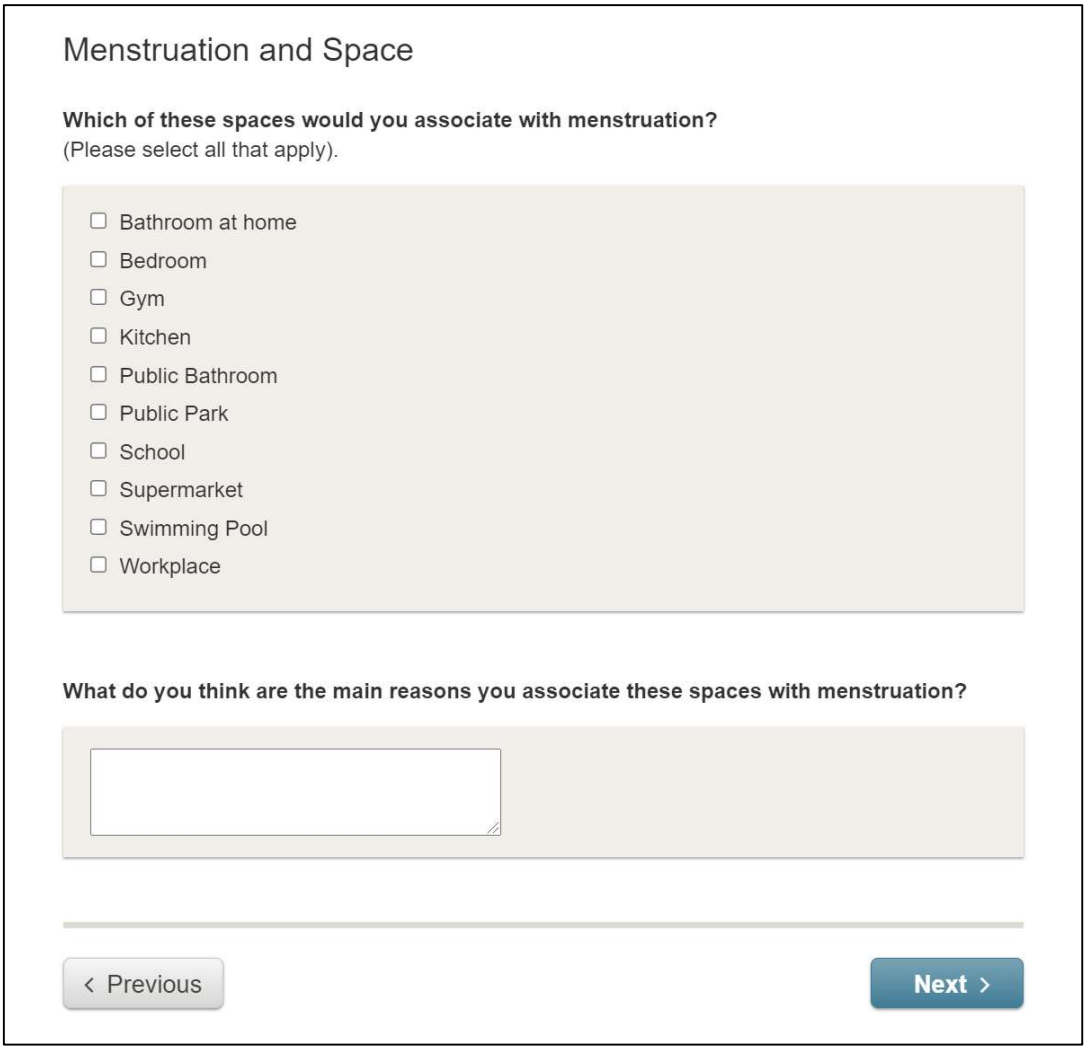
We will be using this information about you because you have given your consent to process your personal data and explicit consent to the processing of your special category data. You may withdraw your consent at any time by contacting myperiodresearch@outlook.com

All responses will be kept confidential and identifiable information about you will not be shared with anyone outside the University.

The University will hold the personal data you provided as part of this activity for a period of **up to 12 months** from when the analysis of results concluded.

Please visit the University Data Protection webpages for further information in relation to your rights.

Appendix 3: Example screenshot taken from JISC Online Surveys, showing how the questions looked to participants.



