Article:
Tomlinson, M.K. (2023) 'Periods don't stop for pandemics': the implications of COVID-19 for online and offline menstrual activism in Great Britain. Women's Studies in Communication, 46 (3). pp. 289-311. ISSN: 0749-1409

https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2023.2222365

‘Periods don’t stop for Pandemics’: The implications of COVID-19 for online and offline menstrual activism in Great Britain

Abstract:

Menstrual activists have long adopted an intersectional approach in their work to reduce period poverty, eradicate menstrual stigma, and educate audiences about health and sustainability. By forcing offline activities to cease, COVID-19 created unprecedented barriers for menstrual activists, including the closure of offline spaces and social distancing. Lockdown, however, provided a unique opportunity to assess the effectiveness of digital activism and created valuable knowledge that will have a long-term impact on the aims and practices of menstrual activists. Interviews conducted with 32 menstrual activists across Great Britain demonstrate that, although digital technologies help to raise awareness amongst more privileged audiences, they are less effective for conducting intersectional activism that supports communities who are disadvantaged by factors such as race, class, or disability. Furthermore, as activists often focus on the material needs of menstruating women and people, solely relying on digital communication considerably reduces the effectiveness of their work.

Keywords: activism, digital communication, menstruation, intersectionality, materiality

Introduction:

As scholarship on social movements attests, crises can render existing gendered inequalities more visible, present new challenges, create knowledge, and push activists to re-examine how they can most effectively tackle social inequalities (Nilsen, Berdnikovs and Humphrys, 2010). Building on these studies, this article turns its attention to the COVID-19 pandemic

and gender inequalities in Great Britain. It examines how lockdown impacted menstrual activism and how this has reshaped menstrual activists' knowledge and practices. The closure of offline spaces presented a unique set of challenges for menstrual activists who form part of an intersectional movement that tackles gender inequalities through supporting the material needs and the mental wellbeing of menstruating women and people.[1] The challenges faced by activists during lockdown included the exacerbation of "period poverty", the enforcement of social distancing, and the closure of offline spaces where they had previously worked with communities that are disadvantaged by factors such as socio-economic status, race, and disability (Briggs, 2021; McKay, 2021). Hence, during lockdown, activists in England, Scotland, and Wales were forced to use digital technologies to carry out activities, such as product demonstrations and educational initiatives, which they had previously conducted offline. Although they faced the challenge of adapting offline activities into the digital space, the move to online communication (including social media and video conferencing) allowed them to experiment with tools that could reduce costs and save time. Lockdown in Great Britain therefore provides an ideal case study for evaluating the effectiveness of digital communication for menstrual activism and, more broadly, for addressing gender inequalities.

Drawing on interviews that I conducted with 32 activists, this study investigates how lockdown impacted, and will continue to shape, the approaches and practices of menstrual activists in Great Britain. It explores a particular moment of the pandemic, known in Great Britain as "the first lockdown". As most public buildings were closed, and social distancing measures were enforced, activists had to adapt many offline activities into online activities (Jallow, Renukappa & Suresh, 2021). This article analyzes the impact of this move from hybrid offline/online work to exclusively digital labor. I focus on two central characteristics of menstrual activism that all participants identified as being profoundly impacted by

lockdown. Firstly, I examine the implications of lockdown for the material and tactile nature of menstrual activist work, which often includes distributing menstrual products and leading live product demonstrations. Secondly, I analyze how the intersectional approach of menstrual activists was impacted by the necessity of using digital tools to communicate with audiences that they had previously engaged with offline. Based on my participants' reflections on the impact of lockdown on their work with specific communities, this study focuses on menstruating women and people who are disadvantaged by race, class, and disability. Hence, I consider whether activists can effectively support disadvantaged menstruating women and people via the sole use of digital communication. In so doing, I also reflect on the effectiveness of offline forms of activism. As menstrual activists and organizations largely rely on external funds, the findings of this article offer valuable supporting evidence for menstrual activists who are seeking financial support for offline or hybrid activities with disadvantaged communities. Furthermore, this article contributes to emerging studies that critically analyze the potential of digital activism to empower marginalized women and other gender minorities.

A Brief History of the Menstrual Movement: Stigma, Products, and Intersectionality

Although there exist multiple approaches and definitions of menstrual stigma, activists and scholars in the Global North tend to define menstrual stigma as the feelings of shame that are engendered by negative societal attitudes towards menstruation (White, 2013; McHugh, 2020). Stigma compels menstruating women and people to ensure that menstruation is "concealed verbally as well as physically" (Kissling, 1996, p.484). It has broad implications, such as the lack of menstrual health education in schools, and it also affects the health and wellbeing of individuals (Gottlieb, 2020; Bowen-Viner, Watson, & Symonds 2022). Menstrual stigma is evident in societal discourses about menstrual blood and menstruating

people. For instance, activists and scholars have demonstrated that discourses such as “dirty”, “messy”, “irrational” and “out-of control” play into negative stereotypes about women and cause embarrassment about menstruation (Ussher, 2006; McHugh, 2020). Media, education, and interpersonal relationships can reinforce stigmatizing messages but can also provide a space to challenge these messages (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020; Tomlinson 2021). As scholars and activists argue, even Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) campaigns can reinforce stigma (Bobel, 2018; Thomson et al, 2019). Through a combination of shame and white saviorism, these campaigns can doubly stigmatize marginalized women who are experiencing period poverty (which refers to a lack of access to menstrual products) (Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). The discourses of dignity and hygiene within these campaigns not only frame marginalized women’s bodies as “deficient and in need of correction” but position MHM campaigners as saving marginalized women from unsanitary conditions (Bobel 2018, 232). By presenting single-use products as an easy solution and criticizing marginalized women for using “rags”, these narratives mask the complex structural issues that sustain poverty and promote the profit-driven agenda of major brands who sell disposable products (Thomson et al, 2019).

Menstrual stigma has remained a focus of menstrual activist work in countries such as Great Britain, France, the United States and Kenya for decades (Alhelou et al 2022; Bildhauer, Rostvik & Vostral, 2022). Indeed, the menstrual movement bridges the gaps between the second, third, and fourth waves of feminism in Europe and North America (Sobnosky, 2013). In the mid-twentieth century, European and North American practices of keeping women uninformed about reproduction were replaced with calls for menstrual education in schools and products that would allow women to easily manage menstruation in public (Vostral 2008; Freidenfelds, 2009). Although the use of disposables became normalized in the Global North

by the 1960s, discourses of concealment in advertisements continued to perpetuate menstrual stigma (Kissling, 1996; Rostvik, 2022). Criticizing advertisements (and patriarchal society more broadly) for using language that shames women, second-wave feminists in Europe and North America called for women to celebrate menstruation (Leclerc, 1974). To positively shape societal views about the menstruating body, feminists created art, cinema, music, poetry, and prose (Bobel, 2010). Complementing these efforts, the women's health movement emerged in the United States in the 1970s (Freidenfelds, 2009). This movement criticized the medical establishment for undermining women's health issues, fought for reproductive justice and, in response to thousands of cases of Toxic Shock Syndrome in the 1980s, demanded stricter regulation of the menstrual product industry (Vostral, 2008). Menstrual activists' efforts to hold menstrual product companies to account struck a chord with environmental activists who joined the cause to raise awareness of the environmental damage caused by single-use menstrual products (Bobel & Fahs, 2020).

