

#MENSTRUATION: INSTAGRAM USERS CHALLENGING SOCIAL STIGMA

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Thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa
in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts Sociology Specialization in Women's Studies

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Abstract

In many societies there is a stigma surrounding menstruation. It is often perpetuated through representations in advertisements as well as lack of open discussions. This thesis investigates ways that people are presenting menstruation on the social media platform Instagram and concludes that this is a space which allows the normative menstruation discourse to be challenged. Instagram is a widely used app that allows users to interact with others through sharing photos and has the potential to be a space for empowerment and challenging dominant ideologies. Publicly accessible photos were collected from the app using hashtags related to menstruation and menstrual activism, as well as menstrual activist accounts and menstrual product accounts. The results of a qualitative content analysis reveal numerous themes which challenge or reinforce the stigmas: Empowerment, Solidarity, Resistance, Normalizing Periods, Women's Health, Standard/Normative, Eco-Friendly and Marketing.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Kathleen Rodgers for all her support and help throughout this process. I am especially thankful for her passion and dedication in helping me bring this topic to life.

I also want to thank my committee members, Dr. Phyllis Rippey and Dr. Willow Scobie, for their ideas and assistance, and also for making my proposal and thesis defense memorable experiences. As menstruation is often surrounded by shame and embarrassment, it can therefore be an uncomfortable conversation topic, especially in an academic setting. As such, I want to thank everyone involved for being open and honest about periods and for providing a positive space for this topic to be discussed.

I also want to thank my friends and family for their endless encouragement as well as my partner for his support and his confidence in me.

Lastly, I want to thank my period for its monthly solidarity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In 2015, a photo depicting menstruation was deleted from Instagram with the justification that the image was in violation of their guidelines (Jónudóttir Barkardóttir, 2016, p. 12; Lese, 2016; Livingstone-Lang, 2016, p. 17; Lozada, 2015, p. 37). The photo, posted by Rupri Kaur as part of a series of photos to challenge stigma and elicit a conversation about menstruation, featured a woman lying in bed on her side with visible period blood on her pants and on the bed sheet. According to the feminist news site Jezebel, the photo was removed by Instagram censors and, after Kaur attempted to post the photo again, it was censored for a second time. This resulted in Kaur posting to her Tumblr blog to criticize Instagram and bring attention to the fact that the photo was not violating any of the guidelines but somehow continued to be reported and removed (Tolentino, 2015). Within only one day the controversy gained so much attention that Instagram reinstated the photo along with a statement from their spokesperson saying “when removing reported content from the Instagram community, we do not always get it right and we wrongly removed this image. As soon as we were made aware of this error, we restored the content” (Tolentino, 2015). Kaur’s photo prompted a conversation through the fact that it had been censored more than once. She stated that Instagram had demonstrated exactly what she was attempting to critique with the photo, the misogyny behind the social norms surrounding women’s bodies (Warren & Warzel, 2015). As the photo did not violate any guidelines, it is more likely that those reporting the photo found it offensive and were not comfortable with it. Users that reported the photo and the censors that deleted it were reinforcing the societal taboo surrounding menstruation (Jónudóttir Barkardóttir, 2016, p. 12; Lozada, 2015, p. 37). Three years have passed since Kaur’s post and as such, I chose to investigate the extent to which photos

of menstruation continue to be posted to Instagram, the nature of these photos and whether or not users are attempting to use the space as a medium to create a conversation by challenging the stigma surrounding menstruation. This thesis provides the results of this inquiry.

Menstruation is a normal bodily process that is experienced by over half of the world's population (Petronzio, 2014). It is a regular occurrence for women¹ from the time of their first period (menarche) until they reach menopausal age². Despite that menstruation is a standard experience for the majority of the population, it is rarely discussed openly. This is largely because in Western societies there are stigmas and taboos associated with menstruation that are reinforced through the media and socialization; these perpetuate the idea that menstruation is shameful and is not an appropriate topic for conversation (Lozada, 2015, p. 8; Schooler, Ward, Merriweather & Caruthers, 2005, p. 324). Menstruation is also frequently associated with sexuality as it is an indication that women's bodies are capable of reproduction (Fingerson, 2005, p. 92; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013, p. 381; Schooler et al., 2005, p. 324). This connection between menstruation and sexuality is taught when girls learn about menstruation in sex education classes as well as much of the focus with "early mother-daughter communication about sex" (Schooler et al., 2005, p. 324). Due to these connections, girls begin to be treated differently once they reach menarche and are socialized to feel ashamed about their bodies in relation to sex and sexuality (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013, p. 381; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 10; Schooler et al., 2005, p. 324).

¹ Throughout this thesis I may refer to those that menstruate as 'women', however it is not without acknowledgement that there are some women who do not menstruate (trans women, menopausal women) and there are also trans men who experience menstruation. When applicable I may refer to people who menstruate as 'menstruating bodies' or 'menstruators'. If I use women or girls to describe the events of menstruation it is in the context of the literature or a post from Instagram I am referencing.

² Menarche will begin around the ages of 10-12 and menopause will bring an end to their menstruating time when a person reaches ~40-60 years old (Forman et al, 2013, p. 2). These are average ages of menarche and menopause. Not every menstruator will have these experiences at the same age.

Investigating the shame and stigma associated with menstruation is an important topic due to the negative impacts it has on those who experience it. The stigma controls the way that women behave and feel about their bodies as well as how others judge them, perceiving their bodies as gross, dirty and shameful. This internalized shame appears when young girls reach the age of menarche and there is a shift in how they are treated by others. This can impact their participation in activities, such as sports or in other parts of the world they may stop attending school altogether due to the stigma that surrounds their bodies and the act of menstruation. Destigmatizing menstruation is important in lessening the shame that women and other menstruators have internalized about their bodies.

In recent years, menstrual activists have attempted to challenge the societal stigma by promoting menstrual health awareness and advocating for environmentally conscious menstrual products through brochures and zines (Bobel, 2006, p. 342; Bobel & Kissling, 2011, p. 121). Despite increased awareness about menstrual health and safety as well as a market for environmentally friendly menstrual products, the silence and shame of the taboo persists. While some research exists on menstrual activism (Bobel, 2006; Bobel, 2010; Bobel & Kissling, 2001; Fahs, 2016), very little research has examined how contemporary activism is challenging the menstrual taboo, and in particular how menstrual activism has moved online and onto social media platforms.

Instagram is a popular social media app that is used daily by 500M+ people (Instagram Press, 2018). Since this app is so widely used it has the potential to be a space for empowerment³ and challenging dominant ideologies (Friedman, 2007, p. 790; Ridgeway, 2011, p. 157). Given the importance of these spaces for challenging dominant ideologies, social media presents

³ Empowerment and what this means in terms of social media and advertising will be briefly defined in the next chapter. Along with the goal of empowerment as a type of activism against menstrual stigma.

opportunities for menstrual activists and ordinary individuals to confront the shame and silence that surrounds menstruation, as was the intention of Rupri Kaur's photo. In this thesis, I have examined how people are using Instagram to discuss and share their experiences with menstruation, how they are using the space to challenge the dominant discourse surrounding menstruation and whether Instagram has the potential to be a space for empowerment. In her book *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World* (2011) Cecilia Ridgeway states that "technological innovations...and the continual interests of women and men in bettering their lives create ongoing pressures that alter the very structures of social organizations in which positions of resources and power are embedded in our society" (p. 157). In other words, technology offers the potential to enact change in oppressive social structures. The interest of this thesis is in the social expectations and stigma of menstruation which contributes to social structures of oppression. My research is therefore, guided by the feminist principle of challenging structures of oppression. I have investigated the different ways in which people are presenting menstruation on Instagram and whether some of these ways are in an attempt to challenge the dominant ideologies surrounding menstruation. Elizabeth Friedman (2007) posits that the Internet is a tool that offers marginalized groups "new opportunities for making social change" (p. 790). Due to it being a relatively inexpensive medium, it provides a space which is widely accessible and allows for an array of topics to be explored and discussed. The technological theory of mutual shaping proposes that there is a give and take relationship between society and technology as they shape and influence each other. This theory has been employed to explain the interaction between the societal stigmas that surround menstruation and the technological space of Instagram.

1.2 Research Questions and Purpose of Research

Drawing on the concepts outlined in the literature review and theoretical framework, I conducted a content analysis of photos posted on Instagram in order to answer the following research questions:

- How are people using the space of Instagram to present menstruation?
 - Are people presenting menstruation on Instagram?
 - What are the different ways that people are presenting menstruation?
 - Is there a relationship/connection between the stigma of menstruation that exists in society and what people are posting on Instagram?
 - Can the different presentations on Instagram be seen as challenging to the normative/standard way of discussing menstruation?
 - Are there ways that menstruation is presented on Instagram that continue to reinforce the existing stigma?
 - More broadly, what does this tell us about Instagram as a space for activism/challenging societal stigmas?

The purpose of this research is to investigate if menstruation is being presented on Instagram and if so what are the different ways it is being presented. This thesis is also interested in whether Instagram is being used as a space for people to post content that challenges the societal stigmas that surround menstruation. There is also a relationship between technology (Instagram) and society (norms surrounding menstruation) that is revealed through the theory of mutual shaping and the results of the content analysis. Through a qualitative content analysis of

publicly accessible Instagram photos, it was found that menstruation is presented in a number of ways that are both challenging to the stigmas as well as representations that are normative. The different ways that people present menstruation reveals that Instagram provides an open space to discuss the subject, which is an advancement since Kaur posted her photo back in 2015.

The goal of this thesis is to understand the predominant ways that people are presenting menstruation on Instagram and how this platform is being used as a space to challenge the existing menstruation taboo. Following this Introduction, the thesis is organized in the following way. In Chapter 2 I outline the literature review and theoretical framework where the background research on some key concepts are developed and where the theory of mutual shaping is explained. In Chapter 3 I provide an overview of the Methodology, a qualitative content analysis and the steps for completing the data collection. The findings are presented in Chapter 4 where I provide a summary of each of the themes that arose from the content analysis. Chapter 5 consists of the analysis and discussion of these themes by connecting them to the literature and the theory of mutual shaping. Finally, Chapter 6 is a Conclusion which provides a summary, limitations and suggestions for further research on the topic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Literature Review

In this Chapter, I provide an overview of the existing literature in several overlapping areas and outline my theoretical framework. Specifically, in order to understand how this thesis research will fill a gap in the existing literature, I will provide background on the following topics: the history of the menstruation taboo and stigma, language, secrecy and discussions surrounding menstruation, menstrual activism, the existing literature on menstruation and Instagram, as well as the literature on online communities and collective identity, empowerment and finally the use of feminism in advertising. This is followed with a discussion of the theory of mutual shaping.

2.1.1 History of the Menstruation Taboo and Stigma

Social stigma is defined by Goffman as a “stain or mark that sets some people apart from others; it conveys the information that those people have a defect of body or of character that spoils their appearance or identity” (as cited in Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 9). Menstruation is stigmatized in most societies and also has a long history of being a taboo subject. Taboos are “restrictive laws that use exacting imperatives...that exist to protect people from perceived danger” (Fingerson, 2006, p. 43). Thus, taboos surrounding menstruation arose in order to protect others and those who menstruate from potential dangers that were believed to be linked to menstrual blood. Like all taboos and stigmas, attitudes about menstruation are socially constructed and remain unquestioned by most members of society (Delaney, Lupton & Toth, 1988, p. 28).

Several explanations attempt to clarify the source of the stigma and taboos surrounding menstruation. The most prominent of these is that it arose from the idea of blood as symbol of

danger (Delaney et al., 1988, p. 7; Lozada, 2015, p. 5). Lozada (2015) argues that since men did not menstruate they were only accustomed to blood in the circumstances of violence or death (p. 5). As such, they did not understand that it was normal for woman to bleed during menstruation, which led to its association with fear (Lozada, 2015, p. 5). Several authors explain that there is also a belief that menstruation is unsanitary, gross and dirty (Delaney et al., 1988, p. 8; Livingstone-Lang, 2016, p. 17; Schooler et al., 2005, p. 324). From this perspective, it is argued that menstrual blood is thought to be the most “disgusting or aversive” bodily fluid, even more so than breastmilk or semen (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 10). Stemming from the association with danger and uncleanness, the menstruation taboo has grown to manifest itself in shame, silence and concealment (Jónudóttir Barkardóttir, 2016, p. 6; Kissling, 1996b, p. 293, Lozada, 2015, p. 3; Schooler et al., 2005, p. 324). The feeling of shame is therefore not inherent in menstruation, but is socialized from a young age through secrecy and a lack of open discussion (Lozada, 2015, p. 7; Schooler et al., 2005 p. 324).

Some of the first mentions of the negative attitudes associated with menstruation come from the Greek and Roman writings of Aristotle and Pythagoras, who thought that menstrual blood was an unwanted, dirty material that the body was flushing out (Fingerson, 2006, p. 42; Hufnagel, 2012, p. 29). It was believed that menstrual blood had dangerous and toxic powers, including the ideas that if crops came in contact with the blood they would die and it could rust bronze or iron (Hufnagel, 2012, p. 21). Some believed that menstruating women and witches had similar abilities, like the “power to make cattle sicken and die or cause hailstorms or unseasonable rain to ruin the crops” (Hufnagel, 2012, p. 21). By the 17th Century there was an overall belief that the menstrual cycle was “inherently foul and evil” (Hufnagel, 2012, p. 29). Many societies used the menstruation taboos to isolate the power of men by placing restrictions

on menstruating women which denied them privileges they would normally be granted (Fingerson, 2006, p. 43). For example, throughout the 1900s swimming, physical exertion, and sexual intercourse were discouraged during menstruation (Fingerson, 2006, p. 43). There were also fears associated with “how women’s hormonal cycles would interfere with their ability to concentrate”, so they were also restricted from certain “high-pressure jobs” (Fingerson, 2006, p. 43). Fingerson (2006) posits that due to the lower social standing of women, men “developed and perpetuated the negative beliefs and taboos” to further socially control women and maintain their own power in society (p. 44). Although there are no legal restrictions that are enforced today, there are still some religious practices that are geared toward menstruating women. Some Orthodox Jews still believe in “post-menstruation purification rituals”, although it is said to be a spiritual practice and not associated with physical cleanliness (Fingerson, 2006, p. 42).

Religious beliefs were the main influence on societies’ attitudes about menstruation in the 18th Century (Hufnagel, 2012, p. 32). Religion was used to justify women’s inferior status. For instance, in Leviticus, a menstruating woman is defined as “polluted”, thus women were not allowed to participate in worship (Hufnagel, 2012, p. 30 & p. 33). During this time there was a focus on the sanitization of women’s bodies because of the beliefs that menstrual blood was dirty and toxic. It was thought that women were impure during menstruation and if anyone touched them, they would be “rendered unclean” (Fingerson, 2006, p. 42). Religion was a major influence on people’s understandings and negative attitudes towards menstruation.

With the turn of the 19th Century, medicine became the dominant contributing source of the stigma surrounding menstruation (Hufnagel, 2012, p. 53). Restrictions on menstruating women were based on medical opinions, rather than the previous century which focused on what was stated in religious texts. Medical experts of this time believed that the safest place for

women during menstruation was in the home, as they still believed that certain activities or “simply stepping in cold water while they were menstruating” could result in sterility (Hufnagel, 2012, p. 39). The medicalization of menstruation led to more of a sexualization women’s bodies as well as the shaming of the menarcheal (first period) experience (Hufnagel, 2012, p. 55). There was a silence associated with the topic and most girls were “traumatized” at the onset of their first period as they did not understand what was happening to their bodies (Hufnagel, 2012, p. 35).

Moving into the 20th Century, with products advertised to control and manage menstruation, commerce began to influence societies beliefs about menstruation and theories associated with religion and medicine were pushed aside. Previously girls would learn about menstruation from their mothers or other family members, but with the rise of the menstrual product industry they began to receive most of their information from commercials and advertisements (Hufnagel, 2012, p. 85). Product advertisements moved the focus of menstruation to sanitation and hygiene by marketing the appropriate products to keep women clean and ease the process of menstruation (Hufnagel, 2012, p. 85).

2.1.2 Menstruation Product Advertisements

Through advertising in the twentieth century menstruators learn that their period is something that should be hidden (Lozada, 2015, p. 8; Schooler et al, 2005, p. 324).

Advertisements since the 1950s have marketed the discretion of products for menstruation (Delaney et al., 1988, p. 107). The media continuously emphasize the importance of secrecy and perpetuates the taboo that menstruation should not be seen or discussed openly (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 11; Fingerson, 2006, p. 16). Advertisements create a narrative that menstruation is something that needs to be managed and the only way to do so is by using the

products that they are marketing (Polak, 2006, 194). They use several tactics to convey their messages, such as word choice and constructing a narrative around fear and embarrassment. The strategic use of words such as, “trust, security and comfort” force the viewer to buy into the narrative of protection and management that the advertised product will offer (Polak, 2006, p. 194). In order to present their product as the most trustworthy, they contrast these themes of protection and security with other products on the market that could cause “leaking” (Polak, 2006, p. 194), which instills messages of fear, shame and embarrassment (Fingerson, 2006, p. 16; Lozada, 2015, p. 8). Since menstruation is supposed to be kept hidden and secret, leaking is a cause of shame and embarrassment as it reveals the act of menstruating to others. The advertisements play on this fear of discovery which perpetuates the stigmas and taboos associated with menstruation (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 11).

Menstrual products are usually labeled ‘feminine hygiene’ products. This label assumes two things: first, that females are the only users of these products – ignoring trans men that may menstruate and second, that these products are meant for hygienic purposes and without them you are unhygienic, reinforcing the unclean/dirty aspect of the taboo. The way these products are displayed in stores and presented in the media can be very influential to girls who are new to learning about menstruation. Moreover, some advertising techniques (the use of blue liquid to demonstrate the absorbency of products) can even be somewhat confusing to those who are not yet familiar with menstruation (Fingerson, 2006, p. 54). The tactic of using blue liquid rather than red, which resembles menstrual blood more closely, is used to separate the products from the “actual physical experience of menstruation” (Fingerson, 2006, p. 54). This strategy contributes to the sanitization of menstruation, which focuses on the stigma that it is dirty and can only be cleaned or maintained by the products (Fingerson, 2006, p. 54). The products’

packaging also contribute to the taboo; they come in small packages that are easily hidden and can be “discretely discarded in a bathroom container” (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 11). This is to hide the fact that women are noticeably menstruating and maintains the secrecy and silence of the taboo. Tampons and pads are also stereotypically gendered as they are decorated to appeal to women and girls; pink wrappers with flowers and ‘feminine’ designs on them (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 11).

Along with advertisements, other forms of public discourse such as magazine and newspaper articles, TV shows and jokes also shape societies’ attitudes about menstruation by framing it in a negative or humorous way (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 11). Most forms of media portray menstruation in a negative and stereotypical way, usually referring to women who are experiencing premenstrual syndrome (PMS) as irrational, violent and emotional (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 11). This reinforces the idea that women who are menstruating or about to begin their cycle again are “out of control” and are not to be trusted due to their “irrational” behaviour (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 11). These are stereotypical ideas about PMS that continue to be the basis of societal knowledge about women and menstruation.

2.1.3 Language, Secrecy and Discussions of Menstruation

Another way the taboo is maintained is through the language used when discussing menstruation. It is a subject that is often silenced, however when it *is* spoken about it is done in a highly negative way, accompanied by the use of euphemisms to avoid the word ‘menstruation’ and even ‘period’ (Delaney et al., 1988, p. 116; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013, p. 382; Lozada, 2015, p. 13; Polak, 2006, p. 191; Schooler et al., 2005, p. 324). There are over 5000 euphemisms and slang terms from different cultures around the world including; “that time of the month”,

“aunt flo”, “monthly visitor”, “crimson wave/tide”, “the curse” and “code red” (O’Connor, 2016; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 12; Polak, 2006, p.191). If menstrual blood was not stigmatized, people would be able to discuss it openly while using the formal terminology and euphemisms would not be used so widely around the world (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 12). The slang terms, along with the messages from advertisements, create and perpetuate the taboo through the discourse of shame, silence and secrecy associated with menstruation.

Scholars theorize that when menstruation is discussed it is allowed to be spoken about in a reference to women as menstruators in general, but as soon as it is referred to as an individual event it becomes more stigmatized and silenced (Newton, 2012, p. 394). Women learn to hide the fact that they are menstruating, and therefore once the conversation becomes focused on the individual it exposes them as a menstruator (Newton, 2012, p. 399). When girls are taught to keep menstruation hidden and “to themselves” this shows that menstruation is not a “normal” or “usual state”, they must learn to manage it in a private space in order to “pass off as normal” in a public space (Newton, 2012, p. 399). Newton (2012) explains that public discourse, such as advertisements, jokes and portrayals on television or in movies, are not allowed to speak about the personal event of menstruation and must keep it more generalized, as this is a more accepted way to reference menstruation in society (p. 399).

Some women and girls feel that they should keep all discussions about menstruation in “women-only spaces”, such as bathrooms or female only hangouts, in order to maintain their “private menstrual identity” (Fingerson, 2006, p. 29). They allow themselves to discuss experiences of menstruation in the company of other women, but at the same time maintain an outward appearance that they are not menstruating (Fingerson, 2006, p. 15). Information that is not relayed through advertisements or the media, such as “how to remove menstrual blood stains,

how to be discreet about carrying a tampon...and how to dispose of it”, are messages passed between female friends and family when they feel comfortable within the private sphere (Newton, 2012, p. 399).

Fingerson (2005) studied North American teenage girls and how they experience and manage menstruation in their school environment (p. 94). This study notes that girls form a supportive community to discuss and sympathize with each other about their experiences with menstruation (Fingerson, 2005, p. 94). In addition, Kissling (1996a) suggests that a group of friends can provide “valuable experiential information” along with a context in which girls will feel “comfortable talking about menstruation” (p. 492). Talking to friends who share the experience of menstruation can increase solidarity among the group and reduce some of the discomfort associated with such a taboo topic (Fingerson, 2006, p. 94; Kissling, 1996a, p. 493). In this way, menstruation is used as a “resource in social interaction” within a “peer culture” to create social bonds and develop identities (Fingerson, 2006 p. 94). Girls will share their stories and learn from each other as they experience menstruation as a “social event” (Fingerson, 2006, p. 98). These types of communities that girls are forming around menstruation can be a source of empowerment and aid them in feeling less ashamed with the stigma of menstruation (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013, p. 382).

Kissling (1996a) claims that there are some “recent feminist efforts” that re-evaluate and attempt to counter the seemingly inherent negativity that surrounds menstruation, but also wonders if it is possible for the the negative associations to be “brushed aside and replaced with positive ones” (p. 497). She posits different ways that people attempt to “honour their periods”, which can help celebrate menstruation and combat the stigma that surrounds it (Kissling, 1996a, p. 498, 499). Some women celebrate menstruation by telling stories and “reminiscing” about

their experiences, while there are others who spend time alone to meditate (Kissling, 1996a, p. 498). There are also women who use a more activist approach of the DIY ethic (which will be discussed in the menstruation activism section) to make their own cloth pads and “enjoy the ritualistic aspects of using and taking care of them” each new cycle (Kissling, 1996a, p. 498). By celebrating their periods with positivity, they are challenging the negativity that usually surrounds the menstruation dialogue. Kissling (1996a) concludes that if people were to share their menstrual experiences more openly and more often, it would aid in breaking down the taboo of communication (p. 499). Jackson & Falmagne (2013), reiterate this idea of “open talk” as a form of resistance against the silence of menstruation (p. 392). Girls and women form a solidarity with others who experience menstruation through their discussions as well as by helping each other with menstrual management. An example of this is checking each other for period leaks while in a public space (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013, p. 392). Although this management feeds into the concealment and secrecy of the taboo, it nonetheless allows peers to give and receive the support that they need to feel secure rather than the fear of embarrassment that a leak may cause. Talking openly and helping each other with managing menstruation both contribute to moving menstruation from the “private into the interpersonal realm” (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013, p. 392). Changing the menstrual event from something one experiences on their own to something that can be spoken about openly in a safe space among peers helps to challenge the stigma.

Fingerson (2005), concludes that even though menstruation is embedded in negativity within society, girls and women are able to associate menstruation with positive experiences (p. 106). In this study, Fingerson discovered that the teen girls “drew on the resources of their bodies and their experiences of menstruation as a way of building a sense of their femininity and

connecting to other girls and women” (2005, p. 106). In doing so, they were resisting the dominant cultural constructions by discussing menstruation in an open manner.

These communities that openly discuss menstruation can also be found in online spaces. There is evidence that girls are attempting to challenge the societal silence of menstruation through social interactions face-to-face (as previously mentioned) as well as with online peers (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 15). Polak (2006) conducted research on an online forum where adolescent girls were found developing a new menstruation narrative as they used this platform to allow their voices to be heard within the communal space (p. 191). The forum was intended as a space where girls could interact with each other, it was not created with the purpose of facilitating an open discourse of menstruation, however the topic frequently arose. Girls were found to be discussing issues about menstruation that were not being mentioned elsewhere and using the platform to work through these issues together (Polak, 2006, p. 192). They were also not constrained by the language taboo of menstruation and were using the formal terminology instead of euphemisms (Polak, 2006, p. 204). Some topics that were discussed openly and judgement-free on the forum were “teen health and wellness”, “dealing & health”, “PMS/period” (Polak, 2006, p. 199). Polak (2006) came to the realization that if women have a safe space in which to discuss menstruation, they will do so and concludes that these types of conversations are needed in society (p. 192).

The online platform discussed in the article provides a balance between private and public space, where girls can be “honest yet anonymous without fear of the repercussions that may occur in a physical space” (Polak, 2006, p. 199). The internet allows for a space where people can feel less constrained by pre-written gender constructions as the body is removed and identities become malleable (this will be discussed further in the communities and collective

identity section of this literature review) (Polak, 2006, p. 199). This online platform allowed the girls to interact in a way that was not controlled by discretion and they were able to speak freely about menstruation in a manner that did not conceal aspects of the event. They posed questions about issues not discussed in advertisements for menstrual products, and were provided with answers from other girls on the forum that were supportive and useful (Polak, 2006, p. 200). For example, there were some individuals on the forum who had not begun menstruating yet who were able to learn that menstrual blood can be different shades of red and is definitely not the blue liquid that is often used in advertisements (Polak, 2006, p. 200). Part of the new narrative that these girls were writing had to do with the management of menstruation. Advertisements teach us that the main concern about products is whether or not they can successfully keep menstruation hidden and secret from others (Polak, 2006, p. 202). These girls were putting these products on trial; instead of talking about which product can keep menstruation hidden, they were discussing which products work best and are the most comfortable as well as how to use them properly; something else that is not directly taught in the media (Polak, 2006, p. 200).

Polak concludes the article with a statement that the online platform is a very positive space for girls to discuss menstruation but does have its limitations. For instance, there will always be a digital divide in which there are people who do not have the same computer access as others and who will not be able to benefit from the open discussions going on in these spaces (Polak, 2006, p. 205). Moreover, even if one does have access to a computer, they may not participate in this specific online community as its mentioned that one would have to have strong technological skills to access the forums discussed in this particular article (Polak, 2006, p. 200). Since this article was published, more social media and interactive platforms exist that are easily

accessible by the average person⁴. Polak's work suggests this is a positive development that could aid in increasing and expanding the open discussions that were taking place on the forum, now taking place on Instagram and potentially other social media platforms. However, even though these platforms provide a space for an open discourse about menstruation, these discussions continue to be isolated within the platform and are not able to challenge the stigmas and taboos on a broader societal level.

2.1.4 Menstrual Activism

Menstrual activism aims to directly challenge taboos and stigmas surrounding menstruation. Questioning the socially constructed discourse of menstruation as shameful became popular in the mid 1970s, during the second wave of feminism (Bobel, 2010, p. 42; Lozada, 2015, p. 9). One of the largest movements within the second wave of feminism was the women's health movement, which "challenged male-dominated medical establishments" and advocated for women to take control of their own health and bodies (Bobel, 2006, p. 332). Not until the late 1970s was the topic of menstruation important to this movement when their main focus became menstrual safety (Bobel & Kissling, 2011, p. 8). This shift in the movement was sparked by a medical crisis called *Toxic Shock Syndrome* (TSS); a bacterial toxin that can lead to fatality, which became a problem with the introduction of a super absorbent synthetic tampons (Bobel, 2006, p. 332). Due to the increased health risks of these mainstream products, women involved in the health movement were advocating for the safe use of tampons. They created brochures to teach others about safety and alternative products, including patterns for reusable

⁴ It should be noted that this article was written back in 2006, when computer and internet access was not as accessible. Forums that existed then were not as simple or straight forward to use as social media platforms are today. In relation to this thesis and accessibility; Instagram is easy to understand and navigate, there may be people that do not have access to a smart phone and would not be able to create an account to participate, however the use of the app is not hindered by limited technological skills.

pads made out of cloth (Bobel, 2006, p. 332; Lozada, 2015, p. 10) that women could make on their own instead of buying the products that could cause TSS.

