(De)stigmatizing menstruation

how do menstrual activist brands from the UK represent menstruation and menstruators online and challenge the perception of young generations?

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ABSTRACT

Menstrual stigma in the public discourse has been cultivated for many years and menstrual product advertising has been an active contributor to strengthening its effect. The notion of secrecy and shame around menstruation is deeply rooted in the concepts of impurity and curse and aims to control and discipline female bodies through objectification and sexualization. Menstrual activist brands by opposing the standards of the conventional femcare industry and building their personality around affordability, sustainability and inclusivity, create a new destigmatizing direction in menstrual discourse. By qualitative thematic analysis of textual and visual content of 175 Instagram posts by menstrual activist brands, this paper aimed to answer the research question: "Destigmatization of menstruation: how do menstrual activist brands from the UK represent menstruation and menstruators online and challenge the perception of younger generations?"As a result, eight themes of the menstrual narrative were established, among which six were classified as destigmatizing and two as stigmatizing, showing that even among menstrual activist brands menstrual stigma is present. The destigmatizing themes determined that menstrual activist brands challenge the perception of young generations on menstruation through the open and honest educational approach to the body, its biological functions, and physical features, by promoting a progressive outlook on femininity and sexuality, by eliminating the concept of menstrual impurity and environmental noxiousness and to some extent by discovering empowerment in the process of menstruation. Nonetheless, it was established that by pushing their marketing goals forward these brands also perpetuate popular stigmatizing narratives present in the media for decades: menstrual shame akin to the promotion of advanced concealment of menstruation, and the cultivation of an image of an out-of-control, PMSing female menstruator. Additionally, the dominant themes of visual brand identity communication of each brand and the analysis of visual branding elements were examined to determine the variety of ways in which menstrual activist brands establish their brand identity and communicate it to their younger target audiences. The study has important academic and managerial implications as it develops a framework for the destigmatization of menstruation which can be further reevaluated by academic scholars but also could serve as a blueprint for menstrual product producers, who seek new ways of communication promoting menstrual normalization.

KEYWORDS: *menstruation, stigma, destigmatization, branding, social media*

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1. Introduction

The notion of secrecy and shame around menstruation is deeply rooted in traditional cultural beliefs which associate female reproductive functions with impurity and disgust and aim to control and discipline female bodies through objectification and sexualization (Johnston-Robledo et al., 2007; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011; Roberts, 2020 b). The menstrual stigma in the public discourse has been cultivated for many years and advertisements as "powerful socialization agents in popular culture" significantly strengthened its effect (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011, p. 9). The imagery and glossary used in the communication by popular menstrual advertisers: euphemisms such as "this time of the month" or "down there" instead of words menstruation and vagina, the blue liquid replacing blood and advertised products as protectors from shameful leaking, contributed to menstruation being suppressed and stigmatized (Merskin 1999; Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). Additionally, most broadcasting networks and social media platforms have imposed standards censoring menstrual products' advertisements, claiming that any depictions of menstrual blood violate their standards (Steigrad, 2019; Watson, 2021).

The feminist movement recognized the oppressive consequences of menstrual stigmatization already around the late 1960s and the first menstrual activists opposed the notion of menstruation as a curse and inconvenience, instead proposing to see it as a source of power and sisterhood (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). At the beginning of the 2000s menstrual activism resurfaced as a "radical menstruation", when the environmental concerns about menstrual management by conventional femcare corporations came to voice (Bobel, 2006). The problems of menstrual politics were further identified by protesting menstrual product taxes, highlighting the burning problem of period poverty, and the unsustainability and toxicity of traditional menstrual products (Gottlieb, 2020).

Nowadays, the efforts of menstrual activists align with progressive social views of younger generations, open to imminent social changes, also in the sphere of gender equity and diversity (Parker et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the acceptance of the normalization of menstruation among young generations does not mean an immediate disappearance of menstrual stigmatization. As Stubbs and Sterling (2020) noted "with respect to menstruation, girls face a developmental dilemma - how to accept it as normative in the context of persistent menstrual stigma" (p. 238).

Some period product producers try to make sense of the changing social attitudes and switch the way they represent menstruation to resonate with younger consumers' beliefs and values and denounce the stigmatization (Hodge, 2019; Punzi & Werner, 2020). In order to capture the current conflict between the traditional stigmatizing narrative and progressive attitudes enforcing destigmatization, this thesis investigates the communication strategies of menstrual activist brands, understood as producers of alternative menstrual products engaged in invoking the change of menstrual discourse and aimed at achieving menstrual equity.

Therefore, the following research question is created: (De)stigmatizing menstruation - how do menstrual activist brands from the UK represent menstruation and menstruators online and challenge the perception of young generations?

To facilitate the depth of the research three subquestions were determined:

1. How do menstrual activist brands communicate their brand identity to young generations, Millennials and gen Z, on Instagram?
2. How is menstruation represented and portrayed on Instagram of these brands?
3. How do these brands (de)stigmatize menstruation on Instagram?

1.1. Societal relevance of the research

The research addresses a relevant and pressing societal issue of social discrimination and stigmatization of menstruation, a natural process that is an inherent experience of a vast part of the world population, and the urgency to terminate discourse of such kind. Even though menstrual activism gradually enforces the normalization of menstruation, still many people worldwide, including menstruators themselves, express highly negative attitudes toward menstruation, which is a result of the ongoing stigmatization (Clue, 2015; Plan International UK, 2021; Thornton, 2011). It was studied that the majority of Gen Z and Millennials still feel menstrual shame and are therefore not comfortable speaking openly about menstruation in public (Gervis, 2019).

Normalization of menstruation by period product producers is therefore a highly important development considering the negative consequences of menstrual stigmatization on menstruators' well-being. Women who show unfavorable attitudes toward menses tend to have less body comfort and perceive other reproductive functions of their bodies as shameful (reproductive shame), which among others manifests in willingness for applying hormonal suppression of menstruation and body-altering practices (Goldenberg & Roberts, 2010; Johnston-Robledo et al., 2007). It can result in behaviors of constant self-monitoring, self-

loathing, disgust, disconnection with one's own body, and constant hypervigilance due to the efforts of hiding the menstrual status (Roberts & Waters, 2004; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011).

Furthermore, women are expected not to speak publicly about periods, which emerges the hesitancy to discuss their menstruation even with medical professionals (Gottlieb, 2020). This often leads to the negligence of symptoms of infections and diseases of the genital tract, which can have severe consequences on women's health. A negative attitude toward menstruation was found to be correlated with engagement in sexual risk (Schooler et al., 2005), and feeling of disgust toward menstrual sex (Fahs, 2020). On the other hand, menstrual education was studied to encourage the development of healthy sexuality among young females and improve their sexual body image (Stubbs & Sterling, 2020). Ultimately, feminist theorists believe that menstrual stigma contributes to gender inequality and the lower social status of women (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2020).

1.2. Academic relevance of the research

Menstruation as a form of social stigma and gender inequality started to be explored on a broader scope by the third-wave feminists, who studied diverse practical, cultural and political aspects of menstruation (Bobel 2010, 2019; Chrisler et al., 2006; Fahs, 2014; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011; Kissling, 1996; Merskin, 1999; Przybylo & Fahs, 2018). Eventually, in 2020 the field of critical menstruation studies (CMS), originating from feminist theory, was conceptualized by Sharra Vostral and Chris Bobel as a transdisciplinary research and advocacy field that centers on the "biological, social, cultural, religious, political, and historical dimensions" (Bobel, 2020, p. 4) of menstruation as a category of analysis. CMS serves this research as a principal theoretical reference in the exploration of menstrual stigmatization as well as the rationale that stands behind it.

"The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies" (2020) is the most comprehensive source of CMS epistemology, gathering empirical and theoretical essays about the roots, consequences, and evolution of menstrual discourse as well as different experiences of menstruators, including those under challenging life circumstances such as subjected to period poverty or social exclusion as well as commercial representation of menstruation.