The intersectionality of contemporary menstrual activism in Great Britain and the United States has its roots in the third-wave feminist movement of the 1990s (Bobel, 2010). Influential black feminists such Audre Lorde, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill Collins criticized second-wave feminists for presenting the experiences of white women as if they were universal (Crenshaw, 1991). They argued that bodily experiences are shaped by factors such as race, gender, age, and class and therefore women's experiences must be viewed through this lens (Weldon, 2008). As a result of this new intersectional approach, activists also moved away from the second wave's focus on women. In the 1990s, activists in the Global North began to use the term "menstruator" to ensure that transgender, intersex, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming menstruators were included in the fight for menstrual equality (Bobel & Fahs, 2020).

The rise of digital menstrual activism in Europe and North America can be contextualized as part of the fourth-wave feminist movement. This movement, which adopts a hybrid offline/online approach to activism, views social media as a powerful tool for empowering women (Zimmerman, 2017). Indeed, it is undeniable that social media played a vital role in sparking the significant global mainstream media attention to both offline and online menstrual activism that was first ignited in 2015 (Tomlinson, 2021). Although fourth-wave feminists often come under fire for their neoliberal approach to empowerment that places the onus on individuals to empower themselves, they frequently adopt an intersectional approach (Baer, 2016). This is evident in their use of digital tools to empower and mobilize women who are not only disadvantaged by their gender, but also by additional axes of oppression, such as their race, class, or disability (Bailey & Mobley, 2018). This intersectionality is also evident across the menstrual movement in activists' focus on specific racial, religious, or gendered groups (Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021).

A Brief Overview of the Menstrual Movement in Great Britain (2015-2020)

Even though the menstrual movement is thriving in many countries including France, India, Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Japan, and New Zealand, most research on menstrual activism focuses on the United States (Patkar, 2020). Indeed, my qualitative study is the first to interview activists in Great Britain and present a qualitative analysis of their ideologies, aims, and practices.[2] Menstrual activists in Great Britain share the central aims of activists in many other countries in the Global North such as the US, Canada, and Australia. These aims include improving accessibility to menstrual products, encouraging the use of environmentally friendly alternatives, improving menstrual health knowledge, and fighting against the discrimination that is experienced by transgender people who menstruate (Gaybor

& Harcourt, 2021). Thus, my findings will likely also resonate with activists working outside Great Britain. However, as the British movement has its own discourses, practices, history, and political landscape, these findings may not be fully applicable to other countries. Hence, I invite scholars outside Great Britain to investigate the implications of my findings with consideration to their own specific socio-cultural and political contexts.

Since 2015, period poverty is the issue that has most preoccupied menstrual activists in Great Britain and is an area in which they have achieved considerable progress (Briggs, 2021). As a result of numerous campaigns to end period poverty, the UK government removed the tax from single-use menstrual products in 2021 and the governments in Scotland, England, and Wales began in 2018 to successively provide free products in educational settings (McKay, 2021). Scotland has led the way for change in Great Britain, becoming the first of the three nations to provide free menstrual products in schools, colleges, and universities. Scotland is also the first nation in the world to provide universal access via the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (2022) (Bildhauer, Rostvik & Vostral, 2022). It is important to note that although my participants frequently used the term "period poverty", many criticized this phrase for offering a narrow view of activists' intersectional approach to alleviating menstrual inequalities.[3] Emphasizing that period poverty was popularized by the British media, participants criticized this term for erasing structural inequalities (de Benedictis 2022). As one participant stated, "we'd like to use alternative words like 'menstrual inequalities' to highlight the structural issues that have left some women in the UK unable to access period products, but we're stuck with 'period poverty' because it's the phrase everyone knows from the media". Another stated: "Period poverty is much more than simply not being able to buy products. It's to do with culture, stigma, religion, education, and parenting styles." Thus, British activists are not solely tackling gender inequalities by

distributing products, but are also working closely with specific communities to tackle the stigma and the lack of education that act as barriers to access. For instance, one participant discussed how her organization ran different sessions for particular social groups including women from the traveler community, Somali women, and South Asian women: “The needs, access issues, and knowledge about periods are different for each community. I work with South Asian women, and menstrual stigma is especially profound in our community.”

Sustainability and menstrual health are also important to many British menstrual activists. Due to concerns about the climate crisis and the health issues that can be caused by single-use plastic products, many activists chose to distribute reusable rather than single-use products. As my participants emphasized, menstrual cups, pads, and underwear provide a more sustainable solution to period poverty because they offer long-term financial savings and health benefits (Gottlieb, 2020). British activists also focus on improving the lives of those with menstrual health conditions such as endometriosis, polycystic ovaries (PCOS), and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) as well as supporting the physical and mental wellbeing of all menstruating women and people (Bullo & Weckesser, 2021; Missmer et al, 2021). It is important to situate these efforts within the context of the British National Health Service that offers free health care but has been chronically underfunded for over a decade (Goyal, 2021). Since activists believe that the NHS fails to adequately treat health issues that are typically experienced by women, they position patients’ struggles to be diagnosed and receive care as a structural gendered issue (Cole, Grogan & Turley, 2021). Organizations such as Endometriosis UK, and NAPS (The National Association for Premenstrual Syndromes) therefore engage with medical professionals, call for better menstrual health education in schools, and raise awareness of menstrual health conditions amongst the wider public.

Although these aims have remained central to the British menstrual movement until today, it is undeniable that COVID-19 caused significant disruption. Although there were three official "lockdowns" in Great Britain, the first (which provides the case study for this article) was the strictest. From March 26th 2020 until 1st June 2020, the population was instructed to stay at home (apart from shopping for essential items and one hour of daily exercise). As the activities of menstrual activists did not fall under the remit of "essential", my participants were severely limited in their offline activities for a period of approximately three months. Not only were menstrual activists in Great Britain required to rapidly adapt most of their work into a digital format, but they also faced mounting pressure from the exacerbation of social inequalities that was engendered by lockdown. Lockdowns exacerbated period poverty due to rising unemployment and the closure of spaces, such as schools, in which free menstrual products were previously distributed (Power, 2020). According to Plan International, 30 percent of 14–21-year-olds in Great Britain struggled to access menstrual products during lockdown as compared to approximately 10% before the pandemic (Plan International, 2020). Hence, menstrual activists were obliged to increase their efforts to fight period poverty during a time in which they were suddenly blocked from accessing the offline spaces in which they usually provided products, education, and advice.

Feminist Digital Activism

Many studies indicate that feminist digital activism has the potential to positively impact women and other gender minorities (Jackson, 2016; Williams, 2016; Clark, 2019). As the mainstream media typically excludes the voices of marginalized women, feminist scholars argue that digital activism provides a valuable alternative space in which marginalized women can effectively call out discrimination, be heard, build communities, and empower

each other (Baer, 2016; Darwin & Miller, 2020; Willem & Tortajada, 2021). Feminist scholarship also underscores the potential of digital activism to empower marginalized women whose gendered experience intersects with other aspects of their identities such as race, disability, socio-economic status, and sexuality (Gogin & Newell, 2007; Clark, 2019; Borda & Marshall 2020; Merlin & Reed, 2020; Bitman, 2021).