Appendix 4: Copy of survey questions

1. Where in the UK do you currently live?
    i. England
    ii. Wales
    iii. Scotland
    iv. Northern Ireland

2. What is your age category?
    i. 18-25
    ii. 26-35
    iii. 36+

3. What is your gender?
    i. Cisgender Woman
    ii. Cisgender Man
    iii. Transgender Woman
    iv. Transgender Man
    v. Non-Binary
    vi. Prefer not to say
    vii. Not listed (please specify)

4. Do you menstruate?
    i. Yes
    ii. No
    iii. I have previously, but do not currently, and would still consider myself a menstruator or person who menstruates

5. Which of these spaces would you associate with menstruation? (Please select all that apply)
    i. Bathroom at home
    ii. Bedroom
    iii. Gym
    iv. Kitchen
    v. Public Bathroom
    vi. Public Park
    vii. School
    viii. Supermarket
    ix. Swimming Pool
    x. Workplace

6. What do you think are the main reasons you associate these spaces with menstruation?

7. Do you find any spaces more difficult than others to manage your period and related symptoms? (Please tick all that apply)
    i. Bathroom at home
    ii. Bedroom
    iii. Gym
    iv. Kitchen
    v. Public Bathroom
    vi. Public Park
    vii. School
    viii. Supermarket
    ix. Swimming Pool
    x. Workplace

8. What do you think are the main reasons for this?

9. Are there any spaces where you feel particularly uncomfortable during your period?
    i. Yes
    ii. No

10. If yes, which spaces and why?

11. Are there any spaces you actively choose to avoid whilst on your period?

12. If yes, which spaces and why do you choose to avoid them?

13. In which spaces have you seen advertisements for period products? (Please select all that apply)
    i. On television
    ii. On a billboard
    iii. Online / Social Media
    iv. At bus stops / on buses
    v. In stores
    vi. I haven't seen any

14. Do any particular brands come to mind? (Please select all that apply)
    i. Always
    ii. Bodyform
    iii. Hey Girls
    iv. Modibodi

v. Supermarket own brands (e.g. Tesco / Asda / Sainsbury's)
vi. TOTM
vii. Wuka
viii. Other (please specify)

15. Have you seen advertisements for re-usable or more sustainable products? (Such as pants, cups, pads or organic tampons)
    i. Yes
    ii. No

16. Many recent adverts for sustainable products have included messages which are intended to empower people who menstruate, encouraging them to explore what might be best for their bodies and the planet, and often advocate normalising periods. Do you think changing how period products are advertised and marketed, by including these sorts of messages, will improve social understanding and normalising of menstruation?
    i. Yes
    ii. No

17. How important do you feel this change is to you as a person who menstruates?
    i. Very Important
    ii. Quite Important
    iii. Less Important
    iv. Not Important

18. Are you aware of the terms 'people who menstruate' or 'people with periods'?
    i. Yes – I know what they mean / represent
    ii. Yes – I have heard them but I am unsure of their purpose
    iii. No – I haven't heard them

19. Some social movements are advocating changing 'feminine hygiene' to 'period products' in advertising and signage in supermarkets or stores, in an attempt to make products more inclusive and to remove any connotations of menstruation as dirty (hygiene). Are you aware of this social movement?
    i. Yes
    ii. No

20. How important do you think changing the language we use to talk about periods is in helping to normalise them further and make it a more accessible topic?
    i. Very Important
    ii. Quite Important

iii. Less Important
iv. Not Important

21. How important do you think it is for all genders to learn about and have at least a basic understanding of menstruation?
    i. Very Important
    ii. Quite Important
    iii. Less Important
    iv. Not Important

22. Do you have any experience of menstruation in gender neutral toilet facilities?
    i. Yes
    ii. No

23. If yes, please tell us your experiences

24. What words come to your mind when you think of menstruation?

25. Did you have period education at school?
    i. Yes
    ii. No

26. Was this education given to all genders?
    i. Yes
    ii. No

27. When you first learned about menstruation, which of these statements would you say most accurately applies (please read the options carefully and choose one statement)
    i. I was encouraged that menstruation is a positive thing and part of the natural life cycle
    ii. I was encouraged that menstruation is a natural occurrence and nothing to worry about
    iii. I was encouraged that menstruation, although natural, was a burden and annoyance
    iv. I was encouraged that menstruation was something which should be hidden from others and experienced in secret
    v. None of the above apply to me

28. Which of these best describe your relationship with your period?
    i. Annoyed
    ii. Confused
    iii. Depressed
    iv. Embarrassed
    v. Empowered
    vi. Energised
    vii. Fearful
    viii. Indifferent
    ix. Joyful
    x. Negative
    xi. Positive
    xii. Subdued
    xiii. Other (please specify)