Outside of the scope of "The Palgrave Handbook of CMS", individual researchers examined advertising campaigns of menstrual products through the lens of preserving or

deconstructing stigmatizing narratives (Hodge, 2019; Molina, 2021). A couple of master theses from Erasmus University Rotterdam analyzed menstrual stigmatization and taboo from the business perspective, particularly how multinational menstrual corporations (van Sandwijk, 2020; Wijlens, 2020) and smaller independent brands (Punzi, 2017; Wehnemann, 2020) approach menstrual stigma.

As most of the previous research focused on the analysis of different aspects of stigmatization, very few examined destigmatizing narratives. Therefore this research approaches the deconstruction of menstrual stigma by menstrual brands by taking a close look at their social media communication. With most potential customers being online, businesses now focus their communication efforts on digital content and Instagram was studied to be particularly effective in this field (Belanche et al. 2019). This thesis contributes therefore to the particular segment of CMS focusing on commercial communication on menstruation by providing a detailed investigation of the development of destigmatizing representation by menstrual activist brands on Instagram. It also has a sensible dimension as it outlines how to build a destigmatizing narrative in practical terms.

1.3. Chapters outline

This thesis is structured based on three main chapters and conclusions. The first subsequent chapter, Theoretical Framework, provides important epistemological background for understanding how menstrual stigma has been constructed. The second chapter, Methodology, presents an overview of a range of methodological choices made in this research. The third chapter, Results and Discussion, demonstrates in detail the findings of the analysis and categorizes them in relation to the main concepts of the research, stigmatization or destigmatization. The last part of the thesis, Conclusions, consists of a conclusion of the results to answer the research question, implications from the research, identified limitations, and recommendations for future studies.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, the theoretical concepts underlying the essence of the research are analyzed. Instrumental to the purpose of this study is to examine the concept of social stigma, especially in the context of menstruation and the female body. The origins and different dimensions of menstrual stigma across various cultures are traced, to ultimately focus on the analyses of the concept in the Western context. Further, the analyses of Western menstrual product advertisements and the representation of menstruation in social media are examined, with a focus on (de)stigmatizing practices. Lastly, the concepts related to brand activism are introduced with the aim to define the main characteristics of brands that are investigated in this study and their target audience.

2.1. Concepts of stigma, stigmatization and destigmatization

Goffman (1963) defines social stigma as an attribute of discrediting effect, tainting people who bear it and turning others apart from them. Stigma, therefore, functions as a "form of social control" (Goffman, 1963, p. 88). He proposed three categories of stigma, such as "abominations of the body" (physical impairment), "blemishes of individual character" (e.g. mental illnesses, homosexuality, alcoholism), or "tribal stigma" (race, nationality, religion) (Goffman, 1963, p. 13). Link and Phelan (2001), drawing from Goffman's theory, argued that stigmatization consists of several parallel processes such as prejudice, stereotyping, social segregation, and discrimination which "occur together in a power situation that allows them" (p. 377).

Destigmatization on the other hand is the action by which stigmatized individuals/groups gain recognition and status in the social realm (Lamont, 2018). Negro et al. (2021) defined it as "individual and collective processes that ameliorate the harmful effects of stigma in a given context" (p. 7670). Destigmatization can advance by providing alternatives to the behaviors and beliefs of stigmatizers which might lead to changes in formal rules and social norms (Lamont, 2018; Negro et al., 2021).

2.2. Female body-related stigma in cultural and academic discourse

Feminist theorists offered various explanations for the common stigmatization of female body functions. The first one is through terror management theory, which assumes that people are greatly concerned with the awareness of their mortality and therefore try to

tame all reminders of it, mainly through participation in a cultural system of norms and values (Goldenber et al., 2001). One of the threats to their composure is creatureliness, understood as humane corporeality, which people try to alleviate by beautifying their bodies (Goldenberg et al., 2001).

Chrisler (2011), inspired by terror management theory, traced three categories of stigma connected to female bodies: body fluids (menstrual blood, breast milk, mucus), forms of body fat (cellulite, lumps, rolls) and the effects of the aging process (menopause, wrinkled body). She implied that all these features are stigmatized because they remind of human corporeality and pose a threat to common social norms, particularly dictated by youth and beauty-centered Western culture. Ussher (2006) inferred that the female feculent body, due to its associations with the animal world, is the opposite of a "clean, contained, proper body" (p. 6), represented by a male or pre-pubescent girl. According to Ussher the "uncontained body" (p. 6) is a peril to social order therefore women must control it. Similarly, Vora (2020) concluded that menstruation is a reminder that women are different from men and they can survive in patriarchal societies only by concealing this process. The consideration that menstruation is a menace to the culture created by and for the convenience of men explains its relevance to the objectification of the female body.

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) using objectification theory, contended that women have to embody the perspective of sexualized femininity created in a culture that reduces the female body to the object to be looked at and evaluated. This, as authors indicated, leads girls and women to self-objectification, the process of adopting a third-person view of oneself. Goldenberg and Roberts (2010) argued that self-objectification serves women as a survival strategy in the culture of constant sexualization, but has severe consequences on women's well-being, such as negative emotions toward her own body, such as shame and embarrassment, eating disorders and depression (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, as cited in Roberts & Waters, 2004). According to Roberts and Waters (2004), the more a woman involves in self-objectification, the more unfavorable attitude she has toward menstruation. Objectification is then one of the factors leading to the stigmatization of female body functions, including menstruation, and females' averse feelings toward their bodies.

Reluctance to one female body function or feature can drive adverse attitudes toward other female attributes. Bramwell (2001) noted that both menstruation and lactation as exclusively feminine processes could be considered the affirmation of womanhood, but instead they are socially condemned. She concluded that the sexualization of body parts

involved in these processes - the breast and the vagina - play a significant role in creating the notion of embarrassment (Bramwell, 2001).

Terror management theory and objectification theory create an epistemological framework helpful to understand the roots of stigmatizing attitudes and narratives associated with female body functions. These considerations imply that to tackle menstrual stigma it is important to place it in a broader context of the stigmatization of the female body and its reproductive processes.

2.2.1. Dimensions of menstrual stigma across cultures

One of the most frequently invoked cross-cultural associations that contributed to the stigmatization of menstruation is the connection to impurity. According to Bramwell (2001), menstrual blood is commonly positioned at the same level of disgust as human body waste: urine, and feces. Rooted in this connotation are purifying rituals practiced in many cultures and religions around the world. In some stances of Orthodox Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam menstruating women are excluded from a range of activities, especially religious practices for the fear of tainting their sanctity (Cohen, 2020; Hawkey et al., 2020; Mirvis, 2020). Furthermore, often they are subjected to strict laws regulating their rights and behaviors in the private sphere (Cohen, 2020).

For the same reason in some countries it is common to celebrate a girl's menarche (first menstruation, traditionally considered the start of womanhood), however, preceded or followed by a period of forced isolation, often in menstruation huts (Hawkey et al., 2020). In some traditions menses is directly associated with supernatural power or a mystical curse, therefore performed at a cost of anxiety for the menstruators' own and others' safety (Maharaj & Winkler, 2020). Ussher (2006) argued that rituals of purification, isolation, and seclusion are caused by a threat that the female power, associated with menstruation and other reproductive processes, poses to phallocentric societal order, which resonates with the terror management theory.

Often in feminist studies, stigmatization of menstruation is interchangeably used with the term menstrual taboo(s). The word taboo defined by anthropologists Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) as a "supernaturally sanctioned law" (p. 4), originates in the Polynesian word *tapu* which roughly translates as "marked thoroughly" (Steiner, 1956, as cited in Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988, p. 8). Thornton (2011) simply explained taboo as "things one does not do without upsetting a status quo" (p. 49). Contrary to feminist studies, Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) cautioned against the generalization that all ritualistic practices related to menstruation

are oppressive to women who submit to them. Instead insisted on considering them in the cultural context where they are practiced and as such, often appear to be protecting women's spirituality and providing them with autonomy, influence, and control. As some women see these traditions as liberating, the experiences of others indicate that these practices are traumatic for menstruators and therefore function as a form of stigmatization (Cohen, 2020; Hawkey et al., 2020; Maharaj & Winkler, 2020; Mirvis, 2020).