Much of this intersectional work has focused on gender and race, especially on social media's potential to empower Black women (Jackson, 2016; Williams, 2016; Cross et al. 2020). Meredith Clark (2019), for example, discusses the power of hashtag campaigns such as #BlackLivesMatters to mobilize women and call out both racism and sexism. She highlights that the mainstream media distorts the messages of Black women, and thus social media provides a valuable form of self-mediation through which they can effectively raise awareness of the injustices and inequalities that they face. Indeed, as black women in Great Britain were at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 because they were overrepresented on the front lines of the NHS, the pandemic shed light on the discrimination, disadvantages, and injustices that they have always faced (Ramamurthy et al. 2022). Hence, due to similar phenomena occurring across the Global North, the pandemic increased the global visibility of movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and was a catalyst for new research on systemic racism that has the potential to positively impact Black women (Merlin & Reed, 2020; Sobo, Lambert & Heath 2020). As Cross et al (2022, p. 324) have observed in their research about the United States:

> the movement, in combination with the COVID-19 pandemic has opened Pandora's box, laying bare for Americans to see, *perhaps for the first time*, the racial, social class, and social safety-net inadequacies plaguing the nation. The BLM/COVID-19 matrix

has made for a once-in-a-generation moment that can lead to social change on a scale of the New Deal.

Women with disabilities are another marginalized group that benefits from digital activism (Baer, 2016; Cocq & Ljuslinder, 2020; Bitman, 2021). Echoing scholarship about ethnic minority groups, scholars from disability studies have framed social media as an empowering space in which disabled women, who can often struggle to access physical spaces, can express themselves, learn about health, and build communities (Jackson, 2016; Mann 2018; Gogin & Newell, 2007). As Cocq & Ljuslinder illustrate (2020), digital media provides opportunities for networking and self-mediation. Thus, it can lead to significant social change via increasing the "visibility and politicization of disability" (Cocq & Ljuslinder, 2020, p. 82). Furthermore, a handful of feminist studies have explored the potential of digital activism to empower women who are triply disadvantaged by gender, race, and disability as well as to raise awareness of their distinct experiences (Baer 2016; Fileborn 2017). For example, Borda and Marshall (2020, p. 134) demonstrate that the #SayHerName movement has led to more "inclusive news coverage of Black women victims (including those who are transgender, disabled, and socio-economically disadvantaged)".

Although most scholarship on digital activism argues that digital media creates an inclusive space for marginalized people, gives them a voice, and raises awareness of their experiences, some studies are beginning to question the effectiveness of digital technologies for empowering marginalized groups (Gogin & Newell, 2007; Butler 2013; Fotopoulou 2016; Schradie 2018). By considering the limitations of digital activism, this small body of scholarship challenges the "assumption that social and new media dramatically bring about social change" (Mohammed, 2021, p. 8). Although only a very small amount of this literature

is focused specifically on women, it gives some indication as to how intersectional activism may be limited through the sole use of digital technologies. For instance, Schradie (2018) explains how disparities in access, skills, empowerment, and time, cause people from lower socioeconomic groups to spend significantly less time engaging with digital activism than their middle-class counterparts. Since many public services were suddenly exclusively online because of lockdown, scholarship has started to examine "technology poverty", which refers to the inequalities that are engendered by a lack of access to sufficient technology (Khan, 2021). Although studies have considered the impact of "technology poverty" on access to public health services and education, they are yet to consider how this affects the reach and influence of digital activism (Power, 2020; Khan, 2021; Mohammed, 2021).

One study which does, however, offer an in depth look at the limitations of feminist digital activism is Aristea Fotopoulou's *Feminist Activism and Digital Networks: Between Empowerment and Vulnerability* (Fotopoulou, 2016). Fotopoulou employs the term "cultural logic of computation" to refer to the normative belief that digital communication is the most effective vehicle for feminist consciousness-raising and change (2016, p. 38). Based on her ethnographic research with women's organizations in London, she argues that if feminist activists focus on social media alone, they may overlook forms of offline activism, such as street demonstrations or education in offline spaces, that may have a longer-lasting impact. Her work raises concern that in the future, due to funding restrictions, feminist activism may be forced into becoming fully digital. Four years later, due to COVID-19, Fotopoulou's prediction that feminist activism would become "digital by default" was, albeit for different reasons, realized (2016, p. 39). This new landscape in which most offline activism was prohibited offers an opportunity to build on Fotopoulou's work. To examine menstrual activists' experiences of digital communication, this study uses Fotopoulou's (2016) model of

"networked feminism" as its theoretical framework. Fotopoulou's model is useful to this study because it provides a tool for assessing the reach and impact of feminist digital activism. Her model consists of five key aspects: labor, access, connectivity, immediacy, and visibility. Fotopoulou argues that these five themes allow us to evaluate the potential of digital technologies to empower women. In addition, these five themes provide specific points of comparison between offline and online activism, and thus reveal their differing reach and impact.

By examining activists' experiences of using digital communication to engage with menstruating women and people who are marginalized by race, class, and disability, this article makes an original contribution to feminist studies and communication studies. Most studies that examine the potential for digital media to empower marginalized women inform their arguments through a discourse analysis of social media posts rather than by conducting qualitative interviews with activists (Baer 2016; Clark, 2019; Borda & Marshall 2020). Thus, by conducting primary research with activists who use digital communication and have witnessed its impact, this article makes a significant contribution to feminist scholarship. Furthermore, studies are yet to examine the effectiveness of other digital communication tools, such as video calls, that are used by activists to engage with marginalized women.

Method:

My participants responded to a call for "menstrual activists" to be interviewed for a wider research project about the impact of the menstrual movement on young people's perceptions of menstruation.[4] The sampling criteria ensured that the five key aspects of the movement were represented in the dataset: destigmatisation, period poverty, transgender identity, the

environment, and menstrual health (Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). All participants expressed a concern with destigmatizing menstruation, and there was a lot of overlap between the other categories. To ensure that the dataset included the viewpoints of activists who support people across multiple axes of oppression, intersectionality was fundamental to participant selection (Weldon, 2008). This created a dataset which included activists who work with a variety of disadvantaged communities, as well as a group of participants who are, themselves, diverse in their ages, gender, race, and (dis)abilities.

Selected participants were aged between 18 and 70 and either acted as individuals or were part of non-governmental organizations. The sample included mostly cisgender women, but also included three non-binary people and one transgender man. 24 participants lived in England, five in Wales, and three in Scotland. The sample included eight participants from ethnic minority groups, most of whom engaged directly with marginalized women in their own communities. These participants identified as Black, South Asian, or mixed race, and referred to women who are marginalized by their race using terms such as "BAME" (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic), "women of color" and "ethnic minorities". Their shared identity not only granted them easier access to community spaces, but also helped them to communicate effectively with their audiences. For example, one activist used the phrase "my BAME community" and talked about the importance of her subject position as a Muslim woman when she visits mosques to educate women about menstrual health. Another explained the benefits of drawing on personal experience when conducting intersectional activism: "All four us are from different cultures and backgrounds, we're all people of color, so one thing that we found was that religion and culture are very important in influencing how people […] view things".

