



Digital Self-Representation and Resistance: Memes on Menstruation by Women on Instagram Pages

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Abstract

The paper examines how women utilize social media to share their menstrual experiences, dispelling misunderstandings and confronting stereotypes while also providing a platform for self-representation, particularly on Instagram profiles. Select menstruation-related memes and postings have been employed as primary texts. The paper is structured into three sections: the first examines how women's experiences have been portrayed through memes before and during their menstrual cycles; the second looks at how festival messages have been used to challenge stereotypes and honour womanhood; and the third highlights the importance of "everyday" for women in projecting their real experiences and bringing to light the ordinary life events that are frequently disregarded or underestimated. The digital visual methods have been used to analyse the choice of content creation, the consumers, ideas of representation, for studying pattern of resistance by challenging stereotypes and the use of literary tools like humour, pun, or visual graphics with a focus on menstrual activism.

Keywords: Menstruation, Memes, Instagram, Social Media Analytics, Digital Visual Methods

Introduction

Social media and online campaigns have stimulated the discussion or awareness about menstruation widely across the globe. It is interesting to note that menstruation and menstrual products were made visible to the public in 1990s Indian TV advertisements for sanitary napkins, however this portrayal was not free from the commercial and capitalist goal of marketing the products. These advertisements have a significant role in fostering new assumptions

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and idealizing the menstrual experience for women. The introduction of social media gave women of all classes and castes the opportunity to take part in the creation of intellectual material and dissemination of knowledge about menstruation. They could freely communicate their personal experiences in their own unique style without being constrained by the unrealistic and idealized empowerment programs that the advertising businesses were offering. Even women with little education watch videos or look at visual graphics on social media pertaining menstruation that appeal to them. This paper examines the ways in which women, particularly on Instagram pages, used social media to share their experiences.

This study employs menstruation-related memes and postings as primary texts to analyse how women engage with their readers or viewers. The idea of 'text' is expansive in its locale. Eileen Gardiner and Ronald G Musto explain that "the notions of 'text' have changed radically under the impact of the linguistic and other critical turns" (Gardiner and Musto 17). They explain that even though digital humanities have allowed us to see the text in many new ways, the process of digitization has led the text, that was conventionally considered as an autonomous subject, to change from being a fixed object or topic of study to more of a fluid process (Gardiner and Musto 17). Three criteria were used to choose the subjects for this study: first, graphics depicting the experiences of women before and during their periods; second, the ways in which festival messages have been utilized to shatter stereotypes and celebrate womanhood by the Instagram users on their pages dedicated to periods; and third, the memes projecting the importance of "everyday" for women in projecting their real-life experiences and highlighting experiences of everyday life that are frequently disregarded or taken for granted.

This paper employs mixed digital research methods particularly social media analytics and digital visual methods, which includes describing the memes' content in relation to its intended purpose—that is, representing women's menstrual experiences. With an emphasis on menstruation activism, these techniques are utilized to analyse the choices made about content creation, customers, representational concepts, patterns of resistance by questioning stereotypes, and the use of literary devices like puns, humour, and

visual graphics. The nature of this research is qualitative. Using the social media analytics research approach, researchers can choose, record, extract, and analyse social media site data to aid in their findings and conclusions. The memes have been chosen based on the criteria mentioned above, and they have been examined in terms of the graphics employed, the colour scheme, the content analysis, and the use of language and other literary devices.

Influence of TV Advertisements Regarding Menstrual Pads

Despite the fact that advertisements played an important role in highlighting menstruation, they failed tremendously in normalising menstruation. In this context, Kissling explains how advertisements were an addition to the prevalent taboos regarding “dirtiness” or impurity itself:

Given that advertising for menstrual products is one of the few visible, public discourses about menstruation, it is especially important to examine messages about menstruation in mass-market ads. These texts implicitly and explicitly emphasize its dirtiness and/or its secrecy, and thus contribute to the ongoing cultural construction of women as Other. (9)

Menstrual blood was viewed as disgusting and unworthy of being projected on a public screen, as evidenced by the way it was portrayed as a blue liquid. The makers of the advertising thought it was wrong to use crimson for menstrual blood even though it was so far off from normalcy. Furthermore, the notions of forced emancipation and empowerment in these commercials resulted in the total lack of exposure surrounding the discomfort and pain certain women bear throughout their periods.