2.2.2. Menstruation in the Western context

In the Western discourse the dichotomic view of menstruation, which at least partially originates in binary attitudes toward the female body, dominates. Female reproductive parts in a heteronormative context are sexualized and desired, but at the same time, they are oppressed and shamed for their biological functions (Roberts & Waters, 2004). Women are praised for their ability to give birth and nurture children with their bodies, but exposing pregnant abdomen and breastfeeding in public are commonly frowned upon. Accordingly, menstruation is considered a sign of a healthy female body able to procreate whilst any visible signs of menstruation are undesired and transgressive. Adding the dominant notion that menstruation is "the least pleasurable aspect of being a female" creates the representation of menses as a curse (Kissling, 1996, p. 500).

Such constructed concepts of menstruation are an excuse for gender stereotyping, framing menstruators as subjects of the uncontrollable power of their biology. Menstruation is always joint with premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and it is a major theme for stereotyping of a menstruating woman, based on the following representation:

> She (pre-menstruating woman) is portrayed in popular culture as a frenzied, raging beast, a menstrual monster, prone to rapid mood swings and crying spells, bloated and swollen from water retention, out of control, craving chocolate, and likely at any moment to turn violent. (Chrisler et al., 2006, p. 371)

Thomas (2007) argued that treating women as emotional and irrational due to their menstrual cycle historically led to the pathology of menstruation and restriction of women's rights to equality and citizenship. As Ussher (2006) noted, the consideration that female reproductive syndromes such as PMS, postnatal depression, and climacteric syndrome seriously affect women's mental health keeps the image of a "monstrous feminine" alive (pp.15-16).

According to Gottlieb (2020), the prevailing perception of menstruation as a curse is rooted in the patriarchal dogma of Abrahamic religions, which highly influenced Western culture. Similarly to the orthodox stances of these religions, the West adopted the notion of stigma and impurity although executed in a rather different way than through ritualization. As Ussher (2006) concluded, "in the secular West, concealment is through secrecy and shame" (p. 19). Any evidence of menstruation revealed is a threat to the cleanliness and freshness of a woman and a potential cause for shame and embarrassment, which belittles women in the eyes of others (Chrisler, 2011; Roberts & Waters, 2004).

The aversion toward speaking openly about menstruation is noticeable in the language realm. It was studied that terms describing menstruation in the English American are mostly negative and focused on retaining secrecy (Golub, 1992, as cited in Kissling, 1996). An international survey on menstruating women examined that there are at least 5000 euphemisms for the word menstruation in use in multiple languages, including many negatively connotated terms, which carry on the menstrual curse by associating menstruation with a plague, devil, monster, or female being broken/out of order (Clue, 2015). Considering that all the respondents for this study were female, it implies that women themselves internalize the notion of the menstrual curse.

2.2.3. Forgotten menstruators

Significant attention in the CMS research is given to the representation of menstruation among marginalized groups: disabled, non-binary, incarcerated, and menstruators subjected to period poverty, such as people who are impoverished, homeless or are refugees (Frank & Dellaria, 2020; Perianes & Roberts, 2020; Roberts, 2020; Steele & Goldblatt, 2020, Vora, 2020). What all these groups have in common is the limited or at times no possibility to conceal menstruation, due to either no access to menstrual products and sanitation or physical and/or mental limitations of menstrual management. Considering that these people due to their life situation are often already discriminated against, the impossibility of compliance with restrictive social norms regarding menstruation brings further oppression (Perianes & Roberts, 2020).

It goes far beyond the scope of this research to introduce the reality of experiencing menstruation by these marginalized groups. However, it should be acknowledged that excluding the experiences and needs of these people from the menstrual public narrative is a form of discrimination and a denial of basic human rights (Roaf & de Albuquerque, 2020). This research argues that acknowledging the variety of menstruators, their experiences and

the individual needs by menstrual product producers is the start to the much-needed menstrual inclusivity.

2.3. Tracing menstrual discourse in Western media

2.3.1. Menstrual stigma in Western advertising

Advertising is an important factor in the creation of meaning and transmission of existing social power structures and relationships (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). Western menstrual product advertisements, as carriers of the dominant discourse on femininity, maintain the narrative of menstrual secrecy, shame, and humiliation in case menstruation is revealed to others (Coutts & Berg, 1993). Menstruation is portrayed as a health crisis and advertisers' rhetoric convinces women that it should be effectively concealed, particularly from men (Roberts & Waters, 2004). To stay attractive to the public eye, women must aim for a state where menstruation is not detectable, which grants the feeling of glamorous femininity. Therefore advertisers of menstrual products reflect "the idealized desires of men" (Coutts & Berg, 1993, p. 190).

In Western discourse promoted in menstrual advertising "femininity involves the cultivation of a body that does not leak" (Merskin, 1999, p. 948), thus the blood leakage should remain the biggest worry of a menstruating woman. This according to Simes and Berg (2001) contributes to the "heightening insecurities" of menarcheal girls, who already show serious concerns about experiencing menstruation (p. 467). Furthermore, the widespread use of codes, metaphors, and euphemisms describing menstruation affirm the need for keeping menstruation a secret sphere (Thomas, 2007).

The most contemporary studies on menstrual advertisements reveal a slight shift in the narrative, however inconsistent and based on contradictory assumptions. Campbell et al. (2021) in the analysis of advertisements by a popular menstrual retailer identified three dominant discourses of menstruation: "overt threat" (promising cleaner and fresher experience), "uncontrollable" (comparing menses to rainfall, or rolling of dice), and a current trend, "invisible" (advocating for gender equality but keeping menses in silence). Przybylo and Fahs (2020) had similar observations examining recent marketing strategies by the most prominent menstrual brands. Although moving toward a more empowering portrayal of menstruating women, the advertisements were perpetuating stigma due to the lack of depiction of the pain and uneasiness of menstruation, or as authors put it "menstrual crankiness", which is necessary to represent a complete and equitable vision of menstruation

(Przybylo & Fahs, 2020, p. 386). They argued that these ads co-opted women's empowerment by advancing the image of a "thinned, whitened, and transformed" menstrual positivity, but leaving out the less appealing aspects such as menstrual pain, discomfort, and limited access to period products (p. 376). As per Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2011), silence is yet another tool for preserving menstrual stigma, thus, advertisers should inform about inconveniences that are inextricably linked to menses.

The development and the relatively common (yet, not in the case of "forgotten menstruators") access to menstrual products provided women with means by which they can manage menstruation in a way that is expected of them by Western cultural standards. However, retaining menstrual stigma is instrumental to the profitability of period retailers (Bramwell, 2001; Thomas, 2007; Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). The more pressure on the need to conceal menstruation the more demand for products that can provide it. Producers market additional values of their goods, such as more discrete, odor-blocking, and absorbent qualities, to sell the promise of an invisible and imperceptible period. It is apparent, considering referenced analyses, that advertisers of period products promote the idea of conventional femininity, constructed on the grounds of gender stereotypes and patriarchal social structures. Any attempts for a shift in menstrual rhetoric created by well-established period retailers are still dictated by the foremost desire for market gain.

2.3.2. (De)stigmatizing discourse online

Unfortunately, menstrual discourse online is also not free from prejudice, censorship, and strengthening the stigma. Thornton (2011) examined that in the open discussion about menstruation on Twitter, male users expressed anger/ frustration with menstruating women, disgust towards menstruation, and the demand that it stays unrevealed, while female users continued the narrative of "victims of gender, unable to control their actions" (p. 47).

Social media platforms themselves are often criticized for biased community standards and rules regarding menstruation. Multiple times platforms such as Facebook or Instagram banned posts that showed a realistic depiction of menstrual blood. The cases which received the most publicity took place in 2015, when a popular Canadian poet, Rupi Kaur, posted on Instagram a photo of a woman lying on a bed with a bloodstain on her crotch and the bedsheets as well as in 2020 when an Australian period-proof underwear producer, Modibodi, launched a video advertisement "The New Way To Period" with an image of bloodstain on a bedsheet and a garbage bin full of used disposable period products. The posts were removed under the argument of violation of the platforms' standards and promotion of

shocking/sensational content, most probably due to reports from offended viewers (Hodge, 2019; Modibodi, 2020). The cases gained appalling recognition from platforms' users and progressive media, accusing the networks of favoring discriminatory and misogynistic attitudes, which made it possible to restore both posts to the platforms (Kaur, 2015; Modibodi, 2020, Watson, 2020).