29. Since first learning about menstruation, has your knowledge developed? (I.e. do you now know more than you did when you first learned about menstruation?)
    i. Yes
    ii. No

30. If yes, where or how did you learn more? What was your main source of this information?
    i. By asking another person who menstruates
    ii. From my own experiences with menstruation
    iii. From reading books about periods
    iv. Online using a search engine (e.g. Google / Bing)
    v. Online via Social Media searches
    vi. Online by stumbling across an advertisement or post
    vii. Other (please specify)

31. Have you ever missed work or school due to your period?
    i. Yes
    ii. No

32. If yes, would you say this is something which occurs frequently? (i.e. significantly impacts or disrupts your daily life?
    i. Yes
    ii. No

33. Have you ever experienced period shaming or stigma?
    i. Yes
    ii. No

34. Has the Covid-19 pandemic influenced your menstrual management? (For example are you working from home or have you been unable to get to the supermarket to buy products)
    i. Yes
    ii. No

35. If yes, please elaborate on how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted how you manage your periods

36. Do you feel that the pandemic has had an impact on your periods in any other ways? (E.g. changes in frequency, symptoms or pain due to stress, or change in routine?)
    i. Yes
    ii. No

37. If yes, please elaborate

38. Do you think we talk enough about periods in society?
    i. Yes
    ii. No

Thank you for your participation so far. This is an opportunity to opt in or out of further participation in this research. Your opinions and experiences are extremely valuable to this study, and I would love to hear them in more detail.

The second part of this research involves an informal chat conducted over Zoom, with the potential to combine it with a creative workshop.

If you would like to hear more about this research and enquire about what further participation would involve, please choose **opt in** and leave a contact email address.

*please note: whether you choose to opt in or opt out you are still protected by the same data rights outlined at the start of this survey

39. Would you like to find out more about this research and register your interest in participating further?
    i. Opt IN
    ii. Opt OUT

Appendix 5: Copy of interview/focus group questions

Firstly, I'd like to talk about your earlier experiences with menstruation, so things like your period education and some of the social aspects associated with beginning menstruation:

1. Were you taught about periods in school? [If NO skip to 4]
    - If no – were you taught about periods in another way, for example by a family member?
    - Did they explain it in the context of biology, or more about its real life impact, so pain management, product types, PMS etc.

2. Was this in the context of biology or in the context of menstruation in relation to your everyday life, for example in PSHE/Sex Ed?

3. Did it cover topics such as stigma, pain management, product types, hormones, PMS etc.
   How did you learn about these things?

4. Do you feel there is an emphasis placed on menstruation as a signifier of maturity and "entering womanhood?"

Next I'd like to talk about your experiences of menstruation in public

5. Do you have any experiences of menstruation in public that are particularly memorable to you in anyway? This could be yourself or someone else.
    - If yes, how did this make you feel in the context of being in public rather than being in your own space?

6. Would you say that when moving around a public space whilst on your period you are more or less aware of it than you would be in a private space?

7. Do you think spaces are designed in mind of menstruators – for example public toilets or the workplace, or are the facilities provided somewhat of an after-thought?

8. In the last year or so, have you experienced or witnessed examples of period shaming or societal stigma? Would you feel comfortable sharing anything about that? Online AND offline.

Now I'd like to talk about the role of sustainable or re-usable products in menstruators lives and in the narrative surrounding menstruation in society / media:

9. Do you use a reusable product? Or have you used one in the past?
    - If no, what are the main reasons you don't or don't want to?
    - Have you seen any ads for reusables?

10. If yes, what were your main reasons for swapping to reusables? (or wanting to)

11. It seems from looking at the way sustainable products are marketed to us that many products are about being the best option for both the person who is menstruating and the environment, is this something you've noticed? What are your thoughts?

Okay so now I'm going to play you two advertisements for period pants, which are about 1 minute each. I am in no way affiliated with these brands or products, I'm just using the adverts as examples of current narratives around menstruation.

Modibodi

12. How did this advert make you feel? (what stood out to you)

13. What are your thoughts on the messages and angle of this advert?

14. Responses to this advert were mixed across social media. It was even banned from Facebook for being 'shocking or sensational content' for its depiction of period blood, before being reinstated after backlash. What are your thoughts on this?

15. Do you think a bold approach to period advertisement such as this is a positive thing?

Bodyform

16. How did this advert make you feel? (what stood out to you)
17. What are your thoughts on the more metaphorical visuals and use of imagery rather than spoken dialogue?