Moreover, the menstrual pads were proposed as a solution to the boundaries of women as if they were for medicinal use. Although menstrual pads were just a straightforward substitute for the clothing women used during their periods, this caused a significant shift in women's lifestyles. Rostvik states that:

in Scandinavia, knitted pads were the norm until the entry of disposable pads in the early twentieth century. This marked a major shift from the semi-public creation and washing of menstrual technologies at home (and school) to a consumer habit largely kept private through discreet packaging practices and code words while shopping alone. (Rostvik 235)

Similarly, in India many women used old rags or clothes as menstrual pads. In addition to bringing about a significant change in women's lifestyles, the introduction of pads contributed to the growing amount of garbage that disposable pads were producing. *Economics Times* reported that: "Approximately 121 million Indian women use sanitary napkins, resulting in 12.3 billion napkins and 1,13,000 tons of waste annually. The scarcity of incinerators and the inadequacy of small-scale incinerators contribute to the problem" ("Waste Pickers"). The companies that manufactured menstruation pads and promoted them did not assume accountability for disposing of the waste.

Moreover, the language used in the TV commercials regarding menstruation has been very problematic. The commercials first began with Whisper, a product by Proctor and Gamble Co. in the early 1990's. Many of these commercials stigmatised the periods as something to be hidden; something bothering and limiting women's life. The advertising overstated and exaggerated the situation, still there was some truth to it. The second part of the commercials promised to liberate the teenagers during periods, of their limitations with the use of menstrual pads. The solution to all problems was sort through the use of these pads which was a false claim and it overlooked the real challenges being faced by women. The content of such commercials underwent transformation with time. Most of them have come forward as awareness projects. Some commercials catered towards breaking stereotypes such as 'she touched the pickle' ("Whisper") where, in stark contrast to taboo (that if menstruating women touch the pickle, the pickle rots), the older women celebrate a young girl having touched the pickle during her periods. Lutfun Nahar Poly et al. study how the TV advertisements increased awareness about the menstrual pads across the world in the late

nineteenth century. They present a comparative analysis of various countries and the awareness about using pads generated through the advertisements as follows:

Whereas, sanitary pads were used only by 7-10 percent of females out of a total 591 million females in India. But the other nations of the East are in better situation where the use of sanitary napkins in Singapore and Japan is 100%. In Malaysia and China the percentage of using sanitary napkins are 88 percent and 64 percent respectively. After the World War II, women became very aware of using sanitary napkins through TV Advertisement to manage their hygiene and promoted themselves to work. Egyptian adolescents get their mothers as the prime sources of information on menstruation, followed by mass media which affect their knowledge and attitude. (Poly et al. 39)

Television advertisements remained confined to menstruation pads despite the shift in content; for example, there are no advertisements in India for tampons, menstrual cups, or other products. Therefore, some of these businesses' awareness campaigns are still somewhat superficial, and their strategies for empowering women and breaking social taboos seem disorganized and haphazard—perfectly appropriate given the commercial objectives of selling their products.

TV Advertisements vis a vis Social Media

In contrast to the regulated television commercials, women have access to a more expansive, improved forum to discuss menstrual-related issues owing to new media and its accompanying social media platforms. Social media ensured a platform for the stakeholders to participate more freely and actively, while the advertisers would control information and content to reach consumers. For the women, who could now participate voluntarily in the virtual arena without fear of exposure or offending their families, this, in a sense, created a space for both resistance and representation. Social media also tends to offer a personal space to the participants. The content on

social media has been open to debate and discussion. However, it may invite huge criticism that may lead to trolling and bullying. In this context Jacqueline Kamei explains:

Social media can be capable of advancing the feminist movement by bringing greater visibility to women's rights issues, facilitating effective communication, aiding people in organizing, educating people on women's history and current events, and inspiring people to become activists in the fight for greater equality. Yet social media can also potentially undermine the movement through online harassment and disinformation, constant self-comparisons and body image issues driven by societal beauty standards, and weakened critical thinking. (Kamei)

Furthermore, the public controls the content; in particular, stakeholders engage in the decision-making process on the content provided on their feeds. These accounts may be first hand or may have been selected by women who employ creative means to draw attention to issues that are important to them.

Memes on Menstruation: Content Analysis

“Chronicles of Womenia”: Before Periods and On Periods

Most of the ideas regarding periods that were shared with the intention of increasing awareness can be attributed to the distinctive way the content is presented. In addition to posts about biological information or serious content on periods, sometimes humour has been also used in many ways to challenge preconceptions or to generate knowledge regarding the personal experiences of women during their periods, such as emotions, bloating of the body, discomfort, etcetera. Interesting applications of animation, doodling, and interactive graphics have been made; these are helpful in a variety of contexts. An analysis of memes and posts on menstruation-themed Instagram account reveals that women have created content in creative and innovative ways.