During the third wave of feminism, around the years 1993-2005, many new forms of activism surrounding menstruation arose (Bobel, 2006, p. 333-334). This wave continued to focus on menstrual product activism and to challenge the dominant tampon and pad products. Their main focus was on environmental concerns, although they still continued to emphasize health and safety. Some activists were concerned with the implications on the environment and health that were associated with the bleaching process of the products to make them white. Another environmental concern was the non-biodegradable and disposable impact that commercial products created (Bobel, 2006, p. 334). There was also a resistance to the commercial products as they were seen as being designed to hide the reality of menstruation and reinforce the taboo. These activists challenge the notion that menstruation is “constructed as a problem that needs to be solved” (Bobel, 2006, p. 334), and continues to be surrounded by this notion to this day. Menstrual activism at this time focused on advocating for alternative products to the mainstream marketed pads and tampons for environmental and social reasons.

Chris Bobel (2006), who is one of the main researchers in third wave menstruation activism, explores how the punk movement’s DIY ethic was incorporated to promote awareness for alternative methods and products for periods, with the use of zines and e-zines online (p. 336). The punk movement was known for opposing mainstream cultural products which lent itself well to the third wave movement’s use of zines (Bobel, 2006, p. 342; Bobel & Kissling, 2011, p. 121). However, similar to critiques of second wave feminism more broadly, third wave menstrual activism faced concerns that it did not represent women of colour. It is speculated that a reason for the absence of women of colour was that the leaders of the movements were

predominantly white, just as the environmental movement in the United States, the punk movement and the second wave of feminism had all been composed and associated with white members (Bobel, 2010, p. 138). The current era of feminism⁵ strives to include women of colour and become more intersectional. Part of my own research involved investigating the diversity displayed on Instagram and whether or not there are different types of women (women of colour, trans women, etc.) using Instagram to challenge the menstruation taboo and potentially using the online space to advocate for awareness of menstrual issues.

2.1.5 Literature on Menstruation and Instagram

To date very few studies have explored the ways Instagram is being used to challenge the menstruation taboo. Some of these focus on the use of menstrual art as a way to challenge the taboo and the use of Instagram as a platform for posting this art (Jónudóttir Barkardóttir, 2016; Livingstone-Lang, 2016; Lozada, 2015). Others concentrate on certain photos of menstruation and their censorship from Instagram, including a study by Lese (2016) which outlines how the previously mentioned photo posted by Rupri Kaur received a lot of news coverage due to its deletion from Instagram. As I outlined in the introduction, the photo was removed by Instagram due to its violation of the guidelines and was reinstated after it received attention from other platforms. As the photo did not actually violate any guidelines, it is clear that those reporting the photo found it offensive and were not comfortable with it. Users that reported and those that censored the photo were influenced by society's taboo of menstruation and thus attempted to hide and silence it (Jónudóttir Barkardóttir, 2016, p. 12; Lese, 2016; Lozada, 2015, p. 37). Several articles use this photo as a jumping off point to discuss either the censorship of menstruation and other controversial photos from Instagram or the use of menstrual art on

⁵ Some call the current state of feminism the 'fourth wave', others refer to it as 'post-feminism'.

Instagram.

Melanie Lozada (2015) argues that menstrual art should be classified as a type of feminist activist art (p. 13) and that social media platforms allow for a space to express this art and form a community (p. 22). Menstrual art (menstrala) is the use of menstrual blood in a visual or performance art piece, which directly connects the body to the art in order to release the artists own shame about their body (Lozada, 2015, p. 15). Lozada argues that feminist activist art has the “potential to effect social change” as it “strives to expose underlying ideologies or existing structures that have a negative effect on women and their lives” (2015, p. 13). It is suggested that menstrual art can connect individuals with the idea that menstruation is not shameful or something to be hidden, as it attempts to expose the existing structure of the taboo. It is argued that by bringing menstrual blood and menstruation “out of the shadows”, people’s ideas of the taboo can be altered (Lozada, 2015, p. 15).

Menstrala has largely existed within small communities of menstrual artists and appreciators in online spaces that they have cultivated (Lozada, 2015, p. 21). Lozada argues that with the use of social media platforms and the communal nature of such platforms, menstrala communities have the chance to thrive within these online spaces (2015, p. 22). Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram are all discussed for their ability to support the menstrala community and content (Lozada, 2015, p. 24). The author suggests that Instagram lends itself well to the presentation of activist art because of its “visual nature” and the ability to ‘like’ and comment on photos can yield engaging discussions (Lozada, 2015, p. 24). Popular hashtags (#) used are #menstrualart and #menstrala, which allow others to search for this content as well as participate in a conversation with those that are attempting to challenge the menstruation taboo. Lozada calls those who participate in the menstrala community “radical menstruators” (2015, p. 25) and

recognizes that menstrual art plays a key role in dismantling the taboo of menstruation, suggesting the continuance of making menstrual blood and menstruation known in order to take part in going against the dominant discourse (2015, p. 38). Lozada's work concentrates solely on menstrual art created with menstrual blood, which is where this research differs from what this thesis investigates. I have looked at different ways that people are presenting menstruation on Instagram, not just menstrual art, but other ways of challenging the taboo.

2.1.6 Online Communities and Collective Identity

The concept of communities, and the related concept of "collective identities" can be helpful in understanding how online spaces facilitate the coalescence of previously unconnected people and marginalized individuals (Friedman, 2007, p. 790; Gal, Shifman & Zohar, 2016). Both of these concepts help to explain that online spaces provide important support and a place for discussions to form that may not be available offline due to geographic location. Without face-to-face contact, people are still able to interact with others as they connect through shared interests and concerns. Community is also important to investigate since Instagram refers to their rules as the "Community Guidelines" and they also rely on this community to report photos in order to maintain these rules. As mentioned above, community is also important to menstrual art and the goal of challenging stigmatized discourse surrounding menstruation.

Wajcman and Jones (2012) assert that the boundaries are dissolving between digital media and everyday life (p. 673), therefore it seems to be increasingly difficult to determine what constitutes a community. Baym (2015) argues that the creators or members of the online groups usually refer to themselves as "communities" and those on the outside attempt to contradict this use of the term (Baym, 2015, p. 81). While debates exist about whether online interactions can replace the "genuine and deep" connections provided by face-to face communities, numerous

authors have explained how online spaces act as communities (Baym, 2015, p. 82). Baym argues that the reason there is such a debate on this topic is because there is not one exact definition of what a community is, there are many ways to define it and whether one believes an online space is a community depends on the definition that they are using (Baym, 2015, p. 83). Baym illustrates five qualities that appear in different definitions of community that connect the term with online contexts; sense of space, shared practice, shared resources and support, shared identities and interpersonal relationships (Baym, 2015, p. 84). She then provides evidence that online groups have demonstrated these aspects of community. I will not elaborate on each of these qualities as it is beyond the scope of this thesis. I will, however, mention that space and location is important to consider, as some argue that because these groups are not in the same physical geographical area they cannot be considered a community (Baym, 2015, p. 85). However, De Souza E Silva and Firth (2010) argue that new location technology on devices can reference a geographical location in the ‘real world’ which helps to link the two realities and lends to the argument that these spaces are communities (p. 487). As Instagram has the ability to “tag” a location that a picture was taken, it can reference a real geographical location and connect others that were in this location as well.

Crawford & Gillespie (2016) argue that social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, place responsibility on their communities to measure and determine the “community standards” of what is generally found unacceptable across the platform, which spawns what content will be regarded as appropriate or inappropriate in the future (p. 412). The community can help generate a consensus of what content is or is not accepted for each specific site; which is done through the ability to ‘like’ and comment on content or flag/report posts that violate rules or are found inappropriate.

The idea of collective identity, often used to understand how social movements develop a sense of togetherness, is closely linked to the idea of community. Polletta and Jasper (2007) argue that collective identity can be defined as “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (p. 285). It is a perceived shared status which encapsulates feelings of positivity towards others in the community; forging a sense of “we-ness” and “collective agency” (Treré, 2015, p. 903). Cultural materials, such as symbols, names, rituals and clothing, are vehicles in which to express cultural identity, although “not all cultural materials express collective identity” (Gal, Shifman & Kampf, 2015, p. 1699; Polletta & Jasper, 2007, p. 285). Collective identity formations have moved to online spaces which has enabled marginalized groups access to public discourse (Friedman, 2007, p. 790; Gal et al, 2015, p. 1700). Social media platforms allow these groups to “gather in alternative public spheres, creating narratives that deviate from the dominant hegemonic line” (Gal et al, 2015, p. 1700). Due to the accessibility, less mediation and less supervision of these online platforms they have become a location where diverse identities can be represented and collective identities can form (Friedman, 2007; Gal et al, 2015).

2.1.7 Empowerment

Within my research I used the term empowerment during the data analysis to describe codes and themes. Since empowerment is part of my research it is important to define how I will be using the term, as it is broad and can be used in many contexts. According to findings by Regan & Steeves (2010), the internet can provide a space for people to self-express and build communities (p. 151). Regan & Steeves (2010) refer to Amichai-Hamburger who has identified four levels of how empowerment can be presented on the internet (p. 155). The first level is personal empowerment which encompasses “a sense of personal competence, an experience of

personal growth and feelings of self-determination” (Regan & Steeves, 2010, p. 155); this is also a feature of the formation of collective identity (Polletta & Jasper, 2007; Treré, 2015, p. 903). Interpersonal empowerment is the second level, which involves establishing and maintaining relationships with others (Regan & Steeves, 2010, p. 155). The third level is where empowerment occurs, which is called the group level. As part of this level, one’s self-esteem will be boosted and their social belonging will be enhanced (Regan & Steeves, 2010, p. 155). Through the internet it is easy to seek out others who share common interests and goals, which can be transferred to their “offline relationships” (Regan & Steeves, 2010, p. 155). This means that one can take the empowerment that they experienced in an online space and bring it to interactions they might have in everyday life. There is also a fourth level of empowerment called citizenship, which involves “engagement with others to do something or to affect some state of affairs, such as change in social or political policy” (Regan & Steeves, 2010, p. 155). This level would be people who come together to empower each other to enact social change in their offline community, or in other words form a collective identity through this empowerment and a sense of togetherness (Polletta & Jasper, 2007, p. 285).

In the context of my own research, empowerment would mean that people will feel positively toward themselves and others through their online interactions with a community and this has the potential to trickle into their daily lives and lead to social change. In the context of the code and theme of empowerment (which came about through the content analysis and will be explored in the findings and analysis chapters), it means that people are posting images that can be empowering to others. They are conveying empowerment and attempting to spread it to others in hopes that they will feel empowered as well.

Empowerment can be a controversial topic as it does not involve structural changes or dismantling the patriarchy, therefore some may not see it as a type of activism. However, empowerment helps to eliminate the shame that surrounds menstruation (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013, p. 382), thus is a beneficial way of presenting menstruation. Menstrual empowerment encourages menstruators to feel comfortable and confident about expressing themselves in a positive way. Destigmatization is the end goal of menstrual empowerment, which means that people are free to discuss and celebrate menstruation as much or as little as they personally see fit. It means more comfort and confidence, with less shame and embarrassment when referring to or experiencing menstruation.

2.1.8 Empowerment and Feminism as an Advertising Strategy

The use of women's empowerment and feminism is not new to advertising; back in 2004 Dove revitalized their brand by launching the "Campaign for Real Beauty" which used feminist criticisms of beauty standards (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 942). This Dove campaign presented "real" women instead of models to advertise their firming products. These "real" women, although not models but "conventionally attractive", were presumably in their 20s and 30s, a mix of different races and were all sporting white cotton underwear (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 951). They were posed together "smiling and frolicking" and appeared to portray friendship and happiness (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 951). Dove's intention was to "make women feel more beautiful" by challenging the normative and unrealistic representation of women in media and advertising by showing women with cellulite and wrinkles rather than air brushed models with perfect skin (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 952).

The Dove campaign aligned itself with feminist ideals of challenging beauty standards presented in the media and the company also participated in "grassroots partnering to raise

millions of dollars for eating disorder organizations and girl scout programs to build self-esteem”, and initiative that was widely celebrated for all this in the popular media (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 943). The discourse surrounding this campaign is an example of a corporation appropriating social movement ideals to help advertise their products. Previous studies have analyzed other advertising campaigns in the past and have used the term “corporate feminism” or “celebrity feminism” to describe this appropriation (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 943). The current article that has investigated the Dove campaign “Feminist Consumerism and Fat Activists: A Comparative Study of Grassroots Activism and the Dove Real Beauty Campaign” by Johnston and Taylor’s (2008) research of the Dove campaign deemed this corporate use of feminism as “feminist consumerism” (p. 943). They use this term as the Dove marketing campaign is rooted in the culture of consumerism where the primary focus is on the purchase of commodities to “assert identity, achieve a common good, express ethical (feminist) principles, and seek personal pleasure and social approval” (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 943).

Since the 1970s, feminist scholarship has countered the “oppressive beauty standards that repress women’s freedom” and create a harmful relationship with one’s body (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 944). Corporations play a key role in the “production and reproduction of beauty ideology”, they perpetuate the unattainable beauty standards and place emphasis on the appearance of women (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 946). The Dove campaign challenges the normative beauty standards by presenting “real” women who are not typically seen in advertisements, however it also stays within a “hegemonic ideology of gendered beauty” by adhering to the notion that a woman’s identity relies on her beauty, ignoring her personality and success as a person (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 954). While they are empowering women to feel beautiful about their bodies, they demand this acceptance and continue to perpetuate the

same message as other media; that women's other accomplishments are not as important as their looks and body. The most ironic part of this campaign is that Dove is encouraging women to come to terms with their beauty by "channeling negative energy into self-acceptance, self-worth and self-care via Dove products" (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 955). Similar to the way that period products are presented as the solution to managing menstruation, the Dove campaign is presenting their products as a way to feel confident in one's own body. They appropriate "feminist themes of empowerment and self-care" and reformulate "feminism as achieved principally through grooming and shopping" (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 955). Feminist consumerism, in the case of Dove, does not involve any radical feminist thought that would be critical of the "gendered grooming and beauty ideology" (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 955). When the Dove campaign reformulates the feminist themes of empowerment in their advertising, these themes become attached to the products, thus associated with an identity of "self-respect, independence, personal strength, and collective identity and community" (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 956). One can embody this identity through purchase of these Dove products without putting any effort into empowering themselves or others; the identity can be bought with the product.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The theory of mutual shaping will offer an analytical basis for this thesis. Within the study of new technologies there are three theoretical frameworks that are used for understanding the interaction between technology and society (Baym, 2015, p. 26). Technological Determinism is the theory that any new technology introduced into society, such as machines, computers, or social media platforms have the capacity to change and manipulate society (Baym, 2015, p. 26; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2010, p. 4; Skrubbeltrang, Grunnet & Traasdahl Tarp, 2017).

Furthermore, this theory posits that technological change impacts society from the outside (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999, p. 5) and that society has little agency and control over the manipulation of technologies. Lievrouw & Livingstone (2010) explain that under the theory of Technological Determinism the affect that technology has on society is predetermined (p. 4). According to MacKenzie & Wajcman (1999), this theory is “oversimplified” and focuses more on how we adapt to changes in technology rather than how we shape them (p. 5). Technological Determinism is most prominent within literature on reproductive technology. Those that employ this theory believe that the advances in technology, such as contraception and abortion, have singlehandedly transformed women’s lives and allowed them control over their own bodies (Wajcman, 1991, p. 55). However, these advancements in reproductive technology are largely based on society’s attitudes towards sex and the status of women (Wajcman, 1991, p. 74). If the birth control pill was not accepted socially at the time, it would not have been conceived or introduced. Therefore, society plays a part in influencing new technological advancements.

Another theory, which opposes that of Technological Determinism, suggests that society has power over technology, which “arise[s] from social processes” (Baym, 2015, p. 44). This theory, developed by Bijker and Pinch (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999, p. 5), is labelled the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) and argues that technologies are invented from the social forces of society (Baym, 2015, p.44). This theory supports the idea that social actors have a significant role to play in shaping technology and “the advancement of technology depends on the society that it is introduced to” (Skrubbeltrang et al., 2017). According to these frameworks, either it is believed that technology is an outside force that holds all the power over society (Technological Determinism) or society manipulates and contributes to technology (SCOT). There is however another theory that encompasses both of these perspectives, which is referred

to as Social Shaping or Mutual Shaping of Technology (Baym, 2015; Faulkner, 2001; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2010; MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999; Skrubbeltrang et al, 2017; Wajcman, 1991). As explored by Baym (2015), mutual shaping states that users shape technology, while technology in turn influences society (p. 46, p. 51). Instead of following the two extremes of the former theoretical frameworks, mutual shaping demonstrates the back and forth relationship between society and technology which are mutually constituted (Wajcman, 2007, p. 293). This approach views technology as a “seamless web or network” that amalgamates “artefacts, people, organizations, cultural meanings and knowledge” (Wajcman, 2007, p. 293). Within the process of mutual shaping “technological development and social practices are co-determining” as they each influence the other (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2010, p. 4).

Within the current topic of study, I will use the theory of mutual shaping to help explain how society and Instagram interact; more specifically the relationship between the stigmas and taboos that surround menstruation in society and the content about menstruation that people are posting on Instagram. The menstrual taboo is a feminist issue, therefore the work of Judy Wajcman is important as it is very influential within the research area of gender and technology. In the article *Feminist Theories of Technology* (2010), Wajcman adds gender to the theory of mutual shaping stating that “technology is conceptualized as both a source and consequence of gender relations” (p. 143). Gender relations can appear within technology, as well as be simultaneously produced and reinforced through technology (Wajcman, 2007, p. 293). Since technology was built into a pre-existing society of sex, class and race relations, these structures continue to be reflected and perpetuated through new technological developments (Wajcman, 1991, p. 52). Therefore, technology and gender have a mutually shaped relationship.

Many theorists argue that technology is masculine due to its historical roots in industrial

and military technologies (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999; van Zoonen, 2002; Wajcman, 1991). Industrial technologies were designed by men for men; this is seen with the fact that machines in factories were created too big and heavy for women to be able to use (Wajcman, 1991, p. 21). Even the birth of the internet, in the 1960s, has roots in the “military-industrial complex” and is embedded with masculine values and codes (van Zoonen, 2002, p. 6). While the roots of technology may have associations with masculinity, some argue that the digital age of technology has more feminine qualities and even has the ability to transgress gender dichotomies (van Zoonan, 2002, p. 6). Rather than the industrial technology that controlled gender divisions through machines, new digital technology is argued to be liberating for women (van Zoonan, 2002; Wajcman, 2007). Theorist Sadie Plant argues that digital technology aids in “blurring the boundaries between humans and machines, and between male and female” allowing users to take on different identities (Wajcman, 2007, p. 291). The ability to take on new identities through the internet can be liberating for women as it can eliminate gender and class hierarchies (Wajcman, 2007, p. 291). As previously mentioned in the literature review, this notion is also highlighted by Freidman, who argues that the internet provides new opportunities for more marginalized and oppressed groups (Friedman, 2007, p. 790).

Since digital technology is considered a more feminine or genderless space than previous technologies and provides a space for more marginalized individuals to express their voice, it lends itself well to the topic as Instagram could offer a space more open to feminist and gender issues such as challenging the menstruation taboo. The connection of this theory to the data collected from Instagram will be explored further in the discussion and analysis section.

Since mutual shaping involves the interplay between society and technology, the relationship between community and technology is important to explore. Although community is

an integral part of society, there is still little consensus within the field of Sociology on what the term means (Jankowski, 2010, p. 59). There are many different definitions of community as well as what it entails in relation to the online realm. This was explored in the literature review section of this chapter, where it was determined that communities can be formed in virtual space and collective identities can also develop. When marginalized groups find a space online to form and develop a collective identity they can attempt to challenge normative assumptions; they can use an online platform to promote social change. There are scholars that do not believe that communities can develop online without interactions in person taking place alongside the online communications. However, some argue that “people in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but [they] leave [their] bodies behind” (Jankowski, 2010, p. 61) and that people are still meeting face-to-face, but the definitions of “meet” and “face” are new and different (Jankowski, 2010, p. 62). People with common beliefs and practices, who are physically separated can be united through virtual communities to meet and discuss their commonalities (Jankowski, 2010, p. 62). According to Jankowski (2010) there are three waves of community and media studies; the first wave is newspaper use and community ties during the 1920s and 1930s (p. 57), the second wave is electronic community media with the “development of portable video recording technology and cable TV” in the late 1960s and early 1970s (p. 58) and the third wave is the current era of the internet (p. 59). The relationship between community and online space falls under this third wave. Throughout the different generations of technology, a relationship between communities in society and their use of technology maintains, this relationship changes with the advancements on both parts but continues to be productive.

The users of a social media platform also have the ability to shape the online space they are a part of through ‘liking’, commenting and reporting content. By doing so, they can control

and come to a consensus about what is acceptable and popular within the space. This demonstrates the mutually shaped relationship between community (society) and Instagram (technology); they can influence and can change aspects of the other. An article by Skrubbeltrang, Grunnet & Traasdahl (2017) offers the concept of affordances in their discussion of mutual shaping of technology. They explain that the original definition came from Gibson in 1979, who said that “affordances describe the various uses an environment or object offers to a specific organism” (as cited in Skrubbeltrang et al, 2017). This notion has been adopted by the field of technology to explain “the flexibility and different perceptions” of human-computer interaction (Skrubbeltrang et al, 2017). Different environments and objects have different perceptions of organisms, in the context of society and technology this means that different social contexts and people will have different perceptions of a given technology. As we know from the theory of mutual shaping, technology is shaped by and shapes the society it is interacting with. Perceptions and uses of technology can change depending on the social context, different communities will use technological platforms in varying ways and at the same time these technologies can influence these social contexts differently.

Societies are constructed on norms and values that are determined and perpetuated by the people within those societies (Castells, 2007, p. 238). Social media platforms allow for the visibility of opposing values and interests where users can voice their opinions, therefore it becomes a “space where power is decided” (Skrubbeltrang et al, 2017). People can use social media to voice their disagreement with organizational practices and demonstrate resistance against certain norms and values of society (Skrubbeltrang et al, 2017). Since digital technology allows communication to reach across the globe, opposing voices can touch a range of individuals from different social contexts. This means that if people are using social media

platforms to oppose certain norms or values that exist in society and reach a global audience, they have the potential to influence social change.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this Chapter, I will provide an explanation of the methodology used and the steps taken to complete the research. This thesis is guided by the following research question: how are people using the space of Instagram to present menstruation? Furthermore, what are the different ways that people are presenting menstruation and are some of these challenging to the normative/standard way of discussing menstruation? In order to provide answers to these research questions, this study used a qualitative content analysis of images posted on Instagram. Social media as a source of data can allow insight into the “beliefs, values, attitudes, and perceptions” of its users (Lai & To, 2015, p. 138) and a content analysis will allow for the investigation of these. Content analyses are appropriate to the study of social media posts as content analyses generally involve the use of already available documents and “provides a means by which to study processes...that may reflect trends in society” (Berg, 2004, p. 265, 287). Publicly published Instagram photos are a rich source of content as they can stay intact in this space (unless the poster or the app itself takes them down due to censorship violations), therefore they can be consumed after they were produced (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016, p. 137). Content analysis has been widely used in previous studies that have investigated Instagram as a subject of research and a source for images (Ahmed, Lee & Struik, 2016; Carrotte, Prichard, Su Cheng Lim, 2017; Doring, Reif & Poeschl, 2016; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Rassi, 2016; Tiggermann & Zaccardo, 2016).

Instagram is a popular social media phone app which allows users to share photos and videos in order to interact with others involved in the community. According to Hochman & Manovich (2013), the app was launched in October 2010 and it offered the same features as other media sharing apps at the time; such as manipulation tools, location services, sharing,

commenting, ‘likes’, and ‘hashtags’ (p. 4). Instagram accumulated all these elements that were found in various other apps and compiled them all in one single space. Hochman & Manovich (2013) suggested that this was the reason for Instagram’s popularity and widespread use; these features and layout have allowed it to integrate well with current cultural trends (p. 4). Instagram is continually evolving and adding new features to the platform, including the “story” tool which allows users to post temporary photos or videos in their profile that will only last for a 24-hour period. This element was not explored as data for this thesis as these posts are temporary and do not contain a ‘like’ or comment feature⁶, which are important and useful for this data analysis. Their censorship page refers to the users of Instagram as a ‘community’ and relies on this community to maintain the space by allowing them to report images that might be found inappropriate or offensive (Instagram Community Guidelines, 2018). There is an Instagram webpage which contains a version of the app although lacks some of the add-on features available with the phone application, such as direct messaging. This website contains a “Press” page which posts news updates about the app dating back to its conception (Instagram Press, 2018). On this page there is also an “Our Story” tab, which indicates that “Instagram’s mission is to strengthen relationships through shared experiences” (Instagram Press, 2018). This tab also includes a section titled “Instagram Statistics” that to date (March 2018) claims 800M+ monthly actives and 500M+ daily actives (Instagram Press, 2018). There is no explanation offered for what monthly or daily actives refers to, but it could be assumed that it is users browsing the app⁷ and participating in “liking” the content that they view. As of a report from September 17th 2018,

⁶ A story does not allow users to ‘like’ the photo or video posted. They can show views (a list of users who viewed the story), but this is only able to be seen by the poster. The only way that someone can comment on a story is by responding with a private message to the poster (if they have this accessibility turned on in their settings), therefore there are no comments that are publicly seen. This feature of Instagram is very interesting, but is not a source of data that would lend well to this thesis.

⁷ Instagram cannot be browsed unless an account is created first, therefore only members can look through the posted content.

there are over 100 million photos and videos uploaded daily on Instagram (“Instagram by the Numbers”, 2018).

3.1 Research Design and Data Collection

In order to gain a complex understanding of how Instagram is being used to present menstruation, several different ways of obtaining information through Instagram were used. I developed an analytic framework which involved collecting posts from different publicly accessible hashtags and accounts found on Instagram. These were saved by capturing posts using the app on an iPhone and then organizing them in separate folders by hashtag or account on my personal computer. Making use of the ‘hashtag feature’ (#), I collected general menstruation posts as well as posts that were more geared towards menstrual activism. Instagram separates the ‘top posts’ and the ‘most recent’ posts for each hashtag that is searched, I gathered photos from the ‘top posts’ section as these are photos that have the most likes or are from more popular accounts; this means that they reached more people than the ‘most recent’ posts. Hashtags are important to social media as they help other users find content as well as “aggregating conversations and creating thematic communities” (Locatelli, 2017, p. 2). Each Instagram post contains an image or multiple images accompanied by a caption of text as well as the ‘likes’ it received and the ability to view any comments made by other users. In addition to searching in the hashtags, photos were also collected from menstrual activist accounts and corporate menstrual product accounts. There are two types of menstrual product companies that make use of Instagram; the mainstream, corporate companies and the companies that market more alternative, reusable products.

The collection process of capturing all posts from the 7 hashtags and the 9 accounts took place over 4 different days during early May and June (the specific days will be discussed further

below). It was not an issue that the posts were collected on different days; those found in the hashtags were taken from the ‘top posts’ which are a collection of popular posts from different dates and the sample from the accounts were the most liked posts published within the past year. Therefore, it was not necessary that the collection process take place on the same day. However, the sample was gathered during a tight timeframe in order to make sure there would be no continuity issues or inconsistencies within the sample. Trends can change rather quickly online, however in my experience of examining the hashtags and accounts prior to the collection, there has been very little to no change in how people are presenting menstruation on Instagram during the past year.