These cases prove that the general responses of online users to the subject of menstruation are the extension of the stereotypes and stigmatization perpetuated in society. The platforms' reactions are accordingly the reflection of the users' demands. Nonetheless, gradually more and more people support the genuine depiction of menstruation and oppose the censorship of menstrual blood online.

Indeed, in recent years, an evident shift toward normalization of the menstrual narrative among both regular Instagram users and business accounts was noted. In a content analysis of Instagram posts connected to a range of menstruation-related hashtags from 2018, Hodge (2019) established a categorization of ways in which users portray menses. "Empowerment", the most apparent overall and among business accounts theme, represented menstruation as a reason for celebration and pride (Hodge, 2019, p. 51). It could be manifested in two ways. The first one, "non-challenging", neither encouraged the audience to any activist-like actions nor aimed to challenge menstrual taboo (Hodge, 2019, p. 51). It did, however, create a benevolent atmosphere around the topic of menstruation and shed a positive light on it. The other type of empowerment, "challenging", emphasized menstrual positivity, encouraged an open and honest approach toward it and challenged menstrual stigma. It was more often found with "alternative company accounts", meaning not corporate businesses (Hodge, 2019, pp. 54).

The theme "solidarity" included speaking about period poverty in developing regions, considering female shared experiences and concerns, acknowledging male support, and recognizing non-binary menstruators (Hodge, 2019, p. 59). The theme "resistance" was the most activist-like of all and it was focused on challenging menstrual taboo, often by shocking and disruptive depictions of menstrual blood and encouragement to stand by menstrual equity (Hodge, 2019, p. 70). The fact that his theme was not found in corporate accounts proves that well-established period product manufacturers are still not in a position to confront menstrual stigmatization.

Similarly to resistance, the theme "normalizing periods" was focused on shifting the menstrual narrative toward more open and honest, however without using shock tactics (Hodge, 2019, p. 74). On the contrary, the theme "presenting menstruation in the

standard/normative way" considered those posts, which did not challenge the menstrual stigma and aligned with the standard, stereotypical social discourse of menstruation (Hodge, 2019, p. 85).

The next theme, "women's health", approached menstruation from a more therapeutic side, thus consisting of tips and suggestions on how to deal with particular menstrual effects (Hodge, 2019, p. 80). "Eco-friendly" theme recognized posts that touched upon the environmental side of using menstrual products and promotion of those that are reusable (Hodge, 2019, p. 89). The theme "marketing" consisted of all the posts that either were promoting or selling the whole range of products for period management (Hodge, 2019, p. 91). They neither cultivated nor broke with the menstrual stigma, but some of them offered alternatives to mainstream period products. The study by Hodge (2019) is significant for this research analysis as it provides it with derived data that can be conducive in establishing its own themes.

2.4. Communicating brands as agents in menstrual normalization

2.4.1. Brand activism and femvertising

Responding to the growing attention toward business' social responsibility, companies engage in brand activism, defined as a "strategy of influencing customers by means of campaigns created and sustained by political values" (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p. 348). Among four categories of brand activism by Manfredi-Sánchez (2019), political, economical, environmental, and social, the latter is of particular interest to this study. Brands, which engage with social brand activism "focus mostly on generic final values that promote a society along progressive lines" (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p. 354). Under this category is brands' involvement in women's rights, including reproductive rights and menstrual equity.

As nowadays customers are increasingly evaluating brands based on their stand on societal issues (Edelman, 2020), feminism became an enticement for business engagement plainly for a market gain and as such is recognized as "commodity feminism" (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p. 355). One form of co-opting feminism in a form of brand activism is femvertising, understood as "advertising that employs profemale talent, messages, and imagery to empower women and girls" (SheKnows Living, 2014, as cited in Varghese & Kumar, 2020, p. 1). Femvertising was examined to have high marketing effectiveness, reinforcing positive reactions toward the brand and purchase intention, particularly among younger generations (Varghese & Kumar, 2020). Nonetheless, from a feminist perspective,

femvertising is often criticized for appropriating feminist values in order to increase brand recognition and profit (Varghese & Kumar, 2020). A particular type of femvertising, a "power femininity", was examined by Lazar (2006) as:

> a 'subject-effect' (...) of a global discourse of popular (post)feminism, which incorporates feminist signifiers of emancipation and empowerment as well as circulates popular postfeminist assumptions that feminist struggles have ended viz., that full equality for all women has been achieved and that women of today can 'have it all'; indeed, that it is becoming a woman's world, with a celebration of all things feminine, including the desire for self-aestheticization. (p. 505).

This type of advertising critiques conventional advertisements targeting women for the promotion of unrealistic body images, but simultaneously it attributes feminine power to particular body parts and owning agency by aestheticization of their appearance and self-sexualization as well as acquiring knowledge of beauty tricks as an empowering tool, in fact only facilitating a better fit into a patriarchal society (Lazar, 2006).

2.4.1.1. Menstrual product activism

To differentiate the brands, which co-opt menstrual positivity and empowerment from those which genuinely contribute to the change in the narrative and management of menstruation, this research proposes to use the term menstrual product activism, conceptualized by Bobel (2006) as "various strategic attempts to expose the hazards of commercial 'feminine protection' to both women's bodies and the environment and the promotion of healthier, less expensive, and less resource-intensive alternatives" (p. 333). Menstrual product activism is based on several concerns related to the conventional feminine care industry.

The first one regards the safety of menstruators due to the materials that the femcare products are manufactured from (rayon) and the processes involved in the production (bleaching) (Bobel, 2006). Considering that vagina is an extremely absorbent organ, any harmful ingredients inserted in it pose a great risk to females' health. It was examined that femcare products contain chemicals that are recognized as endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs), carcinogens, or allergens (Scranton, 2013, as cited in Nicole, 2014). The second concern points out the environmental impact of single-use, disposable, non-biodegradable femcare products, of which, as estimated, one person uses 11400 throughout all years of menstruation (Bobel, 2006). A concern of the high cost of these articles, which disturbs the

lives of many non-wealthy menstruators and drives them to use improvised solutions, putting their health at risk, is another factor. The last concern is the most related to the subject of this thesis and argues that commercial femcare producers were long the co-creators of harmful representation of menstruation as a problem that needs to be properly and secretly managed (Bobel, 2006). This, as already disclaimed on the pages of this chapter, greatly contributed to the perpetuation of the menstrual stigma.

Instead of opting for the corporate femcare industry, which Bobel (2006) called the "enemy number one" (p. 338) of menstrual product activism, she insisted on choosing alternative menstrual products such as: washable pads, menstrual cups, sea sponges, all-cotton tampons and pads and a new product, gaining compelling recognition among menstruators, the period-proof underwear. This thesis will focus on the analysis of the communication of period retailers, which produce either one type or a range of alternative menstrual products and embody the assumptions of menstrual product activism, and for this reason, they are called "menstrual activist brands".

2.4.2. Brand identity

One of the key reasons why brands engage in activism is to strengthen brand equity, which translates to brand recognition and consumer engagement. A crucial component of brand equity is an established brand identity, which consists of customers' brand associations and brand personality (Watkins & Lee, 2016). In visual-centered social networks, such as Instagram, to successfully communicate brand identity companies must focus on visual branding content (Zhou & Xue, 2021). The visual content promotes products "more quickly and directly without too much persuasive stress" and it enhances consumers' ability to process marketing information (Zhou & Xue, 2021, p. 730). Phillips et al. (2014) go as far as stating that visual brand identity can be seen as "the face of the brand" (p. 318) and it is vital that the chosen visual elements reflect the strategy of the business.

