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More Than Just Periods:

Understanding the role of communication and advertising in shaping and challenging menstrual
stigmas in Urban India

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ABSTRACT

This thesis critically analyzes the stigmatization of menstrual experiences by identifying societal factors, communication channels, and communication norms, with a focus on understanding the power and effects of advertising narratives on menstrual stigmas. This thesis aims at recognizing the importance of menstrual justice, by framing menstrual experiences as human rights. This helps us recognize menstrual injustices that cause discrimination and concealment through societal factors and their communication. This research project engages with societal factors like gender, class, culture, religious background age that contribute to shaping stigmas within menstrual experiences. By engaging with these societal factors, this study focuses on understanding how these communication norms shape menstrual stigmas by identifying them.

The research was designed around 10 interviews of Indian Urban Class Women, as this aligned with accessibility to participants by virtue of my position.

The interview consisted of open-ended questions exploring menstrual stigmas to identify societal factors. This approach helped identify how menstrual stigmas are seen in practices of religion, caste, class, and so on. These practices are connected through attitudes of patriarchal norms. This attitude is also reflected and reinforced in communication norms through various channels. Through the interviews, we also identify that media narratives such as advertising hold the power to reflect and dictate menstrual stigmas and it mostly does it through concealment and misinformation. This misinformation has various consequences, especially for women at a young age. By furthering our understanding of media technologies, we see how menstruation is having its moment through digitalization, where feminist discourses that advocate for agency, gender equity, and body representation shine bright. By riding this wave, advertising narratives can benefit from promoting menstrual justice through lived experiences and expose menstrual stigmas through an empathetic lens. This empathy is identified by various interviewees as the communication style through which they communicate with women and individuals whom they are comfortable with with respect to their menstrual experiences. By listening, understanding, and amplifying this community bond that women share with each other, brands can create a strong brand image while tackling menstrual stigmas.

Keywords: Menstrual Stigma, Listening, Patriarchy, Culture, Advertising, Agency, Lived Experiences, Media, Communication,

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Lastly, this thesis is an amplification of the 10 women who agreed to open up to me about their menstrual experiences, navigating me through their lived experiences and never shying away from voicing for all women.

It's fascinating how women constantly open my eyes to another reality, which is more real than anything but is dominated by patriarchy. This thesis is an attempt for me to engage with that reality, and I thank you all deeply for it.

Aditya Sen

INTRODUCTION

Several sanitary napkin brands pay huge sums of money to air their brand's advertisements. However, we need to critically engage and try to understand what exactly is being shown in these advertisements. Are they all correct? Or is it time to restructure these advertisements? (Roy, 2021)

In an article on menstrual awareness, Roy (2021) reiterated the importance of responsible communication about menstruation, adding that menstrual stigmas in India cause cultural discrimination and a lack of esteem. Menstruation in India is an experience that navigates complex social structures, the majority of which constantly stigmatize menstrual experiences. Menstrual stigmatization is found across a spectrum of communication channels, including branding and advertising of menstrual hygiene products. These commercials propagate stereotypes among the masses, reflecting the distorted image of menstruation that's prevalent in society (Yagnik, 2012: 769). Discourses presented within these commercials usually portray menstruation without understanding it or simply disregarding menstrual experiences.

Understanding this stigmatized communication means diving into the framing of menstrual experiences in society. Menstruation, just like pus, blood, and other bodily emissions, is considered to be impure and a polluted danger (Douglas, 2002: 49). This narrative of impurity is a gateway that allows the discovery of other connotations that stigmatize menstrual experiences. The idea of menstrual impurity is complex and context-dependent. Deepak (2018) says that menstruating women in India hold a curious place between sanctity and seclusion, where the onset of menstruation means her banishment from the kitchen yet she is given diamond earrings to celebrate it. It's important to acknowledge the duality of fertility and seclusion within menstrual experiences. These social values are paradoxical and contribute to a context-dependent stigmatization within India.

Another point to raise about the stigmatization of Indian menstrual experiences is its close relation to power dynamics. Biology has always looked at male bodies as fit and normal,

while female bodies as sites of query (Arora, 2017: 528). This argument requires engagement with patriarchy on a deeper level. It brings up a classic question about how menstruation would be viewed if it happened to male bodies instead of female bodies. A speculative answer could be that it probably would be looked at as a masculine rite of passage. This fundamental feminist argument helps us shed light on the power dynamics of menstruation and gender. Acknowledging that the dominance of men in society is what stigmatizes menstruation, rather than menstruation being the reason why women are stigmatized. A compelling argument can be made that if men did menstruate, then menstrual experiences would be better understood. This understanding is multiplied in India, where patriarchy is mixed into religion, caste, and class, creating a complex web of social norms to navigate (Arora, 2017: 529), making India a pertinent case while studying these issues.

India's multi-religious context places menstrual stigma across all religious practices with common themes of isolation and uncleanness (Bhartiya, 2013). This multi-religious, caste-divided, and class-controlled context requires a nuanced understanding of menstrual stigma.

Currently, menstrual awareness discourses revolve around period poverty, which refers to the “inability to afford and access menstrual products, sanitation and hygiene facilities and education and awareness to manage menstrual health.” (UN Women, 2024). UN Women illustrates how women in rural India require awareness about the importance of menstrual hygiene and sanitation. However, it seems that most health campaigners never consider the possibility of menstrual stigmas existing in urban spaces within India. While two out of three women in Indian urban spaces use female hygiene products, the distribution of their usage is subject to class and caste (Singh et al., 2023: 14). This heterogeneity of menstrual awareness can mean that even though menstrual hygiene products are available in urban cities, women have limited access to them. There is also a lack of understanding since there are very few studies done on menstrual practices in urban cities (Singh et al, 2023: 2-3). An important point to add here is that simply equating hygiene and sanitation to menstrual awareness would be narrow. Since menstrual experiences are so deeply stigmatized, they transcend the idea of just sanitary education. Stigma is deeply rooted in power dynamics and identity, creating normals and others

(Goffman, 1986). One can argue that Indian urban spaces require a new communication approach that stems from understanding what makes women “others” and brings their experiences to the forefront. One thing is clear: advertising of menstrual hygiene brands has purposefully misappropriated and wilfully ignored the complexities of menstrual stigma in India. The stigmatization of this can be seen in the use of the blue color to depict menstrual blood or the misinformation that brands adopt, like wearing sanitary pads can help one play sports better while keeping one’s period stain hidden. But it’s also essential to note that female hygiene product advertisements are probably the only mediated spaces forced to talk about menstruation as they have to sell their product.

This thesis dives into understanding societal factors and communication norms that reinforce and propagate menstrual stigmas in an Indian urban context, especially in advertising. The goal is to also identify communication norms that could propagate the idea of menstrual justice. Championing affective communication might result in challenging these injustices. Rhee et al. (2020: 4) describe affective communication as

... a spoken exchange of thoughts, opinions, and feelings, which has the potential to arouse emotion in individuals engaged in the exchange.

By extrapolating the essence of affectiveness and applying it to advertisements, it is possible to accurately show menstrual experiences through feelings, opinions, and thoughts. It can be a step forward for society to understand these experiences instead of concealing or simply misrepresenting them.

Through a case study, empirically building on qualitative interviews, focusing on women’s menstrual experiences in everyday life, I aim to understand and challenge menstrual stigmatization in Indian urban women’s lives through communication and mediated narratives by answering the following research questions,

1) What societal factors stigmatize menstrual experiences in Indian urban women’s daily lives?

2) How does communication stigmatize Indian urban women's menstrual experiences, and how can advertising potentially challenge this?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter aims at structuring and analyzing the existing body of literature relevant to this thesis, by identifying connections between social attitudes, values, and practices of menstrual experiences with their communication norms in society. within the current media landscape.

1. Menstruation through social sciences' perspectives

Understanding menstruation through social sciences provides an opportunity to delve into its cultural, societal, and contextual construction. This lens gives space to understand its various facets and inspect its socially constructed norms and values. Tomlinson (2025:18-21) states that there is little research done on the intersection of menstrual activism and media narratives. Simultaneously, Bobel (2020: 2) argues that menstruation is having its moment, with an increase in menstrual discussions taking up mainstream media through news, activism, and so on.

In India, menstrual activism saw the rise of the #HappyToBleed campaign in 2015, launched by women to protest against temple chiefs who didn't allow menstruating women to enter temples (Tomlinson, 2025:1). This thesis comes at a time when social resistance marks a clear attempt to destigmatize menstruation and engage with the societal attitudes and narratives that exist within them. Beginning a robust discussion around these attitudes helps unpack the stigmatization around menstrual experiences and their communication. It's imperative to establish that patriarchal norms have shaped menstrual experiences into concealment, stigmatization, and misinformation. Winkler (2020: 9–11) points out that we must begin to frame menstruation as more than just a biological process. Menstruation is more complex than that. It comprises paradoxical perspectives, that unfold and challenge ideas that the personal is separate from the political, intimate as distinct from the public, and the physiological from the socio-cultural (Winkler, 2020: 9-11). In totality, menstruation is a concept that should be looked at as *fundamental*, which determines a menstruator's daily life and needs (ibid). An analogy can be drawn between menstruation and clean air or safe water, which are basic necessities that must be fulfilled to meet survival needs. By framing menstruation as fundamental, one begins to see

that if menstrual needs are not met, then women are denied their human rights. Winkler (2020: 9) goes on to say that

Menstruation is fundamental because it facilitates or impedes the realization of a whole range of human rights.

Therefore, menstrual stigmas promote various injustices in an Indian woman's daily life. Patel (2018) explains how pharmacists conceal sanitary pads in black bags while giving them to women, while Bhattacharjya (2024) highlights the promotion of concealment by the former Union Minister of Women and Child Rights, defending her statement against menstrual leaves,

Why should a woman's menstrual cycle be known to her employer?

It is important to understand the root cause of patriarchal dominance over menstrual experiences, which is power relations. These power relations tend to remove agency from women while patriarchy results in societal attitudes, norms, and values about menstruation being historically set by those who don't menstruate.

Winkler (2020: 9-11) describes menstruation as a fundamental phenomenon that boils down to power relations materialized in practical, everyday situations. She contextualizes these power relations with examples of how prison guards have the power to dispense or withhold menstrual products from prisoners, the power of parents to force young girls to marry at the onset of menstruation, or the power of religious authorities that push women to show unquestioned devotion to religious norms that stigmatize menstruation (Winkler, 2020: 9-11). Patriarchal norms are what bring an imbalance to these power relations, shaping an understanding of menstrual experiences that promote menstrual injustices.

An important point to note here is that not all actors in power are men, but they have been subjected to act within patriarchal norms. For example, a prison guard could be a woman. It is important to understand the role that power plays within various actors who are part of an individual's menstrual experience. From Winkler's (2020) text, it's clear that destigmatizing

menstruation starts with providing agency to women to dictate their own menstrual experiences. By looking at menstruation as fundamental in an existential way, we dive deeper into the need for a robust social discussion around it, where we consider various actors and their power relations, including the power that media narratives have over menstruation, where they dictate and reflect societal norms through communication and storytelling.

2. Impure and polluted

2.1 Menstrual blood as impure

Within global menstrual discourses, a common factor for stigmatization is the impurity that is attached to menstruation, in particular with menstrual blood. This can be attributed to the discourse that menstrual blood leaves the body through an intimate part. Douglas (2002) describes the cultural construction of menstruation as a “pollutant” in many societies since it has been compared to other bodily emissions like urine, pus, and blood. This broad understanding of menstruation dives into the societal attitude of impurity towards menstrual blood, and its tag as a pollutant.

By understanding this widely spread societal attitude, one begins to understand how this perceived impurity of menstruation leads to the idea of women being weaker and even polluted, leading to their *othering* in societies. While this works as a great jumping-off point to understand the labeling of menstruation as impure, it would be incorrect to use this single lens to explain menstrual stigmas in our current times. Douglas (2002: 45) argues,

...in short, our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.

Simply reasoning that pollution behavior is a reaction to pollutants because they confuse or contradict cherished classifications seems like a narrow understanding of menstruation. Pollution behavior and stigmatization of menstruation inadvertently justify societal attitudes as innocent byproducts rather than living narratives that are informed by their time, contextual, cultural, and religious complexities. It is important to evolve our understanding of pollution behavior to reflect

the role that culture and rituals have within it. Douglas (2002: 41) describes pollutants as matter-out-of-place, which are sorted into order by traditions and rituals.

Asad (1993: 140-150) describes this approach of looking at ritualistic norms and pollution behavior systems that innocently deal with “matter out of place” as a reductive lens. Asad (1993: 140-150) engages with these ritualistic norms as social practices that link visible signs to invisible virtues, rather than simply restrictive social norms. By looking at ritualistic norms as pollution behavior tactics, one might place a simple symbolic understanding of rituals and traditions. In contexts like India, rituals and traditions hold more value than just symbols; they often contribute to knowledge, and they should be considered dynamic and living. They evolve with time, and their evolution often carries signs of progression or regression in society; this is essential in understanding menstrual stigmas.

One cannot disregard the patriarchal notion that stems from these rituals, which often shape menstrual rituals as codes of restrictions. The argument here is that pollution behavior and ritualistic norms around menstruation should be studied as living narratives that have been shaped by patriarchal notions but are often practiced and informed by their current context, time, and culture. This allows the identification of the pollution behavior around menstrual impurity while looking deeper into the context within these practices. Through Asad’s (1993) and Douglas’ (2002) discussions, one can see why menstrual stigmas, rituals, and social practices are viewed as impurity, but they should not be restricted to it. Engagement with menstrual stigmas needs to include biological, social, physiological, feminist, and mediated lenses.

Moreover, one must move beyond destigmatizing just menstrual blood and assuming that this will destigmatize menstruation. We must focus on menstrual experiences and understand how they have been concealed, discriminated against, misunderstood, and misrepresented. A surprising institution that reinforces menstrual injustice is medical studies, which only complicates matters since medical studies are perceived as above societal norms and values.

2.2 The Biomedical gaze

From a bird's eye view, one can easily see the connection between menstruation and medicine, and this thesis does not deny that, rather wants to investigate it through a cultural lens. This affinity comes with a hegemonic understanding of menstruation. While people often take the word of medical practitioners as gospel, medical practices around menstruation are heavily impacted by hegemonic cultural and social norms, practices, and values. An earlier argument was put forward that menstrual stigmas need a contextual understanding.

According to Gopee (2024: 14), India's medical and scientific knowledge about menstruation is subject to cultural bias, as most of the current knowledge is produced by Indian male upper caste perspectives, resulting in medicalization having a cultural bias. An argument can be put forth that questions the role of cultural biases in medical sciences since medical practitioners are presumed to work out of a space of medical integrity. However, there is a lot of evidence against this. A lot of women face subtle discrimination by gynecologists, felt through the subtextual understanding of their communication with women, like asking them about their marital status during check-ups (Sharad, 2017). Since Indian male upper caste perspectives are what inform medical knowledge production, one can connect the dots as to where these hegemonic perspectives around menstruation come from.

This also sheds light on the minimal understanding of menstrual experiences with a hyper-focus on the eradication of menstrual blood impurity. While hygiene and sanitation awareness, like period poverty (UN Women, 2024), is important, one must engage with the communication or lack thereof, that deals with menstrual experiences. Medicalization of menstruation carries authority and shapes our cultural understanding of it. It also shapes emotional complexities that are forced within the experience. This medicalization of menstruation has also pedagogically informed how menstrual awareness needs to be spread in India.

3. Menstrual Hygiene Management

In India, health drives or menstrual activism are often mired in the medicalization of menstruation. They try to break menstrual stigmas by destigmatizing the impurity and spreading awareness about the importance of hygiene and sanitation in menstrual health. This can be seen clearly through the Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) drives in rural India, which aim at relieving period poverty (UN Women, 2024).

To tackle period poverty, India has adopted strategies of Menstrual Health and Hygiene Management (MHM) that revolve around communicating WASH strategies. According to a World Bank (2022) report, WASH promotes clean water, menstrual hygiene products, and proper sanitary conditions to maintain hygienic menstrual experiences. Just like the perceived impurity of menstrual blood, this thesis isn't trying to undermine the gravity of hygienic menstrual practices, rather, it argues that there are socio-cultural discourses present within menstrual experiences that haven't been addressed enough.

Manorama & Desai (2020: 511–521) describe the need for a menstrual justice framework, which focuses on reevaluating societal attitudes around menstruation in India. Their focus is to position menstruation as an experience, where societal attitudes of discrimination, inferiority, and injustice shape menstrual stigmas and communication around it. Manorama & Desai (2020: 511-521) describe India's current health advocacy as a missed opportunity to successfully use MHM health drives in tandem with WASH within the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*,¹ going on to declare that India's health and hygiene approach has forgotten the health aspect, which has led them to address menstrual hygiene management but not understanding menstrual stigma.

The idea of menstrual justice is a tempting approach since it holistically addresses the needs of de-stigmatization while adopting a bottom-up approach. By framing it as justice, Manorama & Desai (2020: 11-521) advocate that menstrual experiences face injustices through social norms, which they describe as discrimination, inferiority, and injustice, making it a human

¹ A government campaign launched in 2014 to "Clean India"

rights discourse. Through the perspective of menstrual justice, one begins to see the consequences of health drives that continue to propagate the medical understanding of menstruation with minimal cultural subtext.

If the messaging in Indian sanitary pad ads is viewed through a menstrual justice framework, the injustices can be seen hidden behind a veil of advocacy, like the promotion of women's sports or activities. These ads refuse to show menstrual blood as red because menstrual blood isn't just impure, it is discriminated against and inferior. Yagnik (2012: 769-771) establishes that Indian TV commercials reinforce stereotypes to make their product socially acceptable, and this results in further damaging the image of menstruation in India. There is a need in India to reconsider menstrual advocacy by understanding the merits of theories, such as social marketing theory (Lewis & Lewis, 2014), which help focus on the holistic understanding of menstrual experiences and address the discrimination, inferiority, and injustice women face. Manorama and Desai's (2020) robust menstrual justice framework also focuses on bringing menstrual justice along with menstrual hygiene practices, contributing to advocating menstruation as fundamental.

Another point to be noted is the lack of menstrual hygiene programs in Indian urban spaces. In India, Bangladesh, Egypt, Madagascar, and Zimbabwe, adolescent girls and women in urban areas are more likely to use sanitary pads compared to those in rural areas, who are more likely to use cloth. (UN Women, 2024). Urban areas have a higher menstrual awareness of sanitary pads, but by using the term "area", we are missing out on class, which is arguably the bigger factor as it highlights affordability. India's urbanization has created wealth inequality between the urban rich and the poor (Roy et al., 2024). According to UN Women (2024), affordability and accessibility play a big role and policies like the pink tax make sanitary pads less affordable. It's important to move menstrual communication beyond the perspective of hygiene using a culturally holistic approach.

4. Menstruation in cultural and ritual practices

The above literature highlights the need to fundamentally reimagine our understanding of menstrual experiences. Additionally, it's crucial to identify power struggles within class, culture, family, religion, and any other context-based complexities that exist. This helps grasp the extent of othering that women face in their menstrual experiences. It also furthers the understanding of the emotional complexities that women feel when subjected to menstrual injustices.

Menstrual experiences need to be understood from a robust sociocultural lens, focusing on everyday life. India's multi-ethnic culture makes this task harder to tackle since Indians identify with a variety of cultural identities. It might be futile to look at culture from solely a religious perspective. Corichi et al. (2021) describe that religious pluralism exists in India's cultural core, with a majority Hindu population, and multiple smaller yet significant religions like Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism, to name a few. Therefore, it's necessary to find common cultural themes that directly or indirectly promote any menstrual discrimination, inferiority, or injustice. Identifying these themes can help us understand how communication of menstrual experiences is constructed.

The complexity of identifying intersections between menstrual stigmas and culture is a juggernaut that needs further contextual understanding. Ganguly et al. (2024: 1–8) investigate various community-based menstrual practices that range from various belts of India. An interesting aspect of their study is the identification of these groups as communities. A classic indication of this is the cultural practice of banning menstruating women from kitchens in the *Marwari*² community (Ganguly et al, 2024: 4). *Katysthas*³ also have cultural practices that highly discourage women from handling *ghee*⁴ or vinegar allegedly contaminating it (Ganguly et al. 2024: 4). The constant theme across communities in India, irrespective of caste, ethnicity, religion, language, region, etc, have traditions that misunderstand and oppress women and their menstrual experiences.

² Marwaris are a powerful socio-ethnic group that finds their roots in the Vaishya's (Trader) caste and find their geographical roots in Rajasthan (Taknet, 2015: 25-30)

³ A prominent and influential community found in Nepal and India (Ganguly et al, : 2024: 4)

⁴ clarified butter

Another analytical lens to understand the oppression of menstrual experiences, as discussed, is patriarchy. Rao et al (2025: 140-146) describe patriarchal culture as a pervasive force that has shaped a lot of discourses that women face when it comes to menstruation. It's the patriarchal need to dominate and dictate that underscores the discrimination, isolation, and feelings of shame, present within societal practices (ibid). Yet, it's the need to resist patriarchy with communication that pushes for gender equity.

While there are several lenses through which one can understand the role that culture, religion, family, faith, or religion play in India, it's important to highlight that patriarchy is the pervasive hegemonic understanding that shapes menstrual experiences. In India, this has inadvertently resulted in shame, embarrassment, and confusion among women. All the studies discussed above advocate for communication that challenges existing norms and pushes for social change. To understand this, let's dive into the pedagogy within the media and communication sphere.

5. Media Studies on Menstruation

This section engages with the media's role in shaping menstrual discourses through its tendency to seclude, its connection to bio-power and body politics, and its power relations within feminist movements. There is a focus on understanding advertising as a means of knowledge production and the role of *affect* in challenging menstrual taboos.

5.1. Media Narratives of Seclusion

To treat menstruation as fundamental (Winkler, 2020: 9-11), one must look at menstruation as a narrative. The strand of research focusing on menstruation as a narrative can demonstrate the pathway of constructing menstruation as a media and communication phenomenon that is reflexive and actively shapes societal practices of menstruation. Kissling (2020: 865) says,

In conceptualizing menstruation as narrative, we recognize stories as a fundamental element of human culture.

By making a direct parallel to culture and stories, Kissling (2020) furthers the need to culturally understand menstrual narratives. These stories carry knowledge about menarche, menstruation, and menopause, to name a few, and they are passed down from mother to daughter, elder sister to younger sister, and so on (ibid). Each of these narratives carries life experiences that frame the knowledge being passed on (ibid). A point to be noted is the role that interpersonal communication plays in the production of menstrual knowledge.

As established earlier, Indian menstrual stories are culturally shaped by life experiences but also contain knowledge encoded in traditions. Kissling (2020) invites us to the possibility that the impact of menstrual narratives is dependent on how they are being shared, too. While the most common way is through stories being passed on through interpersonal communication, often among family members, the media also plays a role in framing these narratives. There is an urgent need to re-evaluate the importance of media narratives when it comes to menstruation. Yagnik (2014: 620-630) emphasizes media narratives as powerful. These media narratives are essential tools that shape our lifestyle choices but tend to be overlooked.

Most media narratives are coded within cultural taboos that are contextual to where they are produced and their target audience. Yagnik (2014: 620-630) discusses three taboos commonly found directly or within the subtext of Indian media narratives: concealment taboo, activity taboo, and communication taboo. Concealment taboos are found in stories mandating that menstruation should be hidden through various cultural norms, Activity Taboo points towards a misinformed view that women should be discouraged from physical sports and activities like swimming, running and so on during their periods, while communication taboo talks about the undesirable nature of menstrual talks (ibid). These taboos are centered around the feeling of seclusion. While one can argue that these taboos reflect already existing societal attitudes, there is also a clear misunderstanding of the power that media holds. It's imperative to evolve our understanding of media's intersection with people's sociological understanding of menstruation. Media narratives have the power to both reflect and shape society. As long as the stories within media narratives are coded within menstrual taboos, media will contribute to the seclusion of menstrual experiences.

5.2. Menstrual Body Politics Through Media

While health drives like WASH and other MHM advocacy campaigns remain focused on hygiene management of menstruation, Media framing has changed in its portrayal of menstruation. Yagnik (2014: 620-630) discusses the shift in Indian media, especially advertising that has moved from concealment and silence of menstruation to the rise of female hygiene products, which were portrayed in the media through extremely regressive norms reflexive of their time. While this was left unchecked, it promoted blatant misinformation and stigmatization of menstruation to such an extent that there was a backlash from consumers and forced positive framing of menstruation, which revolved around health advocacy (ibid). This brings us to the current phase where normalization of menstruation revolves around human rights and advocates for justice through communication.

This media framing of normalization through engagement with societal attitudes and justice does not mean this progressive direction is natural. A point that this progression must take into account is the political environment along with corporate agendas (Yagnik, 2014: 626-630). This must be emphasized, as shifts in media narratives aren't guaranteed and advocacy can be reversed if the socio-political climate and cultural complexities don't favor it, thus must be highlighted as a cautious disclaimer. The communication of menstrual experiences in media must always be inspected through a complex cultural lens and robust understanding since patriarchal norms linked to culture will always try to repress the menstrual justice discourse. This cautious progression of media framing in India stems from biopolitics or body politics. The power struggles and patriarchy that have informed body politics must be highlighted further. Gaybor & Harcourt (2022: 2393-2395) point towards the role that body politics has played in WASH and MHM drives, where the hyperfocus on hygiene and health has inadvertently further highlighted the need for menstrual discourses to focus on cultural understanding. Menstruation plays a huge role in global body politics as it brings intimate and private experiences, which are context and culture-dependent, to the forefront with an attempt to disrupt gender roles and challenge fundamental power dynamics (ibid). These discourses directly challenge age-old power dynamics, and constantly disrupt gender roles, redefining the normal body and the other. As we have established, the male body is often seen as the normal, while the female body is seen as the other, which has led to further misinformation. Through body politics, one understands the

importance of body representation and of representing it from a cultural lens, and by representing bodies of different cultures, contexts, and classes, one can hope to fully achieve the normalization of menstruation within media.

5.3 The Fourth Wave of Feminism: New media technologies and dialogues

Understanding feminism's evolution as waves helps see the nature of discourses arising within each wave. They can be reflexive of the global social climate, while also tracking the expansion of feminism from a white-dominated space, advocating for suffrage rights to become a beacon of gender equality and sexual inclusiveness, bringing menstrual justice under its wing. These waves started with the need to advocate for suffrage rights for mostly Western white women, and now we are currently living in the fourth wave of feminism, which is inclusive of reproductive liberalization, women's rights, and body autonomy, and is characterized by women in important professional spaces (Rampton, 2015: 4-10).

Moreover, this current wave is subject to a digital world, which has a role to play in how feminism is understood. Rampton (2015: 4-10) illustrates that feminism has moved majorly back into academics, but the fourth wave is seeing its return to public discourse. It's also important to understand how this wave of feminism is being constructed in digital spaces. Chamberlain (2016) understands that in digital spaces, feminism and activism share a dialogic relationship with misogynists and others who counter their views. Here, the hegemonic discourse often takes over and feminism is left battling misogyny. This is important since the democratization of mediated spaces gives space for all voices but does not ensure that all voices are heard equally.

Feminism's advent into online spaces matches Yagnik's (2014) contextual claim that menstrual advertising is moving towards advocacy, which marks a positive change. To understand its significance means understanding the power that menstrual ads hold in dictating menstrual narratives in society.