3.1.1 General Menstruation Hashtags

To collect the data, four hashtags about the general topic of menstruation were selected: #period, #periodproblems, #menstruation and #PMS (see Table 1 below). These hashtags were chosen as they are among the most popular hashtags about the subject of menstruation. Instagram does not provide a way to find the most used hashtags for a given subject; therefore, those that were chosen were found simply through a trial and error process of searching hashtags of popular words used to describe menstruation and these were the ones with the most posts. The #periodproblems tag was found through viewing top posts in the #menstruation and #period tags to see what other popular tags were being used in the description of these photos. After noticing a trend within these hashtags to discuss symptoms related to periods such as cramps and mood swings, it was decided that it would be beneficial to look into the hashtag #PMS (Premenstrual Syndrome). It is very relevant to the topic of periods and seemed to be widely discussed on Instagram, therefore #PMS was added to the general hashtags about menstruation.

The collection process entailed using the screenshot feature to capture the posts on an iPhone. Sometimes multiple screenshots for one post were necessary to capture the entire photo(s), caption and hashtags for a given post. The general hashtag posts (#period, #menstruation, #periodproblems) were collected and filed on May 8th, 2018 from 2pm to 4:15pm. While the #PMS posts were collected and filed on June 1st, 2018 from 2:30-2:40, after realizing this was a major part of what was being shared on Instagram⁸.

From each of these general hashtags 20 posts were collected and this strategy provided 80 photos in total (See Table 3). Sometimes there were posts in these hashtags that did not deal with the subject of menstruation, therefore I used my own judgment to decide if a post was irrelevant, in which case it was not included in the posts that I gathered. I will discuss examples of what was featured in these irrelevant posts when I explore the challenges and ethics further on in this section.

3.1.2 Menstrual Activism Hashtags

The hashtags discussed above were intended to yield results for how people are generally using the app to post about menstruation. Since this research is also interested in how people are attempting to intentionally bring awareness and subvert the menstruation taboo, menstrual activist hashtags (#menstrualhealth, #menstruationmatters, #periodpositive) were also investigated (See Table 1 below). The same collection process as the general menstruation hashtags was used for the activist hashtags: 20 photos for each hashtag were gathered, which were added to the already collected 80 providing a current total of 140 posts (See Table 3). The menstrual activist hashtags were collected and filed on May 9th, 2018 from 1pm to 3pm.

⁸ As previously mentioned, since the photos were taken from the top posts (those with the most likes or from more popular accounts) the date that they were collected is not a factor as these top posts are an amalgamation of posts from different times and dates.

Table 1: Menstruation Hashtag Rubric

General Menstruation Hashtags (number of posts)	Menstrual Activist Hashtags (number of posts)
#menstruation (90,732)	#menstrualhealth (7,248)
#period (868,317)	#menstruationmatters (28,320)
#periodproblems (80,069)	#periodpositive (15,268)
#pms (379,630)	

3.1.3 Menstrual Activist Accounts

In addition to the hashtags, three key menstrual activist accounts were selected: @tonithetampon, @lalobalocashares and @periodmovement (See Table 2). Instagram does not provide a way to track the most popular or most followed accounts for a particular topic, thus I used the menstrual activist hashtags mentioned above to find these accounts. Although they may not be the most followed accounts dedicated to menstruation, they are nevertheless key accounts with a high number of followers. Since these accounts do not post every day, 5 key photos from each feed posted within the past year (2018) were selected. These key photos were chosen based on relevance to menstruation and the number of likes they received. They were collected and filed May 18th, 2018 from 3pm to 3:20om. These posts were collected and then added to the previously collected hashtag posts, rendering 155 photos (See Table 3).

3.1.4 Menstruation Product Accounts

After looking through the hashtags, there were noticeably quite a few marketing posts that were selling different period products. In keeping with the iterative nature of qualitative research, it was decided that it would be beneficial to examine how mainstream corporate accounts and alternative product accounts (See Table 2) were both presenting themselves on the platform. This would provide an idea of how certain companies use the space alongside the

general and activist use of the platform. On June 2nd 2018 from 3:00- 4:30 15 posts from three corporate company accounts (@tampax, @ubykotex and @always_brand) and 15 posts from three alternative company accounts (@shethinks, @flex and @thedivacup) were collected and filed. With these five posts from each of the six company accounts added to those previously collected from the hashtags and activist accounts, there were 185 photos in total to be coded and analyzed (See Table 3).

Table 2: Menstruation Account Rubric

Activist Accounts (followers)	Corporate Company Accounts (followers)	Alternative Company Accounts (followers)
@periodmovement (12.7k)	@tampax (19.5k)	@shethinx (154k)
@lalobalocashares (12.1k)	@ubykotex (36.9k)	@flex (15.9k)
@tonithetampon (6097)	@always_brand (17.8k)	@thedivacup (14k)

Table 3: Number of Posts Collected

Hashtag/Account (#/@)	Number of Posts Collected
#menstruation	20
#period	20
#periodproblems	20
#pms	20
#menstrualhealth	20
#menstruationmatters	20
#periodpostive	20
@periodmovement	5
@lalobalocashares	5
@tonithetampon	5
@tampax	5
@ubykotex	5
@always_brand	5
@shethinx	5
@flex	5
@divacup	5
Total number of posts collected	185

3.2 Ethics and Challenges

As with any collection of data, numerous challenges can arise which should be acknowledged. There is some debate (cf. Roberts, 2012) as to whether or not privacy issues constitute ethical concerns when using material from social media but as I have investigated exclusively photos that were publicly accessible, this minimized these ethical concerns and negated the need to ask for consent from the posters. Given the sometimes short-lived nature of social media posts, there was also a risk that the accounts that I would be investigating would be deleted, either by the person who posts them or by Instagram itself. This however was not an issue that I encountered as all of the accounts that I chose to collect from still exist on the platform. A similar issue is that some posts could have also been censored before I got the chance to collect them. This was a concern, as it was something that happened in the past on Instagram. But while this is likely to occur and some photos may have been deleted before I had the opportunity to collect them, not all photos featuring menstruation meet the fate of censorship, and as such, there were still numerous posts to collect within each hashtag and account that the data was not compromised.

Another challenge while collecting data from the hashtags was that there would occasionally be a post that was unrelated to menstruation, therefore I had to use my own judgement to decide whether certain posts should be included in the data or not. Other posts which were related to menstruation but not included in the data were lengthy videos that were not able to be captured with a few screenshots. These videos would not be easy to revisit after the collection process was complete, therefore the decision was made to leave these out of the data. This did not compromise the data results as there were still many posts that revealed similar messages to these videos and were easier to capture and save. For instance, in #period there was

a video about reusable period products and another about ending period shame around the world. These messages are similar to what was found in numerous other posts which were more easily captured for data analysis. During the collection process I took note of these posts that were not easily captured videos or that were irrelevant to menstruation. Found in #period were posts regarding historical period drama movies that were not relevant to the specific meaning of the word period that I was investigating. In most of the hashtags there were many posts that were in other languages that could not be understood. If there was a caption along with the photo, Instagram offers a feature to “see translation” which was used for some of the posts if the translation that was offered was comprehensible. Some translations still did not make much sense after translation and therefore were not included in the data. Other posts that were in other languages, but did not have text to translate were also left out of the data. Within #PMS there were some posts that dealt with “girl problems” in general but were not directly related to menstruation. In some cases, users on Instagram will use numerous hashtags to get their post more attention even if some of these hashtags are not related to the specific post. Therefore, there will always be some posts in each hashtag that are unrelated to the topic due to posters over using hashtags in order to gain more coverage on their posts.

3.3 Coding the Data

To find out how people were posting about menstruation on Instagram, a qualitative content analysis was conducted of 185 photos collected from hashtags pertaining to menstruation and different menstruation focused accounts.

In order to carry out this analysis, first a description was made of each post collected. These were simple descriptions of the format of the post and what was depicted in it, for instance; if there were multiple photos within the post, if the image was accompanied by a

caption and what this text said or the style of the post (photo, drawing, comic, art, a quote), and what this photo/comic/art was displaying. Each post collected was labelled with a number and their corresponding hashtag or account which were then displayed in table within a Word document. This table included the image descriptions, along with the amount of likes and comments the post received. If the post was collected from a hashtag, the account that originally posted it, along with the number of followers were noted. Finally, all the hashtags that accompanied each photo were also recorded within the table.

Each post presents manifest content that can be described and latent content that is interpreted (Thyme, Wiberg, Lundman & Graneheim, 2013, p. 102). Manifest content is the description of the “visible, obvious components” (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003, p. 106). This would be the initial descriptions that were made of each post and the visible components that were present in each image. Latent content is the analysis and interpretation of the “underlying meaning of the text” (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003, p. 106). Based on this understanding I developed an initial coding scheme for the study. After the descriptions and details of each post were documented, the process of open coding began. In order to come up with the codes and themes that were present in the data, an inductive approach was used. This was done by “immersing” myself in the posts “in order to identify the dimensions or themes that seem meaningful to the producers of each message” (Berg, 2004, p. 272). I investigated each post individually to produce the open codes of what was present in the image as well as the caption, in order to get a sense of the messages conveyed or the purpose of the post. A code or category is a “group of content that shares a commonality” (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003, p. 107). Many codes were created for each post, these codes had to do with what messages were being conveyed through the post (empowerment, challenging norms, environmental concerns or

relatability), how they were sending these messages (humour, shock/confrontation or tips/suggestions), who the creator of the posts were (organization/group, marketing company or a personal account) as well as who they were catering their post to (millennials or an older audience). Codes also included the type of image that was in the post (drawing, photo, cartoon or text/quote). Some of the initial codes were developed from the literature and others emerged in the process of conducting the research. Previous ideas about menstruation and the stigmas provided sensitizing concepts that would aid in creating codes (Bowen, 2006, p. 13), such as “challenging norms” or “resistance”. Other codes arose from the data, such as “empowerment” and “relatability”.

Once every post had been open coded, the codes were then merged together to create themes which express the underlying meanings of these codes. The codes are considered manifest content, more of a description of the message within the post and the themes are thus latent content which is the underlying thread of meaning throughout the codes (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003, p. 107). These themes are much broader than the codes as they cut across the data collected and will be integrated with the literature as well as the theory of mutual shaping in order to help the argument of this thesis (See Table 4 below for Themes). This table below demonstrates how some of the open codes were merged into broader themes. It also shows the strategies that were used in some cases to convey the messages of the posts.

Table 4: Themes and Sub Themes and Strategies Used

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-Themes</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>Strategies Used</i>
<i>Empowerment</i>	Non-Challenging Empowerment Challenging Empowerment	Celebration Positivity Empowerment Strength Self-love Body Positivity	
<i>Solidarity</i>	Global Women Supporting Other women – relating to the shared experience Men/Allies Trans/non-binary support	Global Solidarity Solidarity Trans/Non-binary Support Inclusive Awareness	
<i>Resistance</i>	Challenging the Taboo Menstruation-supportive Organizations	Activism Advocacy Educate Organization/Group/Project Awareness Accessibility Homelessness Challenging Taboo	Shock/Confrontation Showing real blood
<i>Normalizing periods</i>		Sharing Normalization/normalize Relatability/Relatable Ad Comparison Awareness Challenging Organization/Group/Project Taboo Shame	Meme Humour
<i>Women's Health</i>	Nutrition/healthy living Tips/Suggestions and Self-Care	Healthy Living Nutrition Tips/Suggestions Self-Care Recommendations Fertility	Girly/Femininity aesthetic to the tips/suggestions and self-care images

		Period Symptoms Older Audience Millennial Audience Educate Fitness Yoga Active	
<i>Presenting menstruation in the standard/normative way</i>		Negativity Stereotypical Embarrassment Period symptoms - (<i>usually PMS/mood swing/irritability or food cravings, not cramps or other symptoms as these are not normally portrayed or discussed in the media</i>) Relatability/Relatable Marketing Product - (<i>not all marketing, but those that are presenting in the standard way that advertisements do and have in the past</i>)	Exaggeration Humour Comic/Cartoon Meme Relatability Slang Use
<i>Eco-Friendly</i>	Environmental advocacy Promoting reusable products	Marketing and promoting reusable products Natural/Spiritual/Earthy	Natural/Spiritual/Earthy aesthetic to the images
<i>Marketing</i>	Promoting products Selling products	Promoting Marketing Company Alternative Company	Using consumerist feminism to sell products

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter of the thesis I will describe the findings as a result of the qualitative content analysis. Each of the themes that arose from this analysis will be explored in detail and examples will be provided in order to demonstrate each theme. Through exploring the different hashtags and accounts about menstruation eight recurring themes arose. These themes were created by conducting a qualitative content analysis, described above in the methodology section, through open coding and merging these codes into broader themes. The 8 different themes that are presented in menstruation posts on Instagram are: *Empowerment, Solidarity, Resistance, Normalizing Periods, Women's Health, "Presenting menstruation in a standard/normative way", Eco-Friendly, and Marketing* (Table 5 below).

To substantiate how often these themes were present across the data collected, the posts were tallied for how many times the codes associated with the themes were found in each hashtag and each account. The hashtags and accounts were then grouped into their respective categories (general hashtags, activist hashtags, activist accounts, corporate company accounts and alternative company accounts) to determine the percentages of how often the themes were displayed in each category and within the overall data. The average number of likes that each type of theme received overall was also calculated. These data are provided in Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of Data Analysis

Themes	Sub-Themes	Open Codes	Strategies Used	% of posts overall	Average number of likes
<i>Empowerment</i>	Non-Challenging Empowerment Challenging Empowerment	Celebration Positivity Empowerment Strength Self-love Body Positivity		33.51%	869 Likes
<i>Solidarity</i>	Global Solidarity Women Supporting Other women Men/Allies Trans/non-binary support	Global Solidarity Solidarity Trans/Non-binary Support Inclusive Awareness		14.14%	588 Likes
<i>Resistance</i>	Challenging the Taboo Menstruation-supportive Organizations	Activism Advocacy Educate Organization/Group/Project Awareness Accessibility Homelessness Challenging Taboo	Shock/Confrontation Showing real blood	17.30%	574 Likes
<i>Normalizing periods</i>		Sharing Normalization/normalize Relatability/Relatable Ad Comparison Awareness Challenging Organization/Group/Project Taboo Shame	Meme Humour	24.32%	1153 Likes

<i>Women's Health</i>	Nutrition/healthy living Tips/Suggestions and Self-Care	Healthy Living Nutrition Tips/Suggestions Self-Care Recommendations Fertility Period Symptoms Older Audience Millennial Audience Educate Fitness Yoga Active	Girly/Feminine aesthetic	15.68%	872 Likes
<i>Presenting menstruation in the standard/normative way</i>		Negativity Stereotypical Embarrassment Period symptoms - <i>(usually PMS/mood swing/irritability or food cravings, not cramps or other symptoms as these are not normally portrayed or discussed in the media)</i> Relatability/Relatable Marketing Product - <i>(not all marketing, but those that are presenting in the standard way that advertisements do and have in the past)</i>	Exaggeration Humour Comic/Cartoon Meme Relatability Slang Use	26.67%	1015 Likes*
<i>Eco-Friendly</i>	Environmental advocacy	Marketing and promoting	Natural/ Spiritual/	17.84%	1005 Likes

	Promoting reusable products	reusable products Natural/ Spiritual/ Earthy	Earthy aesthetic		
<i>Marketing</i>	Promoting products Selling products	Promoting Marketing Company Alternative Company	“Consumerist feminism”	27.57%	861 Likes

*There was one post that received 450,890 likes which was abnormally high for any of the posts collected. Therefore, it was not included in the average as it would have skewed the results.

4.1 Themes

4.1.1 *Empowerment*

The most significant code to emerged during the open coding stage of the content analysis was empowerment. This code was kept as a theme as it can also encompass other codes that are similar such as celebration, positivity and strength. These codes were merged to create the theme of *Empowerment*.

This theme can be divided into two sub-themes: the first is labelled “non-challenging empowerment” which are posts that consist of messages that are not overly direct or “in your face”, but are still encouraging to women and girls about periods. They are not overtly challenging any of the taboos associated with menstruation, however they present menstruation in a positive and celebratory light (see examples of posts below: Fig. 1 & Fig. 2).

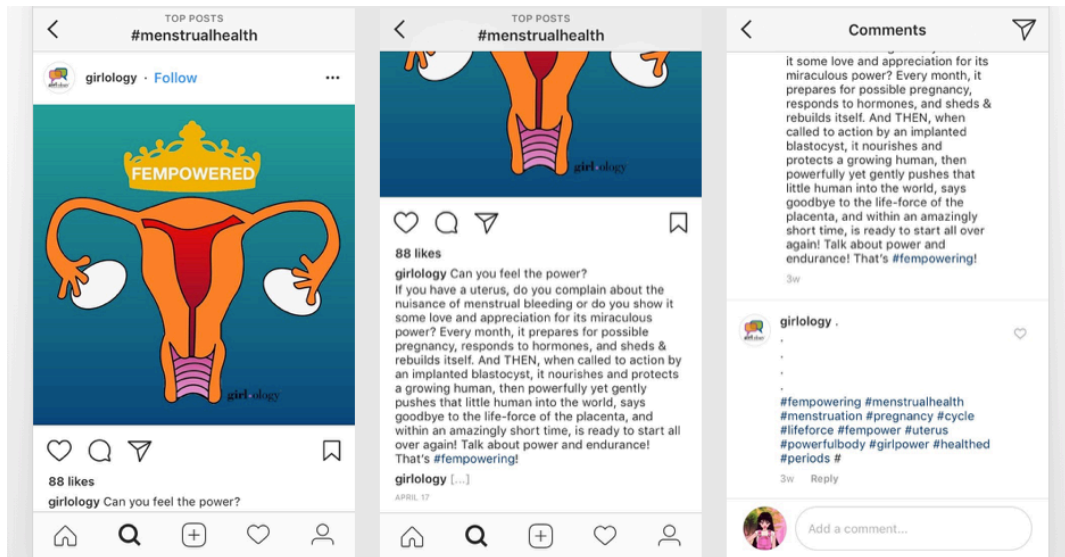


Figure 1. Post found in #menstrualhealth. Shows women's empowerment with a drawing of uterus with a crown with the term "fempowered" written on it.

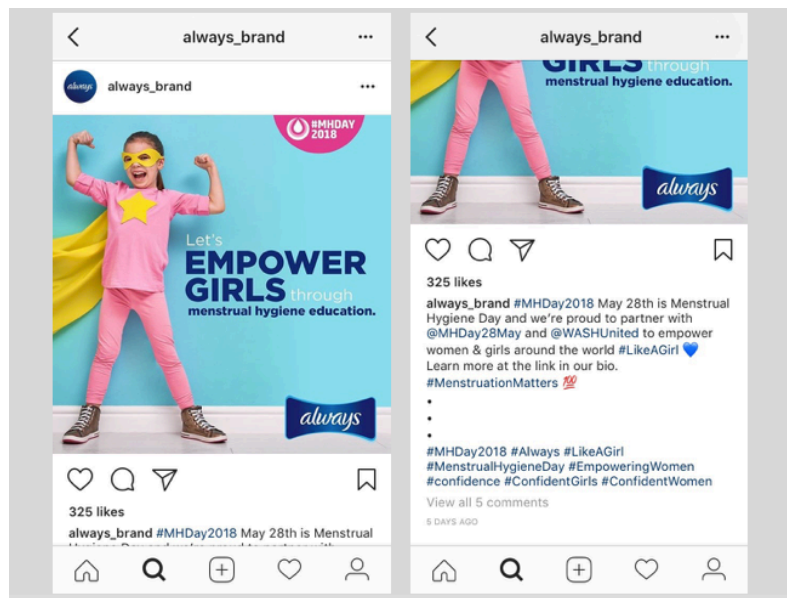


Figure 2. Post found in mainstream corporate period account by @always_brand. Demonstrates positivity, encouragement and empowerment to girls.

The other sub-theme of *Empowerment* is "challenging empowerment" which consists of posts that are encouraging women and girls to be open about menstruation as well as promoting a message that is directly attempting to dismantle the stigma. These types of posts are not quite activist or resistance posts (which will be discussed later in this section) but are promoting positivity about periods while still bringing attention to the stigma to counter the "normative"

assumptions that perpetuate society (see examples below: Fig. 3 & Fig. 4). These types of posts attempt to bring awareness and aim to be more positive about periods rather than focusing on the more commonly discussed negative aspects. These more directly challenge the pervasiveness of the stigma than the “non-challenging empowerment” posts.

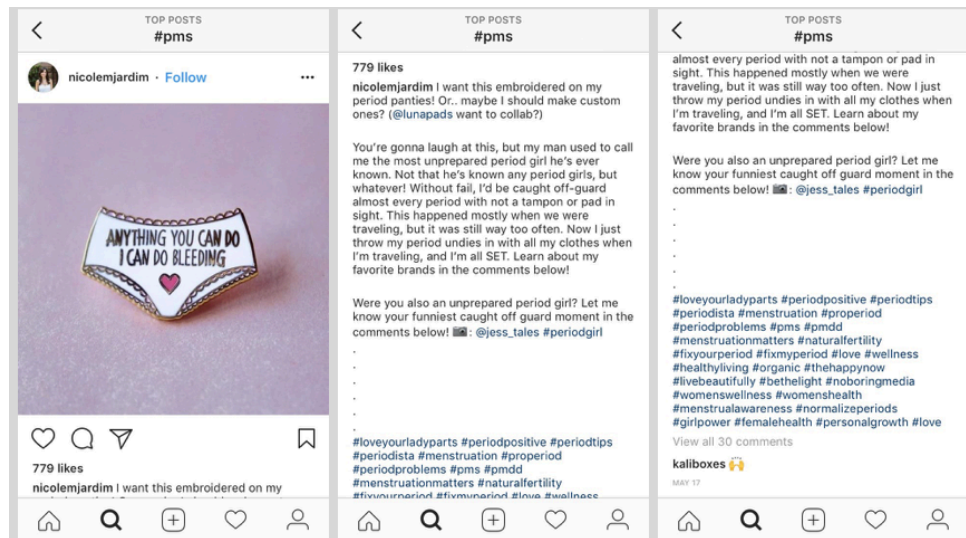


Figure 3. Found in #pms. This phrase “anything you can do I can do bleeding” was also found in other posts and hashtags, it is encouraging, empowering and challenging.

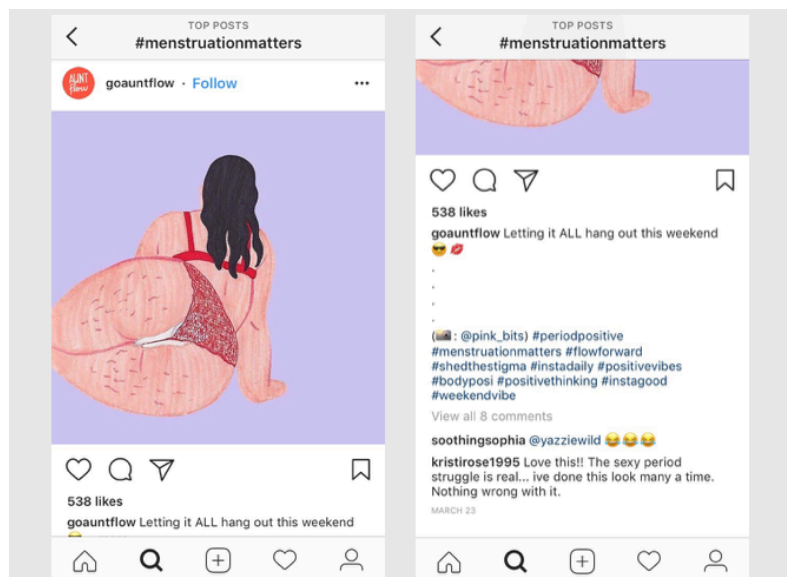


Figure 4. Post found in #menstruationmatters. Demonstrates a challenge to societal body standards and stigma of concealing menstrual products.

The theme of *Empowerment* was found across all the selected hashtags and accounts. This theme was displayed predominantly in the corporate accounts as 53.33% of the 15 posts were conveying *Empowerment*. The corporate company that did not show *Empowerment* was the account @tampax which uses a marketing approach more similar to what was discussed in the literature review on advertisements and the media. They sell products with the intention of preventing leaks and promote discreetness with small packages, in order to hide menstruation from others. In contrast, all 5 of the posts selected from the account @always_brand convey *Empowerment* through celebrating and promoting strength in girls and women. The other corporate company account, @ubytotex, displays both of the marketing techniques of the other accounts; 3/5 of the posts convey the theme of *Empowerment*, while 2/5 demonstrate a more normative depiction of menstruation. As for the alternative company accounts, 46.66% of the posts conveyed *Empowerment*. This was more the challenging type of empowerment, rather than the non-challenging empowerment which was found more in the corporate accounts. The activism accounts demonstrated that 40% of the posts were *Empowerment*, again most of these were challenging empowerment. The activist hashtags demonstrate that 36.66% of the posts were conveying the theme of *Empowerment*, while this theme was in 23.75% of the posts from the general hashtags. Overall the data collected, 33.51% (62/185) of the posts were portraying the theme of *Empowerment*, which reveals that it was the most common way that people were presenting menstruation. There was 10.81% (20/185) of the data that demonstrated the sub-theme of “challenging-empowerment”, while 22.70% (42/185) of the data portrayed the non-challenging type of empowerment.

Empowerment was present in 50% of the posts collected from company accounts (8/15 in the corporate accounts and 7/15 in the alternative accounts), which is more than in any of the

other hashtags or accounts. Out of these corporate companies, there are two accounts which demonstrate the use of empowerment to sell their products. The accounts @always_brand and @ubykotex both present messages of empowerment for women and girls in order to sell their brand and products. The company @ubykotex promotes messages that are empowering to women and older girls, while the company @always_brand gears their empowerment towards a younger audience of girls. The account @ubykotex markets to women and sells the message that they are strong, smart and beautiful while using hashtags such as #feminist, #GrlPwr, #empowered, #EmpoweredWomen, #StrongGirls and #SelfLove. They provide a message that women's identity goes beyond their body by promoting belief in their intelligence and strength. In Figure 5 below they promote the message that women are beautiful, smart and strong and they also bleed. It is an interesting advancement for menstruation advertisements which have often in the past avoided using the words “blood” or “bleed”, rather they usually refer to this as “leaks” (Fingerson, 2006, p. 16; Lozada, 2015, p. 8; Polak, 2006, p. 194).

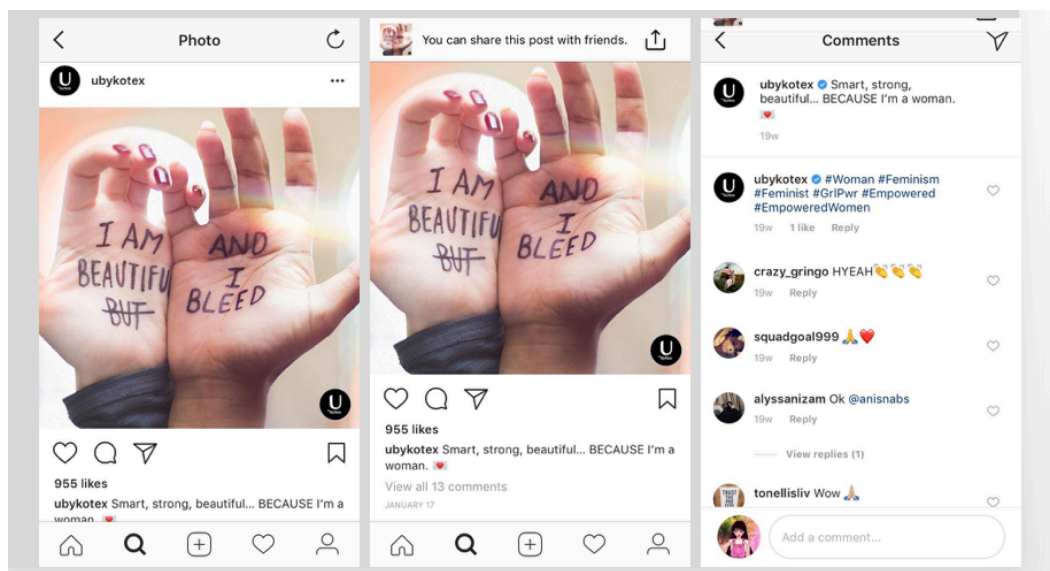


Figure 5. This post from @ubykotex promotes strength and self-love. The caption says: “Smart, strong, beautiful...BECAUSE I’m a woman” and the hashtags used are: #woman, #feminism, #feminist, #GrlPwr, #empowered, #EmpoweredWomen.

