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The Menstruation Stigma

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This dissertation will explore, confer and confront issues surrounding menstruation as a woman and the importance of being able to liberate women through design, innovation, and education. The stigma of menstruation plays a large role in the development of not only accessibility but also transparency surrounding sexual health and education. An evaluation of sexual health education within schools and at home will aim to signify how a historical stigma surrounding the topic has been allowed to remain present within educational institutions and how this has significance in the role of promoting positive sexual health. By researching current marketing strategies for sanitary products and how these may impact women emotionally and physically, may challenge design to promote inclusivity, empowerment, and independence. Research collected will confront why women with disabilities have limitations regarding the use of sanitary products that are active on the current market, also discussing mental and physical implications caused by disabled women having sanitary products inserted for them by caregivers. Exploring historical implications will highlight how a subject can remain taboo in modern times, therefore, representing implications of a stigma.

The UK Government states that “you’re disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities” (Gov.co.uk, 2021). The term “disabled” used within this paper will be a reflection of the government’s definition. At the time this dissertation is written, the term “woman” will be used to refer to those who menstruate.

The evolution of menstrual products has been a rapid and radical journey, with the development of products commencing in ancient times. Research suggests that the Egyptians began to explore solutions for being hygienic during the menstrual cycle, with the use of plants and constituents available to them, thereafter, creating a plug-like artifact to absorb blood (MyMed.com, 2021). Native American women had what was deemed to be, a more natural methodology to staying sanitary whilst menstruating, by using Buffalo skin and moss to create a pad-like product. Many women would only experience a few periods in their life due to high rates of pregnancy and a short lifespan, suggesting that sanitary products would not have been developed for comfort, but possibly just for use (Baute. H, 2021). Interestingly, many of these sanitary products would be reused for long periods during the menstrual cycle, possibly suggesting that the concept of re-useable sanitary products is not modern and is an ancient methodology. In 1879, doctors' concern for infection whilst menstruating grew due to many women wearing the same sanitary product for many days. As a result of this, a sanitary belt that would have a washable pad secured to the groin area with pins would be promoted for hygiene resolutions (Farrell-Beck and Kidd, 1996).

Nevertheless, it wasn’t until the 1800’s that women would explore further options concerning the material choice for sanitary products. The sanitary pad many women use today was remarkably invented by a nurse in the First World War, who quickly took note that the bandages used on wounded soldiers absorbed blood very effectively (Culturenmuseams.co.uk, 2021). Therefore, suggested that women use said bandages whilst menstruating to stay hygienic. By 1888 the first sanitary pad was manufactured and retailed to women, nevertheless, being a taboo subject, women did not feel comfortable asking for this product. As a solution to this, retailers would encourage non-contact and anonymous purchasing of the product to eradicate embarrassment experienced by women (Femmeinternational.org, 2021). Collectively, this research suggests that the evolution of sanitary products has been resourceful and creative during the development process, however, one could identify the issue with menstruation being a taboo matter in current times, as well as previous years.

One could suggest that the stigma surrounding menstruation is due to a lack of education, this could be a result of poor education, resources, or knowledge. From the end of the 19th century, sex education was introduced to aid parents educated their children, this was provided to educated from a hygienic aspect. As a result of the second world war, sexually transmitted diseases were spreading vastly, this then causing a change of direction towards sexual education in schools (sexeducationforum.org.uk, 2021). The UK government has stated that sex education must be compulsory from the age of eleven, educating children on sexual health and reproductive matters, however, they do not promote sexual activity. The regulations surrounding sexual education in schools were updated in 2020, the last regulations were set in 2000, meaning that as the times are changing and children are being educated and influenced through social and digital means, the regulations must move with the times. However, parents and guardians can withdraw children from the education of sexual health and reproduction if desired (Gov.co.uk, 2021). However, even though sexual education was being taught in schools, many would argue that the subject was quickly taught and dismissed even quicker, resulting in the topic becoming taboo and a stigma is developed.