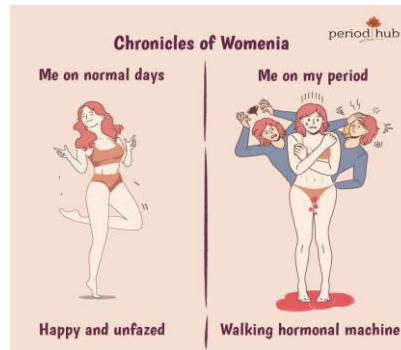


Fig. 1: "I'm a happy person, but on my periods, I feel like a hormonal machine." [@Periodhub]

Some memes use the term "before periods and on periods" to divide time frames, highlighting the difference between apparent normalcy and abnormality in women's lives. This theme is used by the #periodhub meme series "Chronicles of Womenia" to highlight the differences between women's lives before and during their periods. Two columns comprise the arrangement of the memes. In one meme, for example, the first column's title said, "Me on normal days: Happy and unfazed," and the second column's caption said, "Me on my period: Walking hormonal machine." In the first column, the woman is dancing and looks happy and light; in the second, however, she is jumbled and has two other versions of herself peeking out of her back. The other two pictures also show signs of discomfort, including tension, worry, and other facial expressions. In a pool of blood, the woman lies unmoving, her arms folded over her breasts. An orange bikini and panty are worn by the main image, while a grey top covers the alter images. The attention of readers or viewers is captured by the employment of specific colours. Grey is often associated with sadness and suffering, while saffron is a vivid colour that is sometimes also linked to spirituality. The woman's outfit of panty and a bikini may discourage the traditional readers to link the colour to spirituality. Though she might experience mood swings and the rush of hormones during her period, the lady is shown in the vibrant shade of saffron as happier, more satisfied, and more in tune with herself, maybe spiritually collected and satisfied than she would

actually be during that time. The woman, however, is the same regardless of the situation; her physical and spiritual characteristics do not differ from one another whether before or during periods. The after images fade away with time. The meme's light hearted tone draws attention to the "not so visible" or commonly ignored feelings that women experience during their periods, thereby increasing public awareness of these experiences. Additionally, by using the first-person pronoun "Me" in the meme, the woman herself shares her experience, adding a personal touch ("I'm a happy person").

Using Indian Festivals and Celebrating Specific Days for Normalising Menstruation

Memes on menstruation have been thoughtfully selected to align with Indian holidays. For instance, the #periodhub Instagram feed extended wishes for Holi and Dussehra by referencing women and menstruation in the festival's messaging. They shared a meme on Holi that read, "Happy Holi, there's a shade of red for every woman." They wrote: "Period Hub wishes everyone a very happy Holi. May this Holi be filled with colours of comfort, wellness, health and happiness" ("Period Hub wishes everyone. . .").

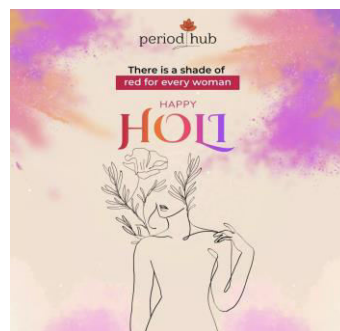


Fig. 2: "Period Hub wishes everyone a very happy Holi. May this Holi be filled with colours of comfort, wellness, health and happiness." [@Periodhub]

Similar to this, the celebration of good triumphing over evil on Dussehra is utilized to refute myths from the past and alter people's

perspectives. The meme reads: “We’re celebrating the victory of Good over evil this Dusshera, so let’s also take a moment to defeat the ancient mythology that has poisoned our minds against periods” (“Let’s bust these awkward periods myths. . .”).



Fig. 3: “Let’s bust these awkward periods myths and celebrate menstruation as it empowers us to be in tune with our health and body.” [@ Periodhub]

Similarly, the Yoga Day page featured a video showing a position that helps reduce pain during menstruation (“Yoga is the ultimate. . .”). On Mother's Day, women were also praised for being the first teachers and for "teaching us how to deal with the world and periods too" (“Mothers are not just. . .”).

Depicting Everyday

Several memes depict the common everyday experiences of women, such as how different it feels to poop on a regular day than during a period, as though "it's firework." (“When You're on Your Period . . .”); another meme suggests “how periods can make great opportunities turn into great efforts” (“We've all been there.”). The discomfort that women may experience with their periods, skin issues, exhaustion, bloating, exercise, etc. are all different concerns covered in this series. The thoughtfully selected content sort of runs counter to the idealized, made-up, pseudo-liberating experiences that the TV adverts claim to provide.