Comparing the two

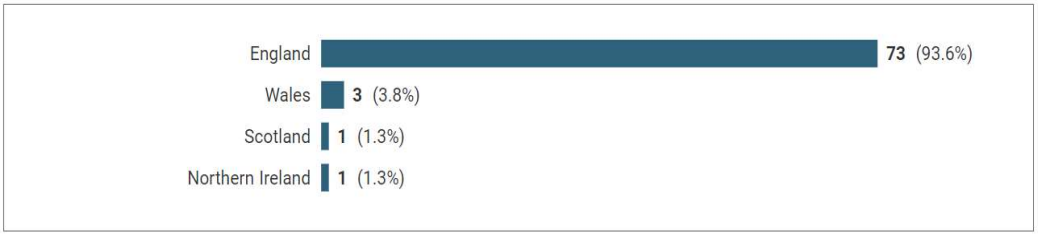
18. Had you seen either of these adverts before? (If yes, where: tv or online?)

19. Which do you feel was a more effective advert in portraying the realities of menstruation?

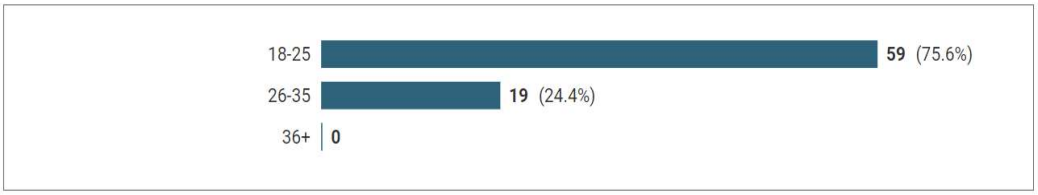
20. What do you feel were the main differences in how these adverts made you feel in comparison to other adverts you have seen perhaps of disposables?
21. Is there anything else about your experiences or anything we've talked about that you'd like to share?

Appendix 6: Data tables presenting the overall nature of the sample

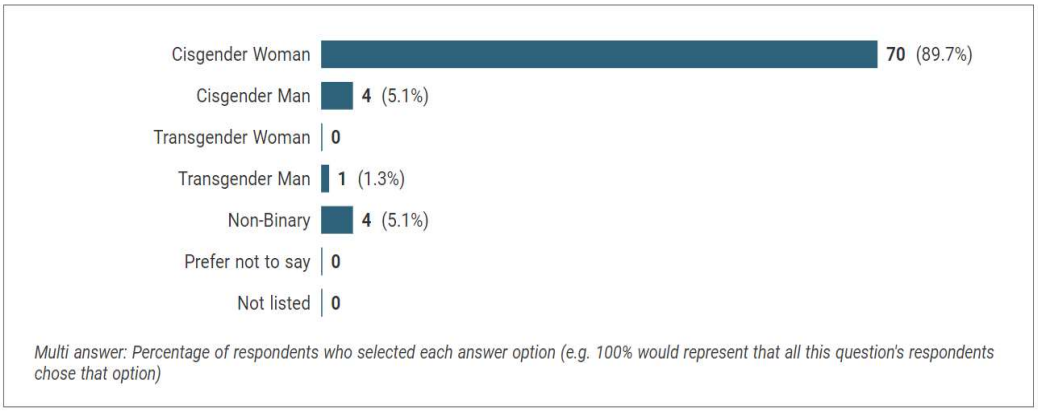
1 Where in the UK do you currently live?



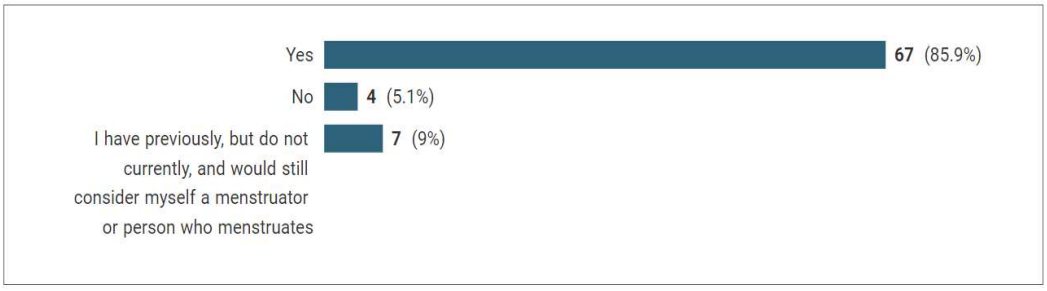
2 What is your age category?