Menstruation education in schools can be considered problematic due to the lack of depth and understanding surrounding the subject. Through studies, (Lunettecup.com, 2021) identify that many young girls within schools have said that they feel embarrassed and awkward when discussing menstruation, especially during sexual education classes. The research provided suggests that the quality of sexual education in schools can be dependent on teachers and textbooks, therefore, indicating that a stigma towards the subject from an individual or an author can influence the quality of education given. By providing credited sexual education within schools and at home, young women and also men can understand and discuss how the female sexual reproductive organs work and any complications a woman may encounter regarding her sexual health. Endometriosis, for example, is one of the most common health conditions surrounding female sexual health, meaning that, without correct knowledge, females are at risk of being unable to identify when something is not right with them. Additionally, many have argued that young males should be included in the discussion of women's sexual health. Since 2017, sexual education has been compulsory in schools, however, discussions surrounding what topics should be discussed have risen (BBC, 2021), the regulations and curriculum surrounding sexual health will include the education and discussion of LGBT. By including all genders within the discussion, eradicates the discrimination caused by separating genders whilst discussing sexual health. (Therealperiodproject.com, 2021) highlights the issue that we are only able to beat the stigma of period shaming if every one of all genders is open and mindful of the topic. The importance of allowing a young person to ask questions, deepen their knowledge, and voice concerns, plays a key role in dispersing any stigma surrounding sexual health.

Sexual education within schools can be deemed as a negative experience with black and white knowledge of the subject. A recent article (Nast, 2021) discusses the experiences of young girls in school and highlights issues with their sexual health education provided by the educator. The article states that genders were separated during the sexual education classes, the young boys were taught the positives of puberty such as masturbation and sex, whilst the young girls were taught only consequences of being sexually active. Pregnancy is often taught within sexual education classes as a consequence of having sex, indicating that young girls would have a dampened view of sexual health. The article also states that the bare minimum was taught in a young girl's school, the only contraceptive method they were made aware of was condoms, through which they learned this was placing a condom on a banana, often told to do this by the female members of the class. Taught through a biological perspective, many young

people have been driven away from learning about important subjects within the topic of sexual health, such as consent and emotions that may be experienced during intimacy. In addition to this, (Education.vic.gov.au, 2021) discusses the importance of menstrual and sexual education within schools and at home. By creating a safe space to discuss said matters, positive menstrual health is promoted to young people.

A social stigma around menstruation is discussed worldwide, the lack of discussion and transparency surrounding the topic has flared the question of why menstruation is such a taboo subject. Dating back to biblical times, the term "niddah" would be used by those who are Jewish to describe a woman in her period. The term was taken from the Old Testament and shamed menstruating women, it labeled them as un-pure, and men were advised to keep their distance from their wives when menstruating (Verywellminded.com, 2021). The conception that women are dirty when on their periods has not changed throughout time, (Medium, 2021) educates us that the phrase "on the rag" originated in the 19th century. Using the term "rag" refers to the menstrual products used by women within the 19th century, the use of the phrase can be considered insulting due to the lack of respect towards women when this slang is used. Many slang terms are used within the 21st century to refer to women who are menstruating, the derogatory terms which lack respect are one of the driving forces which led to a stigma towards menstruating women. To avoid being discriminated against, women have turned to their code words for when they are menstruating, such as "Aunt Flo", by having these terms and avoiding the scientific and traditional terms regarding women and menstruation, it is a form of defense to avoid embarrassment and shame regarding the matter, thus a stigma is present. Suppressing the reality and nature behind the role of the sexual reproductive organs could be considered a detrimental road to discrimination and period poverty. Menstruation is not always as easy experience and many women face complications each month, therefore, the stigma surrounding periods and the lack of education on the subject, can leave many women feeling ashamed and embarrassed not only to talk about their periods but to discuss what their experiences with menstruation are and lack of confidence to reach out when they think something might be wrong.

With social media being a driving force to encourage change and a platform to highlight and share ideas, emotions and beliefs, many people have campaigned to end period taboos and stigmas. In 2019, Plan International campaigned to end menstrual stigmas by proposing a period emoji to be released. Since the development of technology, emojis have become muscle memory for many electronic device users, often used to express emotions. Research conducted by Plan International revealed that fifty-five thousand people supported the development of an emoji or series of emoji to normalise the discussion of periods (Plan International, 2019). The chosen emoji which was released to digital keyboards in 2019 was a blood drop in the colour red. The campaign promotes the discussion and transparency of menstruation by using something small yet powerful, as the emoji is fully accessible and quickly added to our digital vocabulary, it effortlessly speaks volumes by creating normality surrounding the conversation of the topic. The amplification of the normality of menstruation itself applied through a digital platform begs the question of why there isn't already an emoji that represents a natural bodily function for women. Controversially, Plan International did not only propose that there should be a single emoji that would represent menstruation but other emojis also such as underwear stained with period blood and menstrual products were suggested. Unicode Consortium is the leader of emoji development and overlooks all presented designs and suggestions, in fact only accepted the blood drop emoji presented by Plan International, no statement was released to confirm why other menstrual emojis were rejected. Plan international created a survey where participants would vote for the emoji they thought best represented and revolutionised the

taboo of menstruation, the period pants emoji won the vote. Sparking a wide debate online, many are questioning why the least crude emoji was selected to be developed and released onto digital keyboards, considering there are current emojis that are suggested to be cruder than Plan International's designs (The Guardian, 2021). Through the research conducted by Plan International it can suggest that due to the multi-use of the blood drop emoji, this could be a factor to why it has been selected and others rejected. One may argue that the selected emoji has not done the topic any justice due to the fact it can be used for multiple interpretations. The design of the menstrual emojis has opened the topic to discussion, suggesting that although not all designs were selected for development, the stigma was challenged just through the concept of menstrual emojis.