As lockdown started just before the first interview, I added the following question to my interviews: “How has your activism been affected by lockdown?” This question allowed participants the freedom to raise issues that they believed to be important and think reflectively about the impact of lockdown on their knowledge, approaches, and practices (Franks, 2002). Follow-up questions encouraged them to think more deeply about their use of digital communication and their experiences of offline activism during lockdown. The 32 semi-structured interviews took place between May 2020 and January 2021 via Google Meets or over the telephone. For the protection of the vulnerable communities with which the participants work, this article neither names the participants nor their organizations. All participants consented to the publication of direct quotations. Ethical clearance was provided for this project by the Department of Journalism Studies at the University of Sheffield.

Participants’ responses were coded with NVivo. The codebook combined a data-driven inductive approach with a template of codes that were based on my theoretical framework (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2016). Adopting Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model of reflective thematic analysis, the codes were refined through multiple readings of the dataset. The codebook included all five aspects of Fotopoulou’s (2016) model of “networked feminism”. Within each of these five codes, offline and online activities were coded separately so that comparisons could easily be drawn. Since three aspects of Fotopoulou’s “networked feminism” were coded far more frequently than the two others, the analysis below is structured around the themes of access, connectivity, and visibility.

Analysis and Discussion

Access

Offline Spaces and The Material Nature of Menstrual Activism

As revealed by my participants' struggles to conduct their work effectively without offline spaces, the labor of most menstrual activists is tactile and material in nature. Indeed, there was a strong consensus amongst participants that the largest obstacle they faced during lockdown was the closure of buildings such as schools, universities, cafes, youth clubs, and religious centers. These closures significantly impacted activists who distribute menstrual products as they typically left boxes in these spaces so that people could help themselves to the products when needed. Menstrual activists who combine product distribution with menstrual health education were "doubly affected". Indeed, the marginalized communities that they usually supported were suddenly cut off from essential menstrual products and menstrual health education on topics such as bleeding, pain, and how to use reusables.

Although activists were suddenly unable to leave products in offline public spaces where menstruating women and people would come across them, some were still able to reach marginalized communities via door-to-door distribution. However, as one participant expressed, door-to-door distribution is "labor intensive" and requires individuals to "be aware of initiatives and sign up to them online". Hence, a purely digital approach excludes menstruating women and people who are unaware that such initiatives exist or do not know how to access products if community spaces are closed. Another participant explained that she suddenly lost access to most of the teenagers to whom she had been supplying products because she had no way of contacting them to arrange delivery. She explained: "We can't take out products and we can't do our education in schools, so we've just had to go completely social media-based". Hence, as these two examples indicate, offline spaces are vital because marginalized menstruating women and people rely on them for accessing essential menstrual products and discovering activist-led initiatives.

The closure of offline spaces created even more obstacles for menstrual activists who combine a distribution of reusables with education on how to use reusables. As the dataset demonstrates, "environmenstrual" activists, who encourage menstruating women and people to use reusable products (rather than disposable plastic products that are thrown into landfill sites) were profoundly affected by lockdown. Reusable products, such as cups, underwear, and cloth pads, do not only reduce pollution but also benefit the individuals who use them (Rostvik, 2022). Reusables help to reduce social inequalities because they are a healthier alternative to plastic single-use products and lead to long-term financial savings (Shihata & Brody, 2019). To convince audiences to try these products, activists rely on offline product demonstrations, during which they hand out free products and teach audiences how to use them. One participant, who is an ambassador for a women's environmental organisation, explained the vital nature of offline spaces in 'environmenstrual' activism:

> the main appeal of live workshops is people being able to feel the products. As much as you can hold it up on camera and explain how you use it, it's not the same as them literally holding it, feeling it. It's harder to establish that trusting connection over a video call. […] When it's a taboo topic, it's much harder to establish the atmosphere that you would in real life.

Her response illustrates that the move to digital communication during lockdown proved that, without in-person demonstrations during which free products are distributed, many women do not feel confident enough to try reusables. As participants highlighted, reusables carry a significant upfront cost (such as $20-$30 for a menstrual cup), and people on low incomes may be unable to afford them or may fear wasting money on products that they could dislike or struggle to use (van Eijk et al., 2019). Hence, this cost marginalizes people on low incomes

who would benefit from the long-term savings of reusables but cannot risk an initial upfront cost on a product that they do not know how to use. Thus, as digital workshops prevent activists from distributing reusables to attendees and effectively demonstrating their use, they only benefit a privileged audience who can afford to risk the upfront cost of a product they may struggle to use.

Furthermore, this participant's statement about the "taboo" nature of menstruation indicates that, because they allow audiences to discuss reusables in a supportive environment and touch them, offline spaces are more effective than digital spaces for tackling the stigma that prevents people from trying reusables. As another activist explained,

> it's much easier to break the ice when you're in a room together. Women keep their cameras off and hardly ask questions. Most don't want to talk about periods and cups when they aren't comfortable with the other women on the call and their family at home might be listening. They also can't touch the cups and see they aren't scary after all!

We can therefore argue that, as there is a strong societal expectation that menstruation is "concealed verbally as well as physically", activists require an offline space to break down the initial social barriers that prevent open dialogue about menstruation (Kissling, 1996, p.484). As individuals are often reluctant to try reusable products because it involves seeing, touching, and washing away blood, "environmenstrual activists" face an added layer of stigma that can only be addressed by providing audiences an opportunity to touch the products (Shihata & Brody, 2019). Thus, because digital communication cannot effectively replicate the offline spaces through which activists provide essential tactile engagement and

create an open atmosphere, lockdown revealed that digital activism is less likely than offline activism to result in audiences adopting reusable products.

Although participants acknowledged that all audiences were less likely to try reusables if they were introduced to them in a digital, rather than offline, setting, the intersectional practices of participants revealed two marginalized groups that were especially unlikely to use reusables without offline demonstrations: menstruating people with learning disabilities and women from South Asian communities. One participant, who led educational workshops with young people, commented that those with learning difficulties will only try reusable products if they attend offline demonstrations in which they can touch reusables and discuss how to use them. She explained:

> just to give them [the products] and a piece of paper outlining the instructions isn't enough, we need to sit down and have discussions, particularly with some of our young people who have learning disabilities - that's been a massive barrier for us

My participants' reflection on the barriers that are posed by digital communication therefore problematizes a commonly held assumption that, for people with disabilities, online spaces are always more accessible than offline spaces (Baer, 2016; Cocq & Ljuslinder, 2020; Bitman, 2021). Her response highlights that, to evaluate the accessibility of digital activism, we need to consider not only the nature and aims of the activism that is being undertaken, but also the specific disabilities of their audiences. Thus, my participant's work with disabled audiences evidences the multi-dimensional nature of inclusion and exclusion. It illustrates that digital communication is less effective than offline communication for carrying out intersectional menstrual activism (Bailey & Mobley, 2018). Hence, provided that it is safe to

do so, offline spaces can be more inclusive and accessible for the audiences of intersectional menstrual activism.

Another participant, who prior to the pandemic was engaging in conversations about menstruation with South Asian women in mosques and community centers, also indicated the limitations of digital activism for encouraging certain marginalized groups to try reusable products. She underscored that South Asian women felt too uncomfortable to discuss menstruation via video calls or on social media due to a high level of menstrual stigma within their community. She explained that digital technologies do not create "the right atmosphere" for encouraging her community to talk openly about menstrual products and ask questions about reusables. She also mentioned the obstacles that she faced in accessing this community during lockdown:

> The initial reaching out to these communities has been difficult because of COVID-19 and it was apparent to me from the get-go that there is still uncertainty about speaking about periods in some of these communities […] I do not know a single BAME person who uses sustainable products.