In order to establish a visual brand identity, it is important to evaluate the use of colors, typography and product packaging employed by the brand (Phillips et al. 2014). The choice of color has particular importance in branding, as it was studied to have strong persuasive power and influence on the mood and feelings of the brand recipients (Gopikrishna & Kumar, 2015). Therefore brands with a particular choice of color "distinguish themselves amongst competitors, establish an identity, promote an image, and foster relationships with its consumers" (Cunningham, 2017, p. 186). The packaging design was examined to also be able to influence consumer brand impressions and should be

strategically designed considering a particular brand personality to be conveyed (Orth & Malkewitz, 2008). Lastly, the type of font used in branding was studied to be able to influence customers' perception of brand personality (Grohmann et al. 2013).

Furthermore, to determine the way in which period retailers under study communicate their brands on Instagram, this research will use a brand identity framework established by Zhou and Xue (2021). Building on Aaker's (1996) brand identity planning model, they have determined four themes that can be used as a framework in the analysis of the visual representation of brand identity. A customer-centric is focused on the brand-customer relationship (f.ex. reposting user's interactions with the brand) and shows customer satisfaction with using the product of a brand. An employee-centric theme focuses on exposing the brand-employee relationship (f.ex. introducing employees to the followers) and appealing to stakeholders by extending the brand identity through employees. A product-centric theme is understood as presenting products and their competitive qualities. The last theme, symbolic, is defined as "persuasive messages used to create a mood or tell a story in an effort to help define brand personality and cultivate brand loyalty" (Zhou & Xue, 2021, p. 732). As such this theme might result in customers' curiosity and build stronger brand recognition and loyalty. The examination of what themes are used by menstrual activist brands brings insightful observations of how they build their identity taking into account that menstruation is at the core of it.

2.4.3. Communicating brands to Millennials and Gen Z

Menstrual product activism appeals mainly to young generations, which favor women's empowerment and are eager to challenge the status quo of existing social norms (Bobel, 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Varghese & Kumar, 2020). Bobel (2020) described that menstrual product activists are "angry, inventive, tongue-in-cheek, anti-corporate, and evocative of an earlier era, (...) with the energy and attitude of contemporary young women" (p. 332). Younger generations, Millennials (aged 26-41 in 2022) and Gen Z (aged 13-25 in 2022), are principal recipients of an emerging new menstrual rhetoric yet for another reason, as they constitute the majority of current menstruators (The Pew Research Center, 2021).

Both cohorts are digital natives, a characteristic distinguishing them from preceding generations (Prensky, 2001). Nanda (2020) illustrated the behavioral unique characteristics of both generations. Millennials are the cohort, whose cultural context is globalization, and is "questioning", values "integrity, flexibility, participation", spends on "experience and travel" and is influenced by "celebrities and social media" (Nanda, 2020, p. 3). Accordingly, Gen Z

grows up in the context of the digital age, their typical behavior is “communicative realist”, they value “social movements, fluidity, mobility”, spend on “ethical products” and are shaped by “social media, niche influencers” (Nanda, 2020, p. 3).

For these reasons, both generations exhibit unique consumer behaviors, to which brands aim to adjust. Firstly, they spend a significant amount of time on social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube, and therefore they are the driving force behind online shopping (Munsch, 2021). They show strong brand loyalty, while exposed to quality products and brands, but are less prone to the influence of advertising, as they highly value authenticity and for that reason, they tend to trust product reviews, influencer marketing, and user-generated content (USG) (Munsch, 2021). Marketing content that elicits emotions, including laughter, has a good chance of attracting Millennials’ and Gen Z’s attention (Munsch, 2021). They have confidence in peers’ judgment and recommendations, thus they perceive the content shared by social media influencers or their friends as the most authentic. Millennials were found to prefer brands that support the purpose close to their values and they boycott brands that they perceive unethical. Similarly, as per Nanda (2020), Gen Z is looking for brands that “act as an extension of them” (p. 2). Therefore, the brands that respond to and communicate the young generations’ values and environmental and social concerns have higher chances to resonate with them.

2.5. Conclusion

The overview of the literature provided in this chapter aimed to equip this research with concepts and theories the most relevant to further analysis and the answer to the research question. The connection to the stigmatization of a reproductive female body, as well as associations with impurity, curse, and taboo, explained the roots of the perception of menstruation as a stigma, prevailing in many cultures around the world, with a particular focus on the Western discourse. The consequences of a negative social perception of menstruation for people who experience it, also taking into account marginalized groups, demonstrated the urgency for a change in menstrual narratives and politics.

Literature on Western advertisements of femcare products showed how menstrual stigmatization was bolstered in the media by period retailers throughout the years, as well as how this narrative is presently shifting towards empowerment. However, the literature also proved that the current “empowering” representation of menstruation is still stereotyped and therefore perceived as a commodity. It was identified that the change in menstrual discourse

takes place mainly online. By the explanation of the difference between conventional corporate Western period retailers and menstrual activist brands, supported by relevant concepts, it was determined that the latter was the subject of this research. The overview of unique consumer expectations and behaviors of Millennials and Gen Z explained why they are the main recipients of these brands' communication efforts and how this communication is formed. This inquiry paves the way for further analysis of this thesis.

3. Methodology

The following chapter provides a detailed argumentation for the methodological choices of the research and outlines the research design. First, the selection of a particular method of analysis is specified. Then the main concepts relevant to the research question and objectives are operationalized. Next, the sampling approach is disclosed with five sampling criteria specified and justification for the selection of a particular data set. Lastly, the explicit account of the steps taken in the analysis of the data set is detailed.

3.1. Data collection method

To answer the research question "Destigmatizing menstruation: how do menstrual activist brands from the UK represent menstruation and menstruators online and challenge the perception of young generations?", the ways in which the meaning of menstruation is created in the context of (de)stigmatization by menstrual activist brands have to be investigated and the research method that allows for the exploration of that meaning is a desired one. As per Ritchie et al. (2003) "the aim of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of the nature and form of phenomena, to unpack meanings, to develop explanations or to generate ideas, concepts and theories" (p. 82). Furthermore, the qualitative approach is particularly effective in providing an in-depth analysis of social phenomena and their context (Snape & Spencer, 2003). As this research aims to provide the explanation and understanding of the construction of social phenomena of (de)stigmatization of menstruation, a qualitative methodological approach was decided to be the right choice.

The meaning of menstruation is hidden in the content that menstrual activist brands produce and present to the audience on their Instagram accounts and in order to identify it, both the content and the context in which it appears have to be thematically categorized (Ritchie et al., 2003). Additionally, the method of data collection that provides the means for identification and interpretation of socially produced constructs such as (de)stigmatization is required. The thematic analysis allows for the systematic recognition of patterns in data and exploration of the ways in which meanings are constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, this method grants flexibility in ontological orientation and the level in which the analysis is theory versus data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This kind of flexibility is desired in the investigation of menstrual (de)stigmatization, a socially produced phenomenon, which requires a constructionist approach and a certain level of theoretical grounding.

As the research is focused on the analysis of communication of several menstrual activist brands it is a multi-case approach, which allows for collective comprehension of a phenomenon of menstrual (de)stigmatization. Therefore, qualitative thematic analysis of textual and visual content on Instagram by menstrual activist brands was decided to be the best methodological fit for this research.

3.2. Operationalization

Both stigmatization and destigmatization of menstruation, the main concepts of the research, are latent constructs meaning they are not directly observable and measurable on their own, therefore they have to be identified on an interpretative level and largely supported by the theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis for this research was therefore mainly based on the theory, but receptive to new themes that could emerge from the data, which were not yet mapped in previous studies. This indicates a mixed approach to the analysis, both deductive and inductive, with a focus on an examination of (de)stigmatization throughout the entire data set.

3.2.1. Stigmatization of menstruation

Stigmatization occurs in a narrative that presents menstruation as disgraceful, embarrassing, or tarnished and assumes that an ideal state of femininity is a non-menstruating state (Kissling, 1996; Simes & Berg, 2001). This kind of narrative avoids direct talk and the portrayal of menstruation, so it either consists of euphemisms and metaphors (verbal and/or visual) or draws the image of the desirable state in which the menstruator will be after concealing menstruation (Kissling, 1996). In practice, it might be exhibited through expressions like *feel confident during these days* or *with product x you can be yourself*. It emphasizes the need for secrecy of menstruation and its management, for example by offering *discreet protection* and it also uses the promise of confidence, carelessness, or safety with phrases like *stay free/safe/carefree* (Merskin, 1999, Simes & Berg, 2001). All these associations lead to one's feeling of security, which can be achieved only when it is impossible for others to detect one's menstruating status (Simes & Berg, 2001).