The stigma surrounding menstruation and female sexual health could be considered more intense when in correlation with being a disabled woman. Women face difficulties during menstruation in many areas, physically and mentally, however, this is amplified whilst being a disabled woman who menstruates. Designing to empower could be considered one of the industry's biggest motivators, however, it could be argued there is a lack of empowerment towards disabled women regarding menstruation. Menstruation as a woman is inevitable and is often deemed as an empowering transition from a girl to a woman. As a result of market research, there are currently no sanitary products available on the market specifically for women with physical and/or mental limitations. With the medical design industry rapidly growing, one could argue that there is a need for the discrimination within the sanitary product market to be eradicated, with the design of inclusive products to enhance independence for women who are disabled. One could also question why the medical industry is growing so significantly but could be deemed as neglecting disabled women who menstruate.

Being able to independently use sanitary products is often overlooked, however, 3 million disabled women in the United Kingdom face many challenges during the menstrual cycle each month, independently using sanitary products being one of them (Womensbudgetgroup.co.uk). The amount of independence a person may have could impact one's quality of life and mental health significantly. When highlighting the relationship between independence and disability, one may assume that life with a disability is having to be dependent on caregivers, however, the level of care given to someone with a disability depends on one's ability, independence, and attitude. Research conducted has stated that dependant on an individual's disability and limitations, physical or mental, the use of sanitary products may have psychological and physical strains and impact quality of life (Dillaway, Cross, Lysack and Schwartz, 2011). Therefore, suggesting that independence is just as unique as one's menstrual flow. Every woman's experience of the menstruation cycle is unique and often challenging, however, this is heightened as a disabled woman due to physical and mental limitations. Where an able-bodied woman would be able to easily take herself to the toilet and use a sanitary product effortlessly and independently once her menstruation cycle starts, the same experience would not be as simple for a woman with disabilities. For many individuals who are disabled, spontaneity is not always a privilege. A disabled person's level of care may vary, meaning that unless they are with their caregiver, they are unable to complete certain tasks, even if that means they have to wait for their caregiver to place, insert or change a sanitary product.

Many women within the disabled community have shared their experiences of having periods as a disabled woman, (Crippledscholar, 2021) states that due to physical limitations, the use of sanitary products currently on the market can come with challenges. Therefore, in solution to this, many women are creating homemade sanitary products during the menstruation cycle. Interestingly, disabled women who use wheelchairs have suggested that

due to being sat down for long periods, sanitary pads can become uncomfortable, and an odour is present. Further articles have stated that the application of sanitary products is also proven to be difficult, but not impossible (Yoppie.com, 2021), promoting unconventional methods of insertion. This research also suggests that due to the complications of using tampon applicators and menstrual cups, sanitary pads are the primary choice for many disabled women. A lack of choice for disabled women appears to be a common denominator whilst conducting research, suggesting that there is a need for greater opportunity within the sanitary product market.

Physical and mental restrictions that cause the individual to be dependent on the caregiver are not the sole issue of the lack of independence. Commonly told to women by many doctors, exercise is a great relief of period pain and can relax the muscles within the female reproductive system, however, if an individual is a wheelchair user, this isn't an option. As a result of this, the choice of pain relief would be medication due to lack of movement. Concerning this and previously touched upon, the said disabled individual may have to wait long periods for pain relief if their caregiver is not available. This may also be a challenge for disabled individuals who are mentally and emotionally limited, as restrictions to understanding the menstrual cycle would result in full reliance of a caregiver to administer pain relief, insert and remove sanitary products, possibly causing an emotional strain due to lack of understanding and the intrusive nature of the subject. A disabled woman who is mentally challenged and does not understand the purpose of sanitary products or how her body functions, would arguably be unable to give consent for the caregiver to use intrusive sanitary products, meaning that multiple factors are implementing the choice of sanitary products used (Albanese and Hopper, 2007).