Another corporate company which demonstrates the theme of *Empowerment* promotes strength in younger girls rather than the previous account which focuses on women. Most posts

featured on this company's account promote confidence and strength in girls with the use of the slogan and hashtag #LikeAGirl. The majority of the posts do not mention menstruation and only discuss the empowerment of young girls (Fig. 6) which differs from the @ubytex posts that often make the connection between women and menstruation, even going as far as connecting them to the act of bleeding (seen above in Fig. 5). There are two posts (Fig. 2 above and Fig. 7 below) from @always_brand that mention "menstrual hygiene day" which was May 28th 2018, this day fell right around the time of data collection. Even in these "menstrual hygiene day" posts there is still a theme of *Empowerment* and encouraging confidence in girls.

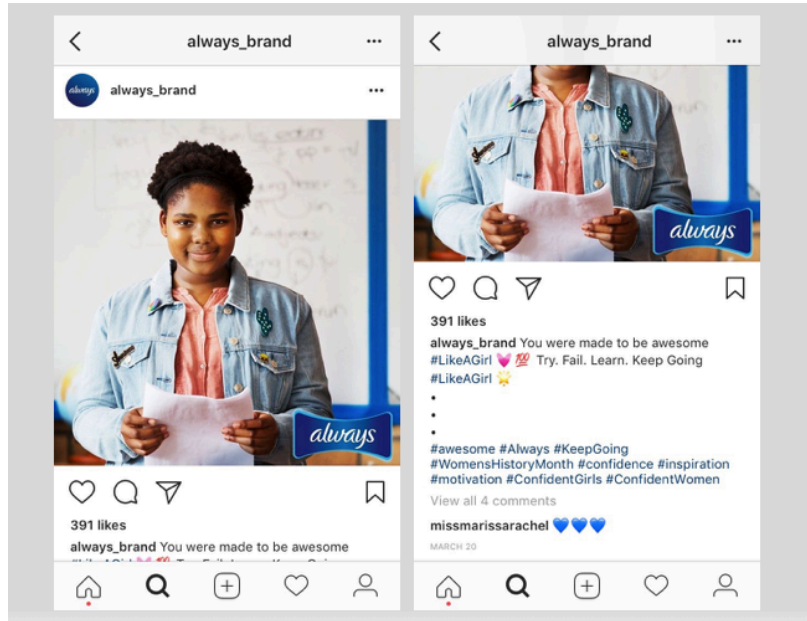


Figure 6. This post found on @always_brand promotes confidence and learning in girls. Menstruation is not mentioned, not even in the hashtags, the only indication that this is for period products is the well-known Always brand logo in the corner of the image.

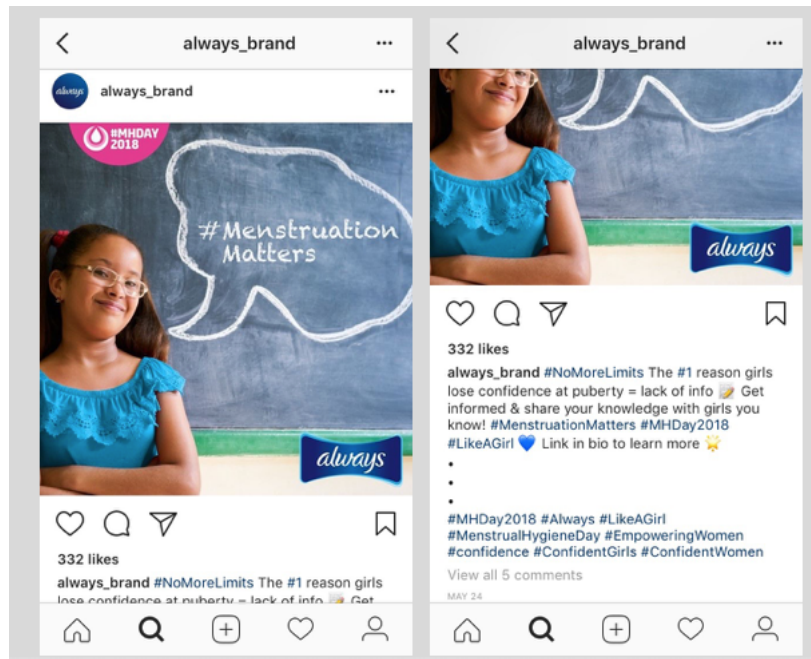


Figure 7. This post from @always_brand mentions girls losing confidence around the time of puberty due to lack of information about menstruation.

Both of these corporate company accounts discussed above demonstrate the use of *Empowerment* in their advertisements. This can also be seen as a marketing strategy used by the alternative company accounts. The theme of Empowerment was present in 46.66% of the

alternative accounts, with the majority (4/5) being represented in the @flex account. In one such post collected (Fig. 8 below), the caption claims that the company's mission is to promote body positivity. They provide photos of women of different sizes, showing off stretch marks and pubic hair, with the message that women should love their bodies. The way that they encourage women to feel positive about their bodies is similar to the framework of the Dove campaign discussed in the literature review. They appropriate these feminist ideals of challenging beauty standards (Fig. 9 below), while forcing women to feel beautiful in their bodies in order to market their products. They also ignore other features of a woman's identity and focus solely on their body and beauty.

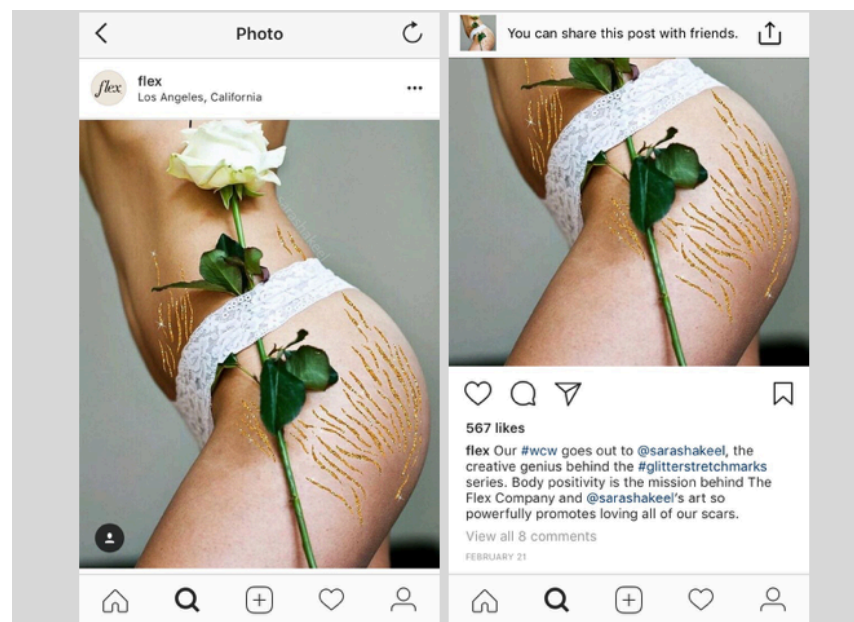


Figure 8. Post from @flex which mentions the company's mission to promote body positivity and features a photo of a woman with glitter as stretch marks.

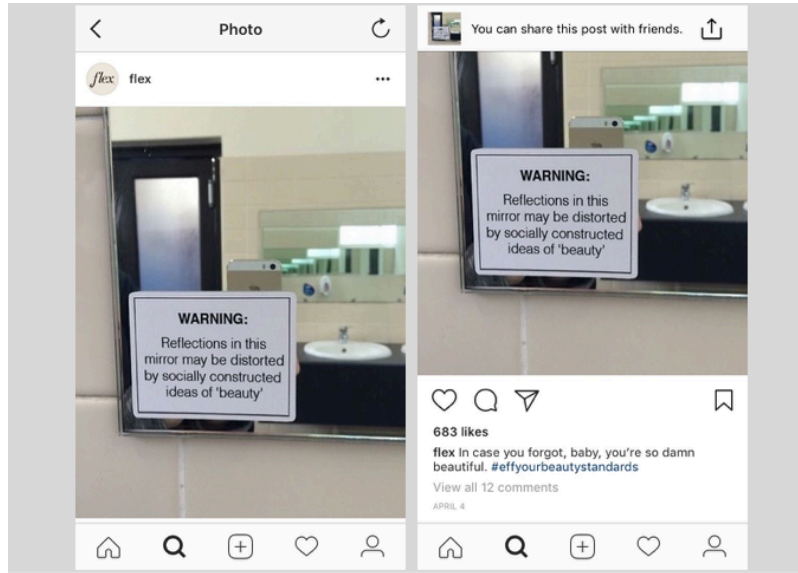


Figure 9. This post from @flex directly addresses societies beauty ideals and tells women that they are beautiful.

4.1.2 *Solidarity*

The theme of *Solidarity* encapsulates the posts of people showing support and reaching out to others who experience menstruation. There are four different sub-themes that capture the different types of supporters on Instagram.

i. Global Solidarity

The first sub-theme is “global solidarity”; these posts contain messages about different experiences of menstruation from around the world. More specifically they demonstrate the struggles that menstruators experience in developing countries. Many bring awareness to the problem that girls will stop attending school once they reach the age of menarche due to limited access to proper period products and the stigma that surrounds menstruation (see examples of posts below: Fig. 10 & Fig. 11).

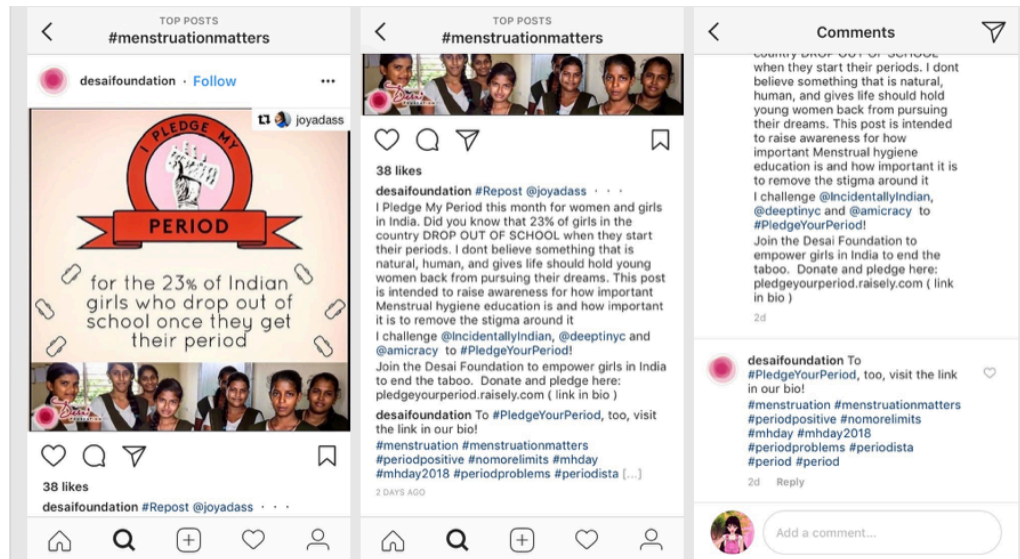


Figure 10. Post found in #menstruationmatters. Shows the fact of girls in India are dropping out of school do to menstruation stigma.

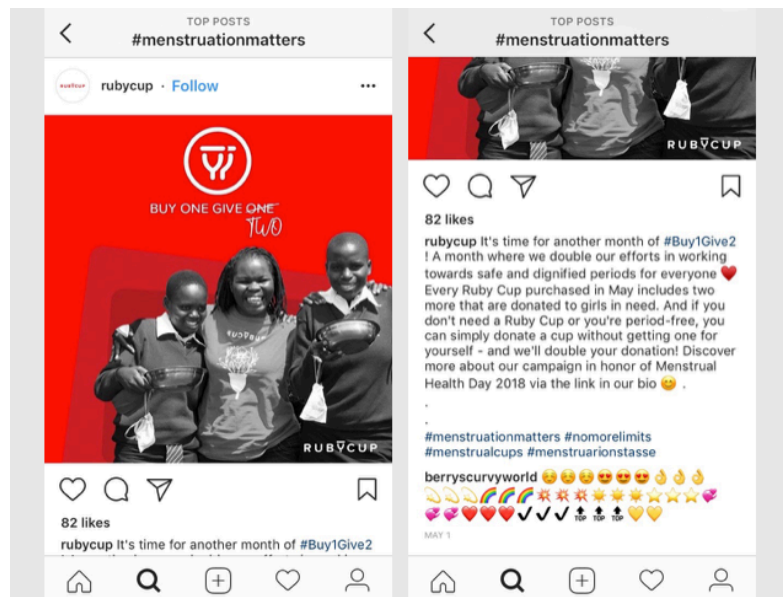


Figure 11. Post found in #menstruationmatters which demonstrates the global solidarity of an organization that provides menstrual cups to women who do not have access to them.

There were two ways of discussing global solidarity that were found in the data collected. One of these ways was general users of the app using a hashtag #PledgeYourPeriod (seen in Fig. 10 above and Fig. 12 below) to bring awareness to the stigma that surrounds menstruation and hinders women in underdeveloped countries in more extreme ways than in western societies.

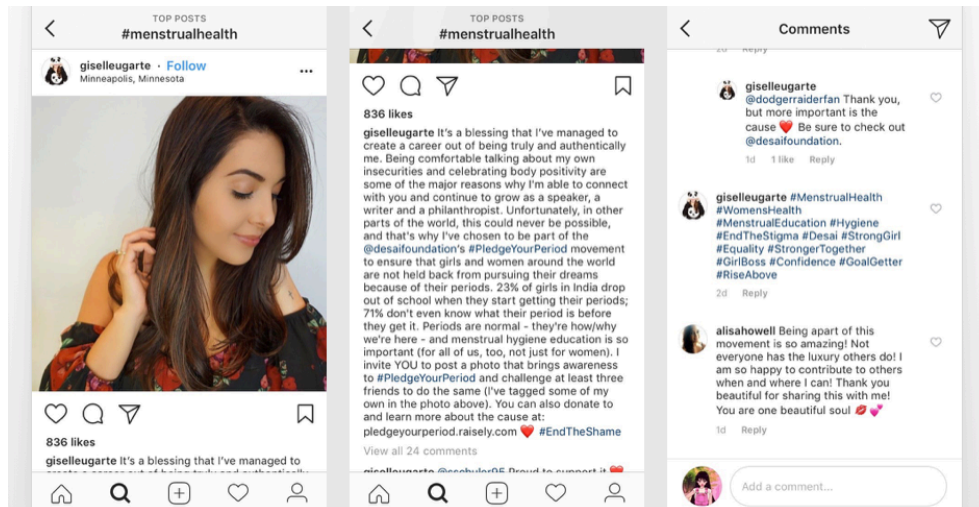


Figure 12. This post found in #menstrualhealth discusses the users own experience in comparison to other parts of the world using the hashtags: #PledgeYourPeriod and #EndTheShame.

Many of the other posts found to display the theme of global solidarity were posts from organizations that were created to help these other countries who experience extreme menstrual shame. Two of these posts indicate that the organizations provide reusable menstruation products to those in need in other countries; one of these posts is Figure 11 above. Figure 13 below is a charity organization that donates money so that girls can stay in school when they have their period with the use of reusable pads that can be washed easily. These posts attempt to not only bring awareness to the issues that menstruators have in other places around the world, but they also provide them with access to proper menstrual products.

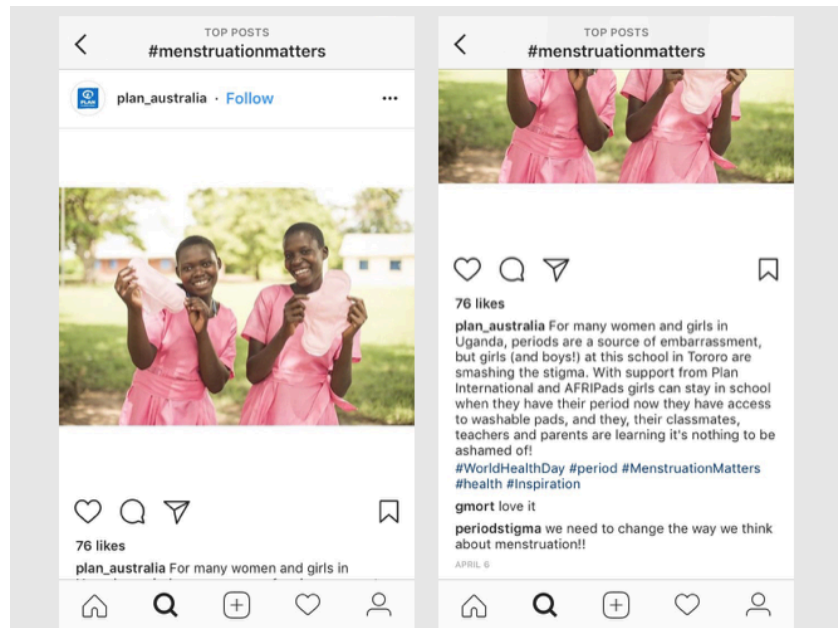


Figure 13. Found in #menstruationmatters this is a photo of two girls in Uganda holding reusable pads that were provided for them so that they can stay in school when they are menstruating

ii. Women Supporting Other Women

The next sub-theme of Solidarity is “women supporting other women”. This type of solidarity usually comes in the form of posts that attempt to relate to other women by conveying a shared experience to forge a sense of togetherness (see example below: Fig. 14). These posts often involve women sharing personal information about menstruation with other users. Below (Fig. 15) is an example of this type of post which features a drawing of a woman surrounded by a number of period related products and accessories, however the caption in this case is more relevant than the image: the woman writes in the caption about her spiritual connection to menstruation and provides details about her cycle. She starts the caption with “Day 26...” almost like she is using this post, and presumably prior posts, like a diary entry. As diaries are usually private spaces to unload our thoughts, using Instagram as a diary is interesting. This user feels comfortable sharing her diary with the world, with other women, so that they may relate to her experience and find comfort as well. Another post (Fig. 16 below) reveals another woman who is

providing personal details about her menstrual cycle to share and connect with others in this space.



Figure 14. Post found in #menstrualhealth. Demonstrates the sub-theme “women sharing with other women” as this artist depicts their experience with a menstrual cup to relate and share with others.

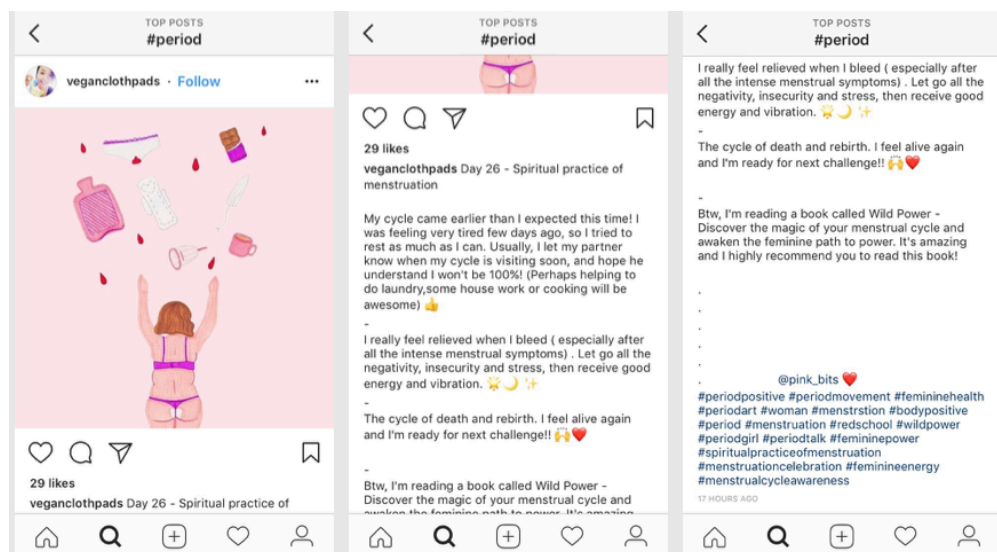


Figure 15. Post found in #period provides details of a woman’s menstrual cycle, indicating that she seeks comfort in sharing her experience with other women in order to forge a relatable community.

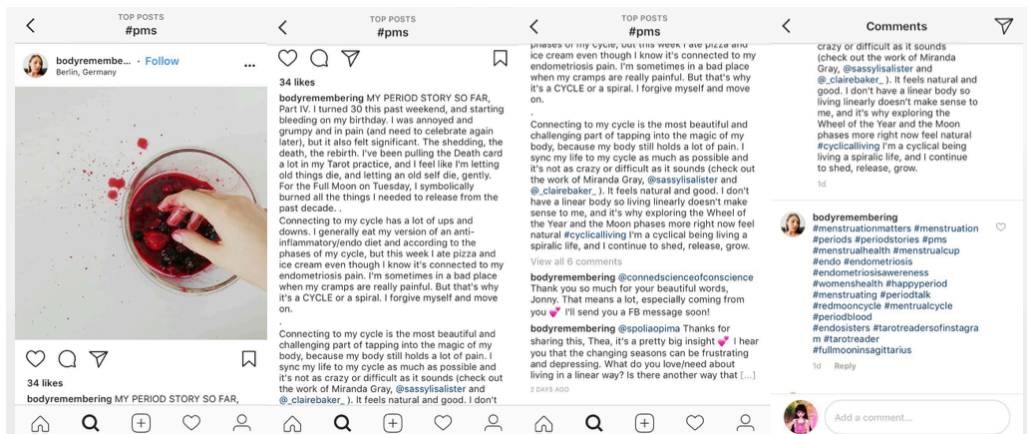


Figure 16. Post found in general hashtag #PMS. Poster shares details about her period story and experience of connecting with her cycle.

iii. Men/Allies

Another sub-theme of *Solidarity* is “men/allies”; these posts contain men showing their support for menstruating women (see example below: Fig. 17). There are not as many of these posts of men being allies as the other forms of *Solidarity*, but they are important nonetheless. There were only 2/185 posts collected that were demonstrating men dismantling the shame and stigma of menstruation (this does not include trans men). The majority of the posts collected for this research feature women and are posted by women (although the gender of the poster is not always clear). One of the posts that demonstrates men’s solidarity is Fig. 17 below, which is of a man posting about ending period shame in India. Another post (Fig. 18 below) explains in the caption how young boys in Ethiopia are learning about menstruation alongside girls.



Figure 17. Found in #menstrualhealth. Demonstrates a man who is standing up for Indian women who feel shame about their period.

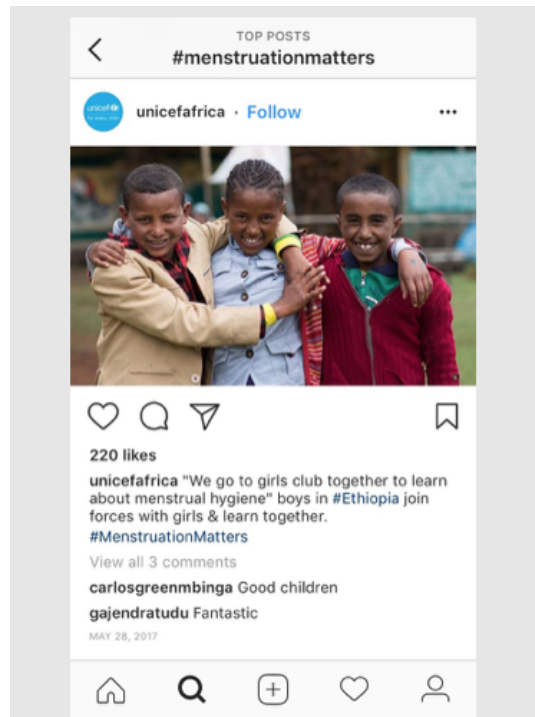


Figure 18. This post was found in #menstruationmatters, posted by @unicefafrica.

iv. Trans/Non-Binary Support

Finally, there is also the sub-theme of “Trans/non-binary support” within the theme of *Solidarity*. These are posts that reveal awareness that trans men/non-binary individuals experience menstruation. Women and girls are not the only people that can menstruate, which is something that is rarely discussed or let alone a thought that crosses people’s minds. These posts can be educational or simply demonstrating support for other menstruators. A common way to demonstrate support and bring awareness to trans menstruators that was found in the data was drawings of underwear typically worn by males with blood drawn on them. This type of depiction was found in the general hashtags (Fig. 19), activist hashtags (Fig. 20) and activism accounts (Fig. 21). This type of representation of trans and other menstruators also attempts to bring awareness to the stigma and shame associated with leaking that is perpetuated through advertisements. The post from the activist account @periodmovement (Fig. 20) mentions this intention of the post by saying that “...bleeding through happens to many people”. They attempt

to normalize the experience of leaking by saying that it is a common occurrence and depicting the experience in an artistic way. In contrast, advertisements use this experience of “leaking” or “bleeding through” framing it as embarrassing or shameful in order to sell their products by promoting protection against these types of situations.

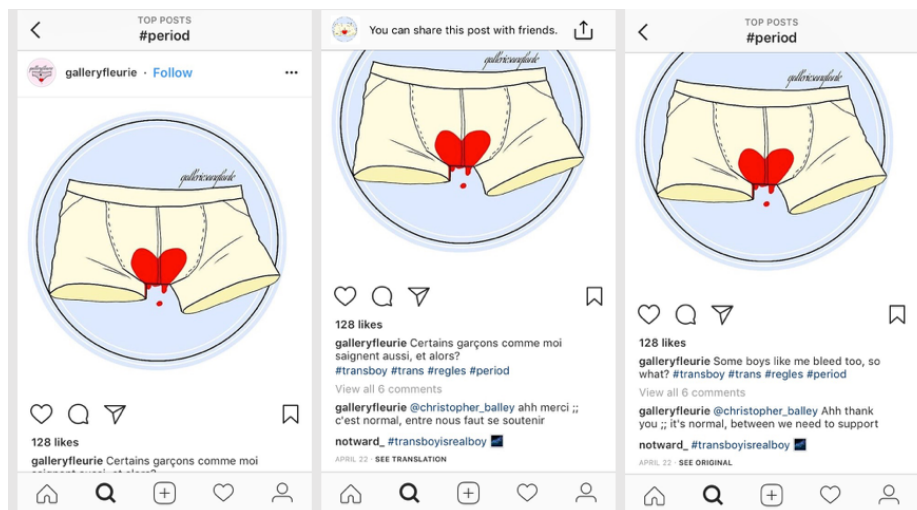


Figure 19. This post was found in the general hashtag #period. The post was translated from French and the caption says “some boys like me bleed too, so what?”.

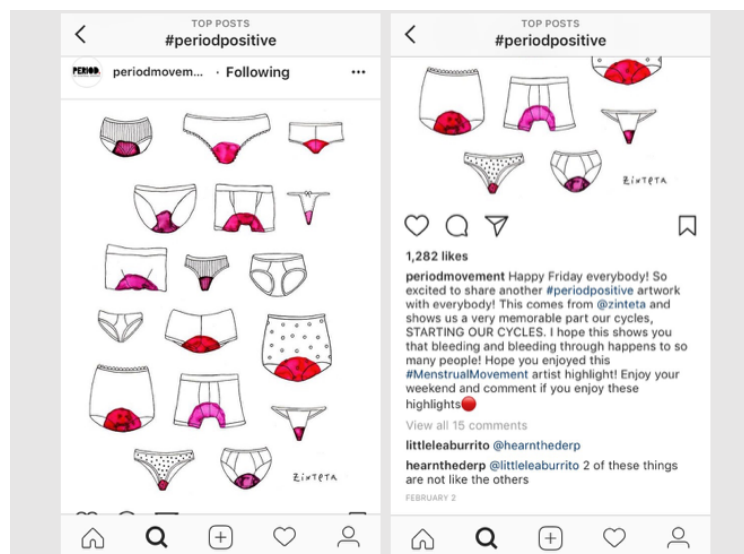


Figure 20. This post comes originally from the activist account @periodmovement, however was collected from the activism hashtag #periodpositive. The image presents different styles of underwear, male and female, with pink and red marks on them to depict menstrual blood. Part of the caption brings awareness to leaking and attempts to disrupt the shame that comes with it that is often perpetuated in the media: “...I hope this shows you that bleeding and bleeding through happens to so many people”. This caption also indicates that “many people” experience menstruation, not just women.