Furthermore, any implications of menstruation as unsanitized, unfresh, and impure are classified as stigmatization (Coutts & Berg, 1993; Merskin, 1999; Simes & Berg, 2001). It might be incorporated through communication requiring women to choose a particular menstrual product in order to be hygienic such as a promise of a *fresher, cleaner experience*.

It also involves the concept of the threat of shame and embarrassment if menstruation was revealed to the world (Coutts & Berg, 1993; Simes & Berg, 2001). This can be manifested through expressions like *no leaks, no worries* and promises of menstrual products being discreet and undetectable (Coutts & Berg, 1993; Merskin, 1999). Indications of a vaginal odor, often exemplified by the deodorizing or odor-blocking features of menstrual products, are also categorized as stigmatizing (Coutts & Berg, 1993; Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). Comparing menstruation to perilous or uncontrollable occurrences or to nature's punishment of menstruators is linked to the concept of the menstrual curse and as such stigmatizing (Campbell et al., 2021; Golub, 1992 as cited in Kissling, 1996).

Stigmatization of menstruation also involves the stereotypical portraits of a (pre)menstruator. The first one is a moody and irritable woman, bloated and craving for chocolate, as described by Chrisler et al. (2006), who is better to be avoided, particularly by non-menstruating men. The second is the image of a woman that perfectly manages her menstruation and carries on her regular activities as if she was not menstruating at all so no one can really identify her menstruating status (Merskin, 1999; Simes & Berg, 2001). It connects to the body objectification theory and the Western concept of sexualized femininity (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The implication that a woman is attractive to a man only if he can not find out that she is menstruating is a sign of stigmatization (Roberts & Waters, 2004).

3.2.2. Destigmatization of menstruation

Destigmatization on the other hand is the intentional practice of converting the process of stigmatization by disconnecting menstruation from the notion of shame (Negro et al. 2021). The destigmatizing narrative does not comply with the socially accepted practices of stigmatization and for that reason is commonly regarded as transgressive. It involves open and often radically honest, verbal and/or visual, expressions of the menstrual process and experience (Hodge, 2019). It considers the physical and emotional aspects of menstruation and therefore depicts menstrual blood, discomfort, and pain and it touches upon topics of sexual behavior during menstruation, symptoms and reactions of the menstruating body, and menstrual abnormalities (Campbell et al., 2021; Fahs, 2020). It can also have an educational form, explaining the anatomical, practical, medical, and any other possible dimensions of menstruation (Kissling, 1996).

Additionally, in this research destigmatization is applied interchangeably with the term normalization, referring to menstruation as an entirely normal biological body function that is a sign of health and well-being (Fahs, 2020). As such, destigmatization also

demonstrates the positive side of menstruation as a unique quality of womanhood (Kissling, 1996). This extends to the normalization of female genital parts often accompanied by a sense of pride and empowerment. Menstrual normalization also takes place in the realm of language, mainly in the form of detailed descriptions of the process, and straightforward expressions used to name it as well as degendering menstrual narratives (Kissling, 1996).

Menstrual product activism emphasizes the importance of the consideration of the detrimental impact of disposable menstrual products on the environment (Bobel, 2006). The view of menstruation as contributing to environmental damage can fuel menstrual stigma. On the other hand, proposing alternatives to mainstream menstrual products has the potential to change the attitude of menstruators toward the everyday products they use and the social perception of menstruation as harmful to the environment (Bobel, 2006). For this reason, narratives that highlight the environmental impact of conventional menstrual products and propose alternatives are classified as destigmatization.

3.2.2.1. Representation of a menstruator

Last but not least, destigmatization is based on the inclusivity of non-normative menstrual experiences and forms as well as a variety of people undergoing menstruation. This includes “forgotten menstruators" (see section 2.2.3.), left out from the Western discourse and imagery, as well as diversified representation of menstruators in the context of gender, race, and physical appearance (Frank & Dellaria, 2020; Perianes & Roberts, 2020; Roaf & de Albuquerque, 2020). Therefore, portrayals deviating from the image of a white, thin, able-bodied, cis-gender woman, which is prevalent in the Western discourse, are regarded as destigmatizing (Roberts & Waters, 2004).

Gender in the case of menstruators is recognized as either female or non-binary and it can be evaluated based on the explicit indication in the caption of the post or the evaluation of the features of the body (breats/ mastectomy signs) and appearance. The latter is based on stereotypical assumptions such as makeup application for female gender identity, but it is expected that if the gender nonconformity of a menstruator can not be easily established then it is not communicated clearly and the aspect of inclusivity of menstrual representation is not accomplished.

The body type of a menstruator is established based on the diversification between the idealized body - slender, shaved, tanned, toned and smoothed, and the non-normative, according to the Western standards, body - full figured with apparent “imperfections” such as fat rolls, stretch marks, floppy skin, pimples and/or body hair (Chrisler, 2011). It is also

considered whether the representation of disabled bodies is included which could be manifested through the portrayal of people with body deformations, missing limbs, people on wheelchairs etc.

A menstruator in regard to race is considered twofold as a white person or a person of color. It was implied that Western menstrual product advertising focuses mainly on the representation of Caucasian females, so it is important to establish whether the data set shows any alteration in this aspect (Campbell et al., 2021; Merskin, 1999). Race is examined based only on visual features such as skin tone.

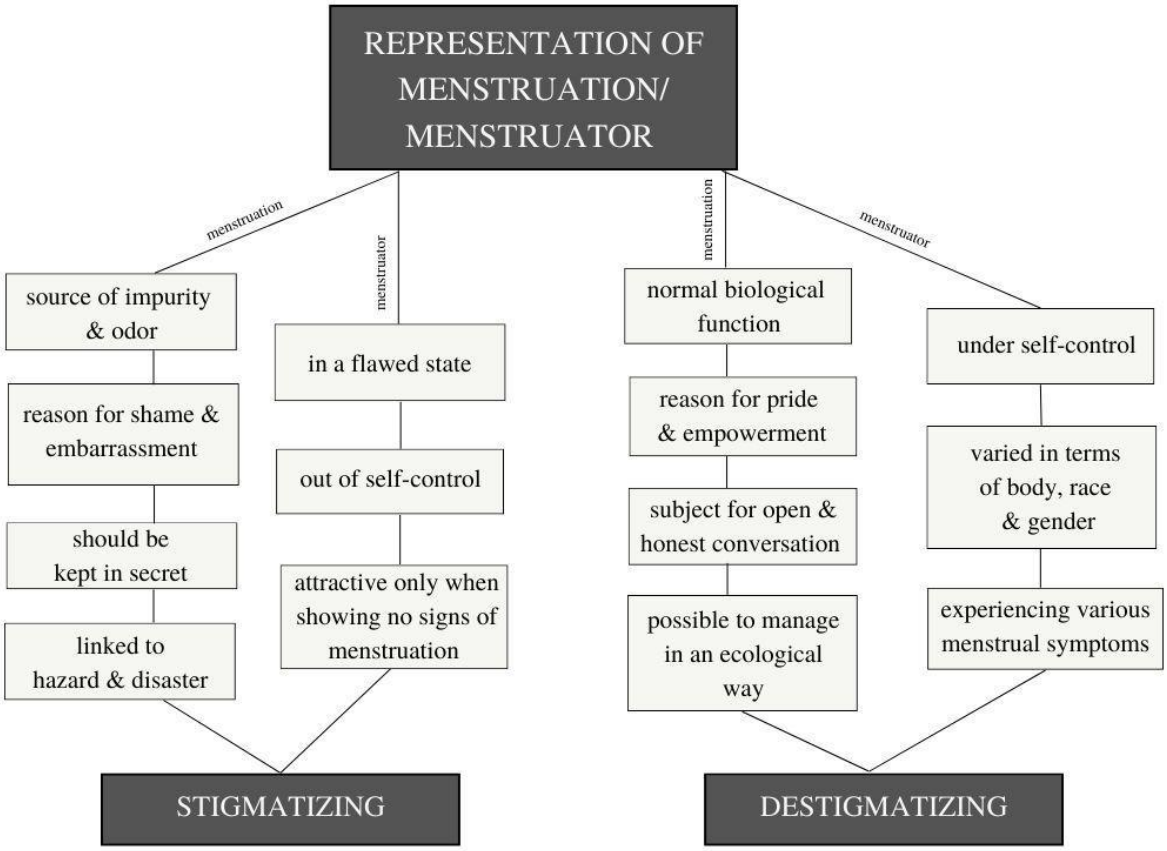

Fig. 1. Horizontal hierarchy model of representation of menstruation/menstruator as stigmatizing/destigmatizing