5.4 Advertisements as knowledge production

As Yagnik (2014: 620-630) describes, media narratives also carry activity taboos that restrict women from performing activities through misinformation. These activity taboos are depicted as the problem statement in many Indian advertisements, and the media narrative within advertisements often focuses on how the product can solve them. Escalas (2004: 277-284) details the complexities of advertising narratives by describing them as stories ideated to evoke cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses that the consumer connects to the brand's experience. Storytelling in advertisements is achieved through narrative or non-narrative ads, where narrative ads focus on a story that connects to the brand, while non-narrative ads hook onto the emotions that the brand wants the consumer to remember while thinking about it (ibid). Most Indian female hygiene products are advertised through hegemonic advertising narratives that display activity taboos as problems to be solved. Sanitary pads are shown to help in concealment so that women don't have to face activity taboos like being shunned away from playing sports, and so on. Roy (2021) writes,

For centuries, women have been told to hide that they menstruate. Hence, wearing a sanitary napkin of a particular brand claims to ensure that they don't stain their clothes and that they can even go to the extent of wearing white clothes during their menstrual cycle, thereby reproducing the very stigma they are attempting to challenge.

It can be concluded that Indian ads not only spread misinformation about activity taboos but also promote concealment taboos through their subtext.

It's important to understand the current mediated space that draws from the fourth wave of feminism and the rise of *femvertising* discourses in marketing. Coleman & Sredl (2022) describe marketers' and advertisers' relationship with the fourth wave of feminism as one being modeled around femvertising discourses like gender inclusiveness, shifting away from the male gaze. It also points towards brands not wanting to be labeled as feminist (ibid). The way to move menstrual justice forward through advertising framing on social media is to build messaging that points towards corporate social responsibility (CSR), consumer vulnerability like price points, and engaging with structural stigma (ibid). There is a need for further research on how marketing can contribute to the intersection of menstrual justice and consumer vulnerabilities.

This exclusion of menstrual justice in marketing, even within the fourth wave of feminism, points to brands that are riding the wave but are unable to grasp its nuances. Advertising and branding could still ride this wave and capitalize on positioning menstruation through human rights, where menstrual justice topics like discrimination, inferiority, and stigmatization are the problem statement. A small precursor to this is the fact that a lot of Indian menstrual ads on digital spaces are slowly beginning to show red color instead of blue for blood. Menstrual justice needs to be advocated through menstrual ads since it is the only space where menstruation is spoken about in media narratives. It would be beneficial to brands as they would be able to create a brand connection with their audience while riding the current wave of feminism.

If brands decide to connect their consumers through stories of menstrual justice, an optimum way they could do this is through affective communication, where ideas and opinions are built from emotional experiences. This provides an opportunity to depict feelings of shame, embarrassment, empathy, and so on, which are felt through discrimination and inferiority in menstrual experiences. This fits perfectly with the need for menstrual justice and coincides with the current wave of feminism, which brand stories can capitalize on.

Menstruation is having its moment, and advertisers need to capture this.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter reflects on previous literature to refine the argument, showcase the importance of understanding menstruation through a social, contextual, and cultural lens, and explore how communication norms are hidden within socio-cultural facets of menstruation. Moving towards understanding menstruation as fundamental requires laying the groundwork that connects communication to stigmatization.

1. Stigma

Goffman (1986) details the conceptual understanding of stigma through ideas of social information, community formation, and personal identity. Social information is the information that abides by its characteristics, communicated by a person, and is conveyed through bodily expression to someone in a nearby vicinity (ibid).

Today's communication practices and advancement of media technologies allow a redefinition of social information to be dependent exclusively on bodily expression and vicinity. It can be said that communication of bodily expressions happens through several media spaces, with each media space having its values and norms. Goffman (1986) suggests the idea of military badges that carry social information of prestige, while a suicide mark on one's wrist carries a mark of stigma. These can be symbols of social information that are frequently available and seen (ibid). In India, the idea of wrapping sanitary pads in black plastic bags directly communicates that sanitary pads must be hidden, as it connotes menstruation. Within the communication of menstrual stigmas also lies a great deal of concealment that leads to seclusion. Goffman (1986) describes that the communication of social information on stigmas is also dependent on the nature of whether it is visible. This visibility of stigmas should be differentiated from the know-aboutness of the stigma, where visibility is discriminated on sight, with a clear demarcation between normal and others (ibid).

Goffman (1986) describes know-aboutness as a contributor to how much knowledge is available about the stigma and the discourses around it, the individual's ability to perform tasks or be productive (ibid). The know-aboutness of menstruation is stigmatized due to the penetration of patriarchy in all aspects of menstrual experiences, be it biological, social, cultural,

and so on. While considering menstruation, we see that it suffers from communication norms that are rooted in the idea that it must be concealed and not made visible.

Through this lens, one begins to identify the different facets through which stigmatization of social information around menstruation has constantly hindered menstrual justice, drawing a direct link between menstrual stigmas and stigmatized communication norms.

2. Communities, Popular Culture, and Cultural Citizenship

The idea of concealment and misinformation results in seclusion, which is propagated through popular culture narratives where menstruation is either concealed or misrepresented. This culture of seclusion through patriarchy brings menstruators together through their experiences. Hermes (2023) emphasizes the need to reconsider the idea of citizenship from a broader socio-cultural lens where cultural practices and norms are taken into account to form communities, with citizenship within these communities being dependent on identification with the community discourses, values, and norms. These communities are bound together by a common identity that is formed by them and by people around them (ibid). Hermes (2023: 19) also justifies,

The bottom line is that if there are no groups or communities to identify with, identities have no meaning.

This identity-dependent nature of cultural citizenship broadens our understanding of citizenship and belonging from a geo-political perspective to a socio-cultural one. Hermes (2023) describes the role of popular culture in shaping cultural citizenship identities, by stating one of the functions of popular culture is to form exchanges or communication that are hard to achieve in other media spaces. Yet, one of the pitfalls of popular culture is the tendency of hard categorization with little to no inclusion and diversity (ibid). This points towards an unhealthy need to fit the category in all its requirements to prove your worth within that community. Here, we need to address the gendered aspect of popular culture which has always been male-dominated and built for male categories more than female categories (Hermes,2023). To position this in the current research, let's look at the hegemonic male gaze that runs deep within advertising.

Dang (2022) describes the hegemonic male gaze in advertising as a result of its strong presence in the pop-culture domain, where the female body is compared to a certain body type and is subject to objectification. It results in a lack of diverse female body representation and their over-sexualization to meet the beauty standard. This hard categorization is seen in community formation habits within popular culture, which captures sexism and gender stereotypes in their advertisements to aid profits, along with a naturalization of the representation of female bodies and features, resulting in a commercial building aesthetics that emerged with the accepted female beauty ideals (Dang, 2022). Goffman (1959, as cited in Dawson & Innes, 2022: 522) illustrates destructive information by classifying it as dark secrets that keep damaging information away from audiences, thus, accepted beauty ideals are dark secrets that hide authentic representations of female bodies. It results in a community formation where audiences find themselves either rejecting these beauty standards while furthering inclusive beauty standards or finding comfort in accepting that these are the beauty standards that one needs to achieve. However, these hard categories are still a result of patriarchal male categories, built for male audiences.

Within cultural citizenship through community formation in popular media, menstruation finds almost no space in popular culture as it has been deemed as an impure danger. As we have seen, India treats menstruation as that aspect of the female body that can't be oversexualized, yet it is connected to fertility and thus rests within the dichotomy of celebration and concealment. A conceptual understanding of communities in cultural citizenship highlights how menstruation discourses are excluded from various popular cultural artifacts. Advertisers, who have to engage with it while advertising for female hygiene products, provide a commercially built narrative and aesthetics instead of understanding menstrual experiences. The community that rebels against this menstrual understanding is formed by audiences and producers who promote advocacy that constantly questions the hegemonic male gaze.

3. Bio-power, Body Politics and Cultural Citizenship

Identifying the social complexities in women's bodies directs us to what Young (2005) describes as lived bodily experiences of women who menstruate in patriarchal societies. Young (2005: 6-7) demarcates her engagement of bodily experience as

'Body experience' is another key term in my title. None of these essays takes bodies as objects or things to observe, study or explain. Rather the essays aim to describe subjectivity and women's experience as lived and felt in the flesh.

Looking at women's experiences as lived experiences with subjectivities draws attention to our deficit understanding of female bodies. But, Young's understanding of menstrual experiences comes from her limited access to women only in the United States. Young (2005) describes attitudes around menstrual experiences as not having changed in the last half-century. Two decades have passed since Young illustrated her findings about attitudes around menstrual experiences, meaning that there may be more awareness of menstruation now, but it is surely not enough. Young (2005) describes how popular media and education send mixed signals about menstrual experiences, where menstruation can be a sign of sexual maturity and empowerment, but also promotes feelings of seclusion and disgust for a menstrual bodily experience that has stayed throughout her mature life. The refusal to understand bodily experiences has led to this gross misunderstanding of menstrual experiences.

The idea of misunderstood bodily experiences can be further seen in Hermes' (2023) understanding of power through popular culture. Hermes (2023) elaborates that by challenging the position of power within our daily lives, a feminist insight that attempts to unravel the shades of identity activism. There is more than just oppression that power causes, and that is identity formation through cultural citizenship (ibid). Within popular culture, various communities and their hard identity categories could be the reason why contemporary global societies resort to polarization and anger rather than dialogue and communication (ibid). This is what eventually leads to understanding culture through strategic power relations. By understanding power struggles within communities in popular culture, one starts to see the patterns of why bodily experiences of women are depicted through misunderstood menstrual experiences. Since power relations are strategic, the idea of representing female bodily experiences is done to put up a

front of goodwill and progressiveness, rather than engagement with the topic. It can be argued that acceptance in popular culture narratives is simply seen by whether the narrative has engaged with wider gendered and cultural norms, rather than working towards justice for female bodies, menstrual experiences, and body inclusivity.

Within patriarchal societies like India, advocacy for menstrual justice and body autonomy is achieved through active performativity and knowledge-seeking endeavors. Through his exhaustive work, Foucault (1981) describes the relationship between the body and power as an investment. These investments take forms like muscle building, exercising, and nudism, which are performative endeavors to restore agency and exert power on health, economic, and political institutions (ibid). Foucault (1981) states that once power is exerted by a body, it is met with a counterattack from institutions. It points towards how institutes, often set up to provide agency and power, counterattack when bodies are actively trying to exert their power.

This is especially applicable to the knowledge of women's bodies. Foucault (1981) presents an example where economic products like sun tans pander towards giving agency to bodies, but with a caveat of stimulation. Foucault (1981: 57) describes

Responding precisely to the revolt of the body, we find a new mode of investment which presents itself no longer in the form of control by repression but that of control by stimulation. 'Get undressed- but be slim, good-looking, tanned!

This bio-power discourse is present within popular culture too, with Foucault's (1981) example of sun tans serving as evident proof. Menstruation suffers a similar punishment of power over the body by categorizing it as impure. Menstrual narratives seen in advertisements or hegemonic pop-culture discourse always promote a tokenized power, which depicts women successfully performing tasks by concealing their menstrual experiences rather than advocating for real agency and representation of lived experiences. This shows the double standards pushed by bio-power, where sanitary pad branding disguises itself as an institution that understands menstrual experiences, yet pushes larger menstrual stigmas through its subtext.

4. Affect and Conversations

Communication norms around body agency can challenge seclusion and contribute to menstrual justice. While grappling with affect and everyday meaning-making, Hermes (2023) says that all discussions inspired by popular culture artifacts benefit from the idea of cultural citizenship since it is a direct link for ongoing conversations between the personal and lifeworld. To challenge menstrual stigmas through popular culture narratives like advertising, brands need to understand the value this connection provides and engage with bio-power narratives promoting lived experiences as a branding exercise. Hermes (2023) argues that these conversations need to be understood for their affective and discursive impact on power. To understand affect, Hermes (2023: 47) writes,

We need to understand the personal and the lifeworld at their own merit. In order to be able to do so, we need to understand discourse as rational debate and as affect and emotion in all three domains.

Identifying affect within conversations about menstrual experiences leads to assessing the challenge of understanding how far we are from menstrual justice. Hermes (2023: 47) concludes by saying

The world over we see conversation and discussion stop while the violence and pain of exclusion take over as societies polarize. To offer tools to enable the countering of such processes is my goal. Empathic understanding of the feelings involved will surely, in the short or long run, allow for better counter-offensives.

Building on Hermes, menstrual justice requires informed conversation and empathetic discussions, with visible and dignified representation in pop-culture that is focused on spreading advertising narratives through menstruation and engaging with it as an experience. If derived from lived experiences, they will evoke affective elements that spread knowledge about menstrual experiences and challenges that menstruators face, promoting discussions around the same and increasing brand trust.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter aims to dive into this thesis' methodological positioning through qualitative data analysis and a case-focused approach. The larger aim is to understand how menstrual stigmas can be challenged through a media and communication perspective.

Phronetic research excels as a reflexive discussion of values and interests, that plant the seed for the development of culture, economy, and politics in society (Flyvbjerg & Sampson, 2001). Phronesis allows both inspection and reflection of societal values, norms, and attitudes within menstrual stigmas. This promotes identification and discussion of social injustices that women face through their menstrual experiences. Within this social world, communication plays a vital role as a meaning-making practice and contributes to the social construction of the world (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). Media and technological developments play a crucial role in determining the process that communication uses as a meaning-making practice (ibid). By looking at the mediated construction (ibid) of menstrual experiences, this thesis identifies communication practices of menstrual injustices and the power they have in challenging menstrual stigmas.

Bazeley (2013: 5) points out that qualitative research must be founded on the contextual nuances of the case. Thus, the aim here is to understand menstrual stigmatization through the experiences of Indian urban-class women. Deepak (2018) describes the duality of menstrual experiences in India as carrying norms of impurity and fertility. This patriarchal understanding of menstrual experiences informs cultural practices of menstruation in India and shapes menstrual experiences that are contextual. India also has an unequal divide in accessibility and affordability, which shapes menstrual experiences. Period poverty is rather rampant in India with menstrual awareness and accessibility being more widespread in urban India when compared to rural India (UN Women, 2024). Period poverty can be broadly identified in terms of accessibility and affordability; while accessibility to menstrual hygiene products divides India along lines of geography, affordability divides it in terms of class. To study these stigmatized communication

habits, it's important to acknowledge factors like geography and class that determine a woman's lived experiences with respect to menstruation.

Menstruation is frequently linked to social stigma, silence, and concealment (Shahida, 2024) and is culturally and socially concealed in India. Along with studying menstrual practices of concealment, this research seeks to examine limited communication channels that address menstruation in India, with a focused understanding of the role that advertising and branding play in terms of narrative setting and its social implications. The idea is to explore how lived experiences are shown in these ads or if they are built from a stigmatized understanding of menstruation.

Ethics

Throughout the research, there was a constant focus on upholding ethical considerations. While the conceptual goal of the research is knowledge production, researchers must minimize harm by protecting privacy and respecting the autonomy of participants, even if it hinders the goal (Hammersley & Traianou, 2015). Yet, the purpose of this thesis is slightly more complex than just knowledge production, as it's designed for knowledge production and promotion of menstrual justice. Bhutta (2002) promotes the idea that health research must be linked to community needs so that it speaks about health equity with the goal of addressing health injustices. These suggestions are drawn from the needs of developing countries (ibid). To promote menstrual justice while maintaining sensitivity, the personal information collected from interviewees was their hometown, religious background, age, and gender, factors essential to each participant's menstrual experiences. Furthermore, pseudo-names were used throughout the thesis to maintain anonymity.

Each participant was pre-informed regarding the usage of their data for the purpose of this research only. To ensure the autonomy and comfort of participants, each interviewee was briefed about the larger aim of the research project. There was also an exit clause for each participant, allowing them to dismiss any questions or leave the interview at any point. An invite⁵ was created and shared on Instagram with details about the research project, setting an

⁵ Appendix 3

expectation for interview design. Participants who responded to the invite were then recruited, without any coercion. The interviews were done over Zoom and each participant provided permission to record these interviews. They were informed that the transcription would be used for this research and deleted upon the completion of this project.

Another ethical consideration is the researcher's position within this research. Within this thesis, I view myself as a learner and a researcher. As a master student in Media studies with professional experience in advertising and ad filmmaking in India, I believe I have the necessary tools to deconstruct societal norms that are coded within communication practices, especially in advertising, and uncover the power that menstrual communication holds. But as a man with no menstrual experience, I acknowledge having no lived experience to judge the authenticity of communication that exists, its relation to menstrual experiences of Indian urban women, and its affective implications. Proficiency or expertise is established through understanding context and judgment in social sciences (Flyvbjerg & Sampson, 2001). Nevertheless, my lack of menstrual experiences has allowed me to appreciate the art of listening (Hermes, 2023) which illustrates the importance of listening with generosity rather than listening carefully. It refers to responsible acknowledgment that these women are sharing their social capital (ibid), which in this case refers to menstrual experiences. As a learner and researcher, I'm unraveling menstrual stigmas by consulting women to help educate myself about the female body and menstrual experiences, with the hope to understand and rectify my own biases.

Methods

As established, this thesis explores Indian urban women's menstrual experiences through a qualitative lens. It focuses on understanding communication practices and societal factors that contribute to stigmatization of these experiences. To establish this, I look at understanding themes of power relations, narratives, attitudes, advertising, and shame amongst other things. Communication practices, media, and its technological development play an important role in social constructivism of today's world (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). Through this mediated construction of reality (ibid), one begins to see the power that communication practices play in shaping menstrual stigmas. According to Bryman (2016), qualitative research is designed to understand human actions in social behavior.

Exploring and understanding human actions allows an inspection of values and attitudes, and how are they communicated. This can be either in daily life or through media actors. It also allows one to absorb the capabilities that media artifacts have to dictate communication practices. According to Lyons et al (2013), research that promotes principles of equity, access, participation and harmony for culturally diverse populations contributes to social justice. Positioning this research to promote menstrual justice means that it seeks to abide by these principles.

As previously discussed, menstrual experiences are majorly concealed by media actors, but one space where menstruation is forced to be spoken about is in menstrual ads. Three menstrual ads were chosen for this research project. Each advertisement was shown during the interviews. The first advertisement, *Stayfree: #DinTumhareSathChalega*⁶ is a product advertisement that shows a woman promoting Stayfree sanitary pads because it makes her so comfortable that she forgets that she is menstruating. The ad also promotes the concealment of menstrual blood. The message and the title, *#DinTumhareSaathChalega* translates to “Days move along with you”. The second ad, *It's just a period* by StayfreeIndia⁷ showcases a young girl who talks about difficulties in menstrual experiences and promotes normalizing menstruation by saying, “it’s just a period”. The third ad, *It's Never Just a Period* by Bodyform⁸ illustrates menstrual experiences by promoting bodily representation and exposing concealment practices. Its message, “Never Just a Period” encapsulates that very essence. These three ads were chosen because their messaging contained different insights and conceptualized menstrual experiences from different perspectives, allowing the researcher to understand what is the message that my participants would prefer.

⁶ Appendix 1.1

⁷ Appendix 1.2

⁸ Appendix 1.3

Sampling

This thesis adapts purposive sampling, where participants are chosen with class and age in mind. Each participant identifies as an Indian, Woman, Urban Class, and between the age range of 25-35 years old. Throughout my sampling, I have ensured a comprehensive list of participants⁹ that demonstrates diversity regarding religious backgrounds and geographical locations. As earlier described, menstrual experiences are often connected to specific cultural and religious practices in India (Gopee, 2024).

A social media poster¹⁰ was created to recruit participants and uploaded on Instagram. According to the World Population Review¹¹ India has 392 million Instagram users, making it a fertile landscape to find a diverse Indian population. This thesis was designed to listen, understand, and amplify Indian urban-class women's menstrual experiences. The poster was shared on Instagram, and the response received was encouraging. I received a lot of volunteers who were extremely enthusiastic to share their menstrual experiences. Once I reached a cap of ten interviewees, I had to put out a poster¹² on Instagram which announced an end to the recruitment process. This is indicative of how women wish to genuinely voice their opinions about menstrual experiences which are mostly concealed. While recruiting, there was a conscious effort not to include friends and family to keep biases of familiarity away and reserve authenticity.

A total of ten participants¹³ are sampled for this study. Each woman who agreed to be part of this project was sent a message explaining the project. This was done to maintain transparency from the beginning and to make the participants aware of the sensitivity of the topic that could arise during the interview. This first message also included details of the personal information that would be included in this project, which was age, hometown, religious background, and gender. Ages 25-35 meant that these women can reflect on their past menstrual experiences and voice their needs for future menstrual experiences. The sample group shares the

⁹ Appendix 2

¹⁰ Appendix 3

¹¹ World population review link - <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/instagram-users-by-country>

¹² Appendix 4

¹³ Appendix 2

commonality of age, class, and nationality but brings diversity through religious backgrounds like Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Jain. They also hail from various parts of South India, North India, East India, and West India. This provides diverse intersectionalities of cultures within my sample. While my sample does comprise mostly of Hindu participants, it is also reflective of the majority Hindu population that exists within India's pluralistic ethos.

Data Collection

This study adopts one-to-one semi-structured interviews as its method of data collection. Qualitative interviewing allows the researcher to peer into the social world through their participant values and attitudes (Byrne, 2016). This aligns well with the goal of understanding the social attitudes and values of menstrual experiences, and how communication produces meaning of these experiences. Byrne (2016) states that open-ended interviews allow participants to express their feelings in their own words, which is paramount since this study also takes into account each participant's affective relationship with menstrual practices.

These interviews were designed to provide a close-up and meticulous view, which allows the participants to go in-depth about their life experiences (Byrne, 2016) helping identify and understand the various themes that stigmatize menstrual experiences, the role of communication in menstrual stigmas, and how communication can challenge these stigmas. This also explains why the sampling needed to showcase a pluralistic nature since life experiences are often dictated by culture and religion.

All ten interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted between one and a half to two hours. Zoom provided remote accessibility, allowing me to access participants all over India from the comfort of their homes. Along with convenience, this made my participants comfortable to indulge me with their answers to sensitive questions. Each interview was conducted in English, but one participant preferred to speak in a mix of Hindi and English as she felt that she could express some practices and experiences better. It was further translated to English due to my proficiency in the Hindi language. Each interview was recorded through

Zoom's built-in feature. As stated earlier, each interview was preceded with a consent form¹⁴ that declared the nature of the questions and permission to record each participant (Byrne, 2016). An interview guide¹⁵ was created to allow data generation through co-production, where the direction of the interview was adapted from the guide and steered by both parties while the interviewee produced open-ended answers based on their menstrual experiences (Byrne, 2016). The guide was broadly based on themes that were identified during the research process through relevant theories and previous literature. These themes were based on power, patriarchy, body, gender, communication norms, media and communication channels and affect.

Two pilot interviews were conducted for this study, where the interview guide was continuously revised to reflect newer findings, like the role of medical gaze in communication and family dynamics. This helped develop a robust interview guide that encouraged women to dive into diverse avenues that determined their menstrual experiences. Nevertheless, the interview guide served as a foundation and most of the questions proceeded based on the conversations and keeping the comfort of the participants as paramount. Ten interviews provided information that led to a saturation of data but was rewarding since each woman has menstrual experiences with individualistic subjective characteristics.

Data Processing

Once the qualitative data was assimilated through transcription, it was processed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2008: 79) broadly describe thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data. These themes are related to the research questions and consider patterned frequencies through a qualitative lens (ibid). Rather than using the term "theme" for this stage, I would like to use values or attitudes. During the first stage of coding, I looked for attitudes of power, patriarchy, menstrual stigmas, communication norms in lived experiences, and the power of media actors. This thematic analysis is positioned within what Braun & Clarke (2008) describe as inductive coding. Since inductive coding bears resemblance to grounded theory, where the data sets and themes share a symbiotic relationship (ibid). Although these themes, or in this case, values and attitudes, are loosely based on the

¹⁴ Appendix 5

¹⁵ Appendix 6

research questions and theoretical backing, the data further helped the research questions evolve. My position as a male demanded revision and rethinking, and through thematic analysis, I was not too constricted by my research questions but had a stepping-stone through theoretical understanding.

The pilot coding was done to find codes that emerged and the process involved highlighting quotes¹⁶ related to epistemological understanding as stated before. This research is also done at a latent level, where it looks at data three-dimensionally, exploring all dimensions to uncover underlying themes (Braun and Clarke, 2008) This can be seen while processing the pilot, I looked at descriptive codes that were found but also engaged with the data from a constructionist perspective, exploring how communication norms had constructed it. Latent-level thematic analysis usually involves a constructionist perspective (ibid). The pilot was transcribed on a Google Document and highlighted according to themes found. These codes were collated together¹⁷.

Braun and Clarke (2008) describe thematic coding in phases, which is to familiarise oneself with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review, define and name themes, and produce the report. While the pilot coding engaged in the first two phases, once the pilot codebook¹⁸ was made, I identified initial data-driven themes and found relations within them. Upon synthesizing the pilot codes, I continued with my data collection while constantly relooking at the pilot code book. After transcribing each interview onto a Google Document, I began to highlight the quotes and write the codes in the comments. Through this process, the pilot codebook was continuously refined to find interlinking relations between the codes¹⁹. Once all interviews were coded, the final codebook²⁰ was created with broader themes of “Stigma”, “Power and Patriarchy”, “Communication” and “Emotions”.

In the next chapter, the thesis dives into understanding the categories within these themes and subcodes that exist, along with connections found between them. This approach aligns with

¹⁶ Appendix 7

¹⁷ Appendix 8

¹⁸ Appendix 10

¹⁹ Appendix 9

²⁰ Appendix 11

Braun and Clarke's (2008), naming and reviewing phase where the data is analyzed, categorized, and synthesized to find connections. Within this research design, these themes have reshaped the research questions to make this project more inductive and qualitatively data-driven.

ANALYSIS

The following chapter explores menstrual experiences through inferences from the semi-structured interviews. The chapters are divided into two parts. The first part explains the societal attitudes that shape seclusion within menstrual experiences, and the second part analyzes how media narratives constructed and communicated through advertising reinforce menstrual stigmas that Indian urban-class women face.

PART 1: Experiences of Seclusion

The first part corresponds to the research question: What are the societal factors that stigmatize menstrual experiences in an Indian woman's daily life?

1.1. Power, Patriarchy, and Seclusion

Approaching the topic of menstrual stigma in India through the lens of cultural stigma and narratives of impurity leads to the untangling of norms around patriarchy concerning menstruation. It creates a space for a reflective contextual understanding of patriarchy, gender roles, and power in defining menstrual justice in India.

The analysis of the interviews shows that cultural menstrual stigmas play a vital role in Indian women's everyday lives, evoking feelings of seclusion, discrimination, and concealment. Most cultural practices and traditions around menstruation are steeped in concealment and seclusion, where women are made to feel inferior and impure, as Swati recalls,

[My family would tell me] I should not go to the temple, should not be eating pickles, should not be getting into the kitchen.

These restrictions reflect a cultural understanding of impurity, similar to Douglas' (2002) broader understanding of the human tendency to treat bodily emissions as dirt, which when transcend the body become matter out of place. It is essential to note that cultural stigmas are not homogenous around the country, which means women across India face different cultural practices based on

their religion, geographical location, and caste. Christina described a girl in her church who used to...

...go up in front of the church and ask people to pray for her because she's going through a lot of pain. But that was also a kind of coded language because you're speaking in public, although everybody knew what it was.

Jess describes a tradition of “celebrating menarche” prevalent in South India, whereas Mira, who hails from North India, highlights that, unlike South Indian women, North Indians have no such traditional ritual. However, they both face different concealment practices. Winkler (2020) conceptualizes how menstrual experiences consist of power struggles that materialize in daily life practices. The very idea of concealing menstruation and celebrating fertility is rooted in power struggles that most Indian cultures practice. Mira says: “I could never even talk to my father about menstruation, as it was against our culture,” indicating gendered power struggles, where men seem to influence the information about menstruation, even within close bonds, such as that between father and daughter.