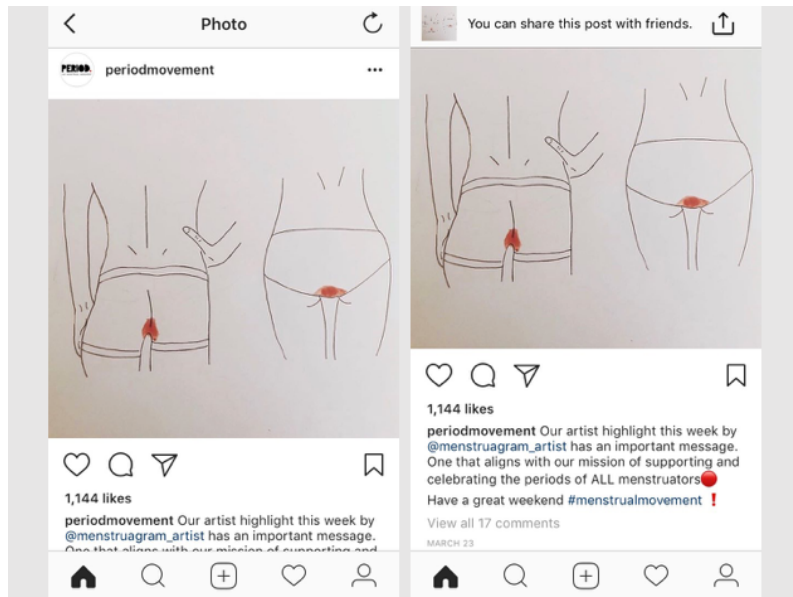


Figure 21. This post comes from the activist account @periodmovement and depicts a man and a woman bleeding with the caption "...supporting and celebrating the periods of ALL menstruators".

One of the activist accounts used in the data collection was chosen due to its intentions of normalizing periods as well as showing support for trans menstruators. This account is @tonithetampon, run by a trans man who advocates for trans menstrual issues. There were 3/5 posts in this account that were specifically discussing menstruating while trans. The normal format of posts on this account is a tampon with googly eyes named "Toni the Tampon" who is propped up in different locations for the photos. Often the tampon will be joined by a menstrual cup or reusable pad, both with googly eyes as well (see Fig. 22 below). These types of posts were also coded as *Normalizing*, as they attempt to humanize these period products by putting eyes on them and allowing them to be seen in public spaces. This tactic brings menstruation out of the private sphere (this is something that will be discussed further in the *Normalizing* theme). The account @tonithetampon also features posts that are showing support for trans menstruators (Fig. 23 and Fig. 24 shown below).

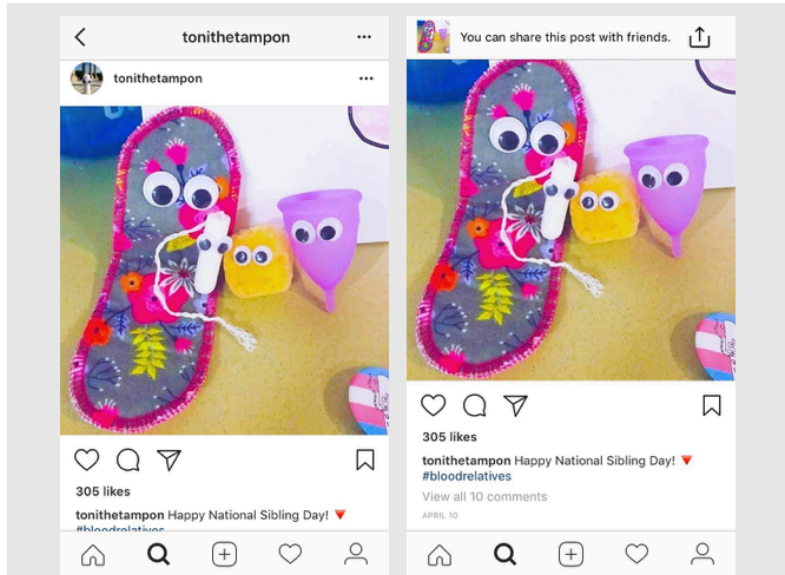


Figure 22. This post was collected from the activist account @tonithetampon and features a tampon, menstrual sponge, menstrual cup and reusable pad with googly eyes. These “characters” are often featured on this account.

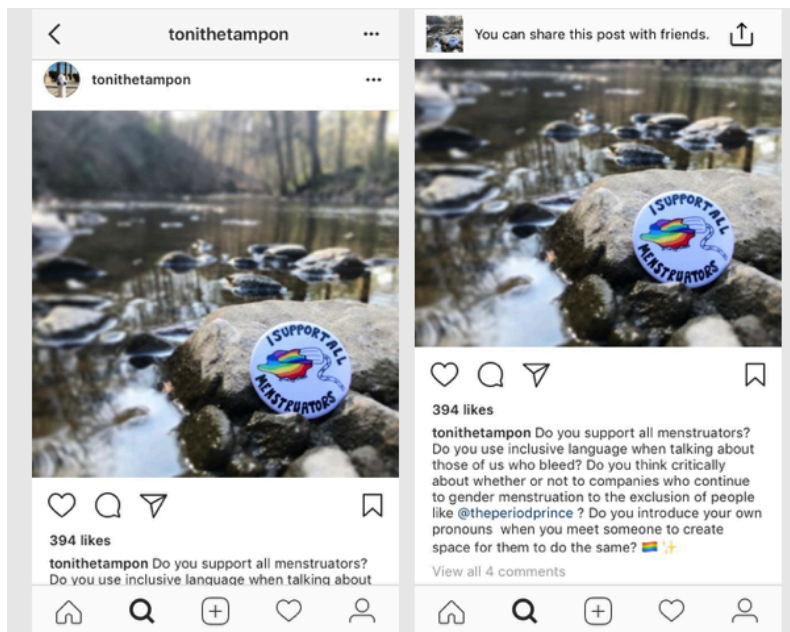


Figure 23. This image from @tonithetampon promotes the message of supporting all menstruators. The caption suggests to not support companies that continue to “gender menstruation”

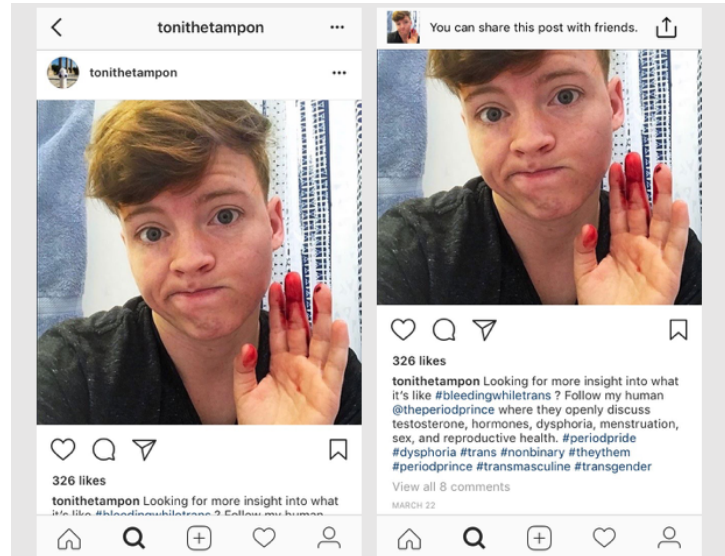


Figure 24. This post from @tonithetampon uses the tactic of shock and confrontation by showing menstrual blood on the hands of the trans man that runs the account. Often these posts that support trans menstruators will be accompanied by the hashtag #bleedingwhiletrans.

The section of data that conveyed the most Solidarity was the activist accounts, with 40% demonstrating mostly “trans solidarity” as well as “women supporting other women”. The activist hashtags revealed that 21.66% of the posts were of the theme Solidarity. Surprisingly, 21.66% of the corporate account posts also conveyed solidarity. These were mostly the sub-theme of “women supporting other women”. However, @ubytotex shared a post that did not explicitly say that they were supporting trans menstruators but they hinted at it by saying “you don’t need to bleed...to be a woman” (Fig. 25 below). This could mean trans women who do not experience menstruation as well as menopausal women who do not menstruate. Only 7.5% of the general hashtags conveyed any themes of Solidarity. The alternative company accounts demonstrated even less with 6.67% of the posts showing the sub-theme of “women supporting women”. Overall 15.14% (28/185) of the total data collected portrayed the theme of Solidarity; 4.32% were “global solidarity”, 4.32% were “trans solidarity”, 5.4% were “women supporting women” and only 1.08% (2/185) posts were “men/allies”.

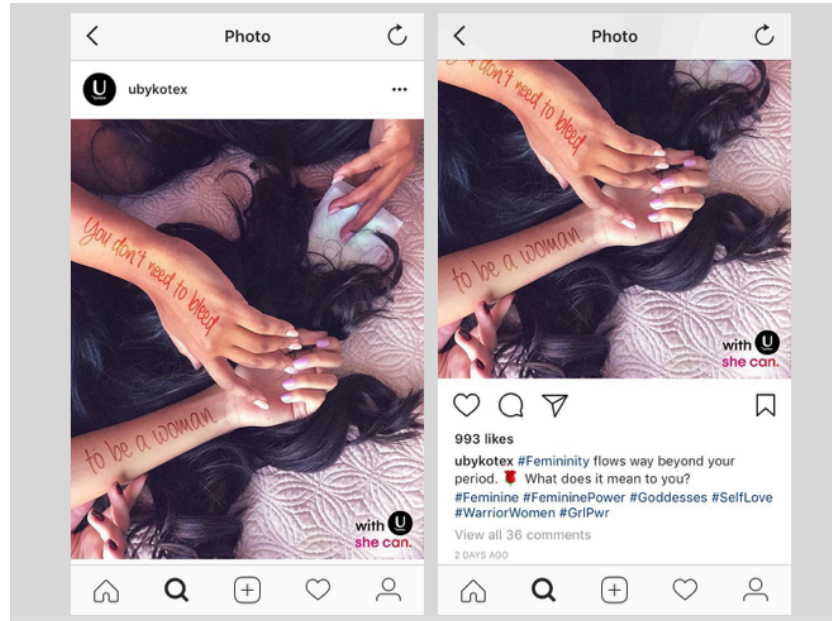


Figure 25. Collected from corporate account @ubytotex. This post hints that they are supporting trans women by saying that “you don’t need to bleed to be a woman”. However, they could also be referring to older menopausal women or other women who do not experience menstruation. It is difficult to say if this brand is making a challenging statement or if they are using feminist consumerism to sell their product.

4.1.3 Resistance

The theme of *Resistance* features different posts related to activism and challenging the taboos associated with menstruation. Unlike *Empowerment* or *Solidarity*, some of these posts use strategies of shock or confrontation to get their messages across. The purpose of these posts is to explicitly disrupt and challenge the stigmas or taboos of menstruation.

i. Challenging the taboo

“Challenging the taboo” is one of the two sub-themes under *Resistance*. This type of post challenges the ideas commonly associated with menstruation, often through pictures of blood which shock and disrupt the normal depictions of periods; a strategy that may help to get the attention of some viewers (see examples below: Fig. 26 & Fig. 27 & Fig. 30 and Fig. 24 above). As explored in the literature review, the normal depictions of menstruation are seen in advertisements for period products and in other forms of media, which market the discretion of their products to perpetuate the silence and secrecy of menstruation (Fingerson, 2006, p. 16;

Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 11; Lozada, 2015, p. 8; Schooler et al, 2005, p. 324). The normative and standard discourse of menstruation is silence, secrecy, shame and embarrassment. It is not an encouraged topic of conversation, but when it is spoken about it is hidden behind euphemisms and slang terms (Delaney et al., 1988, p. 116; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013, p. 382; Lozada, 2015, p. 13; Polak, 2006, p. 191; Schooler et al., 2005, p. 324). Shame and embarrassment are also emphasized in advertisements and depictions in the media, which encourages people to buy the products that will help keep their period hidden and reinforces the stigma of menstruation (Fingerson, 2006, p. 16; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 11; Lozada, 2015, p. 8; Polak, 2006, p. 194).

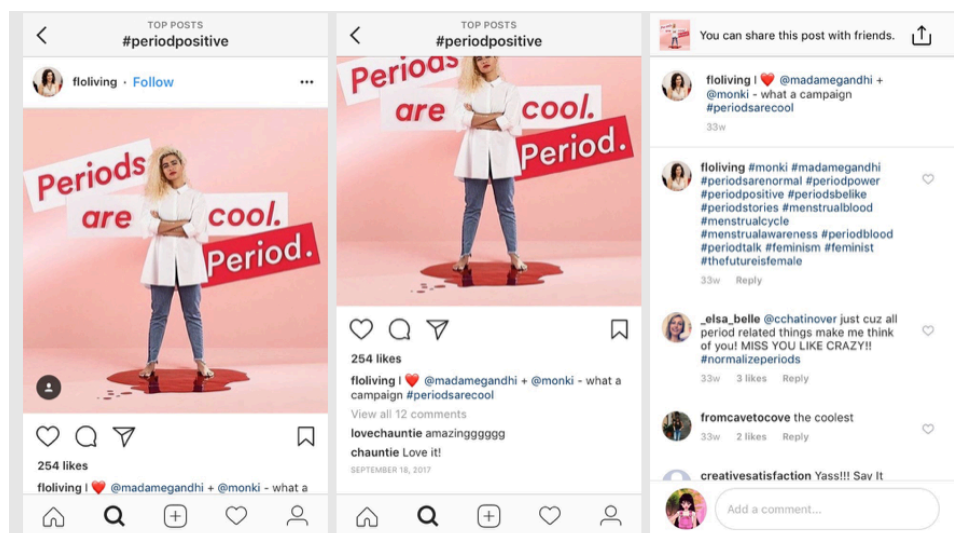


Figure 26. Post found in #periodpositive. Demonstrates the use of shock with the blood depicted on the floor and the menstrual activist message that periods should not be something to be ashamed of.

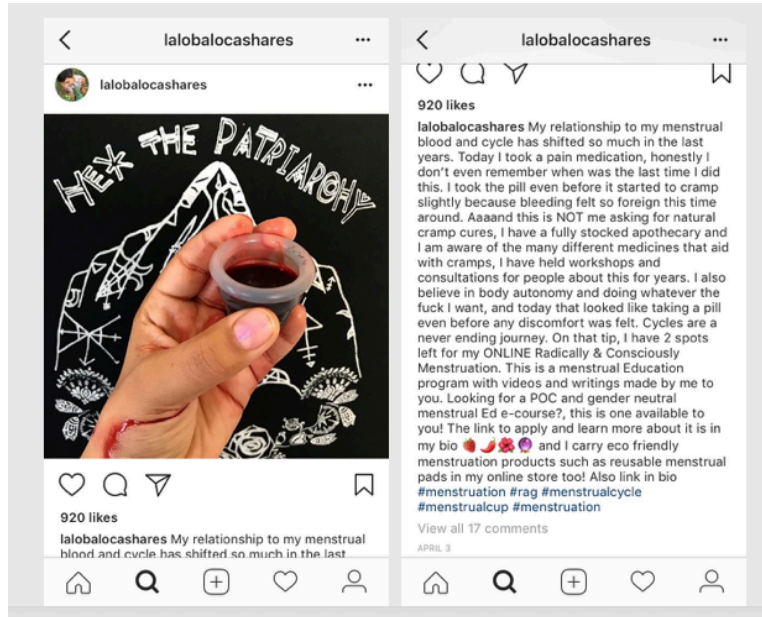


Figure 27. Found in the activist account @lalobalocashares. Shows a menstrual cup filled with what appears to be real menstrual blood, with the words “hex the patriarchy” in the background. This clear activism against patriarchal society that stigmatizes menstruation and women.

ii. Menstruation-Supportive Organizations

The other sub-theme of *Resistance* is “menstruation-supportive organization”. These consist of different posts that were collected from accounts run by a group or organization that take on the social issues that surround menstruation, such as menstrual equity and creating projects that aid those who do not have access to period products (see example below: Fig. 28 & Fig. 30). Most of these posts were found in the menstrual activist hashtags, although some alternative period product accounts demonstrated this sub-theme as well. They are not organizations that solely focus on these social issues related to menstruation, however they have dedicated a few of their posts to menstrual equity and homelessness (see example below: Fig. 29).

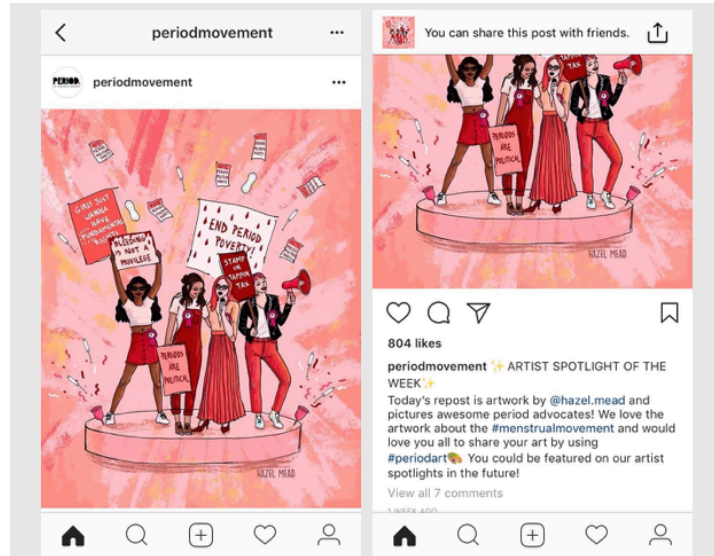


Figure 28. Found in the account @periodmovement. This account is for an organization that helps advocate for social issues related to menstruation. This photo demonstrates an activist protest scene focused on “period poverty”.

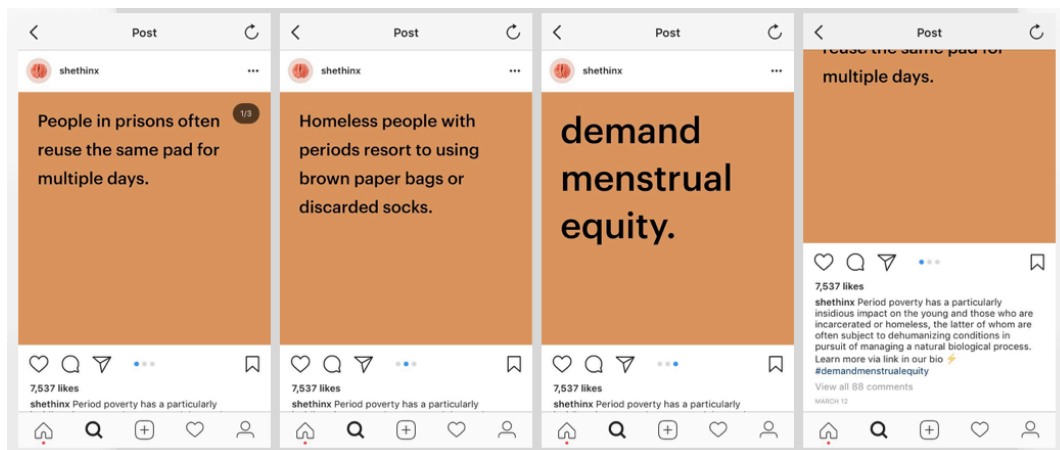


Figure 29. Post found in @shethinx. This is an example of an alternative period product company dedicating a post to activism and the social issue of menstruating while homeless.

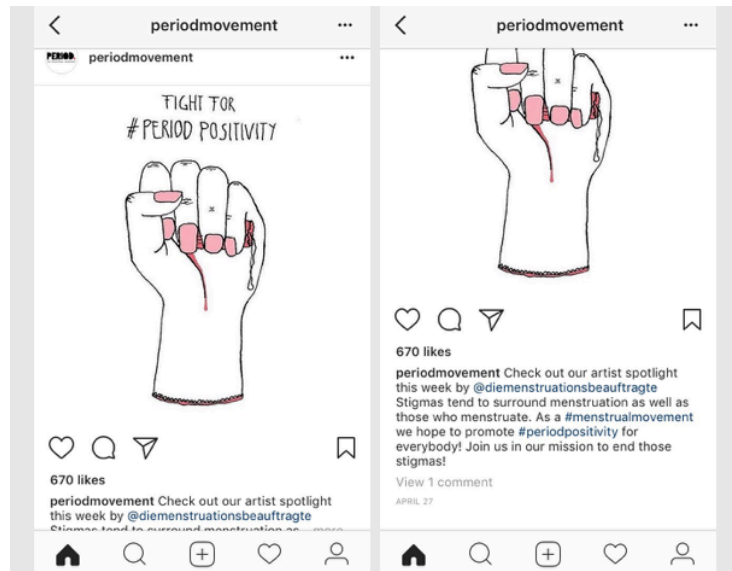


Figure 30. Post collected from the activist account @periodmovement features a woman's fist holding a bloody tampon. The caption addresses the stigmas that surround menstruation and those who experience menstruation. The post's aim is to promote "period positivity". This was posted by an organization and also features the depiction of blood.

The theme of *Resistance* was predominantly found in the activist accounts with 80% (12/15) of the posts. Unsurprisingly, there were no posts (0%) that demonstrated *Resistance* in the corporate company accounts. The alternative company accounts however revealed that 13.33% of the posts were portrayed this theme. As for the hashtags, the general category showed 11.25% of the posts were *Resistance*, while within the activist hashtags there was 15%. Overall, 17.30% (32/185) of the total collected data were conveying themes of *Resistance*.

4.1.4 Normalizing Periods

This theme is somewhat similar to *Resistance* as it attempts to challenge some of the stigma attached to menstruation, however it does not quite fit in the category of activism. *Normalizing* contains coded posts such as; sharing, normalization, relatability and ad comparison. These posts attempt to make menstruation normal and destigmatized by discussing it in an open way, unlike the *Resistance* posts they do not usually use the strategy of shock or confrontation to get the audience's attention. People are sharing their menstruation experiences in order to relate to one another, which can foster honest and open discussions. *Normalizing*

posts attempt to break down the silence and shame that people feel about menstruation. Some of these posts bring attention to the fact that advertisements do not paint a “normal” picture of what menstruation is actually like. *Normalizing* involves presenting the “real” side of periods; presenting the fact that they are annoying and can be difficult to deal with, unlike the advertisements which suggest that they are easily managed with the right choice of product. See some examples of the theme of *Normalizing* below (Fig. 31 & Fig. 32):

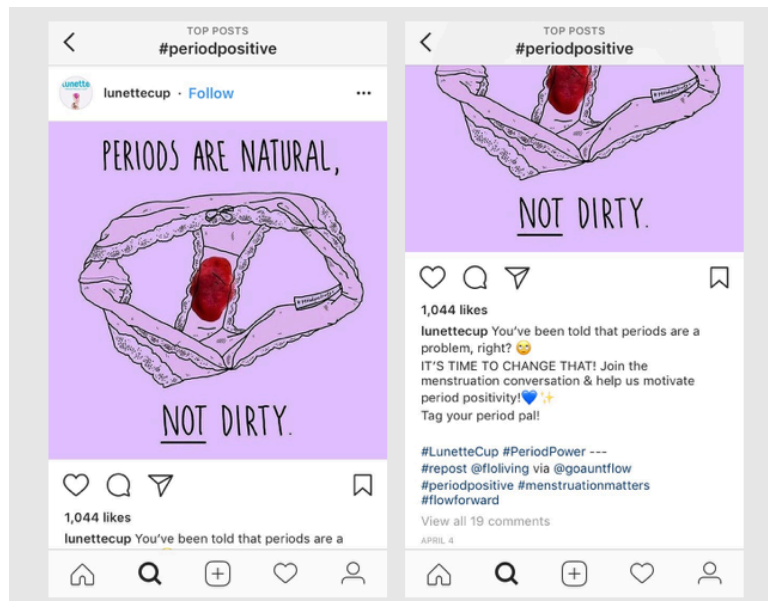


Figure 31. Found in #periodpositive. The message of this post is to combat the taboo that menstruation is dirty. They convey that it is natural and normal to menstruate, while stating in the caption that it is something that should be talked openly about.

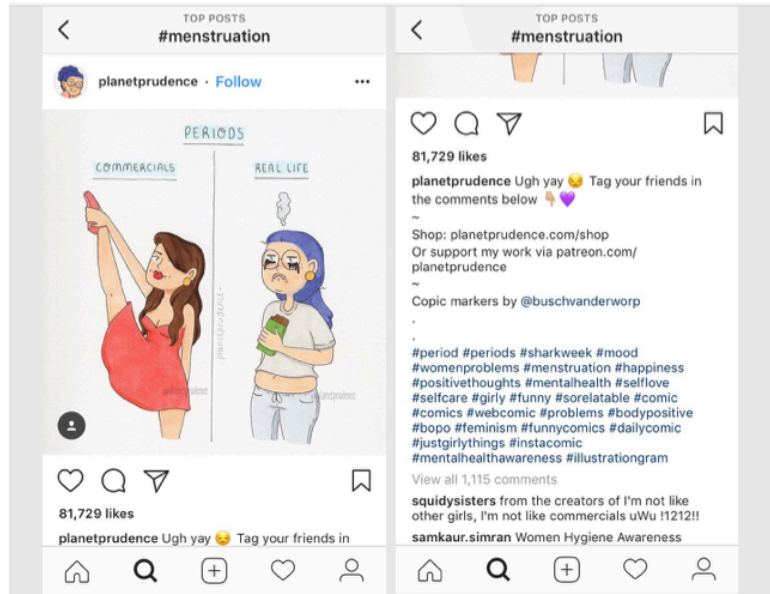


Figure 32. Post found in #menstruation. Shows the advertisement's version of menstruating versus what it can actually be like in real life. This demonstrates the "normal" version of menstruating.

Normalizing posts are explicitly attempting to move these private discussions into more public spaces in order to create a more open discourse about menstruation that is free of shame, secrecy and stereotypes. They are attempting to make menstruation a more normal topic of conversation, hence why I have labelled it *Normalizing*; this is done by explicitly mentioning that menstruation should be normal to talk about and people should not feel ashamed about it (Fig. 33 below).

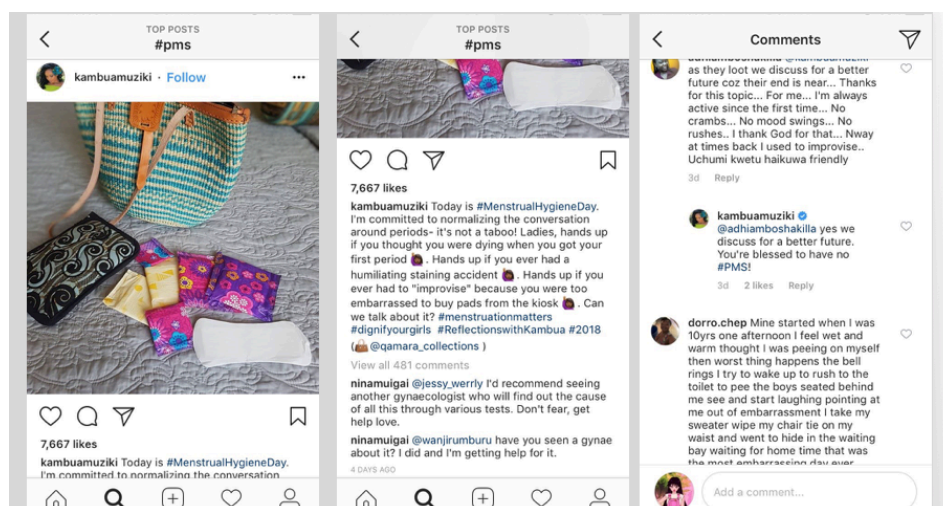


Figure 33. This post was collected from the general hashtag #PMS. The photo shows the contents of the posters bag with a number of pads on display. The caption mentions that menstruation is not a taboo and that we should be able to talk about it.

As previously mentioned in the “trans solidarity” sub-theme, *Normalizing* was displayed through the tactic of humanizing period products and bringing them out of the private sphere and into public spaces (Fig. 34 below). Period products are usually kept and used in private spaces, like a bathroom. When they are brought out into public spaces it disrupts the regular concealment of these products and attempts to make the exposure normal. Menstruation is taught to be hidden and by association any menstruation products should be kept hidden as well so that one is not revealed to be menstruating (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 11). Advertisements perpetuate the fear and embarrassment of leaking or having menstrual products discovered. This is something that the *Normalizing* posts attempt to disrupt, specifically @tonithetampon who brings these products out from being hidden and shows them off without shame in order to erase the fear and embarrassment that are reinforced in advertisements.