3.3. Sampling and data set

Purposive sampling was decided to be an appropriate technique of data selection due to its flexibility to choose data units of particular characteristics which enables the exploration of the central phenomenon under study (Ritchie et al., 2003). This type of sampling is a non-probability sampling and it assures that the key criteria of data relevant to the research question are included (Ritchie et al., 2003).

The study is interested in the current practice of representing menstruation, therefore it was decided to retrieve data from the most recent posts, dated backward from May 1, 2022 when data collection started. In 2020 critical menstruation studies have been distinguished as a separate academic discipline combining all the research related to menstruation (Bobel, 2020). However, the COVID-19 pandemic shed new light on the topic of menstruation and particularly the period poverty, as menstruators had difficulties in accessing menstrual products due to restrictions in leaving their houses or panic-buying which resulted in shops lacking menstrual products (Rodriguez, 2020, March 17).

Nonetheless, the ongoing fight against menstrual stigma and especially period poverty brings tangible effects to menstrual politics, such as the reduction or overturn of the tampon tax being introduced in more and more countries each year as well as a provision of menstrual products to schools and universities by individual governments (Rodriguez, 2021, June 28). The latest events in menstrual politics also stand behind the decision to choose the UK as a specific market for the analysis of this research. In November 2020 Scotland became the first country in the world to decide on supplying menstrual products to anyone who needs them free of charge (Rodriguez, 2021, October 1). Furthermore, in January 2021 the UK joined Ireland as the second tampon tax-free European country, meaning that currently, the VAT rate for menstrual products (except for period-proof pants which are not considered essentials) there equals zero (HM Treasury, 2021).

However, further efforts in eliminating menstrual stigma in the UK are important, since the studies on young British girls' attitudes toward menstruation indicated the overwhelming majority of negative emotions such as fear, inconvenience, annoyance, embarrassment, and confusion (Plan International, 2018). It is important in that case to examine the way in which menstrual activist brands adapt to the important changes in menstrual politics and convey menstrual representation to their younger audience.

Menstrual activist brands due to their main target audience being digital natives, communicate mainly on social media. Instagram is the preferred platform as it is cost-efficient and provides the possibility of presenting unrestrained designs and visuals that allow brands to stand out from the crowd and build their brand identity (Zhou & Xue, 2021). For this reason, Instagram posts were determined to be the most likely to reveal dominant narratives of menstruation communicated by the chosen brands and therefore chosen as a source of data.

3.3.1. Sampling criteria

In order to obtain the desired sample, firstly, a google search for alternative menstrual products in the UK was performed and the most admissible results were explored. Each producer of the mentioned products was then assessed for compliance with five main sampling criteria. The first and the last criteria were dictated by the choice of the UK and Instagram as particular settings for analysis. The three other criteria were linked to the definition of menstrual product activism by Bobel (2006), as a form of menstrual activism that creates alternatives for mainstream femcare products and highlights their sustainable, healthy and affordable qualities (see 2.4.1.2.).

The first criterion expected that the brand is based in the United Kingdom and communicates in English. The second one required that it produces either one or different kinds of alternative menstrual products as mentioned in section 2.4.1.1. The third criterion reflects Bobel's (2006) assertion that menstrual product activism opposes conventional corporate femcare producers, as they profit from menstrual stigmatization. Therefore it was decided that a chosen brand can not be associated with any of the femcare market giants such as Always, Bodyform/Libresse, U by Kotex, O.B., Tampax. The fourth criterion required that the brand considers the following as its primary brand values: safety for menstruators' health, environmental sustainability, engagement in a fight against period poverty, and/or in inclusivity for all the menstruators. The last one demanded that the brand mentions either of these values on its Instagram profile description as a sign of activist marketing messaging (see Appendix A, Table A2).

All of the required information was accessed through the websites and Instagram accounts of the producers. Five brands that best met the sampling criteria were selected, specifically Callaly, Dame, Flux Undies, Ohne, and Wuka. The offering and the description of these brands are introduced in Appendix A, Table A1.

The data unit of the analysis is a part or a whole Instagram post consisting of a photo and a caption/hashtag(s). Ritchie et al. (2003) suggested that in qualitative research "units [of data] are chosen because they typify the circumstance or hold a characteristic that is expected or known to have salience to the subject matter under study" (pp. 82-83). Therefore, the posts that were taken into account needed to show the presence of any of the aspects specified in the operationalization of (de)stigmatization.

The latest 35 posts of each brand were selected, considering sampling criteria, and eventually, a data set of 175 Instagram posts, equal to 247 data units (some posts consisted of

more than one image), was collected. As advised by the Methodological Guidelines (2021-2022), this number of posts was considered adequate in order to obtain substantial data and carry out meaningful observations, considering the scope of the master thesis. Choosing five companies provided a sufficient amount of data per company and ensured insightful analysis to identify patterns.

3.3.2. Exclusion criteria

It is important to state that the Instagram communication of most of the chosen brands is based on both still images and videos. The videos, however, differ in number and length across brands, and analyzing them would impose limitations on the number of data units analyzed per individual brand. Furthermore, they would require a different methodological approach therefore for the purpose of the feasibility of this research project, only still posts were examined, whilst video analysis could be considered in future studies. Similarly, users' comments were not considered part of the data, as the examination of users' perception of the chosen brands' representation of menstruation is the material for separate research. Excluded from the analysis were also any posts identified as giveaways and competitions.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

For the clarity and reliability of the research, six steps of performing thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed as described hereto. In order to aid the process, all data were collected, coded, and analyzed in a computer program, Atlas.ti. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that before performing the thematic analysis it is essential to decide what constitutes a theme. Since there are no strict guidelines, it was determined that a theme could be established if at least three instances of it were found in the data. This number suggests the prevalence of certain topics over the ones which occur randomly and therefore the potential to create a pattern.

The first step of the analysis was based on familiarization with the data set, recurring active reading of the data in search of patterns, and noting primary ideas and observations. Then the open coding of the entire data set was performed, meaning that interesting and relevant parts of the data were extracted and labeled according to their features. If a post was built as a "carousel", meaning that it consisted of a couple of images but one caption, then the caption was coded once and each of the visuals were coded separately. Additionally, if an image of the post and the caption presented the same content then it was coded once.

Hashtags and emojis, whenever they were considered a contribution to the meaning of menstruation, were coded as parts of broader textual content.

The codes were executed on three levels to facilitate the answers to particular research subquestions. To answer the first one, how the brands communicate to younger generations, the way in which the brand identity was communicated visually was coded based on the brand identity framework by Zhou and Xue (2021) and considering other visual branding elements such as color, font, and packaging. To answer the second subquestion, how the brands represent menstruation on Instagram, posts were coded with a strict focus on the topic of menstruation and what the particular data unit said about it. The answer to the third subquestion, considering (de)stigmatization, was approached in the most interpretative way as specified in the operationalization and the model of representation of menstruation/menstruator as stigmatizing/destigmatizing as shown in *Fig.1*.