Acknowledging the risk of homogenizing the cultural experience of menstruation helps one identify that women grapple with different identities that add complexities to the matter. These identities can be religious backgrounds, castes, and family practices. It points towards a need to identify patriarchal values that are coded within each identity and cultural practice, as it deems women as unwanted or weaker. An example of this is when Jess says: “ [In my house], a lot of neem leaves for cleansing are being hung around”. According to the Times of India (2024), *neem* trees are believed to have medicinal, herbal, and purifying properties that provide detoxification to the gut. In Indian culture, *neem* is also associated with the purification of the body and surroundings. Jess also recalls being forbidden to touch *tulsi* plants since they would *die*. *Tulsi* is considered to be a symbol of purity and divinity in India (TOI Religion, 2024). By restricting menstruating women from touching *tulsi* plants or hanging *neem* leaves around to purify the surroundings, there is a power struggle within these traditions that categorise menstruating women as impure, and thus, should be purified. The discrimination through *neem* also brings up another interesting point. Deepak (2018) states that menstruation in India finds

itself somewhere between sanctity and seclusion. If menstruation finds itself in sanctity, then how can it need purification? This point reinforces the duality of menstrual experiences in India, which left Jess feeling “confused” about her menstrual experiences.

With Winkler (2020), this study highlights that these menstrual cultural practices signify larger patriarchal narratives that reinforce women as the weaker gender in society. This perspective helps explain the everyday discrimination of menstruating women in India. While engaging with the conceptual understanding of know-aboutness, Goffman (1986) describes that knowledge about the stigma shapes the stigmatized individual’s ability and position to perform in society. Anamika describes:

See, I think generations ago, it [menstrual practices] was made because women were doing a lot of physical work, and they needed rest at that point in time. Probably that was the reason why they were told to sit aside. But I think as generations passed, there wasn’t any proper communication or proper insight given to the coming generations, so they just assumed a lot of things.

Within India, this know-aboutness is heavily framed through patriarchy, where information that’s communicated contains concealment or other injustices. What is important to focus on within these statements is not historical accuracy, but the patriarchal discourses and power struggles that women face during their menstrual experiences. It also shows the lack of agency that women feel in these traditional practices.

This stigmatized understanding of women’s ability to perform is what has resulted in cultural practices such as not entering kitchens, concealment of menstrual experiences from men, and an impure physical touch. An inference can be drawn that patriarchy has positioned women to be weak, who need to be instructed, and menstruation adds an impurity lens where women need to be restricted and purified to function within our society. This patriarchal discourse points to the socio-cultural stigmatization that believes in restricting women for their own good, since women couldn’t be aware of managing their menstrual experiences. This also reassesses the cultural understanding of menstruation, where cultural practices are seen as a result of patriarchy imposing itself on the community of women. It encompasses most women’s lives, from Hindu women of Northern India to Christian women of Southern India. These traditional menstrual

practices aren't theologically imbibed into the culture but are the modifications that are made from a patriarchal understanding of culture.

1.2. Community Formation in Adulthood

Hermes' (2023) conceptualization of cultural citizenship and community formation considers identity as paramount, where communities are formed from a collective alignment of identities, and a community that shares similar cultural experiences. By looking at menstruation as fundamental, women can be considered as a vast community. Through my interviews, a clear identification of this community emerged.

Saba spoke about how she “got more comfortable talking about her periods with her female friends,” pointing at a community formed through a meaningful bond that was built on similar menstrual experiences. Christina recalls:

Those [conversations] started coming after I grew up, much into adulthood, when we're starting to talk to friends who have menstrual health problems. Then, the more honest and deeper conversations about this started.

This indicates a community bond among friends around their menstrual experience after a certain age. Tina reflects: “Now my friends are married too, we talk about pregnancies and stuff”. It appears that age plays a role in agency, which leads to opportunities to break the concealment around female reproductive health and in turn, menstrual experiences. It seems to lead to a potential community formation in Indian urban women's lives. While this community is formed out of the seclusion that patriarchy has forced onto it, it has also evolved into a safe space for women to voice their menstrual experiences.

It is also necessary to contextualize these community-forming habits of women through the usage of new media technologies. As discussed earlier, the fourth wave of feminism has carried feminist values out of academics and back into everyday conversations with the intent of advocacy (Rampton, 2015). New media technologies have provided dialogic platforms for women to advocate for feminist ideologies (ibid.). Media technologies have positioned

menstruation as an opportunity (Winkler, 2020). While watching the Bodyform ad titled, *It's Not Just A Period*, that depicts women searching for answers to questions on the internet, Jess says: "... searching really stupid stuff on the Internet. All of that is shared. This is what happens."

New media technologies have contributed to digitalization, resulting in increased awareness about menstrual health and feminist discourses, and have worked towards mitigating seclusion and concealment that women feel when it comes to menstruation. There is a shift in daily interactions of older women with younger women, as recalled by Tina:

I recently tried period underwear, which was great. I felt liberated and I actually told my mom about it. When I visited India, I bought a couple of them, told her how to use them and she's actually finding it really easy, and I have two half- sisters as well, who also use them..

By making menstrual information more accessible through new media technologies, these Indian urban-class women are starting to engage with women of other ages around them and create a safer space for these women to take back agency of their menstrual experiences, actively working towards dispelling the otherwise dark secrets (Dawson & Innes, 2022).

Knowledge-sharing provides a chance for younger women to also empower older women to stand up against seclusion, as recounted by Anamika: "I have seen my mom telling my dad I'm on my periods, I can't do it, if you want you do it. It was not like that before." This active challenge to patriarchal attitudes could be a result of narratives seen in the digital space, which has aided in a community built on cultural information that actively works to debunk menstrual stigmas and bond over mutual menstrual experiences.

However, seclusion and concealment are strongly ingrained in women's early menstrual years. Most interviewees recall instances of their menarche, for instance, Vaish says,

I guess the first time that I recall, my mom was obviously involved. She was the first person that I went to because I didn't know what it was. And back then we didn't have the topic of periods or menstruation cycle in the schools before 8th grade. Kids are still getting to know one another. So it was very difficult for me to go and tell her, I didn't know what was going on, what I was going through.

There is a clear case of discomfort and fear associated with menstruation during early menstrual experiences. Most women at that age talk about their menstrual experiences with their friends, but these interactions don't always result in community bonds between younger girls. While Tina recalls: "My friends used to make fun of me because I got my periods late," Christina recalled a different feeling: "Even in school, we would look out for each other when it came to stains and stuff". Saba said: "I hated blood, so I would talk to my friends about it, but I didn't want to talk about it a lot". This indicates that early interactions about menstruating experiences are subjective to their understanding of their own body, agency, and empathy around them.

Many Indian urban women's early menstrual experiences are shaped by interactions within their families and school. It seems that in an Indian woman's life, menstrual experiences are often dictated by family values, attitudes, and norms rather than just cultural practices. While culture dictates the overall practices to be followed, it is the family that decides what practices they want their girl child to adopt. Nevertheless, patriarchy is a common theme that runs across every participant's family, with associated forms of seclusion. Their families are directed by cultural practices, but the degree of enforcement depends on the family's values.

1.3. Family, Gender, and Body

Unpacking patriarchy's role in shaping menstrual experiences brings up norms around gender roles, family dynamics, and bodily agency. Jess talks about how women see themselves as "the mother, the woman, the role of the nurturer, the role of, you know, taking care of the kids and all that".

Foucault's (1981) discourses on how bio-power is foundationally patriarchal and builds on power dynamics suggest how these connotations of power dynamics are what dictate gender roles in society. Jess describes the varied gendered roles that women are expected to follow, like nurturer, mother, and so on, suggesting that women are born with an expectation to follow gendered roles. It's crucial to identify the power struggles while understanding gender roles so that one can begin to see why menstrual experiences carry such stark power struggles and specific gender roles. Jess sums it up aptly when she describes the power struggles around

menstruation: “Men shouldn’t talk to you [about menstruation]. But if men talk to you, you just take it. You don’t talk back to men.” This indicates identification of gender and power in menstrual experience management. Men have no menstrual experience, so women shouldn’t discuss it with them. But if men do say something about menstrual experiences, women seem to be forced to accept and adjust to it. This is indicative of the fact that patriarchal culture has determined that men have the agency to talk about an experience they have never had. It also points towards why menstrual injustice and discrimination exist, since it is seen as a woman’s problem, not society’s. This inference mirrors the attitude that Douglas (2002) hints at with her claim that menstruation is seen as “matter out of place” and needs to be managed accordingly.

Jess's statement also hints at the lack of agency that women have over their bodies. Gender and agency play a key role in shaping menstrual experiences in India. Mira talks about how “a lot of things are just decided for you because you are on your period. I want to go for a hike. But *mai toh hike nahi kar sakti hu* [But I’m not supposed to hike]. *Ye sab sunna acha nahi lagta hai* [I don’t like to be told all this]. I would rather decide it myself.” Kim recalls her early menstrual experiences when she would often hear her relatives talk about how she: “has become a woman now” because she had her first menstruation.

While watching the ad titled, *It’s just a period*, Saba reflects on this lack of agency that women professionally face

I would want people to understand that even when I’m doing a job or I’m with clients, I can’t give my 100% for these two days [First two days of menstruation]. But the thing, it’s really weird. I’m also coming from a place where I don’t want to be that girl.

She then goes on to say

Maybe it’s a stigma that has gotten to me that makes me feel that I can push through it. It’s just a period. But that is wrong. I know it’s wrong but I still want to be the best version of myself.

The need to conceal menstruation in a professional setting is shared by a lot of interviewees. Both Anamika and Tina advocate for menstrual leaves, yet Tina also says: “It’s just odd asking

for a leave for periods, especially from male managers since they also feel odd and make me feel like I'm doing something wrong".

Through these statements, one can see how women feel an ingrained lack of agency because their menstrual experiences take place in a patriarchal setup that isn't equipped to deal with menstruation. Some participants, like Saba, seemed to reflect on this involuntary need to conceal their menstrual experiences. Shobna chalks it up as a "man's world where we just have to adjust within it". The lack of agency is a major hindrance to menstrual justice for Indian Urban Women. It also leads to concealment, where the better option seems to be to hide menstrual experiences because menstruation makes one look weak and impure. Interestingly, this lack of agency is especially faced by women in their earlier years of menstruation. Jess describes her earlier menstrual years as: "You think you understand your body and then you get your period and suddenly realize, it is no bodily autonomy". Menstruation seems to bring a sudden loss of agency in a young woman's life. During early years, this loss of agency can often translate into incidents of helplessness over one's own body. Anamika recalls an incident in school

...So probably I had gotten it [menstruation] while I sat on the bicycle, and I was told by my friends in the prayer hall that I'd got it. They told me that there is a blood stain on your skirt. But I got so scared that I just kept quiet till one o'clock. I was quiet. I could not go and tell my teacher that I've got it.

This moving memory shows how a lack of agency induces a feeling of helplessness. We see how information control through Goffman's concept of dark secrets (Dawson & Innes, 2022) results in this helplessness, yet Hermes's (2023) identification of affect in conversations, in this case, the feeling of helplessness, can help us identify the injustice and even challenge it. Some South Indian families celebrate their daughter's first menstrual experience. Tina describes this experience as a confusing phase

Both of my aunts and cousins who lived in Hyderabad, just family. So they just took an hour to come home with flowers, fruits, and sweets. It was an informal dinner.

During this celebration, Tina recalls that

...they came over and made a big deal about it. And I remember my younger cousin, he saw me wearing flowers and he's like, why is she being treated nicely? Why aren't we wearing those flowers? What's happening? And all of a sudden, I just felt like I couldn't share this with them. I kept hearing my mum saying, making stories up saying, oh, she's just preparing for her 10th grade, So we're just sending best wishes and she's going to go 10th next year and all that crap. And I was like, that's not true.

This points again to the lack of agency, where patriarchy has dictated that menstruation can be celebrated yet must remain concealed. During these early years, the interpretation of menstrual experiences evolves within the family. Families often dictate menstrual practices that a woman must go through at this age. Saba recalls: “I was growing up in a joint family²¹. So this was something that was not discussed at all. And even though I had two elder sisters staying in the same house with me, they didn't do a job in bringing it up.” Communication of menstrual experiences seems concealed because of family dynamics and values. These dynamics are often what shape a woman's menstrual experience and her understanding of gender roles and agency. The role of each family member is gendered, and usually, only the closest family members have agency in shaping menstrual experiences. In Saba's case, the stark memory of her sister not speaking for her menstrual rights indicates a sense of community that Saba yearns to feel from the women in her family. Shobna explains that mothers are usually the only ones responsible for their daughter's menstrual justice, recounting many times: “I remember asking my mother, like, why is all of this happening, and why am I supposed to hide it? And she said, it's society”. This reinforces that women have minimal agency when it comes to their own menstrual experiences, and look to their elders in the family, especially their mothers, for answers. But patriarchal norms seem to hinder communication between a mother and her child. Christina describes the confusion women face within her family:

So, growing up, it's very confusing, you're getting a lot of mixed messaging, right? On the one hand, there's a lot of shame that surrounds it because growing up, even your mom might be

²¹ In some Indian families grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts and cousins all live together. It's called a joint family.

comfortable talking to you about it, but in some homes, even the mothers are not comfortable talking about it. They say this is not something that the men in your family need to know.

Family values are often shaped and informed by cultural menstrual practices, including stigmas that exist in society at that time. However, families also provide a funnel that often filters out many cultural practices that promote stigmatization. After Tina had her menache celebration, she describes her experience with marriage proposals that started coming in.

I think my mom was the only one who said [to me], we're not gonna get you married. Please, you're gonna study and go ahead in life, be independent.

Christina also recalls her mother helping her “learn how to wear a pad with an open mind to explain everything”. This also indicates the importance of a mother in the family, where empathy and assurances go a long way in shaping a young girl's confidence to overcome menstrual injustice. It also indicates a sense of community that the mother and daughter share, as two women who must navigate through a patriarchal society.

Yet another interesting family dynamic to understand is the father and daughter relationship around menstruation. Vaish describes it as,

They don't actually understand it or maybe they feel like the daughters are growing up. Because they're not anymore that kid. Maybe that is the feeling that we [daughters] have and that's why they won't talk emotionally to their daughters about this.

This unwillingness of most Indian fathers to engage with their daughters' menstrual experience comes from larger gender roles within society and is the first instance that a daughter feels that they can't discuss everything with the opposite gender. But as we have seen, families can also function as a funnel and actively try to break the menstrual stigmas that society propagates. Saba compares her father-in-law's involvement in his daughters' menstrual experiences comparing it with her father

[My Father-In-Law] has two daughters. His involvement with raising children has been pretty bad. He's not been involved only basically. Never was empathetic towards their needs. So my mother-in-law only won't bring up periods with my father-in-law. Daughter's bringing it up is *Toh Door ki bat* [Far fetched]. [But My Father] was the first one to tell me don't worry. Sometimes I used tell him, don't trouble me. I'm on my period. He would just say, okay, and walk off. That's what I wanted.

This show of empathy allows a daughter to have agency over her own menstrual experience and helps overcome societal barriers of gender roles regarding menstrual experiences. Tina recalls her early years of menstruation: “ There were some things that I was happy about my father being okay, and my mom being more open with me, but I felt really sad for my friends on the other hand.” Family members have the power to influence a daughter's understanding of gender roles in menstrual experience. Mothers or other female members often smoothen menstrual experiences through empathy and assurances. Fathers can also play a role in actively breaking menstrual stigmas by promoting conversations around it and taking an empathetic route. Fathers can assure their daughters that menstrual experiences need not be gendered. This effort can also empower a daughter to be more open with other male members of the family. Tina talks about how she “went out of her way to normalize her periods with her younger brother”. This active effort by Tina to break menstrual stigma came from watching her father take an active step to break gendered norms.

In an Indian woman's menstrual experience, the power that resides in patriarchal gender norms and the lack of agency play a huge role in promoting menstrual stigma. They force the concealment of communication around menstruation, along with the misrepresentation of menstrual experiences. Kim talks about how: “..I never really knew what menstruation meant, because actually no one told me anything.” She goes on to say how scared she was when “she saw blood come out for the first time.” This forced concealment and misrepresentation can lead to unwanted surprises. Communication seems to be at the forefront of solving menstrual stigma. This also points towards what Young (2005) describes as bodily experience. Society refuses to engage with a woman's bodily experience and thus misappropriates menstrual experiences. It's also why a father tries to understand and empathize with his daughter's menstrual experience; she sees it as an active attempt to break bio-power, which, in turn, empowers her to engage with the

stigma head-on. From my interviews, there is a strong indication that this lack of agency and gender norms is practiced through the concealment of communication, highlighting the inherent role of communication and media representation in menstrual experiences.

Part 2: Communication Around Menstruation

This section delves into the communication norms in an Indian woman's daily life and how advertising plays a role in shaping and reshaping them. Here, the study seeks to answer: How does communication stigmatize Indian urban women's menstrual experiences, and how can advertising potentially challenge this?

2.1. Narratives, Information, and Education

Most interviewees addressed communication around menstrual experiences to carry the theme of concealment. It's important to understand the consequences of concealment and how they promote menstrual injustice. Tina recounted an incident with her school friend

So, she was actually shocked when I spoke to my dad [about menstruation] like: 'You tell your dad about that stuff? You're not supposed to!' I said: 'Why? Why am I not supposed to?' I mean, it's okay, right? He's my father. She said: 'No, you're not supposed to tell your father about it or your brothers about it'.

Menstrual stigmas dictate a lack of communication of menstrual experiences. Goffman (1986), has discussed how the know about-ness of stigmas is dependent on visibility, and social information is shared based on what can be seen. This know-aboutness also decides an individual's position in society and the information about that stigma (ibid). Since menstruation is usually physically concealed, its social information is also concealed. This implies that patriarchy has pushed the concealment of its communication too. Mira recounts: "I know I'm supposed to get my period and something's supposed to happen down there, but I didn't assume it would be blood."

It is not a shock to find that Mira wasn't aware of blood being involved in her menstrual experiences, because the know-aboutness around menstrual experiences promotes concealment. This is multiplied through the continued perpetration of gender discrimination and lack of agency of women. Since menstruation is often concealed from men, the only outlet of communication of menstrual experiences is with other women. This contributes to the community bond that women feel while interacting with other women. But while exploring this community bond, my interviews explained that the willingness to open up to other women comes later in life. Tina describes how her first menstrual experience was late in life

The reason why I wanted my period so bad was because it felt like I was missing out with my friends and the whole secret period-nation. It was something that just seemed cool. It felt like you'd get a superpower, and I kind of wanted it. I thought I would fit better in society. But when I did get it, I realized I was happy before, so why did I get this?

Saba recalls her conversations in school about menstruation by saying: "Coming from a family who are pretty modern, all my other friends experienced similar experiences. Although not all modern families are as forward in giving information to each other." Both Saba and Tina reflect on the kind of discourses that are present within society about menstruation. It seems that interpersonal communication about menstrual experiences during younger years can lack critical information about the experience itself. Saba talks about how her girlfriends and she opened up about their menstrual experiences later on in life: "and it helps her [Saba] learn new things." It points to the community bond within women that becomes stronger with age, agency, and understanding of patriarchal norms. Tina's experience illuminates another existing norm within communication, which is misinformation; the need to conceal information about menstrual experiences has led to narratives of misinformation about menstrual experiences. This misinformation promotes further stigmatization of menstruation. Jess furthers this argument by stating that: "A period automatically is assumed as a bad day". This assumption only furthers misinformation about menstruation.

Vaish talks about how assumptions and misinformation take center stage in a woman's professional life. Christina shares her thoughts on communication norms that are present in her workplace

And if you're really feeling off, you're losing your mind sort of thing, or you're having a lot of physical struggles. You're talking about it without talking about it [Menstruation]. Because in a workplace, you can't go and tell anybody, you can't tell your male manager you need a leave.

Christina reflects on the concealment in communication about menstrual experiences, citing menstrual leaves as a better option since it is uncomfortable to talk about it. This again points to menstrual injustice in professional spaces, where interpersonal communication needs to be improved. Earlier, the literature review had highlighted that the understanding of menstrual experiences suffers from its medicalization. This medical gaze carries hegemonic discourses that are formed from a patriarchal understanding of menstrual experiences. Swati describes an incident she had with a male gynecologist

So I had PCOD and I had a surgery done. I did not have a follow-up ultrasound done so I wanted one done. So I went to him [gynecologist] And I said, I got my periods 19 days late. I just want to know if everything is okay. And I want an ultrasound done. [the gynaceologist] asked me to lie down, he checked my stomach and he said wait for a few days. According to him. since I got my periods, it was okay now. But he didn't understand my worry. Then he explained the biology. I forgot what he said, and tuned out. I told him again that an ultrasound is required. He asked "Why are you worried? I don't understand why you came here?"

Swati points towards this biomedical gaze that has refused to engage with understanding menstruation as an experience. This medical gaze is shown through the gynecologist's attitude toward Swati's concerns, she goes on to say,

The doctor should be more understanding. [Doctors should ask] what's happening with you. Not behave like, why did you come here? Don't make me feel stupid for coming to you.

Women often feel apathy in their communication and interaction with gynaecologists, and share a particular disdain for male gynecologists. Jess specifies her distrust on the medical understanding of menstrual experiences because: “There’s no proper understanding on what exactly happens during menstruation, what a woman actually experiences. There’s always gonna be guesses on what can help”. Her understanding is that “male gynecologists tend to be a little less empathetic. Because they obviously can’t understand female bodies. I’m not saying they can’t be gynecologists. There just isn’t a lot of empathy involved in becoming a doctor.” There is a need for empathy in communication that women want from their gynecologists, especially male gynecologists. The medical gaze not only promotes apathy in communication, but it also promotes misinformation. When Tina describes her experience with gynecologists

Gynacs and all they used to say it was normal that I wasn’t getting my period, it’s fine. Just get married and everything will be okay. Now that I’m married, it had nothing to do with being married. They just meant being sexually active, but they [...] probably still can’t say it in India. But I wish they could or wouldn’t because then, as a young girl. I would understand.

Even medical communication about menstruation contains an active concealment of information. This concealment has promoted misinformation since gynecologists engage in conversations about reproductive health through clues like marriage. Tina also says

The whole cultural thing around being married was just pushed onto my 16-year-old thinking. This would actually help me [...] I’ve been with [My husband] for seven years, and I still have it sometimes. My cramps are bad, and I’m married now.

The narrative that a married girl has regular menstrual cycles seems to be an answer that a lot of women have been given. While Shobna hasn’t ever been to a gynecologist, a few of her friends had a similar experience

Oh yeah, I’ve heard a lot. I had gone for a study trip once, and a girl was puking. She was 21 and the first question the doctor asked was, Did you have intercourse? Do you think you could be pregnant? So I know what you mean. It is very commonly practiced because I also feel like

nowadays, gynecologists have experienced meeting women who have started being more open with their bodies earlier.

Tina and Shobna both cite how gynecologists' communication focuses on the misinformation that an active sexual life is all that it takes to have a healthy menstrual experience. This is also supported by the conclusions made by Gopee (2024) that there isn't enough research on the female body. An important point to note here is that medical studies are hyper-focused on understanding menstrual experiences from just a biological or reproductive standpoint. It sheds light on how this biomedical gaze, patriarchal norms, and taboo on sexual health have resulted in the spread of misinformation, where young women are told that their menstrual cycles will be corrected when they get married.

While most of the contexts within India promote the concealment of stigma, gynecologists' interactions are the one place where society is forced to interact with menstrual experiences. While concealment in their communication isn't directly seen, the cultural biases and concealment in society have promoted misinformation and further stigmatization.

School education also suffers from this bio-medical gaze and concealment. Vaish recalls: "The teacher in my school totally skipped the chapter on menstruation". Mira describes menstrual education as: "They just talk about the biology aspect. They don't talk about the cramps. They don't talk about how you feel at that time". She also added: "...in my class it seemed like the awkwardness was much lesser because it was an all girls school." Jess explained that: "There was only half a chapter in 10th grade about menstruation" and that it: "was only taught to the girls in the class." It seems that Indian education suffers from the concealment of menstrual experiences at various degrees. In some cases, menstruation is skipped over in school education. If it is taught, then often boys are asked to leave the room, and finally, if menstruation is taught as per the curriculum, it only engages with the biological aspect of it. However, both medical and school education promote discussions that engage with the biological implications of menstruation. From Mira's observation, it's clear that the socially acceptable way for schools to educate women about their menstruation is through its biological implications. This shared interest in promoting biological aspects of menstrual experiences indicates that institutions like

medicine and school education are also stigmatized. It leaves women with no institution that accurately communicates their menstrual experiences.

It's important to note here that the interviewees who were quoted above come from relatively bigger urban cities. From Roy et al (2024) and UN Women (2024), there is a massive wealth inequality between urban and rural spaces in India, which has led to a difference in the affordability and accessibility of female hygiene products. This perception has led to discourses that urban cities have successfully destigmatized menstruation. Christina has worked with NGOs²² to spread awareness about menstruation, she narrates

No, I don't see such similar ones [health campaigns] in cities. A lot of times I work with corporates who pay NGOs as part of their CSR²³ activities to go to the community and take up a lot of initiatives. So there they take up menstrual hygiene as one of their main topics because there's very low awareness in rural India about menstrual hygiene and menstrual health.

Previous research by Roy et al. (2024) showed an unequal divide in menstrual awareness between urban and rural areas due to higher period poverty in rural areas. Anamika who comes from a mid-sized town in India, shares her perspective

I think with my personal experience when I see my cousins who are in Bangalore [A bigger city] and where I was in my town, I think then you a lot of things which I didn't know and yeah accessibility can also be one thing where we are in a small town so you cannot get it everywhere and anywhere.

While menstrual hygiene remains a larger challenge in smaller towns and rural areas, tackling menstrual awareness by only focusing on menstrual hygiene disregards the stigmatization of menstrual experiences. It does not address how menstrual discourses are communicated, how much of it is concealed, and what the channels of misinformation are. Swati, who comes from a small town but has lived in metropolitan cities, says: “.. But not necessarily. You can be rich, but you have a very backward thought process. Money cannot change that about you.”. While

²² A common term used for Non-Government Organisations (NGO) that work for social welfare

²³ Corporate Social Responsibility

knowledge around menstrual hygiene has improved in urban cities, there has been negligible social justice done to increase knowledge about menstrual experiences, counter patriarchal norms, and make the experience less stigmatized. That might be why there are such few health campaigns in urban cities. Tina, who is from a bigger city, did have a health campaign about menstruation in her school, but this is what she recalled about it

...once we got there, they did an information session about period poverty. All that information just dumped onto you. And then they gave us samples of free pads to take back, which I didn't know what to do because I really didn't have my period. You're supposed to put it in your diary²⁴ and go back to the classroom because you shouldn't show it to the boys.

It's an example of advocacy that's done with ignorance, where menstrual hygiene is addressed, but does not engage with the communication norms of concealment and seclusion. This experience is subtly different from Kim, who comes from a semi-urban city and also had a health campaign where she said that

It was all girls. We were made to sit in the class, and they told us about menstruation and how important it is to use the sanitary pad and how safe it is to use it, and all of that, and they just gave us complimentary sanitary pads and left.

This shows that even though both parties got menstrual products to use, there seems to have been minimal or no attention paid to providing information in an empathetic way. Kim also said: "She would have liked it if they spoke more about why women need iron during their periods and stuff like that."