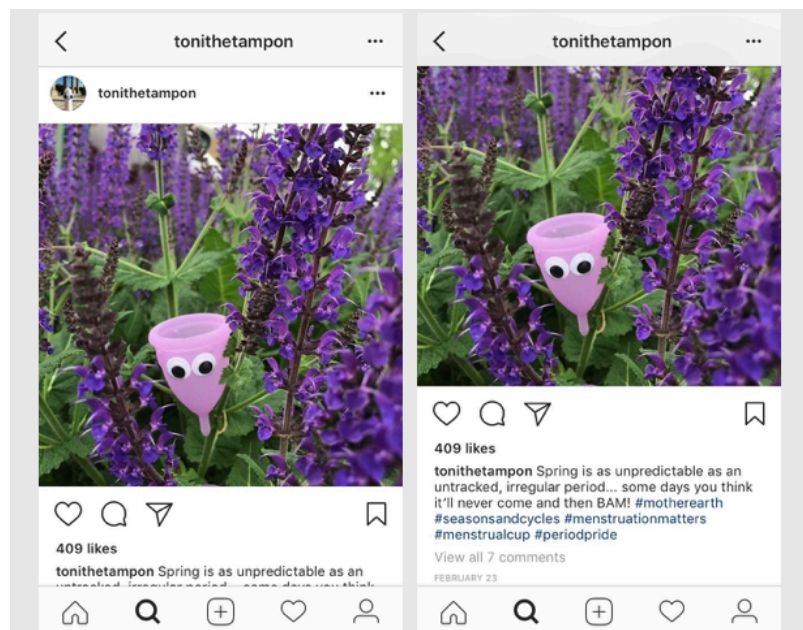


Figure 34. This was posted by the activist account @tonithetampon. The menstrual cup with googly eyes is photographed outside of the private sphere.

Another way that the theme of *Normalizing* was conveyed was through posts that attempt to discredit the way that advertisements frame menstruation. They confront the ways in which menstruation is portrayed in advertisements and show the reality of the experience. Figure 32

above provides a comparison of advertisements versus reality in a humorous drawing. The advertisement shows a woman who is wearing a dress, holding her leg up in the air and looking to be in good spirits, while the ‘real life’ side of the drawing shows a woman wearing casual clothes with mascara running down her face, looks upset and is holding a chocolate bar. This is an exaggeration of what menstruating is like, but the comparison is valid as commercials do not accurately portray menstruation nor do they provide all the information necessary to learn about it.

Overall, 24.32% (45/185) of the data collected revealed to be *Normalizing*. The majority of posts featuring the theme of *Normalizing* were present in the activist accounts with 73.33%. As for the hashtags; this theme was present in 21.66% of the activist hashtags and 21.25% of the general hashtags. The alternative and corporate accounts, respectively, revealed 13.33% of the posts were normalizing. There were 2/15 posts in the corporate company accounts that presented codes associated with *Normalizing*, these came from one account which was @ubykotex. These posts disrupted the normative way of discussing menstruation in advertisements. One of the posts features a woman sitting on the toilet with her tights and underwear pulled down to her knees, she is holding a type of calculator with pictures on it of drops of blood and faces to represent moods; the caption advertises an app to track one’s menstruation cycle (Fig. 35). This was coded as normalizing because although menstrual products are primarily used in the bathroom, advertisements for menstrual products are generally not set in one and rarely indicate any connection to this room (Kissling, 1996a, p. 484). Therefore, this Instagram post advertising for the brand Kotex, a mainstream menstrual product company, was breaking the stigma of concealment that is perpetuated in the media. The other image that was *Normalizing* was also posted by @ubykotex, presented a woman wearing a shirt with a pocket containing a tampon and

a pad with a name tag on that states “hello I’m on my period” (Fig. 36). This was coded as normalizing as it breaks the stigma of silence and secrecy by admitting to menstruating, which is something that people are taught to keep hidden.

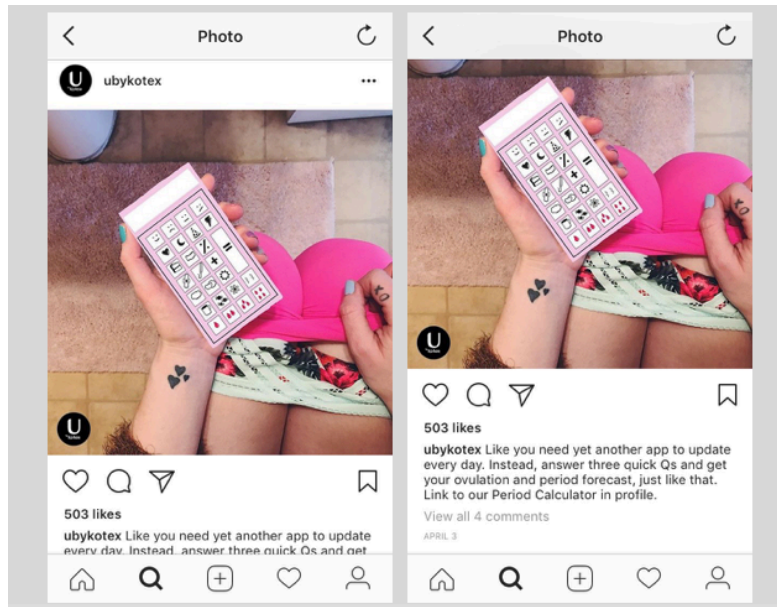


Figure 35. Post collected from corporate account @ubytotex demonstrates the theme of Normalizing.

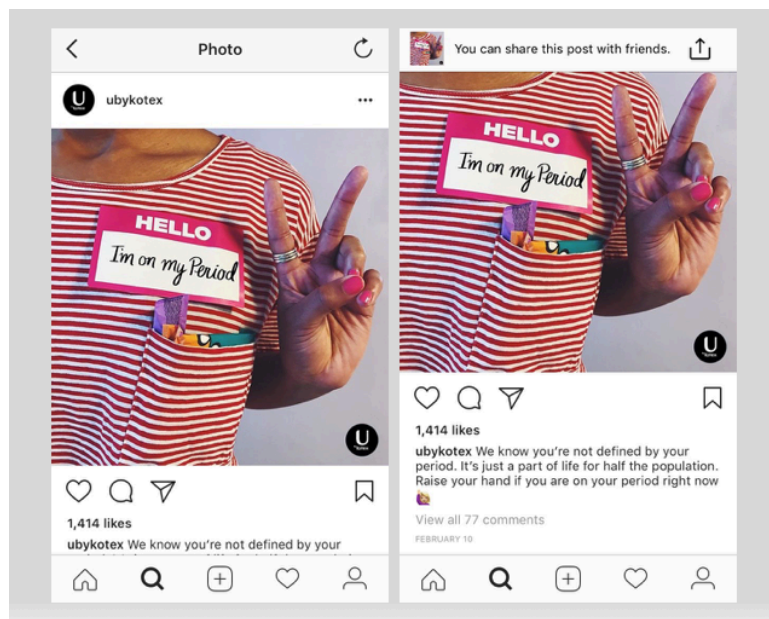


Figure 36. Post collected from corporate account @ubytotex demonstrates the theme of Normalizing.

4.1.5 Women's Health

The theme of *Women's Health* is an amalgamation of codes such as; healthy living, nutrition, tips/suggestions, self-care and recommendations. This theme was split into two sub-themes: “nutrition/healthy living” and “tips/suggestions and self-care”.

i. Nutrition/Healthy Living

The first sub-theme for Women's Health is “nutrition/healthy living” which most of the time provide nutritional facts that can help ease the experience of menstruation. They give advice about what foods that can aid in lessening certain symptoms while menstruating, such as cramps, mood swings or acne. These posts also provide exercise suggestions to live healthy to help with menstruation (Fig. 37, Fig. 38 & Fig. 39 below).

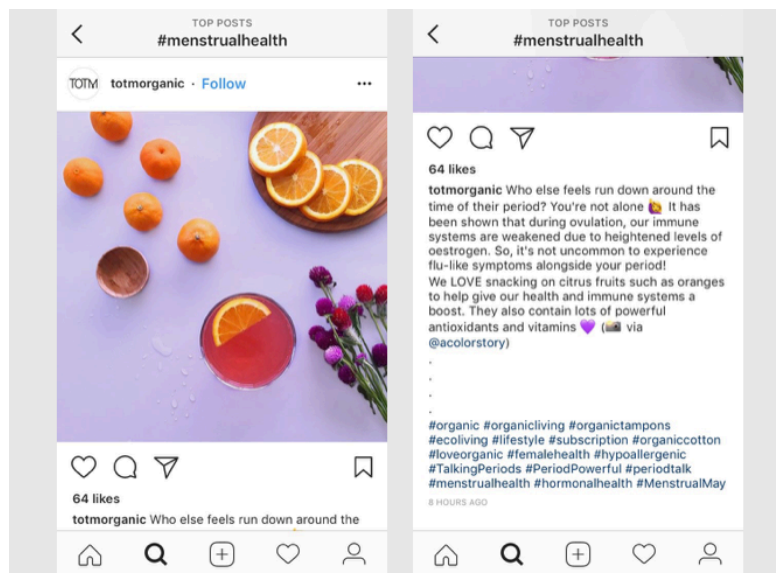


Figure 37. Post found in #menstrualhealth. Demonstrates nutrition and healthy living suggestions for menstruation.

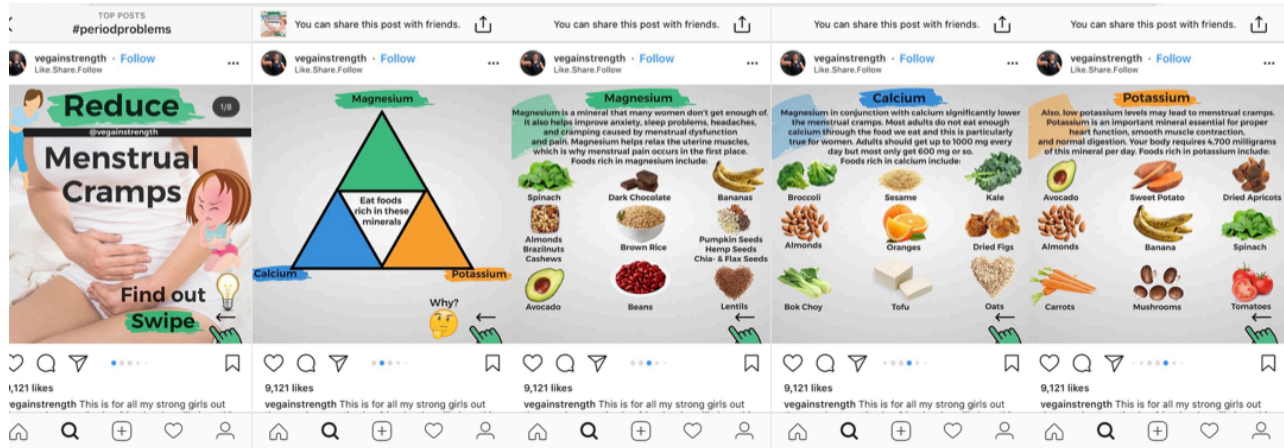


Figure 38. This post is the first half of an 8 photo series; the rest of the photos were captured in Figure 39.

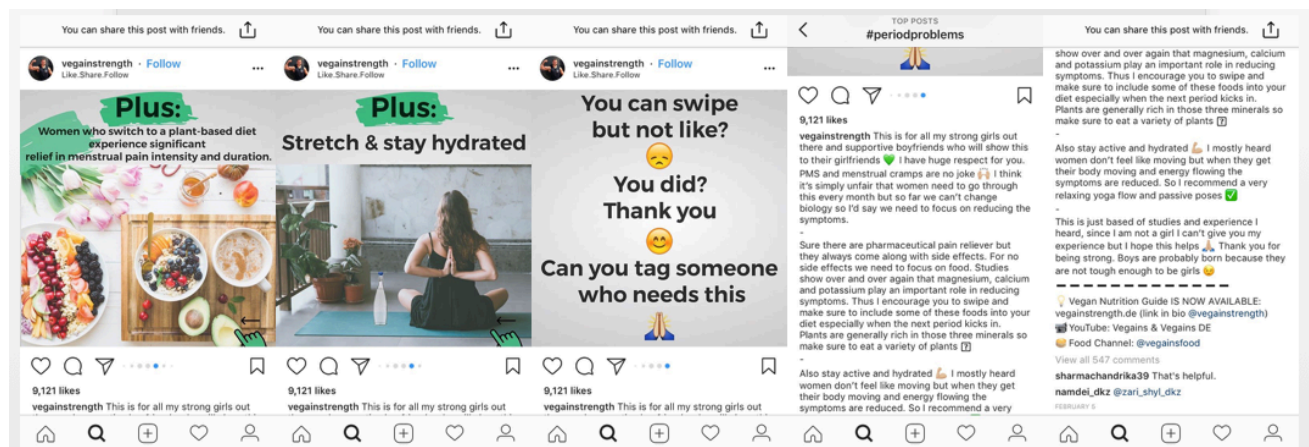


Figure 39. This figure and figure 38 above are captures of an 8 photo series post found in the hashtag #periodproblems. The post provides vitamins and food suggestions to help with menstrual cramps.

There were also posts found in the hashtags that were geared toward older menstruators and the experience of menopause. One of these posts is Fig. 40 below which discusses what can be expected with menstruation later in life. Another post, Fig. 41 below, provides helpful information and symptoms that are often linked to perimenopause, which are the years leading up to menopause when menstruators experience hormone changes and irregularity with their cycle (Healthwise Staff, 2017). These posts are rare (2/185 photos collected) most likely due to the younger age demographic of the average Instagram user. According to data gathered by Statista in January 2018, those aged 18-24 make up 31% of Instagram users, followed closely by those aged 25-34 with 30% ("Distribution of Instagram users", 2018). Those who fall in the age

category 35-44 are only 17% of the users, while those aged 45-54 make up 9% and only 4% of users are 55-64 years of age (“Distribution of Instagram users”, 2018). These older ages fall under the normative age that menopause will begin and all together make up 30% of users, whereas the largest population of users is 18-34 which make up over half (61%) of the users, who are not likely to experience menopause. Therefore, the main age demographic who use Instagram are not concerned with menopause and are not considering it an important topic to discuss on the platform. Menopause and older audience related topics were found unpopular in the data collected from the general menstruation hashtags or menstrual activist hashtags and accounts, but are likely to be found in more related hashtags to the topic, such as #menopause⁹.

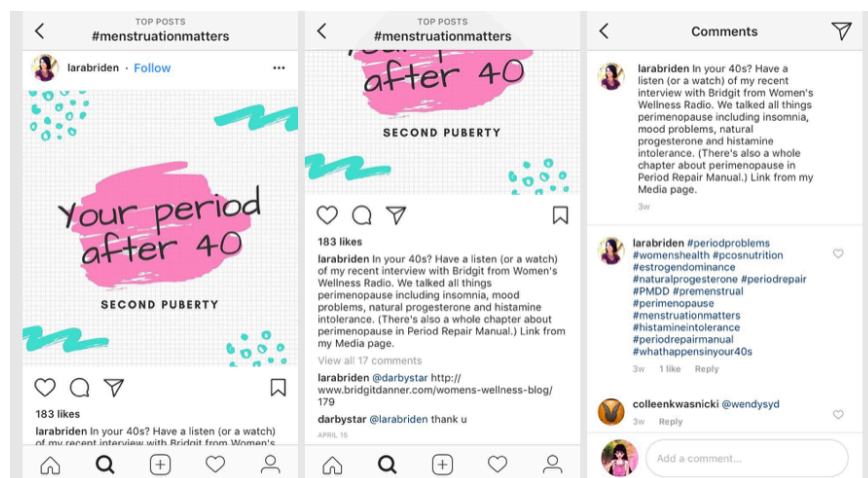


Figure 40. Found in #menstruationmatters. This is one of the few posts that is geared toward an older audience as it mentions menopause. The post does not go into detail but promotes a radio show that discusses nutrition in relation to menopause.

⁹ It should be noted, that within the hashtags and accounts that were chosen for this study, only two posts were aimed at older audiences, however if different hashtags were investigated this would yield different results. I chose to investigate key hashtags related to menstruation that would provide conclusions about the general and activist use of Instagram. However, further research could provide results on the topic of menopause with the use of hashtags related to the topic. As of November 2018 #menopause contains 172, 218 posts.

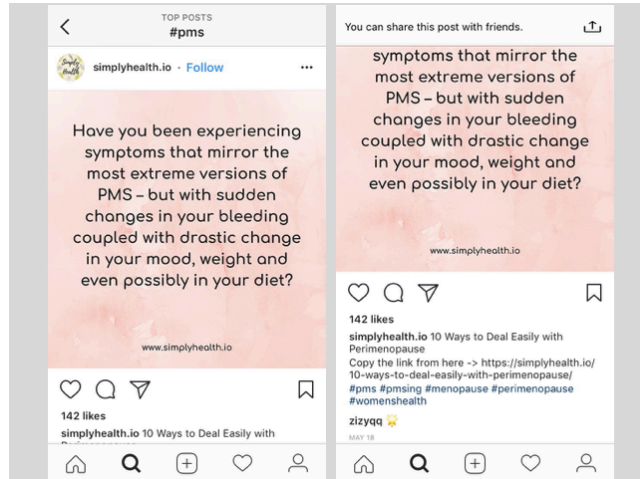


Figure 41. This post was found in the general hashtag #PMS and lists symptoms of perimenopause (early menopause). This information is important to discuss as it is not something that many menstruators are aware of and could be experiencing without realizing. This post also provides diet and other tips that may help with coping with perimenopause.

ii. Tips/Suggestions and Self-Care

The second sub-theme is “tips/suggestions and self-care” which is closely related to the other sub-theme of healthy living, however more geared toward a current popular trend of self-care. This includes face masks and other ways to take care of your skin in order to avoid acne breakouts which are prone to happen during the menstrual cycle as well as practicing yoga to ease menstrual cramps (see posts below for examples: Fig. 42 & Fig. 43).

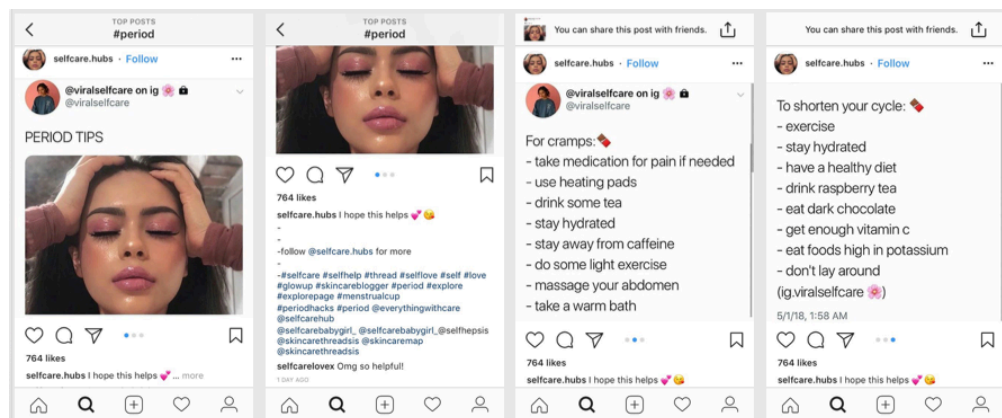


Figure 42. Post found in #period. This post shows the formula of many posts collected that were similar. They all contain a long list of different self-care tips to help with menstruation symptoms. With the use of the photo and the emojis, they also give off an aesthetic that is geared toward millennials and a younger audience.

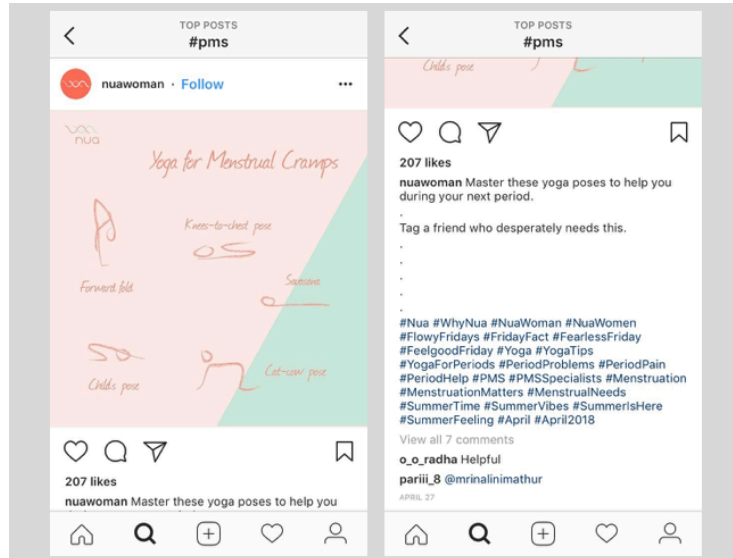


Figure 43. Post found in #PMS. Demonstrates yoga tips to relieve menstrual cramps.

Within all the data collected, there were 29/185 (15.68%) posts found that conveyed the theme of *Women's Health*. There were 17/80 (21.25%) of the posts collected from the general hashtags which conveyed the theme *Women's Health*. These usually fell under the sub-theme of “tips/suggestions and self-care” and follow a similar format and aesthetic to Fig. 18 above. The activist hashtags revealed 13.33% (8/60) of the posts were in relation to the *Women's Health* theme. The corporate company accounts demonstrated 13.33% (2/5) of the posts were found in the @tampax account and were geared toward promoting a healthy, active lifestyle while marketing of their products, which falls under the theme of *Women's Health*. In the alternative company accounts there was only 1 post (6.67%) found in the @flex account, which revealed the theme. This post, like the ones found in the @tampax account, was promoting a healthy lifestyle with practicing yoga. This post however, also challenged societal beauty standards, and the assumption that weight and health are mutually exclusive, by presenting a larger women as capable of doing advanced yoga poses (Fig. 56 below).

4.1.6 *Presenting Menstruation in the Standard/Normative Way*

This theme should not be confused with the theme of *Normalizing Periods*, instead *Presenting menstruation in the standard/normative way* are posts that do not challenge the stigma but portray menstruation in the standard way of society. These posts can be negative, stereotypical, convey embarrassment or shame (often associated with menstruation) or take the common assumption that women are unstable or irrational due to PMS. Even though this theme is not offering anything that challenges the stigmas or taboos associated with menstruation, they are nonetheless discussing it which does aid in breaking the silence that surrounds the subject. These posts use humour, exaggeration, relatability as strategies to appeal to a wide audience and gain “likes” and “comments” from more people. As seen in Table 5 above, posts that present this theme receive 1015 likes on average compared to the *Resistance* posts that received 574 average likes. This reveals that a more standard or normal approach to presenting menstruation is more popular and well received on Instagram than the posts that are more overtly challenging the menstruation stigmas, such as *Resistance*, which may be appealing to a niche audience who are already prepared to view menstrual activism posts. Posts within this theme also tend to use more slang terms and euphemisms for menstruation than other posts, which again is a tool that is used to be accepted by a wider audience. See some examples of posts that belong to this theme below (Fig. 44 & Fig. 45).

The popularity of this theme could also be due to the meme¹⁰ format that these types of posts often use as seen in Fig. 44, Fig. 45 & Fig. 46. This is a prevalent format of expression used online and on social media platforms, therefore this could be a reason for the popularity of

¹⁰ A meme is viral image on the internet that relays a cultural phenomenon. Memes can come in many formats, but one that is currently popular is simple text above an image that expresses a relatable feeling or instance (Fig. 44, Fig. 45 & Fig. 46).

these posts. However, there are also other posts that are relatable and convey this theme which use other formats, such as cartoons or drawings (see Fig. 47 below).

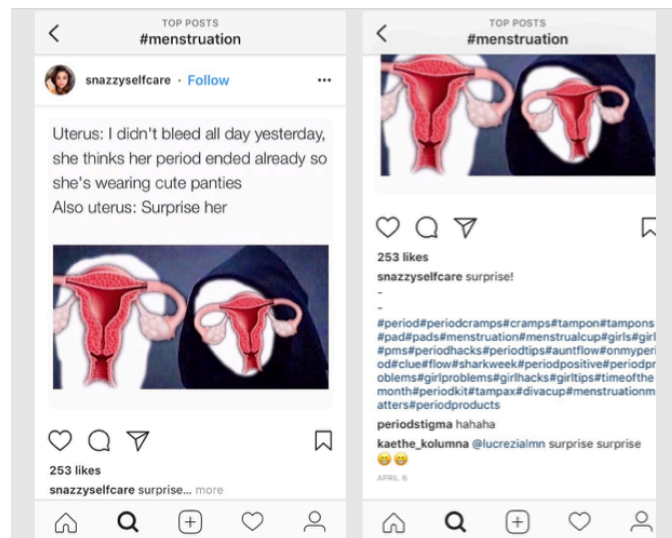


Figure 44. This post was collected from the general hashtag #menstruation. The post is in a meme format and provides relatable, humorous content but does not challenge the menstruation taboo. It does however break the silence by talking about a common experience of menstruation that is not often discussed openly.



Figure 45. This post is a meme format and was located in the general hashtag #periodproblems. This post brings humorous attention to cramps that menstruators can experience, which is something that is not often presented in the advertisements for period products.

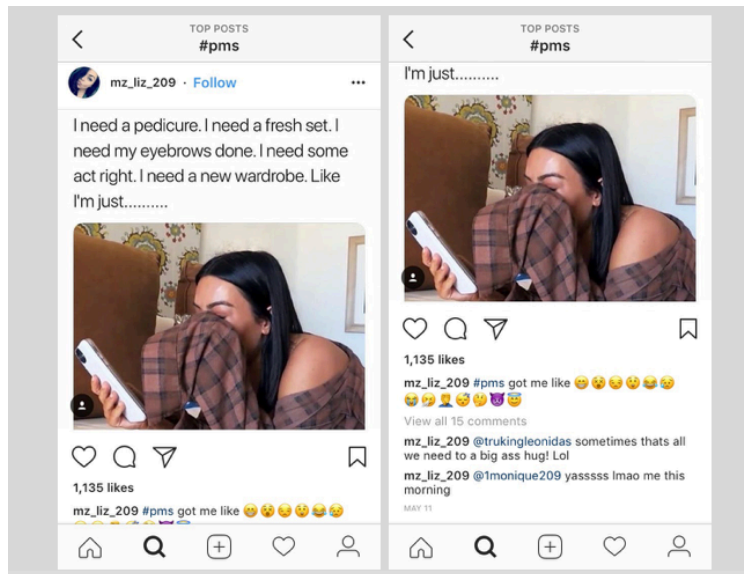


Figure 46. Post found in #PMS. Demonstrates a humorous meme, which is also conveying emotional behaviour which is stereotypical of a menstruating woman.

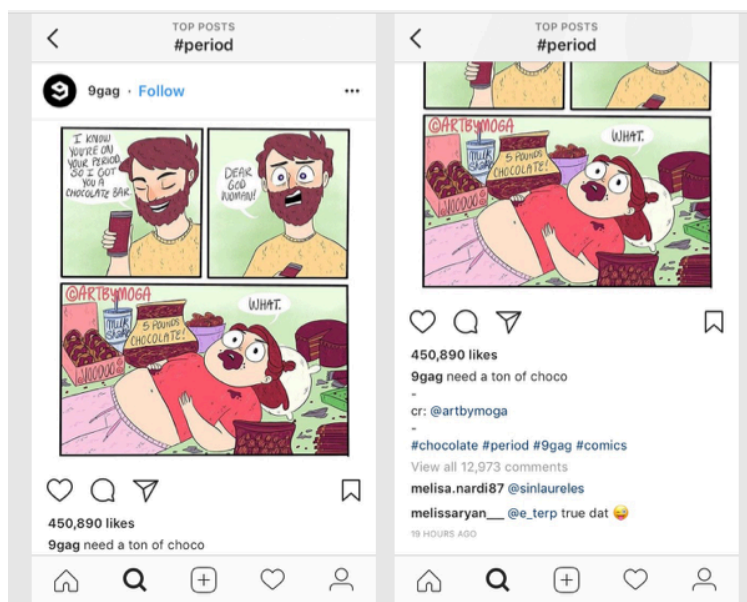


Figure 47. Post found in #period. Another stereotypical depiction of menstruating women. Although humorous and attempting to be relatable, this image shows that when women have their period they have no control over eating too much chocolate.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the literature review explored how advertisements influence and perpetuate the stigmas that surround menstruation, therefore they often present menstruation in this normative and standard way. The corporate mainstream account @tampax continues to maintain the stigma of discretion by marketing products that are small and can be well hidden but at the same time they offer protection against embarrassing leaks (see Fig. 48). They also

create the illusion that menstruation can be easily managed with the use of their products so that one can continue their active and healthy lifestyle without worry (see Fig. 49).