As her experience indicates, in order effectively to support women for whom menstruation is a "sensitive subject" and encourage them to try sustainable products that offer them important cost-savings and health benefits, activists require access to offline spaces, such as community centers, in which their participants feel comfortable to talk about menstruation. A sole reliance on digital activism therefore maintains patterns of privilege because it reduces the likelihood that the most marginalized people in Great Britain will access products and education that could significantly benefit their menstrual health, wellbeing, and finances.

Nevertheless, despite these obstacles, lockdown also provided opportunities to access spaces that activists had not previously considered or had been unable to access. For example, due to their being classified as "essential", foodbanks remained open. Seeking to distribute menstrual products to those living in poverty, seven participants who had previously conducted their work in schools and in community spaces reached out to foodbanks for the first time. This access to foodbanks not only opened a new distribution channel, but it also deepened activists' existing knowledge about how best to support marginalized women and people who menstruate. Activists discovered that foodbanks either did not distribute menstrual products, or only stocked a small range of single-use products. One participant, who founded an NGO that distributes reusable products to schoolgirls in Ghana, refocused her efforts to tackling period poverty in London:

> I started to volunteer at a local foodbank and saw that they were providing only panty liners […]. I was shocked that those who menstruate and are severely disadvantaged through the pandemic and are unable to have, at a minimum, a dignified period. I then decided to create a project […] to provide period products to foodbanks that support vulnerable women.

Echoing the other six participants, this participant's access to foodbanks highlighted that the provision of products to marginalized menstruating women and people was inadequate and afforded her an opportunity to ameliorate this provision. Another participant improved the selection of products available in foodbanks in her local area. She not only ensured that foodbanks supplied reusables, but she also "added a tick box to their forms" so that visitors could select between reusable and single-use products. In order that Muslim women, who

"usually won't insert period products due to religious beliefs", could benefit from the cost savings of reusable products, another participant ensured that her local foodbanks offered a choice between cups and menstrual pads. Hence, thanks to the intervention of activists who helped foodbanks to approach the material needs of menstruating women and people from an intersectional perspective, more people who are living in poverty can now access, and will continue to access, products that best suit their individual menstrual flows and cultural, or personal, preferences. My findings thus reassert the importance of maintaining offline spaces so that menstrual activists can effectively meet the material needs of marginalized menstruating communities in Great Britain and uncover new spaces through which they can carry out their intersectional work.

Access to digital media: Widening Participation, Patterns of Privilege, and Digital Exclusion

As all events for menstrual activists became exclusively online, some participants celebrated being able to access conferences, training workshops, and Menstrual Hygiene Day events that they could not have accessed if they were offline. Suddenly, and often for the very first time, participants could easily access events that were being organized outside Great Britain. For example, one participant began to facilitate joint events between menstrual activists in Great Britain and Uganda: "if everything was normal, then we would probably have a select few young people who would go out to Uganda […] Whereas because everything's online, anyone who's got access to the internet is able to join in. Opportunities have come from COVID, as terrible and annoying as it has been."

Not only did my participants celebrate the removal of financial barriers to accessing events across the globe, but those with accessibility issues also commented that they no longer had to worry about requirements such as wheelchair access, taking rest breaks, and a lack of

accessible public transportation. For this reason, some of my participants discussed how the necessity of using digital technology had acted as an equalizer amongst the menstrual activist community. As one participant explained, “because I’ve got access needs, I’m now on an even level with most people. Sometimes I can’t go places easily, or I’m really fatigued, or I need to bring a PA. Now, I’m just here, the same as everybody else.”

Although lockdown helped some of my participants to feel more included in the menstrual movement, most focused on how lockdown highlighted the extent of digital exclusion in Great Britain and limited the potential of intersectional activism (Power, 2020). Due to factors such as increasing levels of poverty, this digital divide worsened during lockdown, and some marginalized groups suddenly found themselves unable to access vital services (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Merlin & Reed, 2020). Five participants commented that, due to the closure of offline spaces, activists lost access to their most vulnerable audiences. Referring to “technology poverty”, one participant explained that those without internet connections were no longer “aware of the menstrual health services” that existed and “how to access services that were previously offline”. The need to operate solely via digital communication therefore exacerbated the divide between privileged and marginalized menstruating women and people. Critiquing the British government’s “austerity policies” and a capitalist system that is not addressing the poverty that is the root cause of “technology poverty”, participants explained that digital activism will continue to exclude certain marginalized groups as long as “the British government continues to ignore the systemic issues that maintain menstrual inequalities”. In other words, digital menstrual activism will continue to have limited reach until poverty in Great Britain is tackled more broadly and all menstruating women and people have access to digital technology.

According to participants, the impact of digital activism is not solely limited by "technology poverty", but also by the predominance of voices of privilege within the digital space. One stated, "even though there was so much opportunity; it was often opportunity for white educated middle-class women" whilst another expressed, "women of color are alienated by privileged voices [on social media] that take up the space: they offer us help, but they don't reflect our experiences". Another participant indicated that the intersectional perspectives of menstrual activists are often drowned out on social media by "brands, large NGOs, or the mainstream media" because their posts can perpetuate a "discourse of dignity in a 'white-saviorist' way". We find once again a critique of systems of capitalism in her comment that this discourse of dignity "hides that it's austerity that prevents menstruating women and people from living their lives properly". Extending Bobel's (2018) work on MHM campaigns to social media, we can argue that the discourses of dignity that circulate on social media not only undermine the intersectional approach of menstrual activists but also alienate the very communities that they support.

The intersectional views of participants about "technology poverty" and the predominance of privileged voices on social media resonate strongly with the following criticism by Fotopoulou: "because of their celebration of the technological, rather than the social, accounts of digital feminism largely disregard questions of cultural specificity and do not allow an investigation of agency in the multiple sites where it develops and gets expressed" (2016, p. 5). By underscoring the limitations of digital communication for effectively reaching, engaging, and supporting marginalized menstruating women and people, this article therefore poses a challenge to the "cultural logic of computation" (Fotopoulou, 2016, p. 38). Although my findings show that digital feminism can reach and empower more privileged women, until "technology poverty" is eradicated and social media no longer perpetuates

patterns of privilege, menstrual activists cannot solely rely on digital technologies to effectively conduct intersectional activism and support disadvantaged communities.

Connectivity

The theme of connectivity was prominent amongst participants who commented on how lockdown impacted their collaborative work with NGOs and other activists. Focusing on transnational networks, participants spoke enthusiastically about new opportunities for knowledge exchange and collaboration that resulted from the need to operate solely online. Many participants had shared knowledge and practices with activists abroad including in India, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Kenya. For example, one participant celebrated a collaboration with an artistic collective in Nepal and referred to this organisation as "the best model of getting loads of funding and distributing it to communities". Echoing the findings of Cocq & Ljuslinder (2020), these new connections were especially important for activists with disabilities who often face "additional barriers" for attending menstrual health events that are held outside Great Britain.