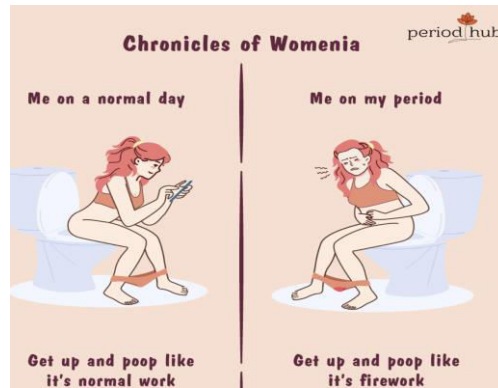


Fig. 4: “When You’re on Your Period, Life Is Like Fireworks, and poop is your morning glory.” [@Periodhub]

Social media provides a participatory space where women may choose to share and post what interests them and highlight the often-ignored, and so-called ‘mundane’ experiences of their everyday life. Through the use of participatory methods, women’s everyday lives—which are typically taken for granted—have gained significance and meaning, leading to a shift in viewpoint. Posting on social media, participating in online movements or even engaging as readers or viewers of content, has led to a goal amongst women to free themselves from the authority of patriarchal power and work towards cultural democracy within their private spaces.

Juncker and Balling explain how the developments in digital cultures have impacted everyday:

With the latest developments in mediatization and digitization of culture, we are experiencing a participation turn, . . . Our everyday expressive life is ruled by individual interests. The different interests gather and separate us as participants, audiences, readers, listeners, and viewers. Some prefer popular art forms while others choose high culture. We each choose particular activities and experiences because

they make a difference to us—they contribute value and meaning to our everyday lives. (1-3)

For example, a woman who is menstruating may require more time to complete tasks that she finds simple and straightforward otherwise, but when on periods she may slow down as a result. A meme shared on #Menstrupedia page depicts the fight that women may face for sticking a menstrual pad correctly. An animated image of a woman, dressed in a t-shirt and a panty is watching herself in the mirror. The wings of the pad are hanging out. The caption on the meme reads “When you’ve already put on the pad like 5 times and it’s still more forwards than backwards and it doesn’t even stick anymore” (“Getting a pad to stick . . .”).



Fig. 5: “Getting a pad to stick correctly is a task in itself. Do you agree?” [@Menstrupedia].

Another example of how women's monthly struggles, which play a significant role in their daily lives but are often overlooked, are depicted is in a meme that shows a woman clutching a blood-stained, laced underwear. "RIP to my cute panties I lost during my periods," is the meme's caption. Despite its seeming insignificance, it plays a crucial role in the lives of women (“I have lost count!”).

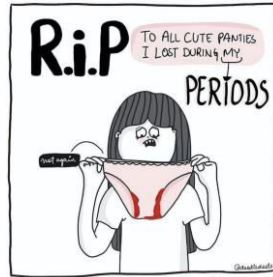


Fig. 6: "I have lost count! How many cute panties have you lost to [#periods](#)?" [[@Menstrupedia](#)].

The changes in the body have also been depicted precisely as to how women feel. A meme posted by [#Planetprudence](#) portrays two images of a woman. The physical changes have also been accurately portrayed to reflect the emotions of women. A meme that was shared by [#Planetprudence](#) shows two different pictures of women. A woman with her breasts as they seem is shown in the first image, while a depiction of enormous and enlarged breasts that depicts how they feel during menstruation is shown in the second. "Period: How my boobs look; How they feel" is the caption ("Sincerely: your frikking period, who else??[#periods](#)"). Memes on social media have also been shared covering a wide range of subjects of everyday life, such as the discomfort that women may experience during their periods, skin issues, exhaustion, bloating, exercise, and other difficulties.

Conclusion

The study of memes on menstruation is not limited to the subjects taken for this study. This study is important because it sheds light on how women on digital platforms have carved out a space for themselves and how they create and interpret visual texts. As a result, they are able to disentangle societal and political agendas through the representation of menstruation. Additionally, they subvert patriarchal views by substituting self-portraits for them. Simultaneously, global conversation or awareness about menstruation has been sparked by social media and digital humanities. Although the rate of content

development appears to have increased, there is still room for improvement because there is not much constructive dialogue regarding menstruation.

Acknowledgement

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