Sanitary products currently on the market are not adapted to the lifestyle and limitations of many disabled women, the lack of consideration within the design means that women are often struggling with the comfort of said products. For example, a wheelchair user would be sat down for the majority of the day, therefore the placement of the product would be uncomfortable and noticeable. If a disabled woman decided that she wanted to use a tampon rather than a pad, the caregiver would have to change the product every three to four hours, meaning that if the disabled woman did not have full-time care, they would be unable to change the product due to risk of toxic shock syndrome. Therefore, by default, a sanitary pad would be the only suitable product available. Having a lack of secondary support multiple times, a day may encourage disabled women to take matters into their own hands. If the said woman was not comfortable with the caregiver inserting or placing the sanitary products due to the intrusive nature, taking inspiration from historical methods, the said disabled women may then resort to unsafe and unhygienic methods. Being dependant on a caregiver whilst menstruating is a common occurrence for those who are physically and/or mentally limited, being unable to independently complete personal hygiene tasks are suggested to have a psychological strain on an individual (Kuscholarworks.ku.edu, 2021), one's quality of life may be challenged due to being unable to complete said tasks. Within research conducted, women have stated that due to being unable to manage their menstrual cycle themselves, they are led to emotions such as embarrassment and feel they are battling a lack of dignity (Blake. M, 2021). Reassuringly, experiencing a menstrual flow each month can remind an individual that regardless of their disability or limitations, they are still a woman (Rodgers, 2004).

Through the means of social media, branding, and marketing, the stigmatization of female sexual health and menstruation is being shifted. Many adverts on the television advertising period products often use a more discreet approach to highlight the benefits of the period product, such as a different colour liquid to represent the period itself. Unrealistic menstrual adverts create a stigma as periods are often advertised as a burden and encourage women to be

discreet about when they are on their periods. Promoting women to be discreet whilst menstruating can cause emotions such as embarrassment and shame to come to the surface, whereas the topic of menstruation should be spoken about openly and should not encourage women to hide a natural bodily function. Unrealistic adverts may also have an effect on young females, tv advertising of products, not just sanitary products, can take a toll on young viewers and can create a false sense of education from the advertisements. Brands that use certain scenarios to cause the viewer to feel emotions such as embarrassment if such a scenario would happen to them, can cause young viewers to take the advice and message from the advert to avoid said scenario (Raising Children Network, 2021). By using adverts to promote the sale of sanitary products, certain brands may use the scenario of women in white playing sport, ensuring the viewer that you can trust the said product. Although it is a positive scenario and comforts women to put their trust in said product, said adverts can be deemed as unrealistic and do not advertise actual scenarios many women face every month, such as suffering from PMS or extreme discomfort and cramps. By being open about the realistic occurrences for many women each month, the topic of menstruation and difficulties surrounding menstruation and women's sexual health is enlightened. As a digital-driven society, we rely on the power and reassurance of adverts to give us the best possible products that fit our needs, so when sanitary product brands over-feminise the menstrual cycle and create a perception that having a period is restrictive and controlling, is damaging and can encourage the stigma surrounding menstruation.

However, a handful of sanitary product companies are tackling the period stigma through their advertisement. Period underwear brand Thinx promoted their products with a biologically accurate representation of a woman menstruating on one of their adverts, promoting the normality of the subject. Sanitary product brand Modibodi took inspiration from the direct advert and decided to support the topic through their adverts and campaigns. In 2019, Modibodi, designed a documentary to encourage transparency whilst discussing the topic of female sexual health and menstruation, the campaign "MENstruation" discussed what it would be like if men menstruated. The documentary was rejected by many TV networks due to simply displaying a tampon string, not only did Modibodi get rejected by TV networks, but they also had several posts banned by Facebook for displaying "blood-stained" sheets in one of their advertisements (Fast Company, 2021). Many social media users commented on the use of blood within TV shows and how that is accepted, but when blood was used to represent a natural bodily function for females, it was rejected. Although both companies faced rejection and were dismissed, the conversation online grew around the topic of normalising the direct and biologically correct visualisation of menstruation and female sexual health within an advertisement. In most recent cases, Tampax released an advert within the UK and Ireland which received numerous complaints. The advert which aired has presenter answer questions about tampons and tampon use. The chat-show presenter in the advert was asked by an audience member if you should feel your tampon after insertion, the chat show host replied "You shouldn't. It might mean your tampon isn't in far enough. You've gotta get em up there, girls." (Good To Know, 2021). The advert was quickly banned in Ireland after it received complaints suggesting that it was a sexual advert and deemed unsuitable for young viewers. Controversially, the advert gives accurate and educational advice to viewers who menstruate without them having to ask the question. The advert was taken down to due causing widespread offence, however, there were only eighty complaints made about this advert. Due to this, many may question when adverts addressing menstruation for what it is and promoting being open about the topic will stop being banned. Through innovation and transparency from sanitary product companies, the stigma surrounding menstruation and female sexual health is being

challenged and has encouraged females all over the world to aid the shift towards a new contemporary outlook on the subject.