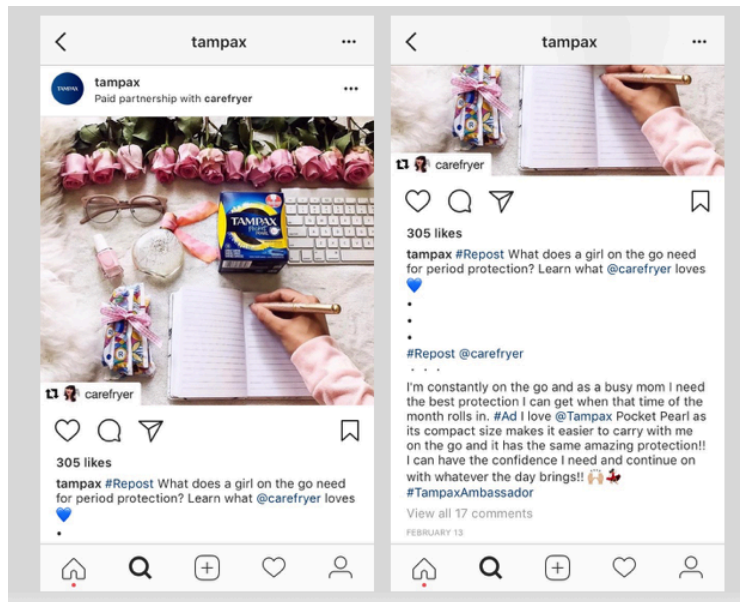


Figure 48. This photo from @tampax markets tampons in small packages that still offer protection. The photo is reposted from a “Tampax Ambassador”, who is someone paid by Tampax to promote their products on Instagram, with the caption: “...its compact size makes it easier to carry with me on the go and it has the same amazing protection!! I can have the confidence I need and continue on with whatever the day brings”.

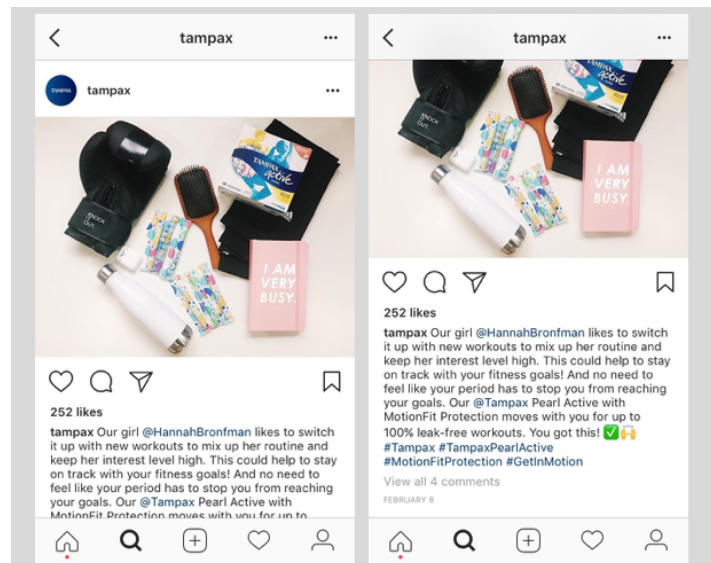


Figure 49. This photo from @tampax mentions in the caption that there is “no need to feel like your period has to stop you from reaching your goals. Our @Tampax Pearl Active with MotionFit Protection moves with you for up to 100% leak-free workouts.”

Throughout all the data collected there were 35/185 (18.52%) posts that were *Presenting Menstruation in a Standard/Normative way*. Within the general hashtags, 20% of the posts were

displaying this theme, while only 5% were found in the activist hashtags. Most of the posts in the mainstream corporate accounts (12/15, 80%) were discussing menstruation in a normative way. Even the posts within the corporate accounts that presented the theme of *Empowerment* were still not challenging to the stigma of menstruation. These posts attempt to convey empowerment by promoting the strength and pride of being women and girls, but not the strength and pride of menstruating. Although, they are promoting empowerment they still discuss menstruation in a normative way. For example, in the account @always_brand, one of the corporate accounts that promotes empowerment in girls the most, they discuss and use the hashtag #MenstrualHygieneDay. They attempt to promote awareness of menstruation, however by associating menstruation with hygiene they are adhering to the taboo of menstruation being something that is dirty (Delaney et al., 1988, p. 8; Livingstone-Lang, 2016, p. 17; Schooler et al., 2005, p. 324). These accounts are still falling into the normative discourse of menstruation. The alternative company accounts revealed 26.67% of the posts were also still referring to menstruation in a normative and standard way. They may be presenting empowerment and body positivity but often times they are not as open or transparent about menstruation as the activist accounts, which had 0% of their posts displaying normative discourse.

4.1.7 *Eco-Friendly*

The *Eco-Friendly* theme includes posts that are displaying reusable products with the intention of helping the environment. This theme was broken down into two sub-themes: “environmental activism” which focuses on posts that attempt to educate on issues that concern the environment due to the use of mainstream menstrual products (see example of this below: Fig. 50). The other sub-theme is “promoting reusable products” which are posts that come from companies marketing products or users promoting these products with the intention of being

environmentally conscious (see examples below: Fig. 51). Most of these posts use a strategy or have a certain aesthetic that is natural/spiritual/earthy (see Fig. 52) which can be appealing to an environmentally conscious lifestyle.

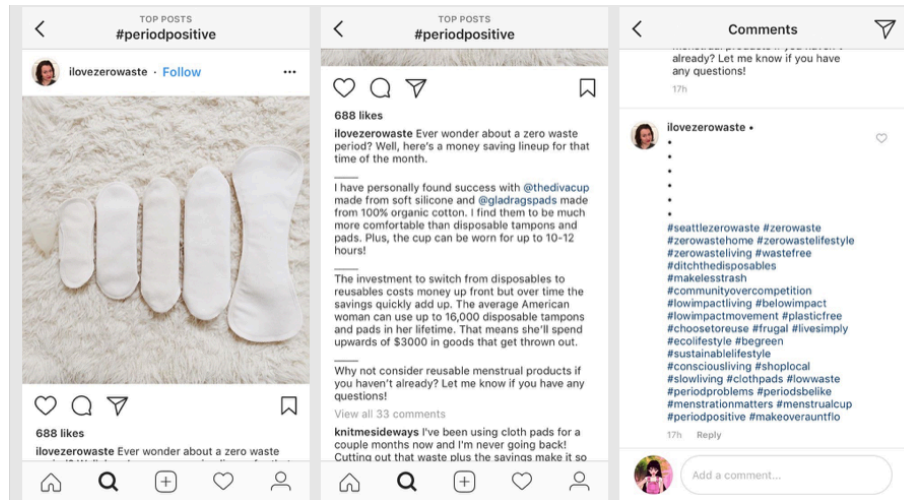


Figure 50. Post found in #periodpositive. This post demonstrates “environmental activism” as they advocate for zero waste period products in lieu of mainstream tampons or pads.

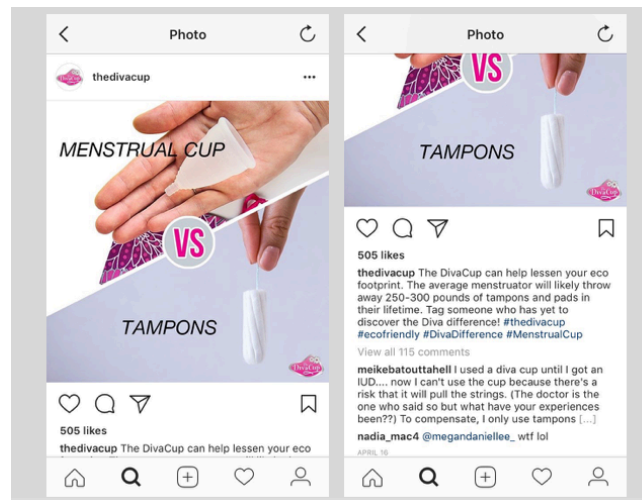


Figure 51. Post found on account @thedivacup. This demonstrates the sub-theme “promoting reusable products. It is from the alternative product company that sells menstrual cups. Part of their brand is to promote an eco-friendly period product.

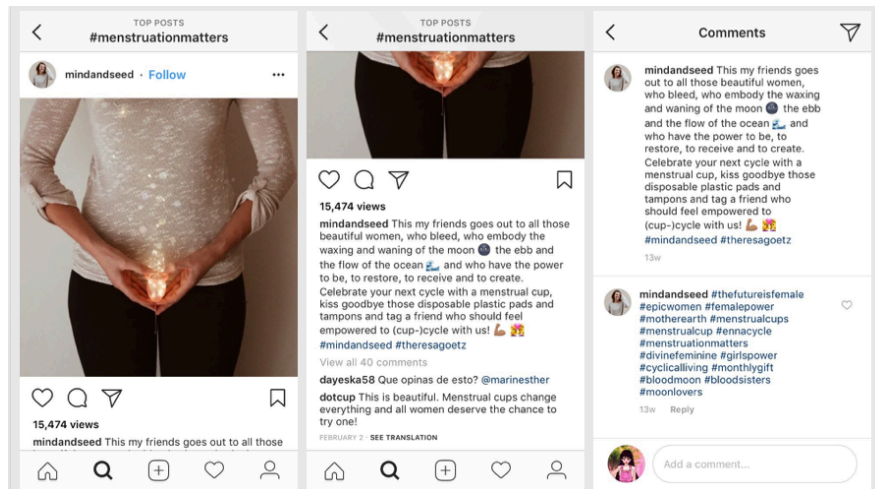


Figure 52. Found in #menstruationmatters. This post is promoting reusable menstruation products and demonstrates the natural/spiritual/earthy aesthetic of these posts.

Overall, 17.84% (33/185) of the data collected were conveying the *Eco-Friendly* theme. Out of all these *Eco-Friendly* posts, 14.59% (27/185) were promoting and marketing reusable products, while 3.78% (7/185) were posts that were advocating for environmental activism. Unsurprisingly, 0% of the corporate accounts were presenting the theme *Eco-Friendly* as none of these mainstream period products are reusable, rather they can be harmful to the environment. The alternative accounts, which do sell reusable products, revealed that 60% of their posts fall under the theme of *Eco-Friendly*. There were 20% of the activist hashtags and 11.25% of the general hashtags that were dedicated to promoting reusable products. There were 3/15 (20%) posts in the activist accounts that displayed reusable products, but were not they were not promoting or explicitly discussing specific brands within these posts they were simply featured in the images used in the posts.

4.1.8 Marketing

The theme of *Marketing* is pretty straight forward as it includes all posts that are selling or promoting different period related products. These can be menstrual products (reusable or non-reusable), different herbal tinctures or pills that can be helpful for other period symptoms such as cramps or mood swings (Fig. 53 & Fig. 54 below). There are two sub-themes that fall

under *Marketing*; “promoting products” and “selling products”. As previously mentioned there are users who promote products but are not the company that has created the products and there are posts associated with companies that sell the products (see Fig. 54 & Fig. 55). Marketing posts can be found mainly in the period product accounts, who often use the strategy of consumerist feminism (which will be discussed further in Chapter 5) to promote their brand and sell products (see Fig. 56 & Fig. 57). Many of the hashtags also contain marketing, such as #PMS which contains the selling and promoting of many different products for cramps, mood swings and other period related products. These products are not as popular or as well-known as the mainstream or even the alternative corporate companies, therefore they make use of the hashtag feature in order to gain more attention from Instagram users. Figure 55 below uses different hashtags related to menstruation including, #menstruation, #periodhacks, #periodpain, #pms, #menstruationmatters, #periodpositivity in order to allow the product to be seen by as many users as possible. In contrast, the corporate companies do not use many hashtags to gain views on their posts, rather they use hashtags to display their slogan or messages that they wish to convey to their audience. For example, in Figure 57 below, @always_brand uses several hashtags that convey confidence and positivity in girls and women; #LikeAGirl, #motivation, #ConfidentGirls, #ConfidentWomen. There are no hashtags used in the post that relate to menstruation, nor does the image or caption offer any connection to menstruation at all. This brand is already one of the top menstruation product brands and does not need to use hashtags to gain recognition from Instagram users.

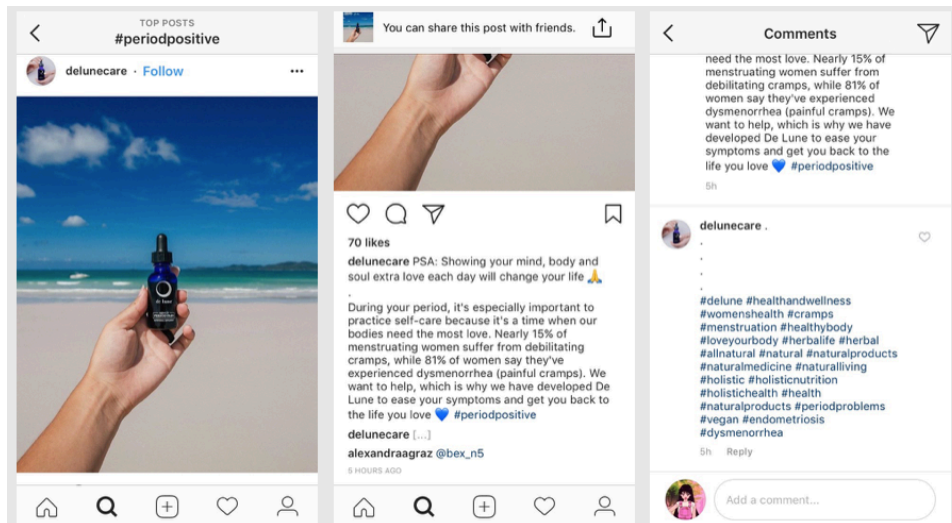


Figure 53. This post was found in the activist hashtag #periodpositive and is advertising a product that can help with period cramps. This post also uses hashtags to help gain attention for their product as they are not a mainstream company that is well-known by many people

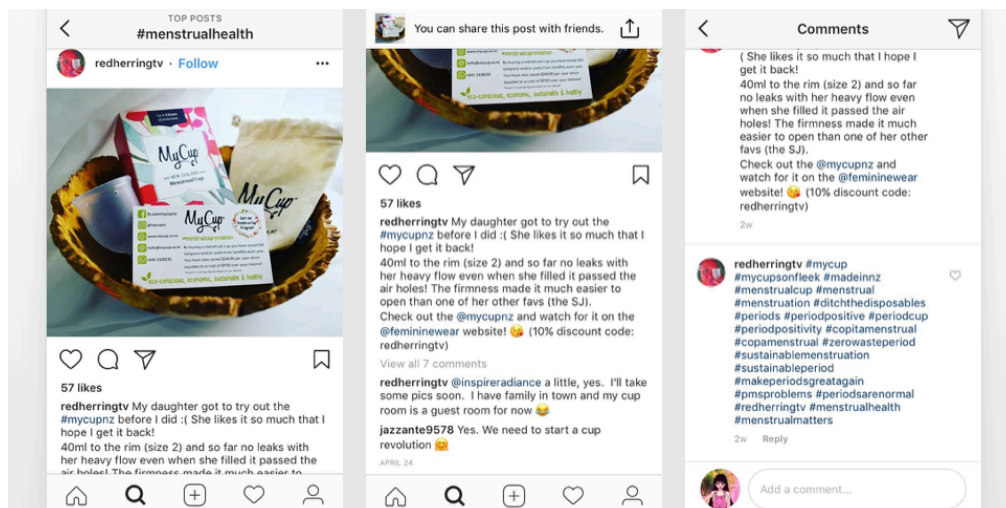


Figure 54. This post was found in #menstrualhealth. Demonstrates someone promoting a reusable product.

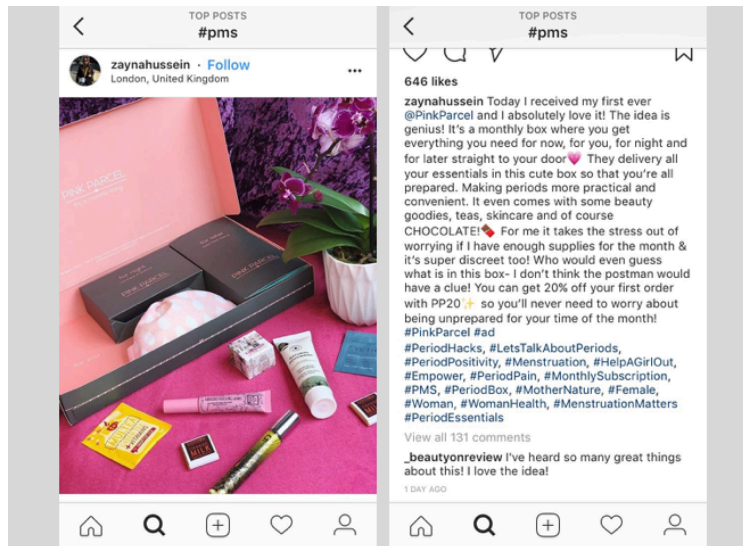


Figure 55. Post found in #pms. This post is promoting a “period box” that can be ordered and contains different items that can help with menstruation. These items are more than just products for menstrual blood, they are also for cramps, mood and skin.

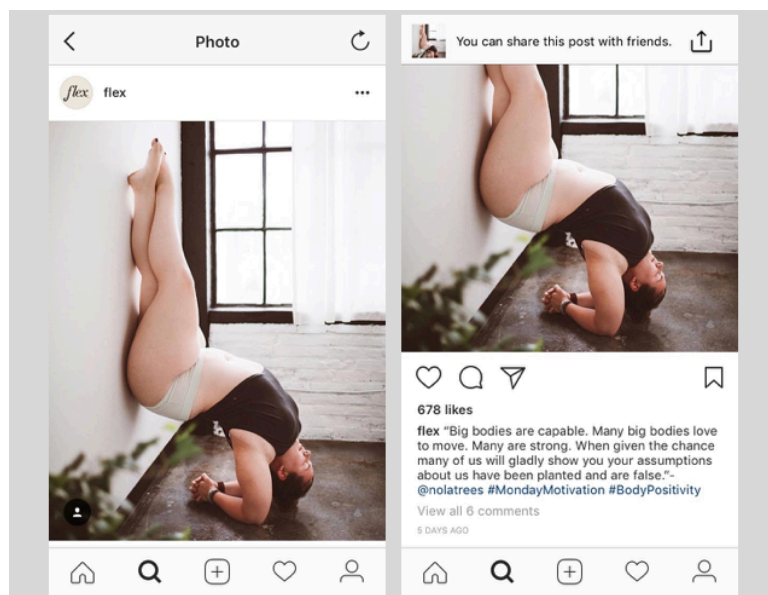


Figure 56. Post found on @flex. This is an example of marketing from an alternative product company. This company portrays a brand that promotes body positivity along with their alternative period products.

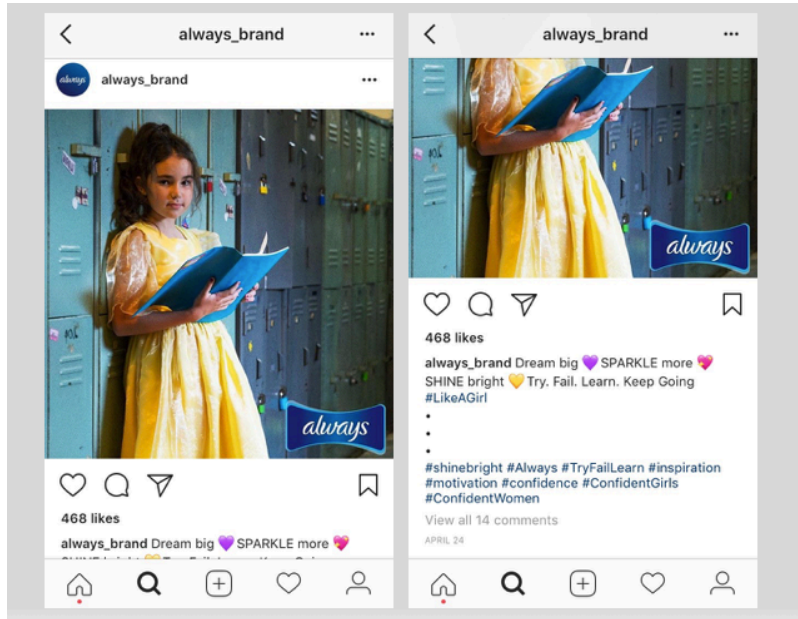


Figure 57. This post was located in the corporate account @always_brand. The hashtags used are: #LikeAGirl, #shinebright, #Always, #TryFailLearn, #inspiration, #motivation, #confidence, #ConfidentGirls, #ConfidentWomen. There are no hashtags used that are related to menstruation.

Within all the posts collected, there were 51/185 (27.57%) that were marketing or promoting products. As the corporate and alternative company accounts were both chosen to reveal how marketing is presented on Instagram, 100% of the posts found in both accounts coincided with the *Marketing* theme. In contrast, 0% of the posts from the activist accounts were marketing products. Some mentioned or displayed regular and reusable products but they were not promoting nor selling specific brands of these products. In both the general and activist hashtags 15% of the posts were presenting the *Marketing* theme. Out of all the data collected 9/185 (4.86%) were promoting other products for symptoms associated with menstruation, such as cramps or mood swings, and these were mostly found in the general hashtags. There were 16/185 (8.65%) that were marketing or promoting regular products, such as tampons or pads, and these were found predominantly in the corporate accounts. Then there were 26/185 (14.05%) of the posts that were promoting or marketing reusable products and alternatives to the mainstream products. These type of products were found more frequently on Instagram than the mainstream

products, which could reveal that this platform provides an open space for these lesser known products to be advertised. It is unnecessary for the mainstream products to use Instagram as frequently as the reusable products as they are more well-known and the predominant brands of menstruation products. Most reusable products seen on Instagram (excluding the Diva Cup) are not available in average stores or pharmacies and must be purchased online or in specialty stores.

4.2 Other Observations

Through the open coding of posts and development of themes, the content analysis of presentations of menstruation on Instagram revealed that this social media space is used to discuss menstruation in several different ways; some of which challenge stigma and others which maintain the normative understandings of menstruation. However, although they are different they can also overlap and be present across many posts. Even though these 8 themes were described with the use of specific posts and what would be present in a post to constitute belonging to a certain theme, they are not mutually exclusive; posts can fall under several themes. They are broad and general themes that cut across the data and encompass several different types of posts. There are some posts that overlap with many different themes; there can be a post that is *Empowering* and also portraying *Resistance*. There were often times when a post was from a company, thus marketing a product, while at the same time promoting empowerment for women. The theme of *Resistance* and *Normalizing* are often found together, sometimes along with *Empowerment*. *Solidarity*, usually the sub-theme of trans support, is linked with *Resistance*. *Presenting menstruation in a Standard/Normative Way* was found to be marketing products as well. These themes cover the data and show that there are many different and simultaneous things going on in relation to menstruation on Instagram.

Part of this thesis is attempting to discover if people are discussing menstruation on Instagram in a way that challenges the stigma. While looking at some of these themes (*Resistance, Normalizing, Solidarity, Empowerment*) it is clear that there are often times that people present menstruation on the platform in a way that disrupts the taboos. Other times there are themes that are not overtly attempting to challenge or resist the menstrual taboos, but are nonetheless discussing menstruation openly. Whether they are intentionally attempting to do so, there are posts that are normalizing menstruation. These posts fall into the theme of *Presenting menstruation in the standard/usual way* and can often be stereotypical and/or negative. One of the stigmas surrounding menstruation is that it is usually a silenced topic and is not something that people discuss openly. Therefore, even if people are discussing menstruation in a way that is not attempting to break the taboos or disrupt the stigmas, they still end up doing so as they are not adhering to the norm of silence regarding the subject. By simply discussing menstruation openly, they are contributing to dismantling the silence and normalizing the subject as something that is acceptable to talk about. Often this way of discussing menstruation, in a negatively or stereotypically way, can be more accepting by a general audience. In contrast, the *Resistance* and more disruptive posts are geared toward a niche audience who are already able to accept this type of presentation of menstruation. The following chapter will continue this analysis of the themes and provide answers to the research questions while connecting this data to the literature and the theory of mutual shaping.

Chapter 5: Analysis and Discussion

Thus far, this thesis has provided background concepts related to the topic of menstruation and technology, explored the results of a qualitative content analysis of Instagram photos and presented detailed explanations of the themes which arose from this analysis. The first few research questions, outlined in the Introduction, have already been addressed in the previous chapters. The various themes that emerged from the content analysis have answered the following questions: how are people using the space of Instagram to present menstruation, are people presenting menstruation on Instagram and what are the different ways that people are presenting menstruation. This chapter will address the remaining research questions.

Specifically, I will discuss whether there is a relationship between the stigma of menstruation that exists in society and what people are posting, whether the different presentations of menstruation can be seen as challenging to the standard way of discussing menstruation, whether there are ways that menstruation is presented that continues to reinforce the existing stigma and finally, what can this tell us about Instagram as a space for activism and challenging societal stigmas. Using the themes presented in the previous chapter to demonstrate the different presentations of menstruation, I will discuss how these challenge the taboo in different ways, as well as how they may help to reinforce the stigmas. I will then explore the mutually shaped relationship between societal stigmas and how people are using Instagram, and what this says about the platform as a space for activism and its potential for challenging stigmas.

5.1 How are the Stigmas Challenged?

The previous chapter demonstrated that certain themes that emerged in the content analysis represented overt challenges to the stigmas that surround menstruation, this includes *Resistance* which will be discussed further on. Other themes are less obvious about the ways in

which they confront the stigmas, but they still provide presentations that diverge from the normal assumptions associated with menstruation. I will first expand upon these themes which diverge from the normative presentations of menstruation, then I will discuss the overt challenges to the stigmas that surround menstruation.

Facilitating open discussions and celebrating menstruation contradicts the shame and embarrassment that is often perpetuated in society. Found within the theme of *Empowerment*, menstruators are being encouraged to embrace their period with positivity and celebration. People were found to be accepting the flaws that come with menstruation and attempting to move beyond the feelings of shame. This also shows that they are not keeping menstruation hidden, but rather discussing it openly and in a positive manner. *Empowerment* was also used in the posts collected from the company accounts as a way to market their products. The use of empowerment and feminism in marketing has been examined in previous research, as explored in the Literature Review with the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty. Dove was appropriating feminist messages and selling them as commodities that could be possessed upon purchase. This was deemed by the author of the article as “feminist consumerism” (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 943). Many of the company accounts collected in the current research were found to be promoting empowerment in women and girls by encouraging them to be proud of their strengths and capabilities in order to sell their products (Fig. 2, Fig. 6, Fig. 7, Fig. 36, Fig. 56 and Fig. 57). This reveals that feminist consumerism is not only used in the beauty industry, as seen with the Dove Campaign, but is also adopted by menstruation companies to market their products to women and girls. However, by using empowerment and positivity in their marketing, standard representations of menstruation are being challenged by these advertisements who in the past

have been responsible for perpetuating the shame and embarrassment that surrounds menstruation.

There are two sub-themes of *Solidarity*, “women supporting other women” and “men/allies” which also forge positive and open discussions about menstruation. “Women supporting other women” demonstrates that there is a space on Instagram where women are presenting menstruation to benefit each other. The Literature Review chapter touched on how women and girls feel most comfortable discussing menstruation in private spaces with other women (Fingerson, 2006, p. 29). When menstruators talk to friends who share the same experience of menstruating it can increase solidarity among the group and reduce some of the discomfort associated with the taboo topic (Fingerson, 2006, p. 94; Kissling, 1996, p. 493). They create communities around sharing and learning about menstruation which can be a source of empowerment and help to reduce feelings of shame (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013, p. 382). If more women can participate in this community on Instagram, by sharing their experiences and learning from each other, it can be an empowering outlet and has potential to eliminate some of the shame associated with menstruation.