The interviewees echo the sentiment that health campaigns need to be done in urban cities since there is still much knowledge about menstruation that is hidden from women. They agree that the focus should also be on empowering women with knowledge about their menstrual experiences. In fact, digitalization has helped ease information about menstrual experiences and the female body. Women like Jess are turning more to the internet for information about their menstrual experiences: "You start looking things up. That's what happened to me. I started

²⁴ Notebook

looking things up when I was 19, and then gradually, by the time I was in my late twenties, I understood completely well on what happens”. She also credits her knowledge about “ at least awareness of what a period is, the existence of the black bag is almost completely gone” as information she got from the internet. This shows that women of a certain urban class might understand the importance of menstrual hygiene, but they still need more answers about their menstrual health. Through digitization, the media has provided a gateway for this information. While admitting the pitfalls of the internet, Shobna still sees it as a means of hope: “Not sure if it’s all true because it’s so unverified, but at least we can read about it somewhere.”

By synthesizing the information from the interviewees, the reasons for concealment and misinformation in communication boil down to power and patriarchy. At younger ages, cultural practices within a family shape the understanding of menstrual experiences. It is also further shaped by the communication with close friends and family. Women yearn for better communication channels that spread awareness about their menstrual experiences. Women experience a lack of agency while talking to gynecologists and feel like these communication norms carry apathy. They also point towards a narrow understanding that gynecologists engage with, which is mostly biological. Even school education suffers from this medical gaze, where only the theoretical biological process of menstruation is taught rather than menstrual experiences. Advocacy done by health campaigns for menstruation suffers a similar fate of focusing on menstrual hygiene and spreading biological awareness. Anamika says that: “What I feel is nobody is doing it because they want to spread awareness. They’re doing it because of their duty, and I don’t see any intention behind why they’re doing it. “

Additionally, advertising plays an essential role within the current menstrual awareness landscape. Through previous research by Yagnik (2014), an argument can be made that Indian media narratives around menstruation have the power to simultaneously reflect and dictate society through their narratives. Since menstruation is such a concealed topic in India, advertising and branding of female hygiene products is one place where there could be active communication about menstrual experiences.

2.2. Advertising and Affective Implications

The hegemonic narratives that are used as insights in Indian advertising are forced to give up on concealment yet hardly contribute to menstrual justice. None of the women who participated in this study trusted advertising to accurately represent their menstrual experiences. Mira says: “*Jab period ads aata hai toh* I look for the skip button [I’m just waiting for the skip button when I see a period ad]” whereas, Shobna adds: “I don’t take sanitary pad ads seriously anymore because they are so fake”. There is minimal resonance in the insights that menstrual ads are built on the lives of their consumers and target audience. Christina expresses her frustration while explaining that

They use blue liquid, and then they show a silent girl who’s suddenly ready to take on the universe after she puts on the pad, it is just absurd territory. Rarely are these ads empowering or meaningful in any way. It’s just literally just meant to sell the product. That’s it.

Menstrual ads are strife with these inaccuracies in their advertising narratives. By showing menstrual blood as blue, advertisements made for menstrual products misrepresent the true form of menstrual blood. When menstrual ads move into this absurd territory, they become strong carriers of misinformation and actively contribute to menstrual injustice. This misinformation is reflected in most activities that are shown in menstrual ads. It promotes the feeling of shame and embarrassment that’s already associated with menstrual stigma.

Most interviewees found these misinformed narratives in the first ad titled, *Stayfree #DinTumhareSaathChalega*²⁵. Vaish commented on the ad’s claim that these products can last up to 12 hours

Because of these advertisements only, right? We keep thinking, even I have thought very early in my life, it is that I can keep it for 12 hours, nothing’s gonna happen to me. But once I started getting all these infections, then I realized that this is not what it is and this is not what I should follow.

²⁵ Days Move Along With You

Misinformation like this can be extremely harmful, with serious repercussions like infections. These ads set unrealistic expectations for younger women. While watching the same ad, Tina recalled another ad she had watched.

There was like a limited mobility sort of a thing. Then suddenly she puts the pad on, and she can jump up and do stuff. I thought that would be the case. But on the contrary, when I did get my period, and I did put my super wings pad on, nothing like that happened, because I basically couldn't jump or skip or do anything at all. I was in bed, ridden with pain. I thought getting your period is kind of like having a superpower. Because as soon as she put the pad on, she was jumping up and going around out and about. I couldn't do anything like that. So I kind of thought that was mixed messaging with the blue ink and the jumping around.

This incident illustrates the repercussions of how misinformation about menstrual experiences confuses young girls. When they see women who wear pads and perform sport activities, it begins to build an impression in their minds. When they can't do these activities, they start questioning their bodies and experiences. In an environment where menstruation often faces only concealment, it's not surprising that it's much harder to dispel misinformation. It reinforces that advertising and branding of female hygiene products can both reflect and dictate menstrual experiences. Jess says these ads are harmful since: "I'm gonna be very impressionable. I'm the kind of child who is really hopeful. When I see an ad where it says if I use Stayfree or if I use Whisper, I'm gonna be much more active. I tend to want to use the product, but when I'm not active, I think something's wrong with me." There is a promotion of confusion, shame, and embarrassment that sets in with this misinformation. With age, Indian urban women start understanding their bodies and seek to take back their agency. Then, this confusion turns into apathy or rage towards menstrual ads, where women assume that most ads will propagate similar misinformation.

Understanding how menstrual ads are framed is important. Jess shares her feelings by saying: "The idea of looking at a period as unhygienic or a sanitization problem itself is incorrect." A lot of women resonate with the idea that menstruation hasn't been framed to show its complexities. This narrative framing was a topic of contention when the next menstrual ad was discussed with the participants.

The ad titled, *It's just a period*, evoked a few responses. Jess says that the ad was well done: “But, again, there is an attempt to take away the seriousness of it by calling it just a period”. She goes on to say “For an ad, it's better than the ones I've seen for sure. But, again, your attempt at normalizing a period should not take away its seriousness.” Over here, the narrative that it's just a period indicates an attempt to conceal true menstrual understanding by oversimplifying experiences around it. While the annoyance with the message “it's just a period” was voiced by some interviewees, others expressed a genuine connection with the ad. Tina described the messaging as “ [...]this ad hit home because this makes more sense. Like all the young girls need assurance because, it's normal.” Tina's referred to a particular scene where the young girl felt ashamed while disposing of her sanitary pad: “[I had to use] My parents' bathroom because my grandmother didn't want to see the period and everything. She said, when you're on your period, just use that bathroom because she was just all about cleanliness.”

Tina's statements reflect a genuine connection to the narrative since they represent a lived menstrual experience through an empathetic framing. Mira vehemently agreed with the representation in this particular ad by saying: “It started with a very realistic face. A common man, a common girl. I could relate to her and her looks. This has happened to me. Not happy, chubby”. Here, there is a relatability in the creative choices made in terms of representation. Christina reflected on the messaging by saying: “If you're talking about the first time it's happening [menstruation] to somebody, I think then that messaging is really good.” A sentiment that this message is a good start for younger girls is shared by a few other participants. It points to the need for media narratives to use empathy to inform young girls that menstrual experiences are perfectly natural and nothing to be embarrassed about or ashamed of. It also points out how advertising through lived experiences and empathy speaks volumes to women.

This empathetic framing of narratives was also highlighted by women while watching the ad by Bodyform titled, *It's never just a period*. Swati watched this ad, took a long pause, and said that

We do need our rest time. That does not mean that we don't demand equality. It has nothing to do with it. It's a biological thing that happens, but even when it is happening, you need to give us equal respect or equal opportunities.

Her statement indicates a genuine plea that menstrual experiences need to be engaged from a human rights perspective. This is similar to Manorama and Desai's (2020) framework of menstrual justice that views menstruation from a human rights perspective. Vaish found the storytelling of the ad to be “genuine” by saying: “... the drop of the blood. That was good, that actually spoke about it. Like it's not like a flower, butterfly, no Indian twist that does not show us the truth.” The fact that the correct representation of blood triggered a feeling of joy in her speaks to the importance of representing lived experiences as compared to misinformation that is usually propagated. Through empathy and representation, menstrual ads make women feel a genuine connection with the brand. This is especially true in a stigmatized media landscape where most menstrual ads only push their consumers away from their brand through blatant misinformation. They invoke feelings of confusion, shame, and embarrassment.

There were a lot of scenes within the bodyform ad that had accurate and destigmatized representations of menstrual experiences. Kim pointed out that she had a similar experience of missing her periods like the girl in the ad: “...a fear that oh my god I’m not getting my f***king period. Why is it? What’s wrong? ” Tina empathetically rejoiced at the representation of blood as a jelly-like clot in the ad: “Oh my God, they've addressed something that nobody ever says. I thought it was blood, and it's supposed to be liquid. But no, it’s jelly.”

While all interviewees appreciated the message “it’s never just a period”, some participants didn’t feel comfortable watching this advertisement with people, especially family. Swati said: “The context was different. It speaks to the same taboo. But if you show that on India TV, in my family, they wouldn’t leave. They would change the channel.” Mira and Saba also expressed a similar concern. Kim said: “Maybe it’s time to shock people into seeing what it really is”. While the Bodyform ad, “It’s Never Just a Period” wasn’t necessarily made for an Indian context, there is something to learn from the framing of empathy and the importance of showing menstrual experiences. It could be adopted to show Indian menstrual experiences.

From Escalas's (2004) understanding of how advertisements connect to the affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses of the consumer, there is a connection that brands have with their consumers' emotional responses. This can be seen in Jess's summary of how the Bodyform ad connected with her,

It was by far the best ad I've seen [bodyform ad]. Everything was a shared experience. Seeing actual blood in your underwear in school, not seeing blood in your underwear, actual showing of what it looks like is what stood out the most, and I am so thankful that they didn't shy away from it because there's nothing to shy away from.

Through the interviewee's responses, it's clear that most menstrual ads in India widely promote misinformation, and their storytelling about menstrual experiences comes from a patriarchal lens and medical gaze. Showing misinformed activities like jumping and skipping makes younger girls feel a sense of embarrassment or shame if they can't do the same. With age, this evolves into a feeling of confusion towards these narratives, which in turn starts to harm the connection that a brand wants to build with its consumers. Instead, these women voiced their appreciation for advertising narratives that promote advocacy and are built on lived experiences, where menstrual justice is imbibed into the essence of the narrative, and it is framed through an empathetic framing. Rather than the approach of reinforcing existing menstrual taboo, the participants related more to that sought to empathise, relate, notice, and inform. These ads create a brand image that's sincere and supportive, reminding women of the community bond that they share.

An argument can be made here that an affective and empathetic brand image would make a stronger connection with their consumers, who are women, which is the goal of any advertising or branding campaign.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been informed by Hermes' (2023) art of listening, pinpointing its importance by stating that cultural citizenship benefits by taking distance and listening generously. Listening allows the identification of power, affect, and identity in popular culture, and listening with respect results in hearing exactly what popular culture says (ibid). This research has attempted to illuminate how listening is not only a tool for identification but a stepping stone for change. If society and media actors adopt norms of listening generously and respectfully, it may lead to enhanced menstrual justice, improved communication, and a means to dispel misinformation or dark secrets (Dawson & Innes, 2022). It also increases the credibility of advertising and helps brands connect better with their consumers. An interviewee, Jess summed this up perfectly when she said: "A period is automatically assumed as a bad day." This patriarchal norm of assumption is what has shaped today's cultural practices, communication channels, and media narratives that women face in their menstrual experiences. Winkler (2020: 10-12) describes menstruation as fundamental because it is shaped by power relations, which has resulted in gendered expectations that women are subjected to. This research has argued that the balance of these power relations is decided through patriarchal norms, setting these gendered expectations.

This thesis has engaged with menstrual stigmas through the lens of cultural citizenship (Hermes, 2023) and menstrual justice (Manorama and Desai, 2020), exposing the implications on human rights that reside within menstrual experiences and how media narratives help push or negate women's causes. Looking at menstrual experiences in daily life helps us challenge these injustices. Through the review of previous literature and one-on-one discussions with women across India, this study sought to answer two research questions.

RQ1) What are the societal factors that stigmatize menstrual experiences in an Indian woman's daily life

A broader answer to the question is that menstrual experiences are constructed through societal norms that are inherently patriarchal in nature. Patriarchic structures hinder menstrual experiences by finding their way into contextual menstrual experiences, and patriarchal norms

attach labels like impurity to menstrual experiences. Here, it is important to highlight the merit of contextualizing this impurity in menstrual practices.

Indian urban class engages with menstrual experiences through a duality of impurity and fertility. This idea is perpetuated through intersecting norms of religion, class, and caste. The understanding of menstruation in India lies between sanctity and seclusion (Deepak, 2018), and impurity and fertility within menstruation are practiced through both seclusion and sanctity. This dichotomy of seclusion and sanctity can be seen in menstrual practices like discouraging or banning women from entering temples, yet celebrating their menarche as the onset of “womanhood”. Both of these discourses encompass gendered power struggles within Indian society, with neither of them representing menstruation as it is. This power struggle is a result of patriarchal norms that shape menstrual experiences. It results in Indian urban women experiencing a lack of agency throughout their menstrual experiences, shaping most cultural stigmas in menstrual experiences. These instructions carry patriarchal norms of injustices like discrimination that remove agency from women during their menstrual experiences.

It’s important to note that even the narrative of sanctity in menstrual experiences within contributes to stigmatization because of power struggles. This is present in the lack of agency that Tina faced during the celebration of her menarche, or the cultural practice of keeping menstruating women away from *tulsi* and *neem* leaves that Jess faced.

Lack of agency also impacts women’s understanding of their menstrual experiences, bodies, and gender roles. It results in a lack of critical information that women deserve, for instance, Mira’s lack of awareness that menstruation involves blood. This lack of agency is especially seen in early menstrual experiences of young women, where concealment is so strong that incidents like staining can induce a feeling of helplessness. During these early years, agency highly resides with the woman’s family. They moderate a young girl’s menstrual experience and contribute to how girls make sense of gender roles, like Jess’ understanding: “the role of mother as a nurturer.” These gender roles are socially perpetuated by religion, class, and caste, but moderated by family values. Indian urban-class families can act as insulation to these gender roles, like Saba’s father, who spoke about menstruation with his daughter. Young girls look up to their mothers for information and empathy during their menstrual experiences. Most mothers

provide young girls with information about menstrual hygiene. Christina's mother actively sought to normalize menstruation by providing menstrual hygiene and social information about it. Mothers also act as insulators from stigmas. It is seen in Tina's mother's refusal to get her married just because she started menstruating. This also points to a community formation, where mother and daughter navigate through this patriarchal setup. This community bond only becomes stronger when they reach adulthood and gain agency, and often aids in empowering women and promoting empathy through communication.

Indian urban women face menstrual stigmas that are constructed from patriarchal norms that promote gendered power struggles. These power struggles can be seen in menstruation being labeled as impure, and how this impurity takes various forms to induce seclusion amongst women. Inspecting this impurity in cultural menstrual attitudes shows us that menstruation is fundamental (Winkler, 2020) since it encompasses various injustices concerning women's lack of agency and knowledge about their bodies. It highlights the role of families that are contextual to religion, class, and caste within India, and how it defines gender roles and societal attitudes. In a heterogenous context like India, cultural norms must be understood as a product of the intersection of class, religion, caste, geographical location, gender, and patriarchy. Families can dictate cultural practices that are mandated during early menstrual experiences and also shape gendered roles in a young girl's understanding of menstruation. Yet, it allows for a community formation of women within families and familial bonds through their shared menstrual experiences. Mothers and daughters benefit from this community bond, which could lead to the empowerment of menstrual experiences and communication that promotes menstrual justice through empathy. To do so, it's important to understand the role of communication within the stigmatization and empowerment of menstrual experiences.

RQ2) How does communication stigmatize Indian urban women's menstrual experiences, and how can advertising potentially challenge this?

Indian urban women face communication norms of concealment and misinformation. These communication norms promote menstrual injustices and further stigmatize menstruation. Goffman's (1986) concept of "know aboutness" of social information about menstrual

experiences is communicated through patriarchal norms that promote the concealment of menstrual experiences.

Only a few communication channels engage with menstruation. In school education, menstruation is taught through a biological lens, where girls like Mira learned nothing about: “cramps and so on”. Education and advocacy suffer from a bio-medical gaze and are done through a narrow perspective of menstrual hygiene (Manorama & Desai, 2020). The scientific and media knowledge of menstruation suffers deeply from Indian Upper caste biases (Gopee, 2024). Current medicalization of menstruation also focuses on engaging with the biological aspect of menstrual experiences. This medical gaze frames MHM drives in India, which ironically claims to destigmatize menstrual experiences. Instead, they exclusively look at menstruation through an impurity lens and adopt WASH initiatives to tackle it. These initiatives spread menstrual hygiene awareness in rural India but are seldom found in urban cities. Interviewee, Christina says that NGOs assume that urban cities don’t require it since menstrual hygiene awareness is present.

This bio-medical gaze forms communication practices that further promote its concealment and misinformation. It also signals that gynecologists are influenced by cultural biases and patriarchal values. Patriarchy has always viewed the male body as normal, sidelining female bodies and lived experiences (Young, 2005). It pushes the idea of seclusion and disgust towards menstruation. This bio-medical gaze brings up misinformation, similar to what Tina cited about a gynecologist who told her that marriage would “regularise” her menstrual cycles. Most interviewees felt that misinformation in medical communication promoted feelings of confusion during their younger years, leading to apathy later.

This refusal to engage with menstrual experiences through menstrual justice is also seen in the communication that younger girls face. Young girls have close to no agency when it comes to their menstrual experiences. Jess feels that if she had been given more information about menstruation as a child, she could have been mentally prepared for it. This concealment and lack of agency is also seen in schools, where girls don’t discuss their menstrual experiences much. Here, community bonding may look slightly different. Tina described facing seclusion from girls

in her school because she had late menarche. In later years, many women found liberation in this community bond that was formed through empathic interpersonal communication.

Rampton (2015) explains the fourth wave of feminism as a space where feminism is coming back into public discourse through media technologies and digital spaces. It points towards the increased agency that women enjoy through information. However, there is a risk of assuming that feminism will flourish in democratic digital spaces since hegemonic patriarchal discourses could loudly counter feminist discourses (Rampton, 2015). Nevertheless, media narratives hold the potential to spread awareness, especially now with the fourth wave of feminism, which positions menstruation as an opportunity (Bobel, 2020). Within this space, advertising narratives can reflect and dictate communication around menstrual experiences for Indian urban women (Yagnik, 2014). Ironically, most menstrual ads promote damaging misinformation and further concealment. All my interviewees voiced their dissatisfaction with current advertising narratives, feeling apathy towards them. In the advertisement titled *#DinTumharaSaathChalega*²⁶, Anamika pointed out the misinformation within the advertisement that guarantees twelve-hour use of Stayfree pads can lead to infections. The participants also saw concealment in the messaging of the advertisement titled “It’s just a period,” but the advertisement still resonated with them. They appreciate the attempt to normalize early menstrual experiences for younger girls. Some of them emphasize the importance of communication to promote menstruation as an experience, pushing the idea that it’s more than just a period.

The ad “It’s never just a period” resonated with most interviewees, with many appreciating the display of lived experiences, not shying away from menstrual blood, and even addressing the fear of late periods. This ad evoked empowerment and empathy from the participants. However, some interviewees pointed out that they might not feel comfortable enough to watch this with their family or in-laws. It points towards a need to represent contextual lived experiences to connect with the experiences of Indian urban women.

²⁶ Days move along with you

It's also important to note the power that these menstrual ads have, where narratives shown in these ads shape a young girl's expectations of menstrual experiences. However, these menstrual ads revert to misinformation, resulting in false expectations like being able to jump around freely while menstruating, thanks to sanitary pads. Escalas (2004) shows us how advertising narratives help brands connect with their audiences. Since menstrual ads have the power to dictate and reflect societal attitudes toward menstruation, they can also push for menstrual justice . Creating advertising narratives that push menstrual justice, that are born from insights of lived experiences and are communicated through empathy, will create a stronger brand connection with women who are the target audience.

Brands can turn to the communication that women use to bond with each other through cultural citizenship (Hermes, 2023) for answers to dispel myths around dark secrets (Dawson & Innes, 2022) and authentically represent menstrual experiences.

Limitations and Future Research

Understanding the menstrual justice perspective requires a social deconstruction of menstrual experiences to identify these injustices. By addressing only Indian Urban Women, this study is situated within a smaller, albeit significant population of women in India. The injustices promoted through communication and patriarchal practices that an Indian rural woman faces may be removed from the ones identified within this thesis. Another limitation of this study is the lack of religious diversity in sampling. The overwhelming Hindu participation might overshadow the nuances of other minority religious nuances that are present among the participants, some of whom are Muslim, Christian, and Jain. Although it has been clarified that menstrual stigmas lie in patriarchy and not theology.

Lastly, the question of my position as a researcher within this research as a man. While the methodological standpoint was certainly inspired by sciences from below (Harding, 2008), there is no doubt that my position puts me at a disadvantage since I am a male with no menstrual experiences. Yet, my effort to listen generously has made me better informed about menstrual experiences. Further research around this can be done by applying this menstrual justice

framework to examine other parts of India, especially rural India. This will help gauge whether India has moved forward in the destigmatization of menstrual experiences.

In conclusion, let's draw attention to the art listening and the importance of affect. By identifying affect and emotions through listening, one begins to see how advertising narratives can induce feelings that cripple menstrual experiences. It also identifies narratives that induce feelings that challenge and empower women. This can have a real impact on societal attitudes towards menstruation and can contribute significantly to challenging menstrual stigmas in an Indian urban woman's life.

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APPENDIX

This section contains tables and pictorial representations of sample selection, Advertisements shown, and the data analysis process. It also includes the recruitment process and consent form given out to the participants.

1. Advertisements

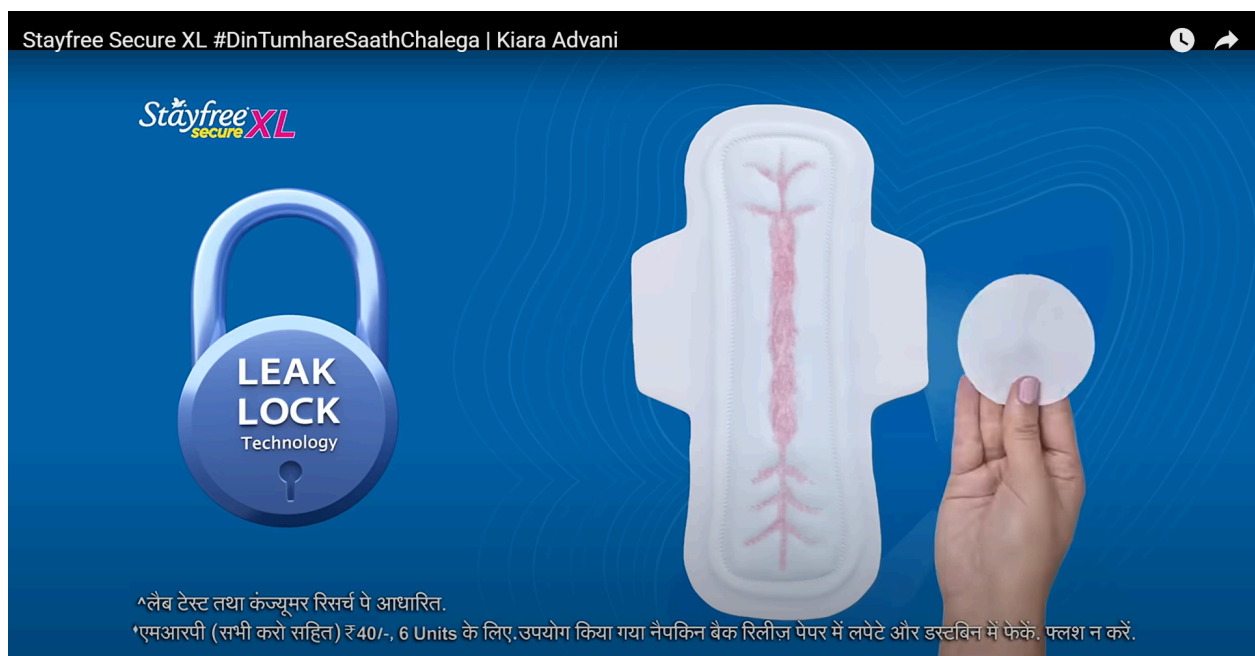
1.1 Stayfree Secure XL - #DinTumhareSaathChalega

The objective of #DinTumhareSaathChalega [Day Moves Along With You] is to advertise Stayfree's Secure XL as sanitary pads that provide twelve-hour leak protection during menstruation. The ad features Indian Bollywood actress Kiara Advani. Kiara Advani owns "Sweet Bakes" with her friend, which seems to be a home-run bakery. In the advertisement, Kiara Advani receives a lot of online orders and their delivery boy isn't working on that day, so Kiara takes it upon herself to do the delivery. Just then her friend tells her "You'll make the delivery today? On your periods? Did you forget that you are on your periods?". Kiara looks back at her friend and says "Yes, assume I have forgotten my periods." We then see her place the baked good in a box, carry it, excitedly get onto a scooter, and ride away smiling. Then we cut to a product shot of the sanitary pads which says leak-lock technology and shows a pad with pinkish blood on it. It then cuts a similar shot with the pad and copy that says "upto 12 hour protection". The ad ends with the message "with Stayfree Secure XL #DinTumhareSaathChalega [Day Moves Along With You]".

[Link to the advertisement #DinTumhareSaathChalega](#)



Product Shot





1.2 Stayfree India - It's Just A Period

The objective of the advertisement “It’s Just A Period” is to normalize conversations about periods for young girls who have their first period. The establishing shot is a teenage girl who says “Mere periods shuru ho gaye [My periods have started]” straight to the camera. We then cut to shots of elderly men and women, presumably her family members, who talk about how she feels unsure of her periods, how she gets scared to sit next to anyone because she may have stained, how she feels ashamed to change her pad at home since they have only one washroom, how she is unsure of how to dispose of her pads since she no one talks to her about it. Then the narrator comes in with the message “She may not understand what she is going through, but just wants to hear that you do. Over 1 million women get their period every day, your daughter could be one of them. This Daughter’s Day let’s tell her *It’s Just A Period*.”

[Link to the advertisement It's Just A Period](#)

It's Just A Period



Stayfree

periods have started.