The theme of "connectivity" was also prominent amongst "environmenstrual" activists who, thanks to "the new normal of working from home", were suddenly connected to a larger captive audience than ever before. As lockdown provided an ideal opportunity to try cups without fear of leakage or having to clean them in public, my participants received increased enquiries on social media from people who were considering buying them. One stated: "lots of people contacted me to say, 'I want to make the switch while I'm in lockdown because I don't need to leave my house'". Although participants highlighted that they were unsure how many of those who enquired began to use cups on a regular basis, we can argue that even a small increase in cup use could have a lasting positive impact on the environment (Shihata &

Brody, 2019). As research shows, people are most likely to try cups if they learn about them from friends and family who use them, thereby creating a snowball effect (van Eijk et al., 2019). However, as participants frequently emphasized, it was only more privileged individuals that could afford to experiment with cups and feel able to speak openly about menstruation in online discussions. Hence, we can argue that this increase in cup use further widened the gap between privileged people, who can afford to risk the up-front cost, and marginalized people, who may be deterred by menstrual stigma and/or price.

As they discovered that the greatest potential to connect with new audiences was through forging new offline collaborations, menstrual activists' experiences once again foregrounded the value of offline spaces. Indeed, three participants commented that an increase in demand for menstrual products that was caused by lockdown created an opportunity to connect with new audiences to which they could provide menstrual health education. One activist who set up her own charity to tackle period poverty began to receive requests for products from British South Asian women: "Normally this community wouldn't have requested products because of the stigma, but requests have been coming in much more". Thus, she decided to collaborate with an organization that had experience working with this community. This organization distributed products on behalf of the participant whilst also running workshops to educate South Asian women about their menstrual health. The fact that a material aspect of menstrual activism (product donation) facilitated a non-material aspect of menstrual activism (education and tackling stigma amongst a marginalized group), once again foregrounds the limitations of using solely digital communication to undertake intersectional menstrual activism.

By creating an unprecedented problem for which menstrual cups provided a material solution, lockdown also strengthened the relationship between menstrual activists and the NHS. As NHS staff worked long shifts on COVID-19 wards with few breaks, activists found a new captive audience that, since menstrual cups last up to 12 hours, could easily be encouraged to use them (Shihata & Brody, 2019). This new collaboration between activists and the NHS will continue to have a positive impact on menstruating staff in the NHS who, because of reusables, will save money, reap the health benefits of non-plastic products, and will save time changing single-use pads or tampons (van Eijk et al., 2019). One participant explained: "all over the world I'm hearing these stories, people have been given cups before, they didn't want to use them, and now they are using them, or they're asking for them. Hospitals in Britain are now asking for cups". Here, she not only highlights the increased interest in cups in the NHS, but also frames lockdown as a moment in which a brand new worldwide captive audience was created.

Visibility

The theme of "visibility" was present both in the participants' discussions about digital communication and in their reflections on the visibility of menstruation in British society. Due to it becoming further exacerbated by lockdowns and rising unemployment, reports on period poverty became more frequent in the British media (Briggs, 2021; de Benedictis 2022). One participant stated: "when we went into lockdown, and Plan International did their updated research around how the issue of period poverty was affecting 14 to 21-year-olds, that sparked a whole new following of media attention". Indeed, throughout lockdown, various media outlets including *Glamour*, *Huff Post*, and *Forbes,* published articles including the phrase "Periods don't stop for pandemics" (George, 2020). Participants generally celebrated this increased mediation of period poverty and some thought this may have led to

their receiving greater donations. Furthermore, some participants framed lockdown as an ideal moment to boost awareness of their campaigns and argued that digital communication, such as social media and podcasts, were an effective way to achieve this aim. One participant, who is a trans-rights activist with a social media following of 100,000 people, commented that lockdown provided him the opportunity to engage with a more captive online audience: "My everyday activism, i.e. using the internet to spread awareness, has continued as normal. If anything, I believe it has gotten more attention because we're all spending more time online given the pandemic".

Indicating once more that a sole reliance on digital communication hinders the intersectional approach that is central to menstrual activism in Great Britain, other participants explained that their online activism actually became *less* visible during lockdown. One participant, who was part of a PMDD advocacy group, identified another vulnerable group who could not always be accessed online: those with mental health conditions. She argued that, to preserve their mental health, many menstruating women who she supported had deliberately stopped using social media during lockdown. It therefore became more difficult for her to access, engage with, and educate, women with PMDD. Discussing the uncertainty of the pandemic coupled with other major political events, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, she explained the impact of COVID-19 on both activists and their audiences:

> Social media went a lot quieter because people were just getting so stressed out with reading everything in the news and all the toxic stuff going around at the moment. I think people are switching off from social media, especially people who have mental health issues

Hence, as my participants indicated, although digital communication may lead to greater public awareness, it is not always effective for undertaking intersectional menstrual activism that provides vital support to marginalized women and people who menstruate. Thus, when scholars examine the visibility and impact of feminist activism, they must take an intersectional perspective towards audiences that incorporates factors such as mental health. This approach must account for the fact that the internet may be a disempowering space for marginalized women and people who menstruate, especially those struggling with their mental health. This finding once again demonstrates that scholars need to consider the multidimensional nature of inclusion and exclusion when examining the accessibility of activism for audiences with disabilities (Bailey & Mobley, 2018).

The theme of "invisibility" was also prominent in the dataset. Five participants commented that lockdown cast further light on the sheer extent to which the material needs of menstruating women and people are ignored by British services and institutions, such as schools and foodbanks. Lockdown therefore emphasized the need for activists to engage in intersectional work to fill these gaps. One participant criticized the government for not providing enough menstrual products for schools to distribute during lockdowns, whilst another criticized schools for not recognizing that each student may have different material needs: "people say to me, where can I get products? School gave me three months' worth of products […], but the three months is almost up. For us we think, right, one period is a pack of pads or a pack of tampons – for some people it's more". By criticizing foodbanks for not considering menstrual products as "essential", another participant epitomized a commonly held belief amongst participants that the needs of menstruating women and people are not prioritized in Great Britain. In this way, activists highlighted the importance of their work to

provide sufficient and appropriate menstrual products for those whose material needs had not been met by the British government.

Once again emphasizing that menstrual activism loses its intersectional approach if it is solely conducted via digital communication, one participant articulated that the refugees who she supported offline during COVID-19 felt too embarrassed to ask for menstrual products in foodbanks. She also explained that foodbanks "had not taken the initiative to ask women if they needed them". Her response indicates that menstrual stigma plays a huge role in perpetuating period poverty, and this is compounded by a lack of societal consideration for the specific material needs of certain marginalized groups. Hence, activists must continue their efforts to reduce menstrual stigma, raise awareness of the needs of menstruating women and people, urge institutions to approach them intersectionally, and change a British societal culture that overlooks them: "it just needs to be made a priority: do you have food? do you have period pads? Just instantly something that's automatic. Hopefully we can get to that automatic state in society where it is a necessity - like drinking water." My findings therefore underscore the vital nature of activists' material work to distribute products and their offline intersectional work to address the culture of silence and embarrassment around menstruation. Such offline work is vital to ensure that the most vulnerable people in Great Britain are offered support and gain the confidence to request it.