This type of sharing and learning is also similar to how girls were connecting via the online forum as discussed in the Literature Review. Polak (2006) researched an online forum where girls were sharing their experiences and helping each other learn about menstruation. They formed a community where they could go for advice and talk about period related topics, which were often topics avoided by advertising or the media (Polak, 2006, p. 192). This is very similar to ways menstruators are using Instagram, not only within the sub-theme of “women supporting other women” but also in the themes of *Normalizing* and *Women’s Health*. People are discussing

menstruation openly and providing information that is not addressed in advertisements, which challenges the normative representations of menstruation.

The sub-theme of “men/allies” shows that there are a few men who are discussing menstruation openly on Instagram (Fig. 17 and Fig. 18). The fact that there are not many examples is significant as it demonstrates that menstruation is still quite a stigmatized subject among men. It is important that this research found evidence of some men who are attempting to challenge this as it could help to ease the stigma that surrounds menstruation. If men and boys can learn about menstruation alongside women and girls, it could aid in eliminating some of the secrecy that is perpetuated in societies. People may not feel as though they need to keep their period hidden if everyone is more open about discussing menstruation.

More evidence of a positive and open menstruation discourse which challenges the stigma is found with the *Normalizing* theme. This theme demonstrates how people are attempting to discuss menstruation in a more mundane way, allowing a discourse which is less stigmatized and showing that it is a normal experience that is not required to be hidden. *Normalizing* can also be seen as an overt challenge, as these users are aware of the stigma that surrounds menstruation in society and are directly attempting to make menstruation a more normal topic that is not hidden or shameful through sharing on Instagram.

Another overt form of challenging the stigmas is the theme of *Resistance*, which shows how menstrual activists are aiming to destigmatize menstruation. They often use a shocking tactic of displaying blood in their photos (Fig. 26, Fig. 27, Fig. 30 and Fig. 32) in order to erase the normative assumptions that it is dirty and gross (Delaney et al., 1988, p. 8; Livingstone-Lang, 2016, p. 17; Schooler, Ward, Merriweather & Caruthers, 2005, p. 324). Any other type of blood, like blood that comes from violence, is not associated with the same stigmas as menstrual blood.

Those that post images of menstrual blood wish their audience to come to terms with the process of menstruation as something normal and mundane. Since menstrual product advertisements use blue liquid to demonstrate the absorbency of their products people do not associate red liquid with menstruation, thus are not accustomed to this image. If there were more images of red liquid used in the media to portray menstruation, perhaps there would not be as much shock when confronted with menstrual blood (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 12).

Although the intention of these images is to normalize the sight of menstrual blood and to destigmatize menstruation, they are still shocking and not as well received as other posts that attempt to challenge the stigma. Even though there are other *Resistance* posts which do not use the imagery of blood, this theme only received 574 likes on average compared to the *Normalizing* posts which receive 1153 average likes or even the *Empowerment* posts which have 869 average likes. Posts that display the theme of *Resistance* are the least popular¹¹ form of presenting menstruation on Instagram out of the data collected. Herbert Haines (1984) suggests that radicals in a social movement can create a “positive radical flank effect” which can strengthen the position of the more moderate groups in the movement (p. 32). Within a social movement the moderate demands can be seen as more normalized or reasonable in contrast to the position of the radicals (Haines, 1984, p. 32). With the *Resistance* posts providing radical views and shocking images of menstruation, those that are presenting challenges to the stigmas in more moderate ways are more accepted on the platform in comparison. These *Resistance* posts help the *Normalizing* or *Solidarity* posts to appear more reasonable and allow them more acceptance by other Instagram users.

¹¹ For the purposes of this research, the calculated average of the number of likes that each theme received was used to determine their popularity on Instagram in comparison to each other.

Another way of challenging the stigma that was found on Instagram was presenting information that is not discussed in advertisements or the media. Mainstream product advertisements focus solely on the bleeding aspect of menstruation and do not address other symptoms that come with this experience. Found within the theme of *Women's Health* were posts that provided nutritional information, self-care suggestions and different exercises that can aid with cramps, mood swings and acne. This type of information is not discussed widely in the media's representation of menstruation, nor are these other symptoms addressed in advertisements. Therefore, by posting about this on Instagram it can be seen as challenging.

During the second wave of feminism, part of the women's movement of the 1970s advocated for women's health and menstrual activism took on the issues of menstrual safety (Bobel & Kissling, 2011, p. 8). Their main focus at the time was the Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) crisis. Due to the increased health risks of the mainstream products, women involved in the health movement were advocating for the safe use of these products by creating and distributing brochures to inform women as well as provide alternatives to the mainstream products that were causing TSS. This movement provided helpful information to menstruators to assist them in the safe use of mainstream products and provide options for alternative products. The results of the data collection demonstrate that Instagram allows for a space where people can share information about menstruation that is not shared in the media in an attempt to help others. People are using Instagram in a similar way as the brochures by sharing helpful tips and suggestions to fellow menstruators.

This way of presenting menstruation and offering help to others is also comparable to the ways in which the girls were discussing menstruation within the online forum in the research done by Polak, as they used the platform to openly share information that was not disclosed in

advertisements. Polak outlines different topics that were covered on the forum including, “teen health and wellness” and “dealing & health” (2006, p. 199). These are similar to the topics of nutrition and healthy living tips that were found on Instagram. Discussing these topics helps to challenge the limited information that is being represented in the advertisements.

Creating reusable products that can be used as alternatives to what the mainstream companies are offering can also be seen as presenting menstruation in a challenging way. Posts found in the *Eco Friendly* theme provided a contrast to the corporate companies by posting their own products that are also more environmentally sustainable. This is similar to the DIY ethic of the women’s movement in the 1970s that used brochures and zines which shared templates to make reusable pads (Bobel, 2006, p. 332; Lozada, 2015, p. 10). Making reusable pads out of fabric is a form of activism as well as an eco-friendly alternative to the mainstream products. The opposition to mainstream products persisted into the third wave of feminism where women continued to create their own pads and broadcasted their critiques through zines and e-zines (Bobel, 2006, p. 342; Bobel & Kissling, 2011, p. 121). Furthermore, some women argue that creating and reusing their own pads can be a way to celebrate menstruation (Kissling, 1996, p. 498). Making and washing them each cycle can be a ritualistic practice that brings positivity and empowerment to menstruation.

5.2 How are the Stigmas Reinforced?

Within the theme of *Presenting Menstruation in a Standard/Normative Way* people were found to be discussing menstruation in a negative and often stereotypical manner. There are still individuals who are influenced by the stigmas that surround menstruation and perpetuate the normative discourse. One of the prominent stigmas that surrounds menstruation is silence and secrecy, which is perpetuated with the lack of open discussions as well as the discourse of

advertisements (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 11; Fingerson, 2006, p. 16). Even though there are Instagram users who adhere to the normative way of presenting menstruation and they are not attempting to disrupt stigmas of menstruation, they are nonetheless discussing the topic which breaks this silence and secrecy. By posting about menstruation, even if it is negative or stereotypical, it is still talking about the subject and therefore not abiding by the silence. It does not attempt to challenge or present menstruation in a different light than normal, however it does provide relatable content for other users to engage with. It is more accepting to discuss menstruation in a negative or stereotypical way than be overtly critical of the how society perpetuates the taboo.

Advertising plays an important and influencing role in shaping and controlling the discourse of women's bodies and media is one of the main perpetrators of the stigmas that surrounds menstruation. Menstruators learn through advertisements that menstruation is something to be ashamed or embarrassed of and constantly reminded that it should be kept hidden and secret (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 11; Fingerson, 2006, p. 16; Lozada, 2015, p. 8; Polak, 2006, p. 194). From the data collected it appears that the mainstream corporate accounts are also reinforcing this normative/standard way of presenting menstruation, even though some of them are simultaneously conveying messages of empowerment to girls and women. These messages of empowerment are only used to sell the company brand and products, as previously discussed. These companies, for example @always_brand, avoid connecting the act of menstruation to the product they are marketing and only present messages of empowerment to women and girls (Fig. 6 and Fig. 57). They disconnect the act of menstruating with their brand, which is a strategy that helps to perpetuate the taboo and stigma associated with menstruation (Fingerson, 2006, p. 54; Newton, 2012, p. 399). They are instilling empowerment

and confidence in women and girls, but they do not reinforce these positive messages in conjunction with menstruation. This does not help with the shame, embarrassment and fear that is heavily attached to menstruation. Advertisements already infiltrate our everyday lives, by creating accounts on Instagram they have access to this online space as well. As seen with the other themes, people can use Instagram to discuss menstruation in many different and challenging ways, however companies can also take advantage of this space to market their products and attempt to control the discourse that reinforces the stigmas of menstruation on this platform.

5.3 Mutual Shaping: The Relationship between Societal Stigmas and Instagram

Thus far, this Chapter has explored how the stigmas that surround menstruation are being challenged on Instagram. They are not only challenged in overt ways of resistance, often they are through open and positive discussions that celebrate menstruation and attempt to normalize it or by providing information about menstruation that is not addressed in advertisement. There were also ways that menstruation was presented that were revealed to perpetuate some of the stigmas and negativity, but at the same time they were still discussing menstruation which resists the silence and secrecy. It is clear that there are ways of presenting menstruation on Instagram that challenge and also reinforce the stigmas, which reveals that there is a relationship between the societal stigmas and how people post on Instagram.

The sub-theme of *Solidarity*, “global solidarity” demonstrates how this social media platform provides a way for these stigmas to be challenged by diverse groups of people as they can connect to different communities worldwide. This way of presenting menstruation uses Instagram to raise awareness about global issues that surround menstruation and they attempt to lessen the shame that menstruators in other countries may experience (Fig. 10, Fig. 11, Fig. 12,

Fig. 13, Fig. 17 and Fig. 18). This is a mutually shaped relationship, where one society is attempting to bring change and help to another through the use of technology. They are using the platform in a different way than it was intended, by not only sharing photos with their followers but also attaching a message of change and awareness to these photos in order to influence other users. This demonstrates the formation of collective identity, where different people have come together to attempt to bring change to global menstruation issues (Treré, 2015, p. 903).

By using the online space of Instagram menstruators can attempt to contradict societal standards (Friedman, 2007, p. 790; Gal et al, 2015, p. 1700). Instagram, like other online platforms, allows for more accessibility by diverse groups around the world, moreover it is also less mediated and less supervised which means that various identities have the opportunity to be represented (Friedman, 2007; Gal et al, 2015). Even though these online spaces are less mediated, there are still issues with censorship and the influence of the societal stigmas which often hinder some of these open expressions of menstruation. Instagram takes advantage of its users and requires them to report inappropriate content; since menstruation continues to be a stigmatized subject, many of the users might report this content as they are influenced by societal standards of keeping menstruation hidden.

In the past, there have been issues with the censorship of menstruation photos on Instagram, as explored in the Introduction with the example of Kaur's post. However, within the current research a photo that is similar to Kaur's was collected which fell under the *Solidarity* sub-theme of "trans support". The post below (Fig. 58) depicts the trans activist who runs the account @tonithetampon; he is sitting on a bench in a public park with his legs spread with visible blood on them, he is holding a sign that says "periods are not just for women

#bleedingwhiletrans”. Below this, is Kaur’s photo (Fig. 59) displaying a woman lying on her bed with blood on her pants and the sheets.

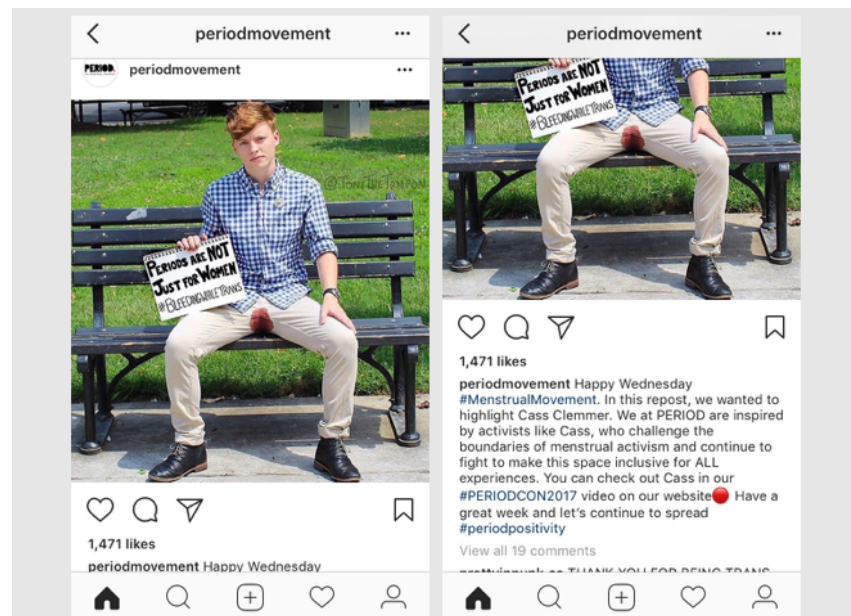


Figure 58. This photo was originally posted by the creator of the @tonithetampon account (@theperiodprince), but was collected for data from the activist account @periodmovement. This photo has been reposted by several different accounts around Instagram as it displays an important message that women are not the only ones who experience menstruation.

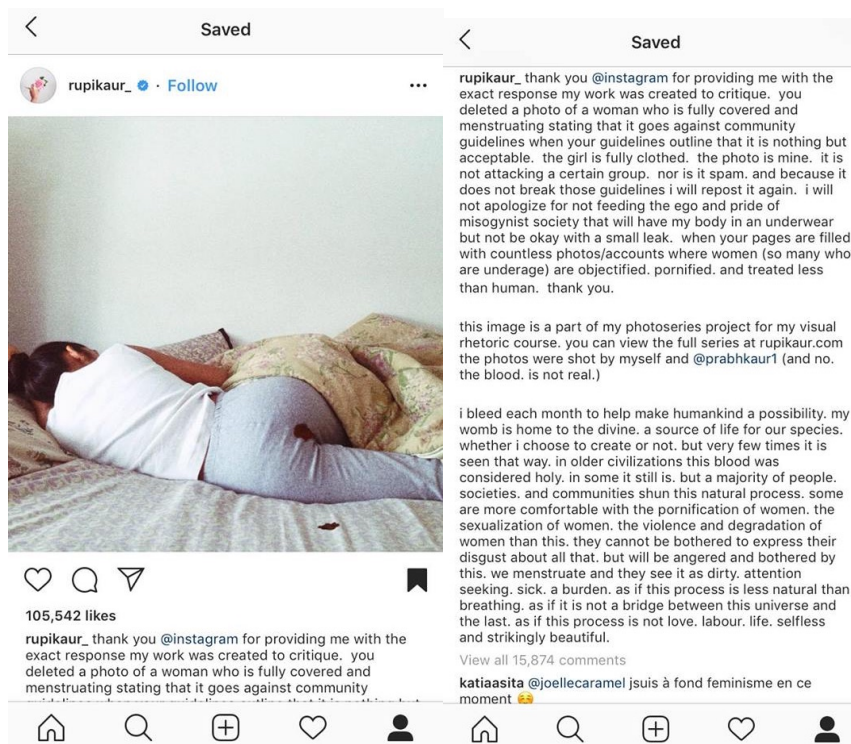


Figure 59. This is the original post by Rupi Kaur that was removed multiple times from Instagram and reinstated after much controversy over the fact that it did not violate the guidelines. The caption was changed by the poster to shed light on the situation and discuss the stigma surrounding menstruation.

Figure 58 above was collected from the activist account @periodmovement and continues to remain on their feed (last checked on October 27th, 2018). The original version (not included in the collected data) was posted by the trans man in the photo on his personal account @theperiodprince in July of 2017. The results of an Instagram search verified that the original photo is still on the account and does not show any indication of it being censored or removed. This demonstrates the mutually shaped relationship between society's menstruation taboo and Instagram. Back in 2015, Rupri Kaur's photo was removed from Instagram due to the stigmatized subject of menstruation. Users of Instagram have the ability and are encouraged by the platform, to report photos that they find inappropriate and Instagram will assess the reported photos and take them down if they violate the rules. Unlike, the Kaur post which revealed the censorship in the caption, the "menstruating while trans" post does not indicate that it was ever removed, reinstated or reposted due to censorship. This reveals changes within users of Instagram to be more accepting of photos like this and perhaps learned from the previous experience with Kaur's post. The trans photo, which is almost the same as the Kaur photo – fully clothed, blood showing through their pants, not violating any Instagram rules – now has a place on Instagram, whereas before it would have most likely been removed. What is interesting is that this photo is portraying a trans man menstruating, which is something that is even more stigmatized and even less discussed in society than a woman menstruating. Kaur's photo and censorship, played a role in Instagram being more accepting of menstruation posts. This progression has shown a change in the mutually shaped relationship between the stigma of menstruation in society and Instagram. The platform was influenced by the attention the censored photo received and they reinstated

Kaur's photo, now Instagram has come to be more accepting of menstruation photos by allowing the trans photo to stay intact.

There are two sides to the back and forth relationship between Instagram and society. One side is revealed with the "global solidarity" posts which attempt to use technology to change the stigmas within societies. The other side of this mutually shaped relationship is how Instagram is influenced by the way users posts. As Lievrouw & Livingstone (2010) argue "technological development and social practices are co-determining" as they each influence the other (p. 4). Instagram and the societal stigmas take part in shaping one another. If there are more people posting menstruation photos that challenge the stigmas, perhaps this will change how they are accepted within the platform. It can be speculated, through the evidence of the Kaur photo and the trans photo, that there has been a shift within the platform to be more open to menstruation posts and allow them a space to express their challenges to the stigma.

5.5 Summary of Analysis

Through the analysis of the themes and sub-themes it was revealed that there are many different ways that menstruation is presented on Instagram. Some of these are attempting to challenge the stigma of menstruation in society by posting open and positive discussions (*Empowerment*, "women supporting other women", "men/allies" and *Normalizing*), while others present more overt challenges to the stigma with *Resistance*. There are presentations which provide information not address in or attempt to contradict advertisements (*Women's Health* and *Eco-Friendly*). There are also others ways that reinforce the stigmas and continue to present in a normative and standard way (*Marketing*, *Normative/Standard*) which can often be negative or stereotypical. However, these themes are nonetheless discussing menstruation and therefore breaking the stigma of silence. It can be concluded that there are different ways to challenge the

stigmas of menstruation, moreover there are ways which perpetuate some of the stigmas which surround menstruation. Through the sub-themes of *Solidarity*, “global solidarity” and “trans support” it can be determined that there is a relationship between the stigma that exists in society and what people are posting on Instagram. In other words, the menstruation taboo and Instagram have a mutually shaped relationship.

Through the results of this analysis, it is revealed that Instagram can offer a space that allows different presentations of menstruation that are challenging to the expectations and stigmas which contribute to oppressive structures in society. Through diverse groups of individuals, collective identities are forming in order to resist the normative assumptions of menstruation in society. The ways in which people are discussing menstruation on Instagram could contribute to the overall discourse of menstruation and aid in eradicating some of the associated stigmas, due to the mutually shaped relationship that society and technology have.

Chapter 6: Conclusions, Limitations and Further Research

An interview on CBC radio with Aimee Morrison, an associate professor in the English Language and Literature department at the University of Waterloo, explored how people are beginning to move away from posting “perfect” photos on social media. Instead they are presenting themselves in a more authentic, vulnerable way (CBC Radio, 2018). People are posting photos showing their acne, body fat rolls and taking selfies while crying, they are also being intimate about periods, colostomy bags, and mastectomy scarring. Morrison discusses why people might be sharing such private moments to a public audience and suggests the process means that there is a community that is built around trust and openness. One particular moment of this interview that really connected to this thesis and what is going on with menstruation on Instagram is when Morrison stated that sharing these personal, vulnerable photos with the public is a statement that says “I do not think that these parts of myself ought to be secret because the secrecy of it sort of is undergirded by a sense of normative shame. It’s a different type of intimacy for a different type of purpose” (CBC Radio, 2018). I believe that this speaks directly to the topic of presenting menstruation on Instagram as it is something that has been socialized to be kept secret and now people are sharing these photos to say that it does not have to be hidden anymore and it can be talked about openly in a public way. These menstruation moments are being broadcasted publicly through Instagram to combat the normative shame that is associated with menstruation.

Instagram is a “visual” space where the communication with others is mainly through photos that are shared on public and private profiles (Locatelli, 2017, p. 3). Due to people sharing personal photos on this public space, Instagram cultivates a relationship between the public and private spheres (Locatelli, 2017, p. 3). People can use this space to be open and

vulnerable with their followers and other users of the app, creating personal content and broadcasting it in a public manner. As users post personal content, the app must maintain the space by determining what content should be allowed and what is considered inappropriate. Previously (in 2015), the Instagram guidelines were vague as the section related to the body only suggested that users keep their clothes on and be “respectful toward others”, which does not provide much information about what specifically is disallowed on the app (Locatelli, 2017, p. 3). During this time, some users were sharing images of breastfeeding and were experiencing the removal of their photos as other users considered them to be in violation of the guidelines and thus were reporting them. As previously mentioned, Instagram relies on its users to report content that they find inappropriate, this content is then examined by moderators who determine if the post should be removed from the platform (West, 2017, p. 28). Due to the vagueness of the previous guidelines and the moderators using their own judgements to determine if a photo should be allowed or disallowed, content that people were unsure of, such as breastfeeding photos, would be removed. One such photo was a post shared by a maternity photographer Heather Bays who experienced the entire shut down of her profile due to a negative comment left on a photo of her breastfeeding her daughter (Locatelli, 2017, p. 3; West, 2017, p. 33). Bays used another social media platform, Facebook, to express her disapproval of how the app handled the photo she shared, this received a lot of attention and solidarity from others posting their own breastfeeding photos in protest (West, 2017, p. 33). After the controversy with the image and the attention it gained, Instagram reinstated Bays profile and the photo. The platform also changed their guidelines shortly after this protest around the censorship of breastfeeding photos, they are now more explicit in their guidelines stating that they allow breastfeeding photos as well as mastectomy scars but still explain that nudity is not allowed (Instagram Guidelines, 2018).

Instagram wants to maintain a platform in which they prevent harmful content from being circulated, at the same time their rules also experience being “pushed beyond the limit by the users who desire to express themselves freely” as seen with the breastfeeding photos (Locatelli, 2017, p. 3). This example demonstrates how the platform is able to change with the influence of its users and societal and cultural beliefs. This also shows the mutually shaped relationship that Instagram and society share, as they influence and alter each other. The breastfeeding photos gained attention and demonstrated that the content was not inappropriate and should be allowed in this space, Instagram then changed their guidelines to be more specific and allow these types of photos. There was a back and forth interaction between Instagram and the shared beliefs that users had about breastfeeding photos. Breastfeeding in public is something that still carries some stigma in society. It is something that people believe should be done in private, which is why when these photos were posted in a public space they were reported and were censored by the moderators. Once Bays photo sparked controversy and protests of solidarity, Instagram decided to revamp their guidelines and allow these types of photos, which shows how the app was influenced by society. It also demonstrates how a collective identity was formed as many people shared their breastfeeding posts in order to enact change. As previously discussed, a similar situation arose with the censorship of Kaur’s menstruation photo; it sparked controversy and ended with Instagram reinstating the photo. Unlike the reaction to Bays photo, there has yet to be any concrete changes to the guidelines to specify that they allow menstruation photos in this space. Although, with the example of the “bleeding while trans” post discussed in the analysis as well as other data collected for this research, it appears that the community of Instagram is more accepting of these photos than they have been in the past. More photos of menstruation appear to stay on the app and there is less negativity that surrounds these photos. Since there still has not

been a change to the guidelines about menstruation, this indicates that it is arguably more of a stigmatized subject than breastfeeding. People are accustomed to breastfeeding in private spaces, but when it becomes public it is less accepted, in contrast menstruation is something that people rarely want to see due to the socialized beliefs that it is dirty and gross and should be kept hidden. If people continue to present menstruation in different ways, there may be changes to the guidelines due to the mutually shaped relationship between technology and society and the previous success that the breastfeeding photos offered.

The significance of this research was to show that Instagram users are attempting to lessen the shame that women and other menstruators have internalized about their bodies due to the stigma that surrounds menstruation. From a feminist perspective, menstruation is an important part of women's health and reproduction. Many jobs or activities associated with women are undervalued in society. Therefore, just as childcare (including breastfeeding) and housework are undervalued, so is reproduction. Removing the shame associated with menstruation is an attempt to give it some value within the process of reproduction, while also recognizing that it is a normal but nonetheless important part of people's lives.

This thesis explored the different presentations of menstruation that were found on Instagram. Even though menstruation content has been censored in the past, there continues to be instances of resistance to the taboo on the platform. Through a qualitative content analysis there were a number of ways in which the stigmas surrounding menstruation were being challenged. The themes of *Empowerment*, sub-themes of *Solidarity* and *Normalizing* revealed that people are posting menstruation in open and positive ways which challenge normative menstruation discourse. They bring attention to the societal menstrual taboo and attempt to bring it away from the secrecy in order to promote a normal and open discourse. The theme of *Resistance* reveal that

there are menstrual activists on the platform displaying overt challenges to the menstruation stigmas. *Women's Health* and *Eco-Friendly* themes presented information that is not addressed in advertisements which challenges those normative representations. In contrast, there were also some themes that continued to present menstruation in the way that it is often seen in the media, which relies on negative stereotypes. Some of the *Marketing* posts displayed this, along with the theme of *Presenting Menstruation in a Normative/Standard Way*. Although these posts are reinforcing some of the stigmas and often perpetuate the normative assumptions, they are nonetheless discussing menstruation which is breaking the silence and secrecy. Through the sub-themes of *Solidarity*, “global solidarity” and “trans support” the mutually shaped relationship between the stigma that exists in society and what people are posting on Instagram was revealed. Through diverse groups of individuals, collective identities are forming in order to resist the normative assumptions of menstruation in society. These themes all offer a different presentation of menstruation that can be challenging to the existing stigmas. They demonstrate that Instagram allows for a space for activism and challenging societal stigmas, as well as presenting menstruation in a normative way. Although there has been issues with censorship in the past, with the results of this research it appears that the acceptance of menstruation has grown on Instagram and the community is allowing more challenging and normalizing views to be posted.

There are always limitations and challenges that come along with any research. In particular, using an online social media platform can have its problems as these spaces are constantly in flux and changing quickly to adapt to societal trends. Instagram offers other features that were not able to be explored as they were beyond the scope of this thesis. Each profile has the ability to share a temporary “story” with their followers which can only be viewed for 24-hours unless the user highlights the story to allow unlimited access. As these stories

function differently than posts on a user's feed, they provide another space where menstruation could be explored and presented differently than in the regular posts. Another feature which was not investigated as it was beyond the scope of the current research, was the comment section of the posts collected. The comments could provide useful information about how people are interacting with each other and the posts on Instagram, although many of the comments on the photos that were collected were users attempting to bring the post to another user's attention by tagging them in a comment.

Another feature of Instagram is the ability to explore the hashtags, this aspect of the platform was used to gather part of the data, however there are other hashtags that could have benefited this research further. While collecting the data there were a few posts that appeared which presented the topic of menopause, it became apparent that this was something that could be explored on the platform. This issue was addressed in the analysis of the Women's Health theme explaining that the majority of the Instagram user demographic is 18-34 years old and those that may experience or discuss menopause (women above the age of 40) only take up 30% of the of the platform's users. This can explain why posts about menopause were less frequent in the hashtags explored in the current research. An Instagram search revealed that that hashtag #menopause contains 172, 218 posts as of November 2018, which shows that if this hashtag were to be explored it would be a rich source of data that could be investigated further. It would be important to examine the ways in which older menstruators present menopause and menstruation within the platform.

In order to understand if there has been a change on Instagram to be more accepting of menstruation posts since the controversy surrounding the Kaur post, there would need to be more research on how censorship and the function of reporting works, which are both difficult to

investigate. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, it would be interesting to dig deeper behind the function of moderators on Instagram. A qualitative study using interviews with past and present moderators would provide useful context, as this type of research would be helpful in understanding why menstruation photos have been censored in the past when it appears that they do not violate the guidelines. With the result of this thesis, it cannot be determined whether censorship of menstruation is still taking place, however it can be concluded that menstruation is being presented on the platform in many different ways. This thesis shows that within the space of Instagram there are presentations of menstruation that promote a discourse that is challenging and resisting to the societal stigmas that surround menstruation.

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