It's Just A Period



Stayfree

I can't even sit close to anyone

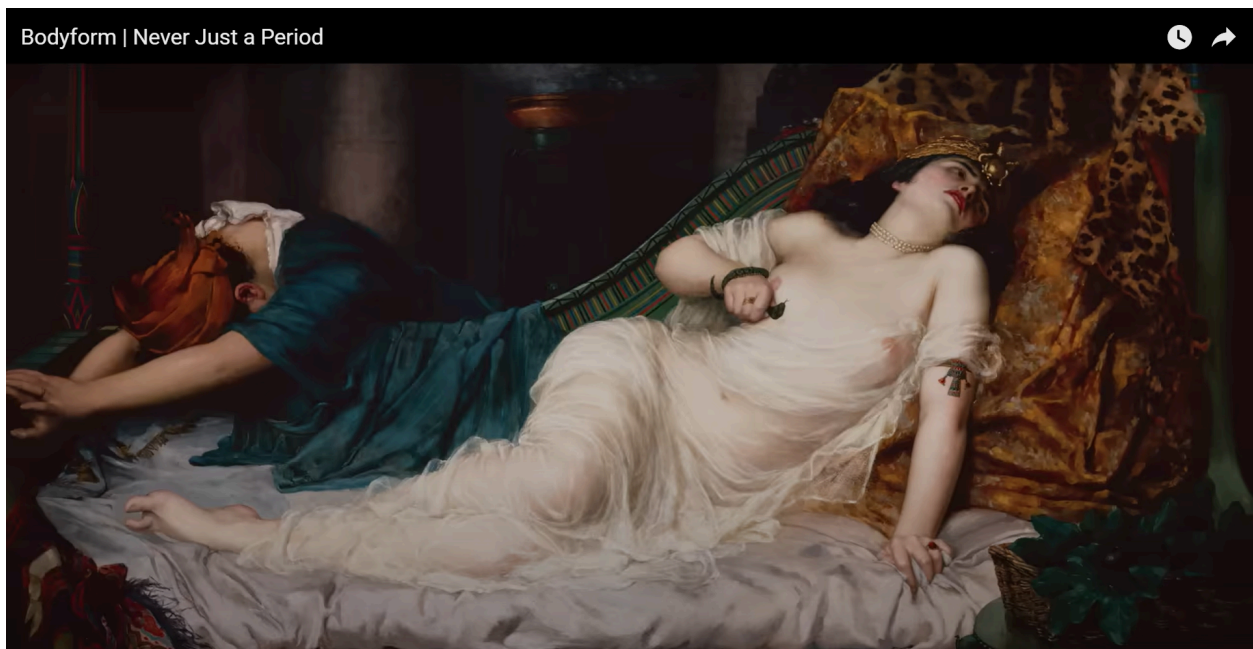


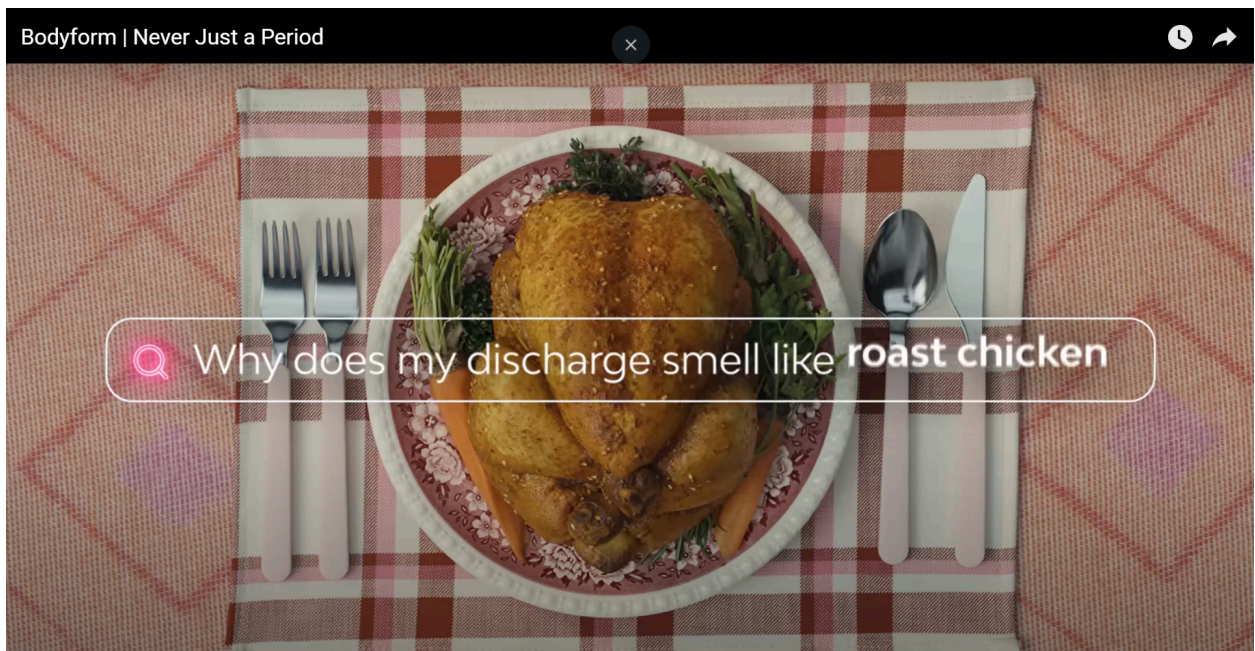
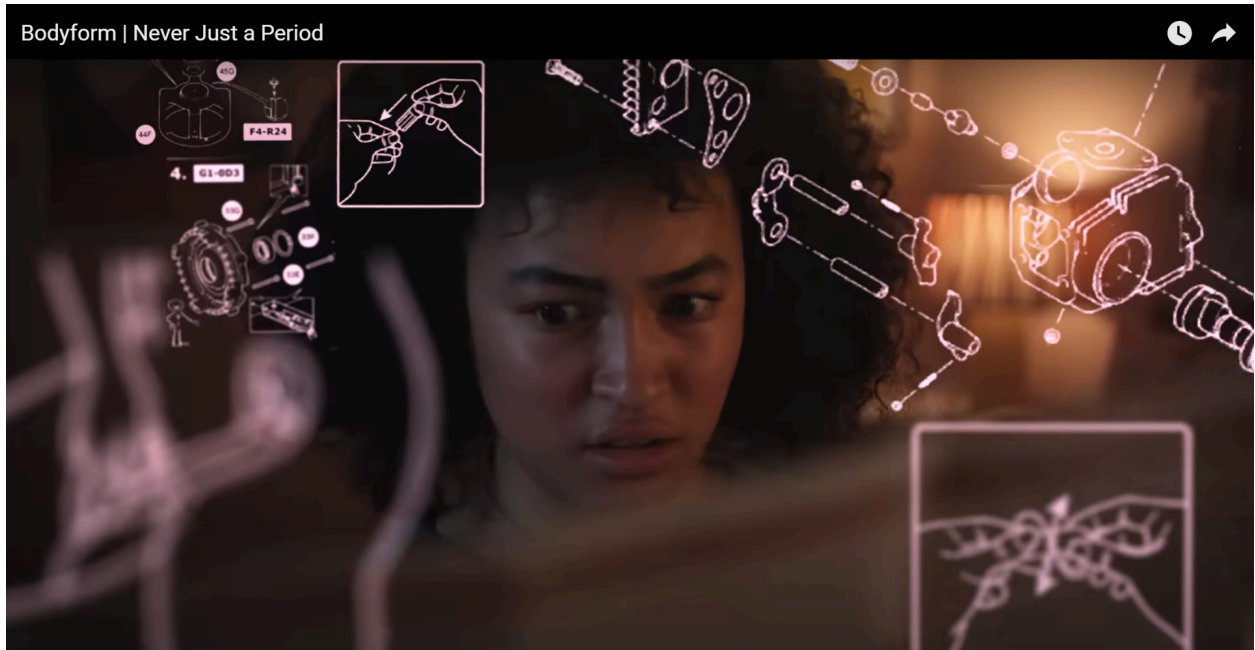
1.3 Bodyform - Never Just A Period

The objective of “Never Just A Period” is to highlight the importance of understanding women’s bodies and put forward the message that menstrual experiences are more than just periods. The establishing shot is an orchestra of women starting in a room with red streamers flowing from the ceiling. We then see blood dripping and we see a young girl discover that she got her period and looks confused. We then see an animated uterus enter the frame and it takes out a bit of it, Then we have jump cuts of various paintings of women lying down, and we then see a frame with the copy “Why do girls still see blood in their pants and think they are dying”. We then cut between various scenes of women struggling to try tampons, women searching on the internet for reasons why their discharge smells, and Women who seem extremely confused as to why they haven’t got their period. Then we see a woman who visits her male gynecologist because she is having period cramps but the gynecologist says it’s just a period. We then see the paintings again roll their eyes with a copy that says “It’s never just a period”. We then see a woman looking at a jelly-like clot on their sanitary pads and laughing, women changing her pad while she is breastfeeding, The copy says “It’s messy, it’s life”. We see a young girl teaching her friends a paper-modeled uterus, the kids are painting and drawing on the sanitary pads, we then see paintings of women from different races We then see a copy that says “What do you wish to have

been told?”. The ad ends with the message “It’s time for a world that actually understands our bodies”.

[Link to the advertisement It's Never Just A Period](#)





Bodyform | Never Just a Period



Bodyform | Never Just a Period



Bodyform | Never Just a Period



IT'S NEVER JUST A PERIOD

Bodyform | Never Just a Period



WHAT DO YOU WISH YOU'D BEEN TOLD?



IT'S TIME FOR A WORLD THAT
ACTUALLY UNDERSTANDS OUR BODIES

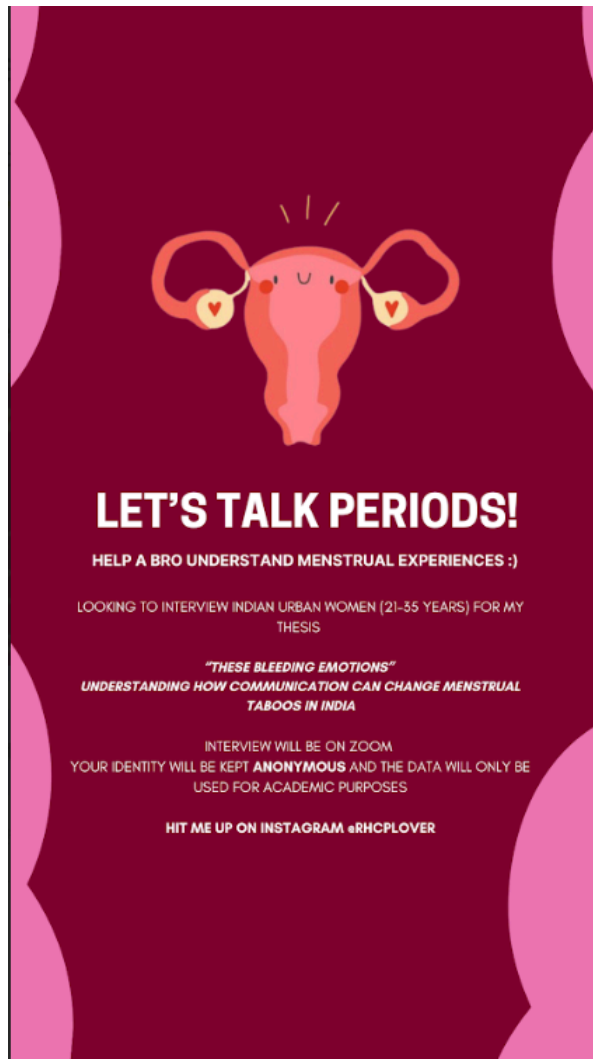
2. Participant Details

Names have been changed

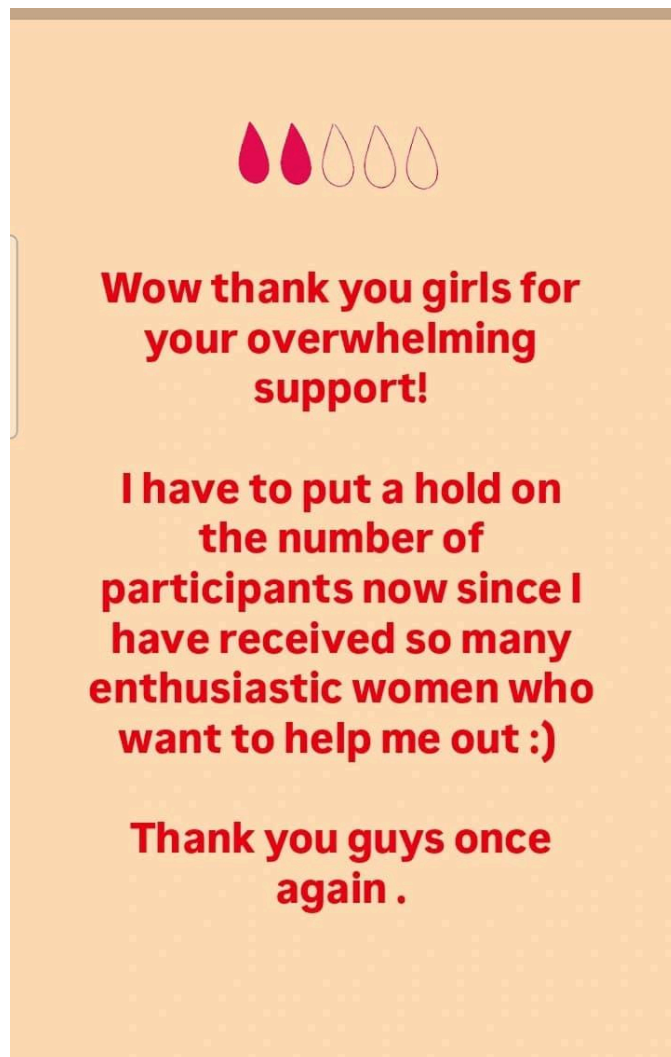
Name	Age	Hometown	Religious Background
Jess	30	Bengaluru	Hindu
Swati	32	Sambalpur	Hindu
Christina	32	Bengaluru	Christian
Saba	30	Mumbai	Jain
Mira	26	Delhi	Hindu
Tina	28	Hyderabad	Muslim
Anamika	27	Chintamani	Hindu
Vaish	27	Hyderabad	Hindu
Kim	25	Ludhiana	Hindu
Shobna	25	Kochi	Hindu

3. Call for interview

A creative poster to call for participants



4. Poster closing recruitment process



5. Consent Form

Invitation to participate in research projects

February 2025, Master's thesis



LUNDS
UNIVERSITET

Hello!

My name is Aditya Sen and I am studying the international master's program in media and communication science at Lund University. In my master's thesis I examine how communication plays a role in menstruation taboos in India, ie how Indian Women's Menstrual experiences and navigates everyday life with media and communication. In today's society, menstrual experiences and taboos is not well known but it effects many, and in some cases it is less obvious how to navigate these taboos, as well as what help there is to offer.

You can choose yourself if you prefer to speak English or Hindi, you can change the language when anything to be able to express yourself better. Although English would be preferred.

Anonymity

Your name and other information will be completely anonymized. All personal information is treated confidentially and the questions are used only to create a perception of the participants' experiences in this specific study.

All the information you provide, as well as during the interview, is treated confidentially and used to create an idea of the participants' experiences. Your interview will be anonymous, your name will be removed and replaced with one code name. After the project, the material is deleted.

Contact

Aditya Sen
Master Student
Medie- och kommunikationsvetenskap
Tel:
E-mail:

Responsible supervisor

[Mia-Marie Hammarlin](#)
Docent & Universitets Lektor
Institution för Kommunikation
mia-marie.hammarlin@kom.lu.se

With warm regards,
Aditya Sen

Consent form

Thesis title : “These Bleeding Emotions” : Understanding how communication can help change menstrual taboos in India

I hereby agree to participate in this interview
under the terms described to me

Signature _____

Name _____

Date _____

6 Interview Guide

Hey! Can you hear me ...and see me? That's great! So, thank you for doing this and helping me out with this project. As you know, I'm currently doing my Masters Thesis in Media and Communication at Lund University. The project is about understanding how open communication can help destigmatise menstrual taboos in India through advertising. Before I start this interview I'd like to inform you that you have the option to skip over any question or stop the interview you want.

This interview will be used for only academic purposes, and as the consent form says I will only add your sex and gender, age, hometown and your current town into the research. I hope this is ok?

Ok let's start

Taboos

1. How did you view menstruation growing up?
 - How was your family involved in your menstrual experience?
 - What about your friends/ people you interacted with?
 - Any incidents you remember in particular?
2. What is your relationship with your periods now?
 - How has it changed since you were a teenager?
 - Can you describe the factors that have contributed to this change?
3. How do you think (Indian) society views menstruation?
 - Can you describe the kind of conversations around menstruation?
 - Can you describe any menstrual taboos that you experience?
 - How would you attribute this to cultural practices?
 - How would you attribute this to religious practices?

Health Communication

4. Did you learn about menstruation from education at school?
 - If yes, can you describe what you learnt
 - If no, where did you learn about menstruation
 - What do you think is lacking in menstrual education at school level?
- Why do you think it is important to educate boys about menstruation?
5. Do you remember any health campaigns or drives done around menstruation?
 - If yes, can you name any? If no, why do you think that is?
 - How do you think it was different from what you learnt at school?
6. Are there any stand out menstrual ads that you remember?
 - Did you like anything particular about them?

- Body representation
- Visual aspects, message/storytelling
- What would you want to see more of in these menstrual ads?

Storytelling and Media

Now I show them the first ad by stayfree **“It’s just a period”**

- Can you describe any particular emotions with this ad that connected with you?
-Can you describe any personal menstrual experience that this ad reminded you of ?
- What are your thoughts on the tagline “It’s just a Period” ?
- What did you like the most about this ad?
 - What are your thoughts on the stylistic choices in this ad (likewise action with a serious narration)?
 - What are your thoughts on the fact that they did not show a pad throughout this ad?
 - What do you think that they missed out on in this ad?

Now I show them the next ad by Bodyform **“It’s Never Just a Period”**

- Can you describe any particular emotions in this ad that connected with you ?
 - Can you describe any personal menstrual experience that this ad reminded you of?
 - Did anything make you feel uncomfortable? Why?
 - Was there something that you could not relate to?
- What did you think of the tagline “It’s Never Just a Period”?
- What did you like the most about this ad?
 - What are your thoughts on this ad being playful and animated in parts?
 - What are your thoughts on the visualisation of menstruation, womb and women’s body in general?
 - What do you think that they missed out on in this ad?

Affectiveness and Hygiene

- What do you think needs to be spoken about menstrual experiences?
 - What do you think you can’t describe about your periods?
 - How do you feel women can talk about the emotional aspects of periods?
- Does living in a metropolitan city play a role in this according to you?
 - If yes, then can you elaborate on this ?
- Do you think India has progressed with understanding the importance of hygiene in menstruation
- What do you think period ads should stop focusing on ?
- Just a fun question, but if you had to make an ad to sell menstrual products and you could say anything you wanted to , what would your messages be?

Is there anything you would like to add or ask me?

7. Interview Transcript and open coding

I have added the interview with Swati along with a two-page excerpt of the open coding of the same interview. The codes are written in the comments section on the right.

7.1 Transcript

A :Hi, my first question is actually a fun thing, is there a name you want to give yourself? Apart From Own? Yes, the one which I am going to use it, so we can think of a name together. Anything Ever Want To Do.

V

Varsha, but if you want to give me another name, I'm Cool With It.

A

Then I can keep you on it, that's okay. How Old Are You? 35. There is no good way of asking anybody's age.

V

People stop feeling awkward about asking ages and answering the age.

A

Yeah, I know, it's such a thing, when somebody feels awkward and they ask me, I am like, it's okay you can ask. But then when I have to ask somebody, it's just the weirdest question to ask.

V

That's What You Go Up With, right? The awkwardness that comes with the culture, I guess.

A

Exactly. And gender and sex, what do you identify as?

V

She, her, female.

A

And your hometown?

V

It's Sambalpur, but I was born and brought up in Murneshur.

A

And you're currently in Stockholm?

V

Yeah. Yeah. Cool

A

.So, my first section revolves around menstrual experiences while growing up. So, how did you view menstruation when first got it and when it first happened? ?How Did You View it?

V

Yeah, vaguely. I mean, before I got my periods, I used to hear it from my friends.

Advertisements were not very helpful. But friends said that, okay, there's something called periods that happened women bleed. We Bleed.

We have started bleeding. I knew that it did not happen. Hasn't Happened To Everyone Yet. But gradually I'm getting there. Misinformation a lot. One of my friends told me that you're going to continuously bleed everyday without pause. So, once it starts, it's never going stop. Wow.

Okay. But I remember also waiting for it. But When It Happened, like there was a brownish stain

I grew up with my maternal grandparents and my aunt and uncle. So, I showed it to my aunt and I was pretty nervous about what's happening. Then she told me to go ahead and use this cloth or whatever, how to use it. She did not tell me what is happening, why it is happening. It's just... I thought I know everything because my friends told me this is what happens. Yeah.

A

And do you think that at that age, when did first get your period?

V

11 or 12.11.

A

Okay. And do you think at that age, I mean, was it a little bit like I thought I know my body and suddenly this has happened now have to know my body again? Was that sort of thought in your head?

V

I mean, you keep getting bits and pieces of information from everywhere. I mean, we just think that, okay, small children will get more shocked, but we don't. Yeah, it was kind of okay that way. Okay.

A

Okay. It was okay. Yeah. You mentioned that you got a lot of information from friends. Right? How involved were your family in your menstrual experiences, both your parents or your grandparents? Who Was It And Who Was More Involved?

V

I think My Aunt, not because I was close to her, but because I grew up with her, I did not live with my mother. They did not tell me anything more and remember..

V

.So I'm saying that somehow it so happened since I grew up in that house with my aunt. But even though I was closer with my mom, my mom did not live with me. She came every weekend.

And the day I got my periods, my mom was in the house, but somehow I went to my aunt telling her this happened. I don't know why. And she gave me this cloth and she told me this is how you should be doing it, whatever. And then she told me to hide it from my grandparents. My grandmother has a very apparently, I mean, you know, the whole thing where they tell you to be a part for seven days, keep you in a different room, the kind of thought about that.

Yeah. So my aunt told me that your grandmother is going to make you do that. And it was happening to my some of my friends. So I did not keep it a secret from them. Okay. Okay.

A

So can you tell me a little bit about this? Is it a ritual or is it like something where you the seven days apart thing that happens?

V

So I think most of my, I think some of my South Indian friends, I couldn't like, I don't remember it's only the South Indian friends or whatever, but they were told to be in a separate room for seven days. They're not supposed to see anybody touch anybody. They're not supposed to look at men, have men look at the or something will happen. Don't know what I remember making fun of my best friend trying to touch her when she was trying to run away from me during that time. So it hadn't happened to me by then. She was the first one of the group. So that also I remember like my aunt telling me to hide my pad. Like so me how it's all hush hush. And I think my grandmother got to know because I was a child I was using a cloth. So I may have been lying down and she might have got whiff of the smell and she got an idea. And she was like, show me, show me, show me. And it Was Embarrassing, obviously. And I was fighting it off. My grandfather, I mean, my grandfather came in and my grandfather came in and my grandmother was like, I think she's got her menses. And I'm like, what are you doing?

No, fighting it off. But we had a Dog, female dog. My grandfather was like, no, you must be mistaken. It must be time Dog. Okay. With Some people that are coming to me right now.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, okay. And Volume Shinedown. Oh, is it better now?

V

I can hear you, but it's okay. Lower, but I can hear you. That's okay.

A

Yeah. But, um, so, okay, this was your, this was something that, that was your, is a, is an experience that you first had. And usually I, we ask a lot about, as an, I read a lot about, because it didn't happen to me.

So I read a lot about, you know, there is a kind of celebration, which happens with your first, with your first period. Do you remember that who was involved? What was happening? What were the cultural ties behind it?

V

So it didn't happen to me, but it did happen to my South Indian Friends. They have this whole wedding Equivalent Celebrate. Hello. Yeah, you got cut off, I think.

A

I Hope It Doesn't Happen Again.

V

I Repeat From Tell Me.

A

You're Telling Me About Wedding Equivalent Celebration.

V

Yeah. So the lady or the friend, the girl, she is dressed like a bride. She's given new clothes, new jewelry, everybody gives gifts and everybody knows that she has a periods now and she's, she is flowered, whatever that word is. Yeah. Yeah. It happened to my South Indian friends, but not to me. Thankfully.

A

Do you remember how you felt about it, about this happening to your friends?

V

I mean, on the one hand, I'm being told to be all hush hush. Like these people are, you know, told to stay indoors away from the eyes of everyone. And on the other hand, you're making it a public, I don't know, circus of it.

Yeah. So it was very, I mean, see, you don't, you don't question the norms at that age. I just got hit. You think they know that elders know better.

So you're like, okay, if it is happening to them, it must be something right. But I'm not comfortable with that because there's, I mean, so much of fear has been pushed into your mind by then that even the school teachers are not very helpful. I was supposed to be, we were supposed to hide our pads. I remember one time I was trying to pull the pad out of my bag and my teacher saw it. I was not discreet enough and she pulled me aside and she scolded me a lot. She told me that I'm trying to lure the attention of the boys. Wow. Because

I'm bleeding from there. That's a very sexist thing to happen. I don't know. But Then You Blame Yourself, right? Because you think the elders are right. Yes.

A

And I think it's also an important point to look at that how at that age, I guess when something, when you suddenly something new happens and then elders tell something, it kind of forms what it means to you, right?

Exactly. So how is the interaction about this amongst your friend group? I mean, you have told me some instances, but like generally, do you remember what were the conversations like around menstruation and periods during those early years?

V

It was nothing biological. It's just that bleeding happens. It hurts the first or these days. Dress stains and you have to be away from them. Okay. No, I should not go to the temple, should not be eating pickles, should not be getting into the kitchen.

A

Yeah. And how much of this information that you got, you actually think was useful as in like not eating pickles and not going to temple? Do you think any of this actually helped your menstrual experience?

V

I mean, we were told, I remember being told that if you eat pickles, you'll get more of the pain of cramps. So even now I feel if I, I mean, I, of course, during my periods, I get more craving of kutta and pickles. And I have to cycle.

I'm not sure. I'm still not sure if it's a fact that pickles do increase your cramps or whatever, but it's a thing that's there. But otherwise, not going to temples seemed illogical, but I was too young to question hiding from people. Again, I was not hiding, right? So always made fun of friends. But then again, no questioning when it's happening to other people. You just make fun of friends away from the elder's eyes.

A

Yeah, it's it. I mean, I don't think you like from what you're describing, it's not really you engage with the idea of what is actually happening. Yeah, never did. Yeah, you just kind of go about it. And do you remember for how many years it was like that until you started actually understanding what is going on?

V

Hmm. So like, irrespective of what aunt said, my grandmother was not like that. She Was her Mother-in-law, right? So another story altogether. My grandmother was a pretty woke feminist lady. So she would not have forced me into doing that. So my family, my home was not like should. I Mean, my family never told me to actively not get into temple.

That was never told me. It was all from my friends happening to my friends. I remember when my grandmother passed away, my best friend, the same one I was trying to touch, she

did not come because it was happening in a temple and it was her second day of periods. I really needed my friends and they were not there. I Was Doing Graduation. So I must have been, I don't know, just 14 years ago. So 35 minus 14, 21.

A

And you want your friends at that time when something. I said you'd want your friends like that. Yeah.

V

So yeah, they were not there and it was really heartbreaking.

A

That is, that is not. I mean, that is really sad to hear.

V

I hope I'm answering your questions right and not digressing.
No, no, no.

A

So the fun part about my study is that it's about the experience, about your experience. So whatever your experience is, and it's dependent a lot on how you emotionally felt at that time. So I was actually going to come to the idea of a little bit about in the early years, what are the emotions you kind of act like you thought of when you were about to get your periods, like what are the emotions you connected with periods at that time.

V

Yeah, scared.

A

Like, is it, is it like, I mean, I'm trying to understand a little bit more in detail, because is it like, are you scared of something is about to happen to your body? Or now I have to be very careful about other people, both which one, what is what is if you can.

V

Initially, the first, the first time it happened, I was like, Oh my God, blood. So that was scary. But then human mind adapts to these changes. Of course, changes were happening, body hair growth in certain areas. So that was there. But we all knew that was going to happen. So it was very, I mean, it was like, wow, like, Oh, wow, this is happening to me. Okay, it just happened to you. It's happening to me now.

So it was like that. But otherwise fear because people instill that in you. Okay. Be careful this way, careful that way, you're not hiding yourself enough. Men are getting to know. Okay.