According to participants, lockdown further illuminated the lack of visibility of menstruation on a political level, thereby indicating that digital activism and product provision alone (although vital in addressing short-term material needs) could not significantly improve the lives of menstruating women and people living in poverty. This realization inspired some activists to reduce their digital activities and focus instead on addressing the systemic issues

that cause menstrual inequalities. As participants underlined, the immediate need to tackle COVID-19 led to a political de-prioritization of menstrual health and period poverty. For instance, even though period poverty increased during lockdown, the government dismantled the "Period Poverty Task Force" (Briggs, 2021). As one participant noted, the British government's response to COVID-19 elucidates the lack of gender equality in British politics: "100 per cent of the emergency response team were men. If you're not having any women or anyone with a period at the leadership table, the priorities of those with periods is going to fall behind". This fact led this participant to realize that her organization's distribution of menstrual products, albeit providing vital short-term support, only puts "a plaster on a big open wound".

The lack of political attention during lockdown to the needs of those who menstruate therefore highlighted that period poverty and menstrual shame can only be eradicated through ensuring that menstruating women and people are involved in "policy making and implementation". As one participant indicated, it is vital that menstruating women and people not only attain leadership positions, but also help to change the style of leadership in Great Britain:

> We need to make sure that, as well as doing on the ground projects, we're also training young women and people to go into leadership, to lead as themselves, not to fit into a patriarchal leadership style which already exists.

My findings therefore demonstrate that menstrual activists must carry on providing offline grassroots support to marginalized menstruating women and people (unless it is unsafe to do so). My research also indicates that activists must continue to call for, and facilitate, broader

political and social change so that the root causes of period poverty, namely menstrual stigma, poverty itself, and a societal stigmatization of those in poverty, are addressed (Reid & Tom, 2006). In this way, marginalized menstruating women and people will likely become more confident to ask for help, and activists will expand their existing intersectional expertise on the menstrual experiences of marginalized communities.

Conclusion

To conclude, lockdown created a unique tension for menstrual activists who often had to resort to using a digital solution to a material problem. The experience and knowledge gained by menstrual activists in Great Britain during lockdown provided a valuable insight into the effectiveness of digital communication for undertaking intersectional activism that addresses the differing needs of various groups of menstruating women and people. Through analyzing interviews with 32 menstrual activists, this study demonstrates that a sole reliance on digital communication limits both the intersectionality of menstrual activism and its material aspects. Lockdown therefore reiterated that offline spaces remain fundamental for menstrual activists so that they can meet the material, educational, and wellbeing needs of menstruating women and people who are marginalized by factors such as disability, race, and class. These spaces are especially vital for creating an atmosphere that facilitates open discussions about menstruation, offering a tactile experience with reusable products that can lead to audiences using products that benefit their finances as well as health, and ensuring that communities encounter services that exist to support them. Whilst digital activism can effectively engage more privileged audiences and expand the networks of activists, it will continue to have limited reach if systemic poverty, which is the root cause of "technology poverty", persists and social media continues to silence the experiences of marginalized people. As lockdown revealed, without offline activism, the gap between marginalized and privileged menstruating

people will continue to widen. Hence, provided that offline conditions are safe for all audiences, it is important that menstrual activists consider whether offline or online forms of activism are more effective for addressing the needs of diverse menstruating women and people. As my findings have demonstrated that offline spaces are essential to intersectional menstrual activism, this article provides vital supporting evidence for menstrual activists who are seeking funding for offline activism within marginalized communities. If activists nuance my findings within their own cultural contexts, this article could also provide valuable evidence for funding bids outside Great Britain. Furthermore, scholars can adopt my intersectional research design to evaluate the effectiveness of menstrual activism (or other forms of feminist digital activism) within their own cultural contexts.

Indeed, since this study argues that a sole reliance on digital communication reduces the effectiveness of intersectional activism, it has implications beyond the menstrual movement. It is therefore imperative that feminist researchers consider the limitations of digital campaigns because this activism may be only reaching and impacting the more privileged members of society. It is essential that future feminist research adopts a critical intersectional approach when analyzing the extent to which digital communication can support, empower, and give voice to marginalized groups. Hence, this article calls for scholars to rethink and problematize their approach to digital activism to ensure that intersectionality is central to their participant recruitment, methods, and analysis.

Funding:

This work was supported by the Leverhulme Trust under Grant ECF-2019-232.

Disclosure statement:

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References:

Alhelou, N., Purvaja, K., Rountree, L. & I. Winkler (2022) 'We like things tangible:' A critical analysis of menstrual hygiene and health policy-making in India, Kenya, Senegal and the United States, Global Public Health, 17:11, 2690-2703, DOI: 10.1080/17441692.2021.2011945

Baer, H. (2016). Redoing feminism: digital activism, body politics, and neoliberalism. *Feminist Media Studies 16*(1), 17-34.

Bailey, M., & Mobley, I.A. (2019). Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework. *Gender & Society* 33(1), 19–40. DOI: 10.1177/0891243218801523

Braun, V., &. Clarke., V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology 3*, 77–101.

Bitman, N. (2021). 'Which part of my group do I represent?': disability activism and social media users with concealable communicative disabilities. *Information, Communication & Society* DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2021.1963463

Bildhauer, B., Røstvik, C. M. & Vostral, S. L., (2022) Introduction: The Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021 in the Context of Menstrual Politics and History. *Open Library of Humanities* 8(1). doi: https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.8159

Bobel, C. (2010) *New Blood: Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press

Bobel C., & Fahs, B. (2020). The Messy Politics of Menstrual Activism. In C. Bobel et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, (pp. 1001-18). Singapore: Palgrave.

Borda, J. & Marshall, B. (2020) Creating a space to #SayHerName: Rhetorical stratification in the networked sphere, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *106*(2), 133-155, DOI: 10.1080/00335630.2020.1744182

Bowen-Viner K., Watson, D. & Symonds. J. (2022): Addressing menstrual stigma through sex education in England- taking a sociomaterial turn, *Sex Education*, DOI: 10.1080/14681811.2022.2145461

Briggs, A. (2021). "Period poverty" in Stoke-on-Trent, UK: new insights into gendered poverty and the lived experiences of austerity. *The Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 1 – 15

Bullo, S. & Weckesser. A. (2021). Addressing Challenges in Endometriosis Pain Communication Between Patients and Doctors: The Role of Language. *Frontiers in Global Women's Health 2*, DOI: 10.3389/fgwh.2021.764693

Butler, J. (2013). For White Girls Only? Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion. *Feminist Formations, 25*(1), 35-58.

Clark, M. D. (2019). White folks' work: digital allyship praxis in the #BlackLivesMatter movement. *Social Movement Studies*, *18*(5), 519-34.

Cocq, C. &. Ljuslinder, K. (2020). Self-representations on social media. Reproducing and challenging discourses on disability. *Alter, 14*(2), 71-84.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), pp. 1241- 1299

Cross, E. et al. (2022) Black Lives Matter and Nigrescence Theory: When Police Violence Triggers an Encounter. Journal of Black Psychology, *48*(3–4), 309–326. DOI: 10.1177/00957984221086449

Darwin, H. & Miller. A. (2020). Factions, frames, and postfeminism(s) in the Body Positive Movement, *Feminist Media Studies.* DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2020.1736118

De Benedictis, S. (2022). Periods of austerity: The emergence of 'period poverty' in UK news media. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494221133131

Fereday, J. & Muir-Cochrane. E. (2016). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 5*(1), 80–92.