3 What is your gender?



4 Do you menstruate?



This data was collected to establish the overall nature of the sample. These tables include the data from non-menstruating participants, despite the choice to exclude this data after collection, as they were part of the original sample. The sample of menstruating participants is made up of predominantly English cisgender women aged 18-25 who

currently experience menstruation. The four non-menstruating participants were all cisgender men aged 18-25, three of whom are from England and one from Wales.

Note: the total number of responses to ‘what is your gender?’ exceeds the total participant number of 78 as one participant identified as ‘non-binary’ and ‘transgender man’.

Appendix 7: Key participant profiles (in order of appearance in the thesis)

Participant 51

- England
- 26-35
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 51 is a menstruator who suffers from Endometriosis. They discussed their experiences with the condition, as well as menstruation pre and post childbirth. They do not use re-usable period products.

Participant 60

- England
- 18-25
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 60 is a menstruator who does not use re-usable products but identified that they would like to for environmental and financial reasons, despite being apprehensive of taking the first step. They like to talk about their periods but are reluctant as they feel they are often met with awkwardness or rejection of the topic.

Participant 57

- England
- 18-25
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 57 is a menstruator who uses re-usable period products and is very open in discussing menstruation. They experience what they describe as 'heavy' periods and advocate for the removal of shame around period sex.

Participant 13

- England
- 18-25
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 13 is a menstruator who recently began using re-usable products for environmental and comfort reasons as they realised they could not change the fact that they had a period (in their personal circumstance) and wanted to be as sustainable and comfortable as possible.

Participant 33

- England
- 18-25
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 33 is a menstruator who connects with their cycle as a natural process and is reassured when their period begins. They became interested in and reliant on re-usable period products during the lockdowns of 2020, and expressed concern about using these post-lockdown.

Participant 11

- England
- 18-25
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 11 is a menstruator who suffers from PMDD (Pre-Menstrual Dysphoric Disorder). They cite their condition as a driving reason they were forced to connect with their cycle and embrace it on a 'spiritual' level, learning about its relation to moon phases, and its connection to the life cycle, using the blood to water their plants.

Participant 50

- England
- 18-25
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 50 is a menstruator who identified they are awaiting a diagnosis for suspected Endometriosis. They use re-usable period products and advocate for greater awareness of menstruation and the effects it can have on a person.

Participant 10

- England
- 26-35
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 10 is a person who 'has previously but does not currently menstruate and would still consider themselves a menstruator or person who menstruates'. They run their own company which sells products aimed to remove staining from period blood and reduce the waste of material and clothing. They feel empowered through the work they do for their company and say it has helped them shape their relationship with their own period.

Participant 68

- England
- 18-25
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 68 is a menstruator who uses re-usable period products. They have completed a few small projects on the topic of menstruation for education and are 'very open' in talking about periods.

Participant 64

- England
- 18-25
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 64 is a menstruator who began using re-usable period products two weeks before the focus groups were conducted. Their decision to swap came after beginning their own masters research into re-usable period products and developing an interest in incorporating what they had learnt about reducing waste and cost efficiency into their own menstrual journey. They are passionate about the topic and talk openly about menstruation with their friends.

Participant 61

- England
- 26-35
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 61 is a menstruator who uses re-usable period products. They identified experiencing significant growth in their relationship with menstruation in recent years, having previously shied away from the topic in conversation due to awkwardness. As a result of this growth, they are now very open about the topic with friends and have successfully campaigned for period products in their workplace bathroom.

Participant 2

- England
- 18-25
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 2 is a menstruator who uses re-usable period products. They find their period to be 'reassuring', signifying that they are not pregnant and that their body is working as it should be. They have a keen interest in the role of pregnancy, menstruation and gender roles in society and the debate of why menstruation is not treated as a normalised bodily function.

Participant 21

- England
- 26-35
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 21 is a menstruator who suffers from Endometriosis. As a result of their experiences they are passionate about advocating reform in education and healthcare regarding Endometriosis. They successfully campaigned for their workplace to partner with Endometriosis UK to become an Endometriosis-friendly workplace and have written blog posts about the importance of conversations about periods both within and outside of the workplace.

Participant 5

- England
- 18-25
- Non-Binary

Participant 5 is a person who 'has previously but does not currently menstruate and would still consider themselves a menstruator or person who menstruates'. They identify as non-binary, and openly discussed navigating menstruation as a trans-masculine person who menstruates.

Participant 34

- England
- 18-25
- Cisgender Woman

Participant 34 is a person who 'has previously but does not currently menstruate and would still consider themselves a menstruator or person who menstruates'. They 'pause' their menstruation with the use of contraceptives and use re-usable period products when their period returns.