A

I mean, you are not hiding yourself enough. This, this sort of sentiment was, was pushed onto you by the elders in your house also ,or was it not them only people in school, or was it everyone, everyone.

V

Like you asked my classmates. So I have, I remember this, this discussion with a guy friend of mine a couple of years ago. He is South Indian. So I remember having this discussion about this taboo that why you should not be going to temples. You know what he told me, he said he, he must have been 31 at the time, my class mate. He said, you know, there's are a reason why women are not allowed in temples during periods. Because for example, what if you have the periods in the temple and blood falls on the temple floor. So the temple becomes impure. I said, do you think we are at a pipe or something? I mean, I said, I'm not having this discussion with you anymore. So this is the state of understanding. Yeah. So.

A

And, and also it's the idea of that period blood is impure. Yeah. That's it. I mean, it's that, that is something that do you think that that is this, that is a one of the biggest taboos that shapes everything around it. Like that just that it's just so impure.

V

Yeah. Which is not true. No, it's not true.

A

It's not. It's just that I think, see, initially, previously there were no bathrooms, right? So the bathrooms are situated somewhere, like outside your house. So bleeding, sanitary napkins are not there. So it made sense that you put the woman in the room for seven days, like a bleed, whatever she wants to.

And then she goes out and cleans herself. Yeah. That's where it started from is what my understanding is what my mother, my grandmother even told me. It's like the Monday, Tuesday, balanced diet kind of thing, right? Monday, non-veg, veg day, whatever. Yeah.

So, I mean, there's many things to eat. So Monday, this Tuesday, this Wednesday, this. That became Monday veg, Tuesday veg, Wednesday non-veg.

It starts from somewhere and then we modify it. Maybe you're not doing it. I'll make you do it. Like don't come into the kitchen because you're bleeding. You don't have sanitary napkins. So don't touch pickles. Don't touch, just don't go.

So they'll just form different rules around it to put fear in it, in the mind. And it sticks in the wrong way. Yeah. It sticks.

A

It sticks. And do you feel that this sort of, so this feeling that you had, that it is of fear and like whatever scared. This was a universal feeling, right? What did the boys in your class feel about this at that time? I mean, now you told me, but have you even had a conversation or no?

V

No conversation, but it was like soft porn for them. I mean, you know, you get to know it. Yeah.

Yeah. They're curious of course. And if you don't answer questions, the curiosity increases and it is about a private body part. Everybody, I mean, they had puberty. They were revolving. They were finding out like my husband told me, I mean, my husband is my schoolmate.

So he was in the same class. Let's go. Thank you.

Yeah. I think he told me he did not know the meaning of, what was that word again? Intercourse or rape.

Yeah, both. I think he did not know the meaning of intercourse and somebody, another classmate showed it to him. So one classmate was more woke than the other. How he got to know about the word intercourse. I don't know.

My husband was more innocent. So everybody wants to get their hands on this kind of information. Yeah. And they're not told those things.

So, okay. I remember this one incident where some people had come to guide the women on how, sorry, in school. Some people had come to guide the girls on how to use a pad properly. So I remember during our assembly, after the assembly, we were told that girls from class six till 10, you stay and everybody else and the boys from class six to 10, you go inside the classroom.

Okay. So of course the boys are going to ask what happened. They will try to get to know from here or there. And then they'll put girls into one classroom and show the pad and this and that.

So whoever is kicked out, they will of course have questions. It's normal.

A

And do you think it would have been a better idea if the guys were allowed to just sit with you and see what's going on?

V

It would have been embarrassing because the reproduction chapter was embarrassing in itself. Periods happened in seven, my periods happened during my seventh.

Reproduction was in tenth. Okay. Yeah. Four years gap.

Still the embarrassment was very much there. Okay. But everybody has to normalize it from the start to make it acceptable.

A

Yep. Which is actually very good into what I was coming next to, which is how many periods and menstruation is taught about in school.

Right. So can you describe what you remember learning about menstruation from like school course textbooks? Also, which, if I can ask you which post did you start?

What did you start? CBSE or state board or ICSE? ICSE. Okay. And what, what, what did you learn about menstruation? Nothing.

V

Like you still asked me about my, what do they call, how much is the cycle days or something? I don't understand it. Okay. I have not given, and I mean, I have been explained it, but there's a practical way of learning it, right?

Yes. So from the textbook, there was nothing. I remember my teacher just reading through the chapter, like she was going through a running race or something.

She was herself embarrassed. Okay. And me reading, I mean, I know my periods are happening on this stage. I'm going on for four days. Okay. Four days, five days, whatever.

And then it's happening almost on the same date next month. Okay. I don't know what a 28 day cycle is. Okay. Okay. So you have to connect like, okay, 31 days in a month, four or five days of bleeding, somebody bleeds two days, somebody bleeds seven days.

What is a 28 day cycle? Yeah. Yeah. So you have to help. It's happening to people. It's happening to women. Explain that.

There was nobody till date there was no, there is nobody to explain that to me. Okay.

A

Till date. That information has not been given.

V

Friends who have done biology, like masters and PhDs and stuff, they know it, but whenever they tell me, I just switch off. Okay.

A

Yeah. Would you have liked to receive this information at school?

V

Of course. Like I want, like, of course I had to study the chapter for my exams, right? So when I'm reading, there is no correlation with that to what is happening with my body. I told you, right?

A

What is a 28 day cycle in accordance to what is happening? Yeah. That match did not fit. Yeah. I was not able to make the connection and there was no one to explain. Yeah. Yeah.

V

My teacher was doing a running race.

A

How do I go to her and ask what is this? Did you ever feel like asking anybody about that chapter, like anybody near at home or any elder or anything?

V

No.

You don't think? We all tended to avoid it. And till date I have, we have this joke that my seniors, my friend's brother, he told me that, like, there were four or five guys and the certain teacher, he would, there's this joke, running joke.

I don't know how apt that is. They're like, okay, we close the door and behind closed doors, we are taught about the reproduction chapter. Only the guys. I don't know what the hell they ever taught then. I also don't know.

A

I am a guy and I have no clue what they're talking about.

V

So I need to get full of my seniors and ask for that. That's interesting. Yeah.

A

Yeah. And it's always this, I mean, even when I was in school, when menstruation was taught, we were told to leave the class. So we had two chapters on menstruation and we were told to leave the class at that time. And to be very honest with you, even if I was in class, I would have not listened to anything and I would have not understood. Just being a teenager at that time. Yeah. No, no, no, I mean, attention span apart.

V

Yes. No, I mean, if you're not taught in the proper, so I am, I don't know, I'm 35 now.

I don't know how old you are, but I'm sure like few years younger to me. Yes. And it is very saddening to know that nothing has changed. Yeah. I think, I mean, I am 28. I think. I think I've heard that it is a little bit better now. Now it's a little bit better, I hope so.

V

But I mean, even we had nothing. In my younger sister, she is 28. She I mean, she is now woke enough to, of course, she also had the same experience growing up. But there was me, people around her telling her that it's okay to talk about periods. But even then, when she just openly tells that to my husband, Manaswati, I'm just getting my periods, so I'm having this.

There's this half second of what she's talking about periods to my husband, half second, but that is there. Where do you think that comes from? Something you have been taught since childhood, it's hard to go away, right? Childhood trauma, childhood learnings, like there are so many women who friends who do this evening pooja, morning pooja, not because of their belief in God, but because their mother used to do it and now they're blindly following it.

Nobody has questioned their own belief system. It's like that, right?

A

Yeah, it's it's pointing towards childhood experiences with this whole menstruation just in general.

Yeah. I actually I have one question at footborne is what do you think is lacking in menstrual education at school? But since you did not learn anything, it's very hard for me to ask that question.

V

Everything. They just told me they told us that it could be an optional question. You can leave it out if you don't understand it. One problem with India is the obsession to just answer the exam and not know anything more than that. Yeah, not know anything about it.

It's not important. I don't like somebody if a boy gets to know about periods, he's automatically going to come and rape the girl. Yeah, because because spreading awareness is what that's what it leads to apparently. I'm very angry feminist at this point.

A

Yeah, very angry. And I can totally I totally get to why women think like this because I mean nothing is adding up.

V

None of the narratives that are spread are actually making sense together. But I am an agnostic. My mother-in-law doesn't digest it, of course, but I use my periods to get out of the Pooja days.

Very conveniently, my periods happen during the Pooja days. So how do you get on your to your favor? Yes, that's a good one. I like that.

A

I like that. Not that you're going to check, right?

V

Yeah, exactly. And that's also a fear that I think I that I mean a lot of just in plain conversation when women tell me that, you know, that that I can't go to the temple today or

just my family's and I'm like, how could somebody know even if you do go? But then it's just it boils down again to this whole like how you explained it.

A

It's just that child. I mean, don't you have your own brain? But no, they will not use their own brain.

V

They will give you a hundred kind of excuses which will not sit well with you, but they will be super confident.

A

Totally, totally, totally. Um, did you have in your school or any of your teachers or anybody was there and that one teacher or that one person you felt like you could have spoken about this to or was there any incident where you know you that had this had to happen in your many menstrual experience? I mean, the female teachers are there.

V

I mean, if if I'm having a stain or I need a pad, of course, I can go up to a female teacher, but I mean, they understand you're having cramps. You can go rest. But apart from that, I don't think I don't think we needed anything. I didn't.

We didn't know we needed anything more. Yes. Yeah, that is true.

A

You didn't know you needed anything. Yeah, yeah, that is true. That's quite true. Also, another thing is that, you know, in our society, generally how menstruation is tabooed, how much of this is is can be like attributed or put on religious factors, like how many religious taboos do you remember being there?

V

I think all of them are religious. No.

A

Okay. Say, for example, suppose the puja one is say it's a religious one, but was it was it explained to you through some God? Like, oh, this is because because this God said this, then you have to like Lakshmi said it or or some was there that sort of mythological religious thing attached to it or was it only?

V

No, not in my family, as I told you, only my aunt made me fear this because of her in-laws and outstrips. But otherwise my maternal grandmother, my grandfather, my mother, they are not like this.

My mother-in-law might have a religious explanation, but I don't have the patience to I won't go and ask.

Yeah. Then have you heard about this Roger thing, the Roger festival that happens during the monsoon?

A

Yes, please tell me more about that. I don't know much about it. I just, I mean, a few years ago, right?

V

Maybe 10, 12 years ago, I figured out this is celebrate, take menstruation. So again, as you said, two clashing things together. So you are that's a goddess, so you will pray to them, but you are mere human being. So you're there's no respect for you and you are impure. Yes, that is that is how it's looked at.

A

So I mean, I have heard of Rojo from Adyasha and I think we've heard a little bit about it in general also. Do you have any, like, what do you think it's like to go through that if you were in that position? What would you, what would you imagine it would be like to go through something like this? Those experiences.

V

I mean, *Rojo* is all about three days of not doing anything. Women are supposed to rest. The idea is to like, what do you say, they're made to put, they're not supposed to wear the normal footwear, footwear made of leaves, which means give the earth a rest because earth is menstruating, give your feet rest and you get decked up and you do nothing, just eat and swing and stuff. But it means that give your body a rest because you are on your periods. But when we were growing up is with was just three days of going, putting going on a swing and wearing new clothes.

As I told you only 10 or 12 years ago, do did I get to know that this is associated with periods. But again, of course, I questioned when I started questioning that if you are worshipping the Goddess and what do you say, giving respect for her state, what about our state? No, I mean, the main thing that I get is you guys have become more educated. So you only logical, you won't, you don't have any more beliefs left in you. This is my mother in law

statement. As I said, it didn't come from my family. Some things like these only is what I heard from my friends and their family, not mine.

A

Yeah. Which is interesting to hear that. Why do you think that your family was not someone who did the was a family that did not partake in this? What do you think were the factors that contributed to that? But I can't say my mother, my grandmother was a graduate.

V

I can't say education because I know better. Maybe because of my grandmother's upbringing, she had to fight her way in her family.

And I think whoever feels the need to fight her their way through, those are the people who think differently. Yes. Yeah. Maybe that.

A

Yeah. So I mean, it's always, it's always that challenge of the first person, the first one generation has to fight and then then things open up and then things get a little bit easier.

Yeah. Questioning the norms. But again digressing that, okay, my mother, my maternal grandmother did that.

V

She taught that to her four grandchildren, granddaughters, daughter gets married to a son, son who is not woke, son, I'm trying to make a work, son's family who is not woke. So that is dying down, right? I mean, it's a whole new fight altogether. It's always a fight. It seems to be always a fight in every generation.

You start the fight and then it ends and then you have to start the addiction. I remember, sorry,

A

I'm interrupting you. No, no, no, no, go ahead. It's an interview where you speak and I don't. Okay. So I remember, as I told you, it didn't happen in my family that you have to shampoo your hair on that day and stuff.

V

So I got out of situations as I told you, I'm an agnostic. So we went on this trip, we were supposed to, it was a school trip. We were supposed to go to the Hanuman Mandir at the top of the mountain. I did not want to climb.

I told them, and we were short of water in the hostel. I shampooed my hair that day because I have oily hair. Thin hair, oily hair. So I have to shampoo. Otherwise I look horrible. So I shampooed my hair using a water bottle. My teacher was like, why did you waste that water?

And then why are you not going to the temple? I said, ma'am, I have my periods. Oh, okay, okay. So the wasting the water is math because you're supposed to wash your head when you have your periods. Cut to, cut to, that was in 2006 or seven.

So cut to two years ago. In the morning I washed my hair. In the afternoon I got my periods. My mother-in-law got to know and she's like, we in our house, we wash our head after getting periods.

And then I just washed my hair in the morning. Doesn't apply. You have to go. I'm like, your daughter works in the office. I work in the office. You worked as a teacher.

Would you have gone in the middle of the day and washed your hair if you got your periods? No answer. The answer is you are arguing back because you're too educated. You're too educated. You don't listen to the belief system, religious belief system. You just too educated.

A

What was the explanation given to you that you should wash your head?

What is it? Is it just that you're supposed to do it? That's it? Or did anyone tell you anything more about it?

V

No. On the contrary, I'm not sure again, washing or not washing helps. But I think washing actually doesn't help.

A

You're not supposed to wash your hair. I'm not sure. I mean, does it make you feel better? After washing?

V

No, I feel better after pooping.

Not washing. No. Where did that come from?

Anyways. There is, like, it's a recurring theme that like most of the times when people tell me things, where did you get that come from when it comes to menstruation? We don't know. Someone told us to do it. I'm going to ask that GPT after this.

A

Where it came from. Yeah, GPT might know the answer. Yeah. You were also talking about the fact that you're trying to tell your husband or maybe any other male in your life who's there, you're trying to maybe explain to them about menstruation and stuff. Why do you think that is important?

Why do you think men need to know about this?

V

Oh, God. More support, less judgment, normalizing the thing. So that people around me don't, I mean, even my sister-in-law, I don't want her to have this burden around her head, right? Yeah.

A

Yeah. So, and how do you think you can make the rest of society not only boys, because even the rest of society, just understand what is the importance of talking about menstruation. What do you think is the way to do it, to actually talk about it? Way? Oh, God.

V

I don't know what is the way. I have so many examples. Say, for example, I agree with you. That is a fair way to say it. Yeah. Is it, you think it's a better, it is a better way to like, you know, just shock people into understanding that this is what it is? That's my favorite way. Okay. That is very good. I try to put them in their shoes.

I have this favorite, like my favorite method is to put them in their own shoes, like in my shoes. Yeah. Example.

A

Learn by example. Yeah. Yeah. Do you think there is a need to kind of change this whole narrative that it's a woman's problem and make it into a just a problem or just say it's not a problem?

V

It's not a problem. I mean, see, again, it comes back to feminism, right? **Feminism is not about getting what men have. It's just that give us the respect at least, you know, some men, lot of men my age won't talk to me directly.** I mean, husbands of friends, not my circle, but I've come surprised me. Friends of not my choosing. I'm talking to them and they will respond to my husband or they'll be like, they will be like, oh my God, how is she talking so much or how is she saying it in this way?

So it is surprising. Like somebody heard that I had proposed to my husband and he was like, Varsha, you should have been born in the year 2300. You were born too soon. Wow. Okay. So if you're coming from that thought process, you imagine the kind of brain they walk around with.

A

That's true. How are you going to go? I think in this sort of environment, the way to go forward is honestly, I agree with you.

V

It might just be shocking people because that's the only way people are going to understand.

Yeah. Like for example, my main agenda, like who do I have to fight with? **I don't care about anybody else now that I'm married. My husband should understand me. That's what matters.** But I try my best to make my in-laws understand as well because no matter what happens in laws or whatever, if you give me genuine love, I'll give it back to you.

V

Yeah. And if you are having this because I am a daughter in law or a sister in law, then I am automatically a bad person. I try to change that. **But if you misbehave with me and then you say that, okay, I am hurt. I'm insulted. You insulted me, but I'm the daughter in law.** So I should go and make comments not happening in the same way.

So I try to give them example in the sense that I tell my mother-in-law, see, imagine this happening to your daughter. Would you be okay with it? It'll hurt you, right?

So imagine, so in the same way, imagine, like, why shouldn't it hurt me like that? So yeah, I try to give them examples. I mean, I think that's one that's a fair way of explaining it. I hope people understand that. Not from my position though. Yeah.

A

We talk too much. That's true. That's true. It's also like I think, like you said, and explained often all women experiences, not only menstruation is very much about fighting always.

V

Fighting with somebody, fighting for something, trying to fight about something. And it's, yeah, it's a little, it's, I hope, I hope, I hope somewhere at some point of time, there is a shift. And I think, I hope that there's a shift happening now. But yes. Fingers crossed.

A

Fingers crossed, yes, fingers crossed. My next question is around health campaigns. Do you remember any, you were actually telling me about a health campaign that happened when you were in school. Was that a campaign done by an NGO or somebody or who organized it and what happened in that? I don't remember who organized it, but it was definitely an organization.

V

I think it must have been a pad brand like Whisper or something.

A

What did they do? What was, what happened?

What was the, what was the whole thing about? Did they just come show you a pad, tell you this is how you wear it and then go away? Or did they have like a workshop sat you down, spoke about things? Do you remember?

V

Must have been for about 15, 20 minutes where they said, like, asked, like, who all got your periods and stuff to ensure that, okay, everybody in the room had their periods. And then, do you know how to use a pad and this is how it works.

A

Okay. And when they did explain to you about it, was it very mechanical or were they a little bit more, I don't know, empathetic is the right word. Were they more?

V

No, no, empathy, not mechanically, they're just matter of fact. Just matter of fact. Did you, did you think that was a good approach or would you have wanted it to be something else? I was too young to know. We were just embarrassed it was happening and we all knew how to use a pad anyway. So, okay, this is, we're just happy to get two free pads that day, I think.

A

So that's an interesting point you said. So this happened when you were at what age again?

V

Maybe 12 or 13. Okay.

A

Okay. So I'm assuming that there might have still been some women who had, may have not started menstruating at that point of time. But would it have been, what would the ideal age you think would have been to come and actually do this drive and come and.

V

Age is fine. Like even if I would have been, see, at five or six, I got to know about periods. From class three or four. This friend who told me that we bleed every day for the rest of our lives and that was in class four. So that had happened. So everybody had knowledge that it was coming one day or the other.

Second pad advertisements don't help us. What is the blue liquid coming? I don't know. Like I remember telling my aunt that she was upset or something and I told her, why is your face like a sanitary napkin without understanding what I'm saying. In front of the men in the room. And I was pretty small and everybody's face went sour saying, what is she saying?

Oh my God. She said the forbidden word. The forbidden word, which I did not realize till maybe many years later.

I was about five, six, seven years old. I just saw the ad and I used the word and didn't know what it was about. Yeah. I actually, the other day when I was thinking about ads in menstruation, I was just thinking about the first ad I had seen. And I remember to some whisper ad or something and I mean, I don't, I didn't even know what it was. But I remember that the tune was very catchy. So I was just singing it at home and my mom is like, please don't sing this song. I didn't even understand why.

How to do. Shush. Yeah.

A

I didn't even understand why it was a problem. Yeah. And they won't even tell you, right?

V

So then your curiosity increases and then you do stupid things to assuage that curiosity and then you are beaten up for your scolded or something. Yeah. Totally. Totally.

A

Totally. And so what about now that we like there are different sort of education. Like you said, you've got your information about menstruation from bits and pieces here and there, here and there. Do you remember any one one place from where you used to rely to be like, because maybe sometimes something's happening and you don't know what's going on. So what was that one place slash person who you would go to?

V

So, um, not really. So there were two friends who were who I considered mature enough till date. They are the mature women of the group. Yeah, they are. I mean, they were also more mature than classmates, of course.

So majority of the problems. Yes, I went to them. But otherwise it was my aunt because I was the least awkward talking to her. My mother didn't live with me.

So it was more difficult to reach out to her. Yeah. Having that call over a landline phone call was not something I meant.

Yeah. And it's so it was your aunt and two of your friends. Did you ever think in your life that there could have been maybe some men that you have gone to or it's not needed?

Would you it's why would you even want to go to men? Nothing like that, but I couldn't because in the whole world I'm closest. I was closest to my maternal grandfather and I had to hide it from him. Like I had to hide where I kept my pants. I had to hide the cloth that I used initially and I mean, so the cloth part is another story altogether because you have to wash the cloth, right? So when you're washing it, I remember I was washing one. In the balcony, I don't know why, but I was so scared somebody would come in and watch it. I mean, nobody wants to see blood coming from my finger also.

Period blood is another story altogether. But I'm your child. It happens to your wife. It happens to your granddaughter, granddaughter, your daughter-in-law, everyone. I'm a small child. I should have been told that it's okay because it happened to everyone. All these

women in this ladder, I'm the smallest child in the family, girl in the family. It should have been okay. I mean, they all should have taken credit that okay, we have been uncomfortable.

Let's not miss. She was just a small child. Should not make her uncomfortable. Yeah, and it's so internalized that it did not happen. That even if, yeah, it just it doesn't, it didn't happen. Another story. So my, since I grew up with my uncle and aunt, it was a very traumatic experience. So there was this funny thing that happened.

Again, the clash happening. So my aunt was like, I did from everyone. So what I used to do is if I needed a pad, it was of course going to the shop and asking for pads and others, completely different story, right?

Right? This is a piece of paper and show it to him and he will be wrapping it up in newspapers and stuff. So I used to send my younger cousin, my aunt's daughter, who was five years younger to me, she must have been six or seven years old at that time.

I would send her a note, like send her to the shop with a note that this. So I was just walking down and I heard, so I'm supposed to hide it from my uncle, my grandfather, everyone, nobody should. The whole world. Yeah. And I just heard my aunt, my uncle and my young cousin giggling at the fact that I sent a chit to the shop through my sister and she was six or seven years old and everybody were laughing together at that.

She did this. I mean, making fun of that fact. Yeah. And now it angers me. Then I felt very embarrassed that they set it out in public. Now, of course, all the wrong things attached to it makes sense.

At that time, it was like, you only told her to hide it. Yeah. Yeah. And this, it seems to be that hiding, hiding it is the reason for all of it coming out. Like the stigmatization is just at the bottom of this whole thing. Any other incidences that you remember like this, like anything that anything around or any. Again, I.

A: Yeah. Luckily, the other recording is there.

V: I didn't leave thinking if I leave, maybe the recording won't be saved.

A: Thank you so much. I'm no problem. Yes. Yeah. So we were talking about the last thing you were telling me is about how you, it's you, if it's feeling, it's embarrassed that I'm feeling embarrassment is there, right?

When you from hiding it from other while hiding it from other people and you were telling me about the taboo, I'd like an experience. Yeah. So I hate it when this happens. Yeah. So it's, it's, it's, I think a good place from here to look at also another thing that I wanted to kind of understand was your information about menstruation.

How much of it came from media, like from any media around you, maybe newspapers or TV or any like anything that was there around you at that point of time, radio? No.

V: We're talking about what? 2000, 2001. So no internet, nothing TV, you know, how the ads were.

A: Yeah. So, yeah. But at that age, did you take the ad seriously? Did they actually mean something? Did you actually see a bad like that and think that, you know, that's, that's how it is.

V: I mean, once I got my periods, I was like, okay, this one soaks better. This one is more not soakable. So yeah, I knew which one to, I mean, I could choose now that which one is better quality that way. But nothing else about that. Okay.

A: Okay.

V: So jumping around with my pad on. No.

A: I feel a little bit like redundant when you saw it on TV that that was happening and you were just like, you know, that there is no technology like this that is making me run the marathon so much faster.

V: Like, I wanted to tell, like, okay, so only two days ago, this schoolmate of mine, a boy, sends me this video about this dwarf guy. He's put on fake boobs and how women in the period ads behave. And he's jumping around. He's going up and down a pole and everything. I'm like, this is not. And I hang. Oh, he laughed at it. But I just felt from that video that I mean, people have not grown up yet. Yeah.

A: Yeah. People have still not kind of, I mean, if like three plus still sending stuff like this, then they're not gonna.

V: You don't want to engage also.

A: Yeah. Yeah. You and what about what is what is your experience with periods now and how has it changed from that periods now?

V: Yes. I mean, now I'm pretty okay. I'm here as a part of life. I don't know what you want me to answer here.

A: I don't want anything. I just want to know how sure how is your how is your experience changed from when you look back at your time? When you were when you first got your periods and how it was and now how, how has this whole experience? What is the evolution that you've seen? It might be a very obvious evolution to you, but maybe I don't know.

V: Yeah. Now I can openly moan when I'm in pain and I can demand a hot water bag for my husband. I can cry. I can, which I could not do as a young, I remember having very painful periods and having to endure it very silently. I remember lying down not being able to eat losing my appetite because I was so much in pain.

I did not know about medicines or hot water bags or anything. And my grandfather is sleeping next to me. I'm lying down in the afternoon. I'm watching TV and my uncle is scolding me why I left the chicken half eaten on the plate. I don't know what to tell him.

I said, I don't feel like eating and he's like you're wasting food and I remember coming back silently and watching TV and just watching TV is distracting me through that three, four hour period. I mean, as a child, I would have been more helpful for an elder to know what to do about it. Right?

A: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. If that happened to you today and and would you tell your uncle like that that I'm on my periods and I just that may be the reason why or I don't feel like eating.

V: Now I do. He's still in uncomfortable. I don't care. Okay.

A: It's just that now the only difference is you have come to terms with it better to with yourself. Yeah.

V: I mean, yeah, I face that with my in-laws because I can't complain as much when I'm there. Yeah. It's there in some house. I have to shut up about it, but I'm pretty okay. Fine. You don't understand. I don't care. I'll go into my room and my husband understands my mother understands. Yeah.

A: The people who matter the most. Yeah. Understand. Yeah. Say for example, this this idea of using a hot water bag. Who told you about that? Where did that come from?

V: Hmm. So you get a lot of advice. So this helps that doesn't help. This is good. That is bad. But a school friend again told me about it that she really had painful periods and she and her mother. They did that. I did not have my mother to tell me that. So I got it from her basically a school friend.

A: And another question about this is that one thing is when you're when you're when you're on your periods, there is a physical thing of like blood coming out and stuff and a lot of things like blood and stuff coming out. But also it's about the emotions that you feel right that that other part

of these are the different emotions. I feel this is what I'm going through and those emotions are often in not to do with periods. It's because of other people. What they tell you.

V: Yes. Yeah. It's often not to do with what actually maybe. Yeah. So these emotions how much do you add this some stand out emotions now also that you feel that that come from outside.

A: It can be positive emotions also, but just are there any sort of emotions that are there?