Fotopoulou, A. (2017) *Feminist Activism and Digital Networks: Between Empowerment and Vulnerability.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fileborn, B. (2017) Justice 2.0: Street harassment victims' use of social media and online activism as sites of informal justice, *The British Journal of Criminology*, 57(6) 1482–1501, DOI:10.1093/bjc/azw093

Franks, M. (2002). Feminisms and Cross-ideological Feminist Social Research: Standpoint, Situatedness and Positionality – Developing Cross-ideological Feminist Research. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *3*(2), 38-50.

Freidenfelds, L. (2009) *The Modern Period: Menstruation in 20th Century America*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press

Gaybor, J. & Harcourt, W. (2021). Seeing the color red: Menstruation in global body politics. *Global Public Health* DOI: 10.1080/17441692.2021.2016886

George, A. (2020, May 28). Periods don't stop for pandemics. *Glamour.* Retrieved from: https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/period-poverty-lockdown

Gogin, G. & C. Newell. (2007). The Business of Digital Disability. *The Information Society 23*(3), 159-68.

Gottlieb, A. (2020). Menstrual Taboos: Moving Beyond the Curse. In C. Bobel et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, (pp. 143-62). Singapore: Palgrave

Goyal, D. (2021). Primary Care Takes the Brunt of Chronic NHS Underfunding. *British Medical Journal* 374(1709).

Jackson, S. (2016). (Re)Imagining Intersectional Democracy from Black Feminism to Hashtag Activism, *Women's Studies in Communication*, *39*(4), 375-379, DOI: 10.1080/07491409.2016.1226654

Jallow, H., Renukappa, S. and Suresh, S. (2021), The impact of COVID-19 outbreak on United Kingdom infrastructure sector. *Smart and Sustainable Built Environment*, *10*(40, 581-593. DOI: 10.1108/SASBE-05-2020-0068

Kissling, A. (1996) Bleeding Out Loud: Communication About Menstruation, *6*(4), *Feminism & Psychology,* 481-594.

Leclerc, A. (1974). *Parole de Femme.* Paris: Grasset.

Mann, B. (2018) Rhetoric of Online Disability Activism: #CripTheVote and Civic Participation, *Communication, Culture and Critique*, *11*(4) 604–621, DOI: 10.1093/ccc/tcy030

Masonbrink, A. R. & Hurley, E. (2020) Advocating for Children During COVID-19 School Closures. *Pediatrics, 146*(3).

McHugh, (2020) "Menstrual Shame: Exploring the Role of 'Menstrual Moaning." In C. Bobel et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, (pp. 409-22). Singapore: Palgrave

McKay, F. (2021). Scotland and Period Poverty: A Case Study of Media and Political Agenda-Setting. In J. Morrison, J. Birks, and M. Berry (eds). *The Routledge Companion to Political Journalism,* (pp. 404-413). New York: Routledge.

Merlin C. & Reed L. (2020). Racial health disparities and Covid-19—caution and context. *New England Journal of Medicine*, *383*(3), 201–203.

Missmer, A. et al (2021). Impact of Endometriosis on Life-Course Potential: A Narrative Review, *International Journal of General Medicine*, *14*, 9-25, DOI: 10.2147/IJGM.S261139

Mohammed, W. (2021) Online Activism: Centering Marginalized Voices in Activist Work. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media and Technology 15,* 1-11.

Nilsen, A., Berdnikovs, A. & Humphrys, E. (2010) Crises, Social Movements, and Revolutionary Transformations. *Interface 2*(1), 1-21.

Plan International. 2020. Coronavirus: Children's Emergency Appeal. https://plan-uk.org/period-poverty-in-lockdown

Power, K. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the care burden of women and families. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy, 16*(1), 67-73.

Przybylo, E. & Fahs, B. (2020). Empowered Bleeders and Cranky Menstruators: Menstrual Positivity and the "Liberated" Era of New Menstrual Product Advertisements. In C. Bobel et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, (pp. 375-94). Singapore: Palgrave.

Ramamurthy, A. et al (2022). Challenging the Cultures of Racism at Work in the UK's Healthcare Sector. *The Lancet* (pre-print). Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4023214

Rostvik, C. (2022) *Cash Flow: The Business of Menstruation,* London: UCL Press

Reid, C. & Tom, A. (2006). 'Poor Women's Discourses of Legitimacy, Poverty, and Health' *Gender & Society 20*(3), 402–421. DOI: 10.1177/0891243206286939.

Shihata, A. A. & Brody, S. (2019). Five Year Study of a Unique, Eco-friendly, Menstrual Cup, That Enhances the Quality of Women's Lives During Menstruation. *Gynecology and Obstetrics, 7*(6), 161-5.

Sobnosky, M. (2013) Experience, Testimony, and the Women's Health Movement, *Women's Studies in Communication*, *36*(3), 217-242. DOI: 10.1080/07491409.2013.835667

Sobo, E. Lambert, H. & Heath. C. (2020) More than a teachable moment: Black lives matter, Anthropology & Medicine, 27:3, 243-248. DOI: 10.1080/13648470.2020.1783054

Thomson, J. Amery, F. Channon, M. & Puri, M. (2019) What's missing in MHM? Moving beyond hygiene in menstrual hygiene management, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 27:1, 12-15, DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2019.1684231

Tomlinson, M. (2021) Moody and monstrous menstruators: the Semiotics of the menstrual meme on social media, Social Semiotics, 31:3, 421- 439, DOI: 10.1080/10350330.2021.1930858

Ussher, J. (2006) *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body.* London: Routledge

Van Eijk, A. M. et al. (2019). Menstrual cup use, leakage, acceptability, safety, and availability: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet Public Health, 4*(8), 376-93.

Vostral, S. (2008). *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology*. Lanham: Lexington

Weldon, S. (2008). Intersectionality. In G. Goertz & A. Mazur (eds.), *Politics, Gender, and Concepts: Theory and Methodology*, (pp.193-218). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, S. (2016). #SayHerName: using digital activism to document violence against black women. *Feminist Media Studies 16*(5), 922-925. DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2016.1213574

Willem, C. & Tortajada, I. (2021). Gender, Voice and Online Space: Expressions of Feminism on Social Media in Spain. *Media and Communication, 9*(2), 62-71.

[1] This article uses the phrase "women and people who menstruate" or "menstruating women and people" to reflect the terminology used by the menstrual activists who were interviewed for this study. As my participants underscored, this terminology not only ensures that transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming menstruators are included in menstrual activists' discourses but also, in contrast to terms such as "menstruators", recognizes that much of the stigma and inequalities that surround menstruation are linked to discrimination against women and the undermining of their experiences. One participant explained, "we want to be inclusive of our fellow trans menstruators, but we've faced backlash for saying 'people with periods', so we now say 'women and people with periods' to show that we are continuing to fight for women, but also recognize that other people are affected by menstrual health issues"

[2] This article refers to "Great Britain" rather than "The United Kingdom" as it does not include participants from Northern Ireland.

[3] Echoing the approach of my participants, my references to period poverty in this article reflect a more nuanced perspective that captures the structural issues that affect menstruating women and people's access to products.

[4] This wider project will be published as a monograph *The Menstrual Movement in the Media: Reducing Stigma and Tackling Social Inequalities* (forthcoming with Palgrave, 2024).