Whilst sanitary product advertisement is on the path to breaking the stigma, designers could be encouraged to follow suit with the designing of sanitary product packaging. Current sanitary product packaging is dominated by the use of over feminised design, including things such as pearls, butterflies, and the colour pink. The colour red is often avoided on the packaging of sanitary products, but one may question why. If the colour red was used within sanitary product packaging not only would the colour signify the representation of blood, but it would also fuel the discussion as to why the colour has not been used on said packaging before. Mooncup has been deemed one of the most progressive sanitary products, first being seen on shelves in 2002, the Mooncup was the first of its kind when designed as a medical-grade silicone menstrual cup. Mooncup was one of the first companies to shy away from traditional sanitary product packaging by using a neutral colour palette and steering away from the over-feminisation of the packaging. In addition to this, the leading sustainable sanitary product brand Totum shook the market with its controversially bold and energetic packaging (Designweek.co.uk, 2021). The packaging represented something to be proud of and encouraged the excitement of purchasing the product. A simple change in the colour scheme and graphics of the packaging of the product challenges the period stigma by dominating and directing the period discussion.

From the research gathered within this dissertation, one can conclude that the stigma surrounding menstruation and female sexual health is concurrent and creating controversy through the means of social media, and the promotion of the discussion of topics surrounding sexual health and menstruation is dominated through a generational shift. Historical research has suggested that the period stigma was formed from a lack of education and a sense of ignorance towards female sexual health and menstruation. The myths and slag used towards women who menstruate have been a milestone in allowing there to be stigmatization towards women's bodily functions, the research conducted has not only supported the ideology that the stigma surrounding menstruation in the twenty-first century, has been allowed to thrive due to a lack of education on how damaging the slag and myths surrounding the stigma are towards women.

From an educational perspective one may conclude that historically, sexual education in schools has been unsupportive of the liberation towards women. Sexual health and menstruation education must be re-evaluated within schools to diminish the discrimination and taboo surrounding sexual health, including all genders within the education of said topic with added transparency can be beneficial to a new sense of openness regarding the topic. Educational institutes should not only be discussing the biological aspect of sexual health and menstruation but should also challenge the discussion of realistic issues one may face when sexually active or menstruating. By comforting those within education that the discussion of the topic is healthy and can diminish any concerns or taboos, this could also be considered as healthy and allows the young adult to enter the world of sexual health and menstruation comfortably and safely. One can conclude from the information provided regarding the education of sexual education within schools that the separation of genders whilst being taught about sexual and menstrual health has allowed a stigma to form based upon the assumption that males do not need to be educated on the matter and that it is a female-only issue, therefore, pushing women to feel as if they must hide their menstrual issues.

In addition to this, the information provided can allow one to conclude that not only is there a lack of support of able-bodied women regarding sexual health and menstruation, disabled

women are not only facing the same issues but the stigma they may face is heightened due to physical and mental challenges outside of menstruation. One could suggest that through education within schools, young adults should also be educated on how disabled women face the same biological occurrences as they do, but with added pressure and struggles. The education of this matter within schools and at home may open the discussion to how designers and individuals within society can support said, disabled women. Through the innovation of products and platforms within the social media realm, the adaption of products and transparency of lifestyle variations can aid the eradication of development of menstrual stigma within the disabled community and aid not only able-bodied women but all women.

One may conclude from evidence and case studies provided that there is a significance towards the branding, marketing, and advertising of menstrual products regarding creating an environment for the period stigma to thrive. The importance of using social media and other digital means to shift the period stigma has been highlighted with evidence provided, the use of imagery, colour, and scenarios within advertisements and packaging of period products can influence one's perspective on the matter and therefore cause a sense of false education and expectations. With the promotion of directness towards the topic of sexual health and menstruation, the stigma surrounding the topic will continue to be challenged and forced to be discussed. With the direction period product advertisement and branding are heading, the normalisation of menstrual conversation is going to be greater. To conclude, through the means of contemporary branding and advertisement, the stigmatization of menstruation is beginning to run parallel to the twenty-first century, creating a great direction to the eradication of sexual health and menstrual stigma.

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