V: Honestly, no. Like, yeah, people talk about PMS thing, but I'm always low on emotion and high on anger almost all the time that I can't really differentiate. I just use it as an excuse. It is what I feel. I just really can't say that. Okay. I'm PMS thing. So I'm angry. I'm for the crime. I'm just me. Yeah. I don't know.

A: What are the emotions that people showed to you when you're when you're on your menstruation and they get to know because many times you might not even know that you're.

V: People showed to me.

A: Yeah. Like, for example, you did tell somebody that, yeah, I'm on my periods today and what would that what are the emotion that would come out?

V: Silence. Okay. Yeah.

A: Is there anybody say other than people close to you who's ever been supportive in the way you would want?

V: Hmm. I mean, women are always supportive in this matter. They just shut up in front of men, but otherwise we are supporters.

A: And why do they shut up in front of me? I'm asking the very basic question. That's a good one.

V: I mean, my teacher used to tell us our teachers used to tell us that. Yeah. As I said earlier that we're trying to get the attention of men of the boys.

Yeah. I mean, I grew up in a school where even if I remember being taken to the principal's office because I said good morning to somebody and shake should their hand. I just did a handshake and I said good morning and I was taken to the office by a female teacher saying she's being over smart here. She's trying to touch boys. Touch boys where? What? I mean, the whole body part was touching. I don't even want to touch it. Yeah. Touch what?

A: I mean, when I hear things like this, I'm just like, India has a long way to go. Very, very, very long way to go. And it's not. It's just anyway. What about what are your thoughts about like, you know, representation, body representation, just the weights represented around you. The way

people talk about it and the weights represented. Do you think that has some link to menstruation in general?

V: Hmm. I mean, it's a sexual private body part, sexual body part. So anything that happens around it is a taboo. So it's one of the same thing. Yeah.

A: And do you think it would be better if it's more represented or is there a weight? Is there a the weights represented now? Is it good enough? Or are we doing?

V: Not enough. Like I had to my husband, like I had to educate my husband so much. Thank God he's a sponge. He didn't come in perfect, but he was open to suggestions. So that was good.

Yeah. I remember having an argument argument in my own discussion account. He would think it's an argument. I was trying to convince him about sex educating a child and he was like, are you mad?

How can we talk about these things to a child? So it started from there. Now he's okay with that. So you imagine. So that was like two, three years ago.

A: It's like, I mean, even to be very honest, even, even, even I wasn't, I'm not like so open or anything when it first, when, when I first learned about it. And it's always, it always is the same thing. There is always some woman or somebody in your life who needs to like pull your blinds away and just say that, you

V: know, You're dating one person, God, you're dating a whirlwind yourself. Yeah.

A: And I very openly say that a lot of my education around like just women in general comes from her. And it's like, it's a very big blessing in this guy's the fact that I'm doing this now. It's very much also about what she has told me and what I've like, I've become okay with the fact that it's that it's that. And it's, it's like these interpersonal connections between women and men is the only way that men seem to be able to grow outside of their bubble.

V: But then you're giving us much credit. You're forgetting the fact that you're open to you had a discussion with me. Of course, like these 10 kinds of pointers that you have come across some other guy might also have, but he or he is not open to this kind of discussion.

He has shut it off. So you must be in the five to 6% of men who are accepting that, okay, let's talk about it. Other people are like just, what?

A: In fact, like I think the discussion right now should also be around, let's talk about it more. And let's talk about it openly. What are your thoughts on that? Unlike now we've reached a point where we can talk about it. Now, how do we do that? Like should we do it more openly or are we okay in this space?

V: No, I mean, the more the merrier, the more open the merrier. Because my social circle of my choosing is very open. I tend to shut off people who are not in the same wavelength as mine. Some people like I married into whatever I can't choose my relatives and stuff, but friends are like me. But then when I got married, I got my BhaDiKA set of friends also through my husband. They were not as woke and I'm still struggling with that.

Especially in Stockholm, you would think that okay, coming out into a bigger city will open you up more. But sadly not. This circle here is more closed than ever. When I initially came here, it was too much. They don't understand sarcasm. They don't understand sarcasm from a woman. Which one? Open-minded from a woman.

A: So you understand and get it. This is like women who are from India or just people in general?

V: No, India. Women from India and men from India. The women came later, the wives came later, but the husbands themselves, the bachelors also, the guys. No sarcasm, nothing. I mean sarcasm, yes, amongst themselves. My sense of joke was like, I mean, I get a feeling like, oh, how is she? I mean awkward when I crack a sarcastic joke or something. They don't get it.

A: I honestly feel very bad for you. Thank you. : That sounds like a very sad life. Because if people, not that your life is sad.

V: I've been here for one and a half years, I know.

A: Yeah. Are you would think that leaving India would be the thing that will help me open up, but clearly in this case?

V: No, yeah, no. No, I mean, I'm good now because I have kicked out those people from my life. I have my own circle now of my choosing. Not many are Indians, so I'm good.

A: Yeah, I mean, honestly, that's also a thing. Like Indians who leave India and come out are often very weird. And they're very, they come out and they're just like, oh, India is better than everything in the world. Yeah. And I don't know why we live.

V: Yeah, that's another. That's another. That's another. So many versions of them. So many versions of. Old school behavior.

A: Yeah, I mean, somehow that old school paper comes here and it and it becomes even more. This is another conversation. Yes. Yes. Coming to ads. So do you remember any like any of one of those ads which you saw on on TV and you were like. That is some other menstruation. I'm having some other sort of menstruation. This is not the same thing that's going on.

V: No, I was like, okay, I mean, yeah, we were told to like around us, we were told to not jump around during that time. Because you would stain yourself. So friends, like we used to try to figure out how to like what kind of type fans to wear, what kind of panties to underwear to use so that it doesn't move around and it doesn't stay in.

So staining was a major problem when you're sleeping, when you're playing cycling, whatever. So when I see a girl in the ads dancing, jumping, doing whatever invite fans. Yes. I'm like, how I use that to run. It doesn't work. Yeah.

A: So that's like on a very technical way. Also, that is basically it's kind of fraud, right? Because if you are making an ad on a product, then your that product has to be able to technically do what the ad shows you.

V: But what product actually does what it should be, whatever shows in ads.

A: That's true. But but like again, like FHPs or any female hygiene products in general should, they should be monitored a little bit more because they have real work. They actually have the impact that comes out. Right.

If you can have, if you can have like, cigarette, sell cigarettes with with the disclaimer that this is what's going to happen. Then you should because this is you should have other advertising also that is able to like what are your thoughts on this whole on this whole thing about blue color.

A: That's my question. Why blue? Maybe people faint at the like when they view red, I don't know.

V: But that's not true. Right. It's very it's a very odd notion because violence is the most. It's the most like celebrated thing in movies. Like I will watch Quinton Tarantino movie with someone's head chopped off and blood flying out of it. But then I cannot see blood on a on a pad.

A: So, yeah, so if you associate that bleeding, you're associating that with violence. Yeah. People around in the society, people are taught to associate that with equivalent upon. So. Okay.

V: So there is that. There is that. And and it's it's have you noticed like from your understanding of how conversations are that your blood is associated with impurity also. But is it sexually also looked at? Sexually. Yeah. Yeah. Of course. Okay. I am going to ask you very stupid questions because I've never actually felt it.

V: So I will actually never say never admit you asking a stupid question even if you think it. Don't say to the person in question. You don't know how people are going to judge you.

A: I mean, I'm doing I'm doing my thesis on menstruation. I've had a lot of people judge me anyway.

V: They're lost.

A: But yeah, so there is there is a which is a very interesting thing actually to look at which is also that there is a certain amount of sexual. Like gays that is there with periods also. And **it's probably it has nothing like in reality has nothing to do with sex that much.** But it is because it's women. Is that a fair assumption to me?

V: Yeah, because I wonder sometimes if there would be something associated with boys underwear, I would be equally curious. Right. Yeah, I would want to know what is happening and I because I don't know what's in there.

I don't have it. Yeah, even if I am not that attracted to it. Yeah, as much as the opposite is.

But yeah, I mean, curiosity, I don't know much. I'm second. I went into low power mode. Sorry. Yeah.

Yeah, I mean, I would be curious, right? So if I'm not openly told about what is happening. And men, it's with men, it's worse towards women, right? With all the rape happening and all those.

Yes. But the other day I was speaking to somebody about how violence or violence is termed as romantic. Saying no, in sex, in love is termed as romantic. Some men love it, some women crave it as well. Even if it is not nice. So they don't know the difference between who is genuinely saying no and who is saying it out of shyness.

A: That is very interesting. I have to think of that. That's a very interesting thing to think about.

V: Okay. Sexually, yes, because they are attracted to female bodies. They don't have any. My husband used to think like I used to women, sorry. I know a lot of men did it, but he admitted it with saying, I used to think, wow, women walk around. The same that Chandler being said that Joey or Chandler that boobs, they're just there. They can just, you know, look down and is there.

Easy access. I think Joey was that. Yeah, makes sense that Joey did said that.

Yeah. So my husband said the same thing that of course he was curious and he was like, wow, I mean, I can't have a look at boobs that easily. Only a mere glimpse of the, what do you say? The, what do you say?

Clivage. Yes. Through, I mean, he said he used to have newspaper clippings of Bollywood pictures, Bollywood films. I mean, imagine in school how visible were those? Not very much, right? Access matters.

A: Yeah. Accessibility is a very big thing in this, in this whole thing. And, and like for guys also, I think if we do not see the, the best way for I think guys to get normalized to women's bodies is

to see women's bodies and understand that there is more than just like it's just, it's more than a sex thing that is there. It's an actual body.

V: About it. Nobody is showing a female naked body to a 12 or 13 year old boy. No. But yeah, like sex education is important. Sex education is very important.

A: So true. And, and the way to, for it to happen also is very important. It cannot be taught like how it is taught right now. That's also a problem. Because like just reading past it and then throwing the boys out of school is not the right answer to kind of.

V: I agree. Like it's important for the females also because there's another story altogether, right? When we are assaulted, we are silent about it because we are blamed about it. We know that we will be blamed, not the guy in question. So sex education is important for everyone, for everyone's good.

A: Yeah. Totally. Totally. I mean, it's, it's important for all sort of and it's the best, I think, thing, a way of prevention of this stuff. Yes. So now we are going to see some ads together.

I have three ads that I have picked out. We will watch. I just want to know your thoughts. I have some few questions on it.

I just want to know. I will just share my screen and I, and God please, I hope my internet doesn't die. Let's see. Okay. One second. Just give me a minute. I will... So on first.

V: How many people have you interviewed till date and how many more are on your list?

A: So it's a, it's a very nice thing that I, like, I'm really lucky that I'm, I have so many women. I have 14 women who I'm going to talk to 14 women said yes.

Yes. And I have five women. One four. Four zero is my, that my thesis project isn't big enough for 40. And I have five people on standby actually who really wanted to, but I'm so sorry.

I cannot do it. Like there are too many people, but I've spoken to one woman, one person till now. You are my second interview. Okay.

I hope I'm doing okay. Yes. Now I will, so I will play. Let me, I think, can you hear? No. Okay. Let me try sharing again. With sound. Yes. Table. Sound of shit. We'll start again.

Stayfree #DinTumharesaathchalega

Today is the late night. Four orders. Oh no. The delivery colleague had to leave today. So, you see the kitchen. I'm doing deliveries. In periods. Did you forget? Yes. You see, I forgot the periods. Because Steffi Secure XL's leak lock technology, for 12 hours of protection, Steffi Secure XL, will be with you. Very nice to you. Catchy, huh? Yeah.

A: Firstly, do you have any first thoughts when you saw this?

V: Yeah, I mean, in two ways it's good and bad. It's good that it's giving the freedom to women, as opposed to when women are told to just close themselves and being shot in a room. I mean, I can do whatever I want whenever I want.

The cramps is not that bad. I can go ahead and do what I want. But yeah, normalizing it means, see again, we are fighting for period holidays, right? At office and stuff. So, this is not helping there. Yeah. This thing is very rampant in almost all the ads and this idea doesn't help there.

A: Are there any particular emotions that you found in this ad that connected with you? If you didn't, that's no.

V: That's an option. No, just that. They are just, I mean, they are not taking into consideration that cramps hurt. We need rest. Don't impose it on us. We'll take it where we want. Yeah.

A: Yeah. We're not taking it. Yeah. Like choice. Giving someone choice. And this whole, say, has this ever experience happened with you where you are like, where you're bleeding and, or when you're on your periods and when you, when you decide to go and pick up something and like this situation actually, is it a very real life situation or no?

V: Yeah, of course. Because you can't tell anybody, like growing up, I was like, we were four daughters, four females, girls. And we did not segregate between boys and girls. So physical work was part of the game. So go and get grocery, 10 kg, 15 kg worth of buying and all. So you don't tell people I'm on my period, so I can't go get it, right?

A: Yeah. Also, what do you think of the way like everything was, the like Kiyara Advani, what she was wearing, what, how, how, like, is that realistic? Would you wear like clothes like that when you're...

V: Now I would. I mean, there are other things that there, I mean, this was talking about pads, but it's fine. It doesn't stay in that much now, we are more woke. Okay. Yeah. So that's okay. That's not a big deal. Okay.

A: Now I will show you the next one, which is... once.

V: I mean, if I feel comfortable wearing a white, I'll wear a white, but some people are not okay with wearing white, it's completely up to them.

A: It's, I think it's a lot about the choice, right? Yeah. Exactly. Yeah. It's, if I want to wear white, I'll wear white. If I don't want to wear white, I want to wear white. My body.

V: Let it stain. Some people will be like, let it stain, that's okay. Yes. Yeah. So this is the second one. Mm-hmm. So, I'm going to show you the next one.

A: Yeah.

It's just a period

She may not understand what she's going through. She just needs to know, you do. Over a million girls get their first period every month. Your daughter could be one of them. This daughter's day, talk to her about it and tell her. It's normal. It's just a period.

A: First thoughts. Yeah. Are you there?

V: Are you stuck? Okay. Yeah.

A: Yeah. What are your initial thoughts on this?

V: This is a very emotional one because as I told you, my maternal grandfather was closest to me and this, an old man is talking about it. And I remember having to hide it from my grandfather thinking he will not understand. I remember like I had wrapped in a piece of, a used one in a piece of paper and I left it in the bed by mistake. I came from the washroom. I was supposed to dump it somewhere else.

Yeah. Under the, hide it with the garbage and stuff. And I had forgotten it on the bed and by chance I went back into the room and my grandfather, it's on my grandfather finding it and he was about to unwrap it. And I took it from his hand. He didn't ask me what it was. Of course he understood, but nobody really talked about it. So again, yeah, it was an emotional one.

A: This connected, this one connected a little bit to you emotionally. Would you have wanted your grandfather to talk the way this old man did? Would that have been better?

V: I mean, you will feel awkward if that awkwardness is imposed on you. You are not born with anything. Of course not. Yeah. Definitely. So if my grandfather, I mean, I'm okay now. I don't know what I would have felt then. But if it would have started like that with him giving me all that I would have taken it in my stride. Yeah, totally.

A: Of course. What about the message that they're giving that it's just a period? What are your thoughts on that sort of message?

V: Everyone is acknowledging it. No one is hiding it.

A: Everyone is acknowledging it. No one is hiding it. Okay. Yes. And but is it just a period?

V: No, it's not just a period.

A: It's not. Then what is it? What's more? If you had to explain.

V: I mean, apart from the biological changes and all the pain that you go through, it's actually uncomfortable and it would help if other people just took it in the stride.

Okay. So like earlier it used to happen so that only the man went to work. So 10 to five job or whatever. So yeah, he goes to work. So he will not need to work at home.

Of course he comes back home tired so he cannot take care of the house or the baby or whatever. That was taken in the stride. Nobody complained. Same way, three periods in the same way. I'm in pain. He treat me normally. I'm not in pain. Treat me normally. I mean, if I'm in pain, please understand if I'm behaving normally, just understand. I shouldn't have to hide anything.

V: Yeah, you shouldn't have to hide anything. And yeah, and there is more to it than just that. It's just a period. I mean, but I don't think that's the con. I'm not sure what the maker had in mind, but it's just a period as in as opposed to how boys are people, the gaze, the male gaze happens as opposed to that is just a period. Don't act like it's something very big. Normalize it, treat women normally.

A: Yeah, and I think that maybe that's the attempt at what the ad is doing. But if is that the attempt that you felt when you saw it because ads like these are usually targeted for women, to women. So is that what you felt when you saw this?

V: I didn't as I said, so you perceived it differently. I mean, it's just a period that sentence is very, it has multiple meanings, right? Yes. So as I said, this is what I understood and you have understood something else. Something else resonated with me. Something else could have resonated with somebody else. So it's like poetry, like multiple meanings. That's true. I think that's what it is.

A: That's that's actually a very nice way of looking at it. Like it is it can mean a lot of things and it's a way to start the conversation. At least that is something everybody can agree on. What did you do? Did you like the way that the ad was like, you know, it was a little it the way to short and everything. It was a little bit more serious. It had a serious narration. Do you think that helped the cause of spreading period of like period awareness or is the fun way a little bit better?

V: I mean, if a 12 or 30 year old girl watches this.

A: When you saw it, like when you saw this and that it kind of, did you, can you say it connected with you a little bit, this whole emotional aspect of it. What are your thoughts on the fact that it did not show a pad throughout the ad and they're advertising for pads?

V: Hmm, okay. I didn't think about that to somebody who, because I'm informed, so I didn't think about it, but to somebody who is not informed, they would want to know what it is about.

A: It's this euphemism route that they've taken that over talking about this, but they're not showing anything.

V: See again, they don't have to show it. I mean, don't have to show it. I mean, nobody wants to look at a bleeding pad anyway. It's disgusting, smelly, but yeah, as long as you understand it, that's what matters. Yeah.

A: Was there any misinformation in this ad that you found anything that was not true? Like many ads that were menstruation.

V: Can you think about something?

A: I don't know. I have not had menstruation, but I think so like, I cannot see any misinformation that existed in this ad. I don't think so. I might be wrong.

But is it true that like, all to show that all of the experiences are similar like this with your hands holding and everything? Is that a good idea? I don't know.

V: Because would that... When ideation happens, there's a group of people, someone is woke trying to pull the other people to the same level. So I'm sure that must have happened in that room where this ad was being planned.

That okay, there's so many aspects of discomfort associated with pads. What new thing can we do? Somebody must have thought about this angle and decided to go ahead with it. You can't... Maybe you cannot address 10 other things in that one ad of a few seconds. So maybe they decided to go ahead with this that okay, the information should be accepted by everyone equally.

A: Anything else you think they missed out on this ad which you would have liked to see?

V: No, as I said, you can't overdo it. Okay.

A: Now that brings me to the third one that I have. So this is a slightly longer one. Yeah. Yeah, I can hear it.

It's never just a period

V: Huh? Ah! It's just a period. Oh! So now I understand why you asked is just a period question. The context was different there and different together.

A: Yeah, but I didn't want to tell you like this is the next thing I was doing. Surprise. Wow, I was shocked. But yes, first initial thoughts about this ad, what you saw, anything, what you feel, what you saw.

V: Okay, it's funny. I mean the guitarists, the violinists, they're like it's just a period. I totally relate. Yeah. When you don't like there have been memes also about this Hindi memes, English memes that you're worried when it happens, you're worried when it doesn't happen. Yeah. You look at it all the time. But I like that they use red now. It was pretty apt. It was good.

It was a good one. Yeah. I mean the little boys were there in the group and they were like, oh, they're making fun of it, but they're learning. So they will know how to respect women better when they grow up.

A: Yeah. Yeah. And what did you think of the, now, and now you know I'm asking, but what did you think of the line? It's just, it's not just a period. It's never just a period rather. What do you think of that?

V: It reminds me of an interview with Barkha Dat. She was talking about these period vacations and I don't remember if she said or the other person said that, see, bleeding happens, pain happens. We do need our rest time. That doesn't mean that we don't demand equality. It has nothing to do with it. It's a biological thing that happens, but just because it is happening, you can't say that, I mean, you cannot give us the equal respect or equal opportunities. Yeah.

A: Totally. Fair enough. Fair enough. And that's part of that. It's never just a period. It's more than that.

V: Whether any particular... That context was different. Yes, totally. That context was different. But it speaks to the same taboo. Would you say? It's speaking to the same sort of taboo that exists or the same lack of... But if you show that in India, in my family, they would be there. They would change the channel. Okay.

A: So yeah, one question was coming to you. So this ad was actually shown in India, not on TV, but in like over social samosas and a lot of other marketing groups pushed it out. So it reached India. But what do you think if it did come on TV in India? How would your maybe family, husband, anybody react other than you or even you for that?

V: My husband might as well be comfortable about it. I would not be happy if he's not. I think he should not disappoint me. My uncle would be uncomfortable, I'm sure. My mother-in-law would change channels. No, I would be uncomfortable watching it with the male members in the family. But I would also wish I hope they are more accepting of it. I mean, they make me uncomfortable, awkward because I've grown up with them. If I see awkwardness there, I'm going to be awkward.

A: Do you think an ad like this should be shown in India? Do you think it's time? Do you feel like it's time we have reached this place where we can show something like this?

V: Oh yes. We have Netflix. We have been shown God knows what. We're just not shown in regular movies or series. Even Kapil Sharma does non-veg jokes on Netflix now, which he did not do earlier.

A: Honestly, that's what makes me awkward, not anything else. When I hear Kapil Sharma cracking, trying to be in with the new generation, he doesn't do it. Doesn't work. There were a lot of experiences that were shown within this. Anything that stood out to you that really connected with you, I felt this. The waiting for the period? Waiting for the period. It's frustrating.

V: I'm about to travel, whatever.

A: Have you ever encountered male gynecologists and this sort of... Yes. Is it like this? Are they like this? Are they accurate?

V: I only encountered one male gynecologist, only recently, maybe last year. I went to him because... So I had PCOD, I had a surgery done. So that was in 2020. So I did not have a follow-up ultrasound done, so I wanted another. Just to be sure, nothing came back. So I went to him, he was a recommended doctor. Again, what might seem like a good doctor to you might not.

Jail well with me. So he was an aged person, middle-aged. And I said, okay, my periods were these many days, 19 days late, but I did get my periods. I just want to know if everything is okay. And I want an ultrasound done. I don't know how far he understood, but he went on, he's asked me to lie down, he checked my stomach and he was like, okay, no, no, I mean, wait for a few days. I don't remember what he said, but I remember telling him that I have gotten my periods, it's over now. Oh, you got your periods because he thought I'm... He was like, he didn't listen to me the first time. And then since I got my periods, it was okay now. But he didn't understand my worry.

Even my husband didn't get it, like wasn't able to get through. So he was like, are you a science student or an art student? How does that matter? Yeah, he will explain accordingly. He will use terms accordingly.

So I said 12th, science till 12th in the arts. Then he explained the biology. This is what happens. This is what happens. I forgot what he said, tuned out.

Then I told him that an ultrasound is required and he behaved like... Peter happened. So why are you worried? Why have you come here? I don't understand why you came here. This is that.

I mean, in Odisha, that dude is too much. Then he was like, okay, fine, you want an ultrasound? I'll give you an ultrasound. You can take it.

Wait, hang on. On second thought, why don't you get an MRI? MRI, he said, yeah, MRI done.

He'll give you a more clearer view. Ultrasonic costs \$1,100. MRI costs \$10,000 to \$15,000. And first of all, he was like, I don't know why you came here. Then I thought he was behaving out of ego that, okay, if you came here, you want clarity, I'll give you an MRI. So I remember coming out of it because the first thing you hear from doctors, you think, okay, you're saying the right thing. But the moment I came out, I told my husband, I don't want to get anything done.

So that was last or last of last year. And then I didn't get anything done. I came back to Sweden and this time I went to a guy and I can go out my ultrasound done. Okay, okay. By a female doctor, she was another piece altogether.

A: What is the lack of understanding even in the medical community when it comes to menstruation?

V: Why do you think that is? Periods or whatever, you are coming to a doctor with an ailment. You are not a doctor, right? That's why you're going to a doctor to understand what's happening with you. Period or whatever, I mean, the doctor should be more understanding like, okay, let me help you understand what's happening with you. Not behave like, why did you come here? That's crazy, right? Don't make me feel stupid for coming to you. Yeah, I mean, I'm not a

A: doctor. And like, when you explain this about the doctor and everything else, even in this ad, like, what happens is they, do you feel like they kind of, they don't treat the body as some biological thing? It's more about the experiences that are there, right? Yeah. Do you think people would benefit more if they understood that part?

V: Yeah, I mean, I don't know. Do you mean the people who offer it or the people who experience it?

A: I mean, people in both in your, in everyday life for you in your everyday life, plus like, Gainax, for people who actually need to understand a lot of it, for their professional needs.

V: First of all, in, I mean, now that I see the comparison, Indian doctors are like, there must be very rare doctors left who are empathetic. Otherwise, it's like, this doctor that I went to this time, she gave me an ultrasound, yes. But she was like, my husband said, we did the regular blood test also. And I'm like, you know, this, she's got fatty liver. Doctor is like, fatty liver, yeah, yeah, everybody has it these days. Then she turned it, yeah, yeah, grade one, see, you must also have grade one.

What is this ad? I mean, tell me it's fine. Even if it is fine, not fine, whatever, eat this, you'll be okay. No, everybody has it. My husband is like, oh, then reach grade three and get operated directly. What logic? So lack of understanding. I mean, I want empathy.

A: And I think it's, that's a common thing amongst a lot of women that when it comes to menstruation and experiences, you just want some amount of empathy.

V: Yeah, I mean, because I don't understand what's happening. So help me understand what's happening. How difficult is that?

A: Yeah, it's your job. Yeah. Did anything about this ad make you feel uncomfortable?

V: Not really. I mean, whatever slight, this thing I might have had is because of my growing up years, which I need to get. I mean, not very uncomfortable. First, I was like, oh my God, you're showing this for the next moment. I'm like, okay, this should be shown. Yeah.

A: So there was just a little bit. Very little bit, yes. Yeah, it starts. And what did you think of like, you know, the ad as a little, it's quite playful, right? It's animated. It's nice. It's got a little bit. Do you think that's nice compared to the serious tone? That will be, that works better to feel the emotions of menstruation.

V: In Indian market? I don't know. What would you like to see?

A: Would you like to see it like this or would you like to see it like the one before, which is a little bit more serious, but spoke about everything also?

V: Yeah. I mean, I'm okay with both of them, but playfulness, yes, it does work a lot of times. But what I have seen with my experience, people are, especially in India, they're not very open to playfulness. They're not. They're not very open to the more very serious also. Yeah.

A: It needs to be a slight balance. Very difficult to get through to them. I think, you know, there's a very strange thing to say, but everybody has a different mindset, right? But you cannot actually design everything personalized per mindset. And it's normal. It's human tendency that I will only understand based on my level of workfulness.

V: Yeah. So maybe create something like people who are creating these taboos are religious mostly. So maybe create from a religion point of view. Okay.

A: Yeah. Yeah. Why not? Maybe then. If sorry, continue.

V: Like, yeah, like if the Puranas are saying something, the Bhagavad Gita is saying something, actually, of course facts will be used. If something comes from there, then that acceptance will be more. I remember, so my mother-in-law is a devout believer, but she tends to believe only certain Yeah. Gods or certain people who represent God.

A: Yeah, I mean, I know what to talk about.

V: So she the other day, my husband put on Gaur Gopal Das and my mother-in-law didn't like it. Because of the, of course, he doesn't speak the usual. Yeah.

A: The usual way. The usual way.

V: Yeah. If somebody moves a little bit away from the idea, then it's a little bit uncomfortable. Yeah. Everyone gets a little uncomfortable. What did you think of the visualization of women showing a pregnant woman?

A: What was that? Is that needed to show?

V: Yeah, why not? Because right after, oh my God, so right after pregnancy, she bleeds so much. Yes. That, I mean, the post-traumatic, the post-pregnancy thing, the postpartum depression, like nobody, like recently my friend had a baby and I of course got something for the baby, but a lot of like a big basket of stuff for the mother.

Yeah. Her mother was in and my friend's mom is like, oh my God, what a, she got things for you and the friend herself, she's like, why are you getting things for me? Get it for the baby. She was surprised that anybody would think of me. Even the mother thought, like even the grandmother thought that anybody would think of anybody but the baby.

Then there's another friend who said, everybody keeps gifting my child, but nobody thinks of gifting things to me. So they need care and the bleeding, the pain, who's taking care of them, everybody's taking care of the baby, who's taking care of the mother. Yeah.

A: I'm showing a situation like this, which is probably, it's a situation that would happen to a lot of mothers where they would have to breastfeed while they're bleeding. Yeah. So that would, I mean, you, it's a good, it's a thing that they showed it. Yeah.

It's interesting that they showed it and I don't know how it was taken even in, I mean, I think sometimes I feel that, you know, menstrual taboos are, yeah, they are there in India more, but like you said, it's not really about develop, it might be about development, but still it's such an ingrained taboos that's there even in like say UK or US or Sweden or anything. It's all, it's there. It's still, it's just different. The way that it's there is different and it's nice, I guess.

V: But then nobody, like, I'm not sure if anybody would be breastfeeding while changing the pad, but it's a good thing in the Western countries at least that the husband is allowed inside while the mother is giving birth. So they get to see what the woman is going through because most men just think, okay, this is what women do and like I'm watching Mrs. Right now. So imagine, so this is what women do so they can't feel pain or they don't or it's not hard.

A: It's not our problem. Maybe people think some men think it's not our problem.

V: Not our problem or I mean, it's just out of sight, out of mind kind of thing. Yeah.

A: After seeing these three ads or in general also, what do you think that period ads should stop focusing on?

V: Hmm. That is just the period. I'm referring to the first ad.

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah. I realized that when I show these ads back to back, the first one usually gets a lot of hatred.

V: Yeah, it is normal. It is typically Indian commercial ad.

A: Yeah, it is. And so that, yes, that is something you would think that it should stop focusing on. And what do you think is something that is that these within these three ads that you saw, that was the most refreshing you felt. Like when you saw all of these three, the point at which really stood out, I mean, is it the one that where it's like your periods can get late? Is that the one or is there something else?

V: Hmm. I mean, it's not out in a negative sense that yes, people do act like it's nothing. Yeah. When it's actually not that. Otherwise, it was, it was like, they say, you know, what is it, something like that. I want this to happen. It is happening. So I'm happy that these are being shown. Yeah. Pumido pekhara utara.

A: Yeah. Now, just very few more questions. I'm sorry, I'm taking so much time.

V: No, it's okay. I'm just on low battery. I might have to.

A: Yeah, you can. I mean, I think I have to take like 10-15 minutes. Okay. Yeah. So do you think, would you say that you know menstruation now after these many years of menstruation?

V: The biological perspective?

A: No, the experience perspective.

V: Yeah, of course. You know the experience. You're making me doubt myself now with that question.

A: I'm so sorry. No, I'm not. I'm not. I'm not. I'm not. Do you think you know it? After all these years, you think anything can shock you?

V: I don't think anything can shock me though.

A: Yeah, nothing new. Nothing new is will come up. So then can you tell me, can you describe if you don't mind? You can always say no. But can you describe how your menstrual experiences are?

V: They are not regularly painful but yeah, maybe it hurts once every alternative month. There will be either cramps or back pain or leg pain or weakness. Yeah. It's uncomfortable yes most of the time.

A: And what about emotionally? What are the emotions that you feel when you are?

V: I am emotionally a high strong person. So honestly, honestly, honestly I can't segregate it. I am usually feeling that most of the time. Or maybe I have never really given it much thought that okay I am feeling like crying these days maybe I am closer to my periods. I have never really connected it actively.

A: Do you think it should be connected like that? Like I am closer to my periods. I am crying so I must be closer.

V: Depends actually. Yeah. It's an instinct. I am feeling this way irrespective of my periods. It's just that oh she is on a hormone so let us not disturb her. Nothing like that. I am feeling sad so understand me. Be a good friend. Yeah.

A: Also I think a lot of people don't understand what hormones are. I don't for that matter. I don't know how many women understand but I am sure men don't a lot at all.

V: My husband googles so much. Yeah.

A: Yeah. Yeah. And also.

V: But then see yeah okay maybe hormones tend to make you very high strong emotionally but we don't want to also hear that oh you are on a period that's why you are cranky. We don't want to hear that either.

Yes. That's why I say I am not really for or I am not against it also that if you want to be given special treatment because you are on your periods and you are not feeling good. I mean maybe for the rest of the month you are very happy and those very specific days makes you feel very down.

Respect for that. Also throughout the month you are an emotional person also respect for that. Same goes for men right. I mean you have a different temperament. Your other guy friend might have a different temperament but we live with it right. We are not blaming you for it or not taunting you or making fun of you for it. Same goes for women because again it's biological we are not making any of it. Whatever it is is we can't do anything about it.

A: Yeah and you exactly and I think you can't do anything about it is also important thing to think. See do you think living as living in say growing up in Ganeshwar that context shape how

you have experienced menstruation and if you were in say somewhere else in Odisha or anywhere else in India you think it would have been different.

V: When I got to leave my city I was already 25 or 26. Then yes I got to see a broader context of it like a thought process. People were more open so I tended I did open up after that a bit more.

I was like wow people can talk openly about these stuff. Yeah. Then of course when you leave that place then that comparison happens right where you were and where you have come to. So yeah maybe so since I felt that okay Delhi was more open and broader maybe growing up in Delhi would have made me broader. I don't know. I don't know what my circle would have been like.

A: Yeah you don't yeah that's true but there was a chance that maybe in Delhi. Or maybe in Delhi it would have been right the opposite because my next question to you about this is that do you think that you know say capital gain or gaining. A lot of people say if you gain money then there is liberalization when it comes to things like this like menstruation like if the more money you have in the better place you're living in then my menstrual experiences are better. Do you think that's true?

V: Could be yes. Okay. But not necessarily. Yes. You can be rich but you have a very backward thought process. Yeah. Money cannot change that about you.

A: I think that's true. That's true that's true and I think in India it's a little different right because we think of India in the same way people look at like when people look at the west and understand it they try to look at India in the same way. You can't because that's a lot of different. Can't do that. Yeah. Do you think that India has kind of moved forward in understanding the sanitation part of menstruation the importance of sanitation.

V: Not as much as I would like it to be. What more would you like? I mean the government doesn't recognize it. What can you say luxury goods right? That's still a luxury goods. That means you're forcing women to still use the reuse that old cloth.

A: And I think they've increased the tax on it also now.

V: Hence the luxury goods right? So it can't be afforded by everyone. So what are you saying?

A: Yeah. I'm saying which is it should be. Yeah.

V: Everybody needs it. So you're saying whoever cannot afford it does not need it. Yeah.

A: And has an unhygienic menstrual experience there.

V: And that movie that the what was that movie Padman. Padman. Yeah. So it was based on a true story what happened to that brand. I was trying to look it up the other day. I didn't get much. It was there's not too much information of it on the internet.

A: Because Akshay Kumar. He more everybody's more interested in.

V: No, because it was a good idea right the guy. I was trying to look up the guy and is he still selling those pads. Because it's not very even if Akshay Kumar branded it but promoted it. Even then this I don't see it being easily available anymore. Yeah. Where is it? What brand is it? I don't even know that much. Yeah.

A: I think everybody made a film around him and pat it their backs and just left.

V: Yeah. Yeah. Which is a lot of which is a lot of the thing in India about talking about menstruation. Right. We will be like we need to talk about it. I will say periods. You will say periods and we will be like oh we broke in the taboo. Now we can say it to each other.

Then we have we have said the words. So yeah. Yeah. Like this is what people say right. I mean you don't have to worry about convincing thousand other people. You just have to worry about convincing your immediate circle. Yes.

A: That's true. That is a very true. I've heard that notion a lot. Yeah. My life this is the last question that I have. And so just it's just a fun question. If you had to sell menstrual products and what what would your message be?

V: Not really a very marketing kind of person.

A: It doesn't have to be creative or anything just like simply what would your message be?

V: My brain has totally gone blank at this point.

A: I can put you on the spot.

V: Yeah. You did.

A: What is it that you would okay. If you look at it in this way that suppose you want to talk about menstruation right. And I think everybody around you suppose you are given an audience that want to listen to about listen to it. What what was it that what is it what would you say about it? What would be the first way that you go about seeing it actually if you are given a platform like this?

V: I don't know. Like it's your sister your daughter don't ostracize her. Biology happens to you happens to her as well. So please try and normalize it. Yeah.

A: That's actually that's a very good marketing. But yes, thank you.

V: Anyway, throughout this call, like however many compliments you give me as the most I've gotten in, I don't know, the longest of time. That's a good one. That's a good one. That's actually a good one.

A: I liked it. So I would like to be good. I will stop recording no

7.2 Open coding

.And it was happening to my some of my friends. So I did not keep it a secret from them.Okay.Okay.

A

So can you tell me a little bit about this? Is it a ritual or is it like something where you the seven days apart thing that happens?

V

So I think most of my, I think some of my South Indian friends, I couldn't like, I don't remember **it's only the South Indian friends or whatever, but they were told to be in a separate room for seven days. They're not supposed to see anybody touch anybody.**

They're not supposed to look at men, have men look at the or something will happen. Don't know what I remember making fun of my best friend trying to touch her when she was trying to run away from me during that time. So it hadn't happened to me by then.

She was the first one of the group. **So that also I remember like my aunt telling me to hide my pad. Like so me how it's all hush hush.** And I think my grandmother got to know because I was a child I was using a cloth. So I may have been lying down and she might have got whiff of the smell and she got an idea. And she was like, show me, show me, show me. And it was **Embarrassing**, obviously. And I was fighting it off. My grandfather, I mean, my grandfather came in and my grandfather came in and my grandmother was like, I think she's got her me'sease. And I'm like, what are you doing? No, fighting it off. But we had a Dog, female dog. My grandfather was like, no, you must be mistaken. It must be time Dog. Okay. With Some people that are coming to me right now.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, okay. And Volume Shinedown. Oh, is it better now?

V

I can hear you, but it's okay. Lower, but I can hear you. That's okay.

A

Yeah. But, um, so, okay, this was your, this was something that, that was your, is a, is an experience that you first had. And usually I, were ask a lot about, as an, I read a lot about, because it didn't happen to me.

So I read a lot about, you know, there is a kind of celebration, which happens with your first, with your first period. Do you remember that who was involved? What was happening? What were the cultural ties behind it?

V

So it didn't happen to me, but it did happen to my South Indian Friends. They have this whole wedding Equivalent Celebrate. Hello. Yeah, you got cut off, I think.



Aditya Sen
6:48 PM Apr 11

Stigma-Cultural Stigma



Aditya Sen
6:49 PM Apr 11

Power and Patriarchy- Family Dynamics



Aditya Sen
6:50 PM Apr 11

Emotions-Confusion-Embarrassment

Speaker 1

You're Telling Me About Wedding Equivalent Celebration.

V

Yeah. So the lady or the friend, the girl, she is dressed like a bride. She's given new clothes, new jewelry, everybody gives gifts and everybody knows that she has a periods now and she's, she is flowered, whatever that word is. Yeah. Yeah. It happened to my South Indian friends, but not to me. Thankfully.

A

Do you remember how you felt about it, about this happening to your friends?

V

I mean, on the one hand, I'm being told to be all hush hush. Like these people are, you know, told to stay indoors away from the eyes of everyone. And on the other hand, you're making it a public, I don't know, circus of it. Yeah. So it was very, I mean, see, you don't, you don't question the norms at that age. I just got hit. You think they know that elders know better.

So you're like, okay, if it is happening to them, it must be something right. But I'm not comfortable with that because there's, I mean, so much of fear has been pushed into your mind by then that even the school teachers are not very helpful. I was supposed to be, we were supposed to hide our pads. I remember one time I was trying to pull the pad out of my bag and my teacher saw it. I was not discreet enough and she pulled me aside and she scolded me a lot. She told me that I'm trying to lure the attention of the boys. Wow. Because I'm bleeding from there. That's a very sexist thing to happen. I don't know. But Then You Blame Yourself, right? Because you think the elders are right. Yes.

A

And I think it's also an important point to look at that how at that age, I guess when something, when you suddenly something new happens and then elders tell something, it kind of forms what it means to you, right? Exactly. So how is the interaction about this amongst your friend group? I mean, you have told me some instances, but like generally, do you remember what were the conversations like around menstruation and periods during those early years?

V

It was nothing biological. It's just that bleeding happens. It hurts the first or these days. Dress stains and you have to be away from them. Okay. No, I should not go to the temple, should not be eating pickles, should not be getting into the kitchen.



Aditya Sen
6:51 PM Apr 11

Emotions-Confusion-Embarrassment



Aditya Sen
6:53 PM Apr 11

Stigma-Cultural Stigma



Aditya Sen
6:57 PM Apr 11

Power and Patriarchy- Gender Roles
Communication-Narratives-Misinformation



Aditya Sen
6:57 PM Apr 11

Stigma-Cultural Stigma-Religious

8. Pilot Codes

Themes	Taboo					Communication				
Category	Cultural Taboo		Othering	Impurity	Menarche	Lack of information	Narratives	Communication channels	Misinformation	School Education
Sub Category	Religious	Caste								
Description	Religious practices within India's culture and norms that promote the stigmatisation of menstruation	Specific religious and cultural practices that are born from caste divisions in India	The stigmatisation through menstruation where women feel they aren't equal to men, and men feel like they shouldn't know about it.	The stigmatisation of menstruation which portrays it as an impure/dirty substance	Specific menstrual taboos and stigmas that are propagated during the first menstrual experience	A lack of information about menstrual experiences in Indian society	Narratives that are woven by society that shape menstrual experience discourses	Different communication channels through which women can learn about menstrual experiences	False information that's propagated in society about menstrual experiences	Menstrual discourses that are taught in school education
Example	The plants will die if you touch them when you're on your period, especially Tulsi plants.	There was a lot of Brahmin women who attended the ceremony for me. So there was a lot of conversation within Brahmin circles.	Copper utensils for women who are menstruating because they're not supposed to touch anything else.	It's somewhere along the lines of stained and dishonorable. It's disgraced, basically. Something that is dirty.	You're an 11 year old child. You thought you knew your body.	I remember asking my mother, like, why is all of this happening, and why am I supposed to hide?	So the story (about menstruation) was, let the king of gods, Indra, was injured, and he was bleeding out. So a woman from Earth contributes to take that bleeding every month.	My mom's mom sort of was the cultural link between everything. So my mother would always constantly ask, like, is this what we're supposed to do?	A period automatically is assumed as a bad day.	So the thing that we learned in school was a very biological explanation as to what happens in a period.

			Media			Emotions					
	Education		Advertising	Advocacy	Animation		Embarrassment	Morality	Celebration	Confusion	Affective Empathy
School Education	Sanitation	Internet education									
			The role of advertising in shaping women's knowledge and understanding of menstrual experiences	The role of health campaigns in shaping women's knowledge and understanding of menstrual experiences	How can animation be used to showcase menstrual experiences	The feeling of shame and disgust that menstrual narratives shape in women	The feeling of embarrassment and promotion of silence that menstrual narratives shape in women	The feeling of what's socially acceptable to do when it comes to menstruation	The feeling of joy that comes with fertility narratives in women	The feeling of confusion regarding the reason for certain menstrual experiences	The feeling of representation when women see their menstrual experience being portrayed in a destigmatised way.
Menstrual discourses that are taught in school education	Menstrual awareness around sanitation in India	Menstrual discourses that women get through the internet and social media									
			(Menstrual ads made me feel that I could do) A lot. Oh, when I was younger, I thought I could do things. Okay, I thought yeah. Well, I was 11 years old.	Health drives happen a lot more in rural areas, so that's probably why I haven't heard of any drives	Tried to work with animation which doesn't take away the seriousness of it. Okay. Especially that part where you see the jelly in her pad. Sometimes that's how it looks	And then the reaction to it is not concern, but rather a sort of forced shame. Mhmm. That's something that you ingrain with yourself.	We will have to hide and keep them wrapped in a black cover or a newspaper. You shouldn't even be seeing the pads accidentally.	And I think my mom did have some sort of moral compass on what should be followed and what shouldn't be.	She is more like a goddess. She is, dressed up and then put on a pedestal and, a money garland is put on her.	So it's sort of lot of confusion, and you're completely alone. Like, what does this mean? Period of five five days. Why?	It was by far the best a I've seen (bodyform ac Everything was a shan experience. Like, seer actual blood in your underwear in school, n
So the thing that we learned in school was a very biological explanation as to what happens in a period.	In urban spaces, I think it's (health campaigns) very less because accessibility to period products is incredibly high	Searching really stupid stuff on the Internet. All of that is shared. This is what happens.									

	Body		Patriarchy				Medicalisation	Class	
	Autonomy	Body Representation	Power	Gender Roles	Societal Pressure	Family Dynamics		Urban Class	Rural Class
feeling of agency women feel with sex to their body ugh media atives		The portrayal of women's body in media	The power that patriarchy presses on women's menstrual experience	The clear division of activities and responsibilities between men and women in society due to patriarchy	The pressure that society puts on how women should experience their menstruation.	The stigmas and taboos that are propagated in Indian homes through family members	Feelings that are spread within medical practitioners through cultural/religious taboos	Narratives that are present only in urban classes	Narratives that are present only in rural class
as at least given a ore information as I before it actually pened to me, I would nentially ready for it.		You have male figures or male pictures of police and male firefighters and male doctors. So you're automatically thinking, oh, these are roles that men play. And when you see a nurse, you see a woman.	Men shouldn't talk to you. But if men talk to you, you just take it. But you don't talk back to men.	We want men to know about it so that if they don't cover in fear, and I don't have to worry about telling my male manager that, hey I'm not I'm not gonna come into work today.	if a house is too traditional, it never really has the right connotation to it. Because being too traditional means you are also putting these values first.	Like, the mother, the woman, the role of the nurturer, the role of, you know, taking care of the kids and all that.	Male gynecologist tend to be a little less empathetic. Mhmm. Mhmm. Because they obviously can't understand female bodies.	As long as you're in the city, you're gonna interact with the women. You're gonna, have relationships with women, be it sister, friend, partner, anything	Health drives happen a lot more in rural areas, so that's probably why I haven't heard of any drives

9. Final Codes

Themes	Stigma			Power and Patriarchy			Communication		
Category	Cultural Stigma	Othering	Community	Gender Roles	Family Dynamics	Body	Lack of Information	Misinformation	Medicalisation
Sub Category	Religious	Impurity	Menarche			Body Autonomy	Body Representation		
Description	Religious practices within India's culture and norms that promote the stigmatisation of menstruation	The stigmatisation of menstruation which portrays both women and menstruation as impurity/ dirty/ unwanted	Specific menstrual experiences and stigmas that women experience during their younger years	A community built from mutual stigmatisation of menstruation	The clear division of activities and responsibilities between men and women in society due to patriarchy	The stigmas and taboos that are propagated in Indian homes through family members	The feeling (or lack) of agency that women feel with respect to their body through media narratives	A lack of information about menstrual experiences in Indian society	Narratives that are spread through the cultural bias that exists within medical sciences
Example	Like don't come into the kitchen because you're bleeding. So don't touch pickles. Don't touch, just don't go.	They're not supposed to see anybody touch anybody. They're not supposed to look at men, have men look at the or something will happen.	It's somewhere along the lines of stained and, dishonorable. It's disgraced, basically. Something that is dirty.	And I think my mom was the only one who said, we're not gonna get you married. Please, you're gonna study, you're gonna go ahead in life, you're gonna be independent	Men shouldn't talk to you. But if men talk to you, you just take it. But you don't talk back to men.	I was growing up in a joint family. So this was something that was not discussed at all. And even though I had two elder sisters staying in the same house with me, even they didn't do a job in bringing it up. And in fact, once when my mother did try bringing it up with me. With mom, I think it was all good because once I got it, she explained me what it was and all of that. But not,	If I was at least given a lot more information as a child before it actually happened to me, I would be mentally ready for it. You have male figures or male pictures of police and male firefighters and male doctors. So you're automatically thinking, oh, these are roles that men play. And when you see a nurse, you see a woman.	I remember asking my mother like, why is all of this happening, and why am I supposed to hide? A period automatically is assumed as a bad day	Male gynecologist tend to be a little less empathetic. Mhmm. Mhmm. Because they obviously can't understand female bodies.

Awareness				Emotions			Celebration	Empathy
Interpersonal	Education	Media Narratives	Class	Shame	Embarrassment	Confusion		
Narratives that are spread through family, friends or peers	Menstrual discourses that are taught in school education or discourses about the impact that menstrual education has	The role of advertising in shaping women's knowledge and understanding of menstrual experiences	The role of health campaigns in shaping women's knowledge and understanding of menstrual experiences	Narratives that are present with urban classes. This relate to affordability, accessibility and geo-social development of that area.	The feeling of shame and disgust that menstrual narratives shape in women	The feeling of embarrassment and promotion of silence that menstrual narratives shape in women	The feeling of confusion regarding the reason for certain menstrual experiences	The feeling of representation when women see their menstrual experiences being portrayed in a destigmatised way.
	So the thing that we learned in school was a very biological explanation as to what happens in a period.	In urban spaces, I think it's (health campaigns) very less because accessibility to period products is incredibly high	Searching really stupid stuff on the Internet. All of that is shared. This is what happens.	As long as you're in the city, you're gonna interact with the women. You're gonna have relationships with women, be it sister, friend, partner, anything	And then the reaction to it is not concern, but rather a sort of forced shame. Mhmm. That's something that you ingrain with yourself.	We will have to hide and keep them wrapped in a black cover or a newspaper. You shouldn't even be seeing the pads accidentally.	So it's sort of lot of confusion, and you're completely alone. Like, what does this mean? Period of five five days. Why?	She is more like a goddess. She is, dressed up and then put on a pedestal and, a money garland is put on her.
								It was by far the best ad I've seen (bodyform ad). Everything was a shared experience. Like, seeing actual blood in your underwear in school, n

10. Pilot Code Book

Taboo	Actions that stigmatize menstrual experiences through clearly defined practices.
Cultural Taboo	Cultural (could be religious or caste-based) practices within India's culture and norms that promote the stigmatization of menstruation
Religious	Religious practices within India's culture and norms that promote the stigmatization of menstruation
Caste	Specific religious and cultural practices that are born from caste divisions in India
Othering	The stigmatization through menstruation where women feel they aren't equal to men, and men feel like they shouldn't know about menstruation.
Impurity	The stigmatisation of menstruation which portrays it as an impure/dirty substance
Menarche	Specific menstrual taboos and stigmas that are propagated during the first menstrual experience
Communication	Norms, channels, and technology that have shaped communication around menstruation.
Lack of Information	A lack of information about menstrual experiences in Indian society
Narratives	Narratives that are woven by society that shape menstrual experience discourses
Communication channels	Different communication channels through which women can learn about menstrual experiences
Misinformation	False information that's propagated in society about menstrual experiences
Education	Different norms and channels through which education about menstrual experiences is carried out
School Education	Menstrual discourses that are taught in school education
Sanitation	Menstrual awareness around sanitation in India

Internet Education	Menstrual discourses that women get through the Internet and social media
Media	Factors within the Indian media landscape that impact the way menstrual experiences are perceived by society.
Advertising	The role of advertising in shaping women's knowledge and understanding of menstrual experiences
Advocacy	The role of health campaigns in shaping women's knowledge and understanding of menstrual experiences
Animation	How can animation be used to showcase menstrual experiences
Emotions	Emotions that are felt during or because of menstruation.
Shame	The feeling of shame and disgust that menstrual narratives shape in women
Embarrassment	The feeling of embarrassment and promotion of silence that menstrual narratives shape in women
Morality	The feeling of what's socially acceptable to do when it comes to menstruation
Celebration	The feeling of joy that comes with fertility narratives in women
Confusion	The feeling of confusion regarding the reason for certain menstrual experiences
Affective Empathy	The feeling of representation when women see their menstrual experiences being portrayed in a destigmatized way.
Body	The role that bodily agency and representation play in destigmatizing menstrual experiences.
Body Autonomy	The feeling of agency that women feel with respect to their body through media narratives
Body Representation	The portrayal of women's bodies in media
Patriarchy	The role of patriarchy in defining a woman's menstrual experience.
Power	The power that patriarchy presses on women's menstrual experience
Gender Roles	The clear division of activities and responsibilities between men and women in society due to patriarchy

Societal Pressure	The pressure that society puts on how women should experience their menstruation.
Family Dynamics	The stigmas and taboos that are propagated in Indian homes through family members
Medicalization	Feelings that are spread among medical practitioners through cultural/religious taboos
Class	The role of class is defining accessibility and overall awareness of menstrual experiences.
Urban Class	Narratives that are present only in urban classes
Rural Class	Narratives that are present only in rural class

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Stigma	Actions that stigmatize menstrual experiences through clearly defined practices.
Cultural Stigma	Cultural (could be religious or other) practices within India's culture and norms that promote the stigmatization of menstruation
Religious Stigma	Religious practices within India's culture and norms that promote the stigmatization of menstruation
Impurity	The stigmatization of menstruation which portrays both women and menstruation as impurity/ dirty/ unwanted
Menarche	Specific menstrual taboos and stigmas that are propagated during the first menstrual experience
Power and Patriarchy	The power that patriarchal norms have in defining a woman's menstrual experience.
Community	A community built from mutual stigmatization of menstruation
Gender roles	The clear division of activities and responsibilities between men and women in society due to patriarchy
Family dynamics	The stigmas and taboos that are propagated in Indian homes through family members
Body	The role that bodily agency and representation play in destigmatizing menstrual experiences.
Body Autonomy	The feeling of agency that women feel with respect to their body through various communication channels and media narratives
Body Representation	The portrayal of women's bodies in media
Communication	Norms, channels, and technology that have shaped communication around menstruation.
Narratives	Narratives that are woven by society that shape menstrual experience discourses
Lack of information	A lack of information about menstrual experiences in Indian

	society within it's discourses
Misinformation	False information that's propagated in society about menstrual experiences
Medicalization	Feelings that are spread among medical practitioners through cultural/religious stigmas
Interpersonal	Narratives that are spread through family, friends, or peers
Awareness	Different communication channels that spread menstrual awareness in India
Education	Different norms and channels through which education about menstrual experiences is carried out
Media Narratives	Communication norms of menstruation within various media narratives
Advertising	The role of advertising in shaping women's knowledge and understanding of menstrual experiences
Advocacy	The role of health campaigns in shaping women's knowledge and understanding of menstrual experiences
Class	The role of class is defining accessibility and overall awareness of menstrual experiences.
Emotions	Emotions that are felt during or because of menstruation.
Confusion	The feeling of confusion regarding the reason for certain menstrual experiences
Shame	The feeling of shame and disgust that menstrual narratives shape in women
Embarrassment	The feeling of embarrassment and promotion of silence that menstrual narratives shape in women
Celebration	The feeling of joy that comes with fertility narratives in women
Empathy	The feeling of empathy when women see their menstrual experiences being portrayed in a destigmatized way.