The next step involved axial coding, an examination of the codes that could potentially constitute a theme depending on the similarities in which they created the meaning for the research questions of the study. When codes were categorized, the relationship between themes was explored and some were combined into broader overarching themes, which drove to the development of themes and subthemes. Some of the initial codes were not identified as representing elements of any of the core categories, therefore they were discarded. At this stage, the data set was again examined for any units of analysis that were previously missed and to confirm that the themes reflected the data set. When it was decided that the saturation in the expansion of themes was reached, the themes were grouped in core categories, named, defined, and integrated into the thematic map, available in Appendix B, Table B1. The last step involved reporting the results of the analysis and explaining the meaning of themes in the context of (de)stigmatization, which is provided in the following chapter Results and Discussion.

3.5. Conclusions

In this chapter all the methodological steps and decisions made during the research were discussed. It was determined that the qualitative thematic analysis of the latest Instagram posts of the menstrual activist brands from the UK was the appropriate approach to uncover the findings that eventually help to answer the research question. A detailed operationalization of stigmatization and destigmatization was presented with multiple examples to foster clarity of how the concepts could be observed during the analysis. The fact

that they are latent social constructs imposes the constructionist approach to the analysis, which was a detailed account of a particular phenomenon. Stigmatization of menstruation was operationalized as any associations with secrecy, shame, impurity, and curse as well as the recreation of stereotypes of menstruating women. Destigmatization of menstruation was operationalized as an honest portrayal of all the aspects of menstruation, inclusivity of menstrual experiences and menstruating people, and linking menstruation to positive experiences of womanhood as well as diversity and inclusivity in the representation of a menstruator and the body. Both stigmatization and destigmatization could be manifested on an explicit level (language, imagery) as well as a latent level, requiring a more interpretative approach. All the steps taken during the thematic analysis were introduced until the moment when findings could be reported.

4. Results and discussion

In this chapter the results of the thematic analysis of the dataset are presented in order to further answer the research question The findings demonstrated in the first section outline the model in which menstrual activist brands communicate visually their brand identity and how they broadcast menstrual product messaging in Instagram content. The three subsequent sections provide a description of themes associated with the representation of menstruation, menstrual and body education as well as the image of a menstruator. Each of the themes established within these sections was categorized as either stigmatizing or destigmatizing. The last section provides an overview of this classification as well as the use of established themes by particular brands.

4.1. Communicating menstrual activist brands to younger audiences

This section introduces the way in which the chosen five menstrual activist companies communicate their brands on Instagram toward Millennials and Gen Z. This was analyzed based on the brand identity framework by Zhou and Xue (2021), assessment of other visual brand identity elements and the examination of marketing messaging of menstrual products.

4.1.1. Communication of the brand identity

The visual representation of the brand identity was assessed by assigning either of the four themes proposed by Zhou and Xue (2021): customer-centric, employee-centric, product-centric, or symbolic. The most apparent theme, identified across all the brands, was symbolic (N=72). Different ways of typifying this theme were characteristic of particular brands, which are specified in subthemes. The first one, “metaphorical” (N=15), manifested in visual metaphors, often epitomizing vulva or bleeding, and was common to two brands, Dame and Callaly. An example of such a metaphor is presented in *Fig.2* in the post by Callaly where a seashell and a piece of red cloth imitate a bleeding vagina.

Fig. 2. Metaphorical type of symbolic theme (Callaly [@mycallaly], 2022 March 18)

The second subtheme “humoristic” was based on a satirical approach (N=23), mainly by the use of a meme, “an amusing or interesting item such as a captioned picture or video (...) spread widely online, especially through social media” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It often combined iconic symbols of young generations such as celebrities or characters from movies and TV shows. This theme was the most frequent among Callaly, and Dame. An example of this subtheme can be found in *Fig.3* in the post by Ohne which used a still shot from a comedy movie “13 going on 30” to joke about the unpredictability of menstruation.

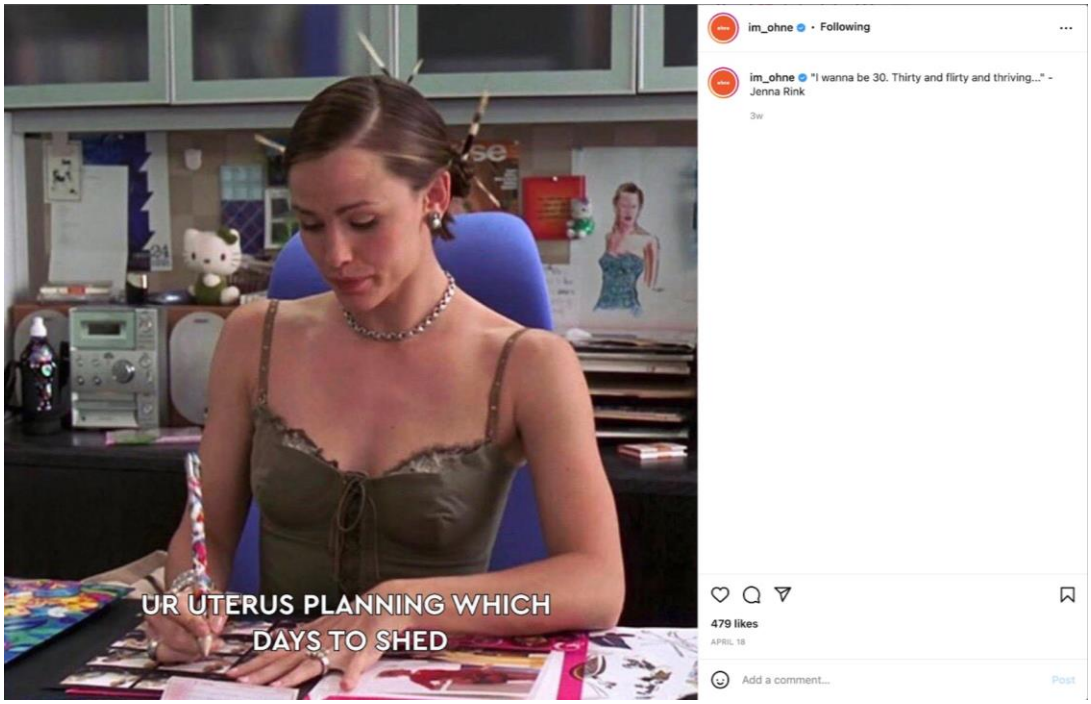

Fig. 3. Humoristic type of symbolic theme (Ohne [im_ohne], 2022 April 18)

The third subtheme, "illustrative", consisted of a visual content that was not representative of any allegorical meaning and it rather served as an illustration for the caption of the post in order to emphasize the mood or the story told in the post (N=34). This theme was the most observable within Callaly, Dame, and Wuka. An example of this subtheme is found in *Fig.4* in the post by Dame, where a group of five naked women walk holding hands in a deserted place.

Fig. 4. Illustrative type of symbolic theme (Dame [@dameforgood], 2022 April 9)

The customer-centric theme (N=55) included either reposts of customers' presenting the product (N=49) or customer reviews being cited in a visual form (N=6). In most of the cases, it was determined that people who presented the product were micro-influencers, as they made it explicit in the original posts on their personal accounts (for example by offering a personalized discount code). In cases of endorsing the product the influencer becomes the extension of the brand identity, therefore the congruence between the brand identity and the influencer is important to consider by the brand while deciding on the collaboration (Janssen et al., 2022). The theme was dominant in the case of two brands, Ohne and Flux Undies. Zhou and Xue (2021) examined that customer-centric themes are the most effective to catch users' attention and viewing consumer-related content is one of the main motivations for users to visit brands' accounts. An example of a customer-centric theme is presented in *Fig.5* in the post by Ohne where an influencer posed in period-proof underwear by the brand.

Fig. 5. Customer-centric theme featuring a micro-influencer (Ohne [@im_ohne] 2022, March 22)

The product-centric theme (N=48) manifested in three ways categorized in subthemes. The posts featuring product-centric visuals were focused on emphasizing the competitive qualities of the product, often by comparing them to conventional period products. The theme was the most evident within Flux Undies and Wuka posts. *Fig.6* shows an example of a product-centric post presenting underwear by Flux Undies.

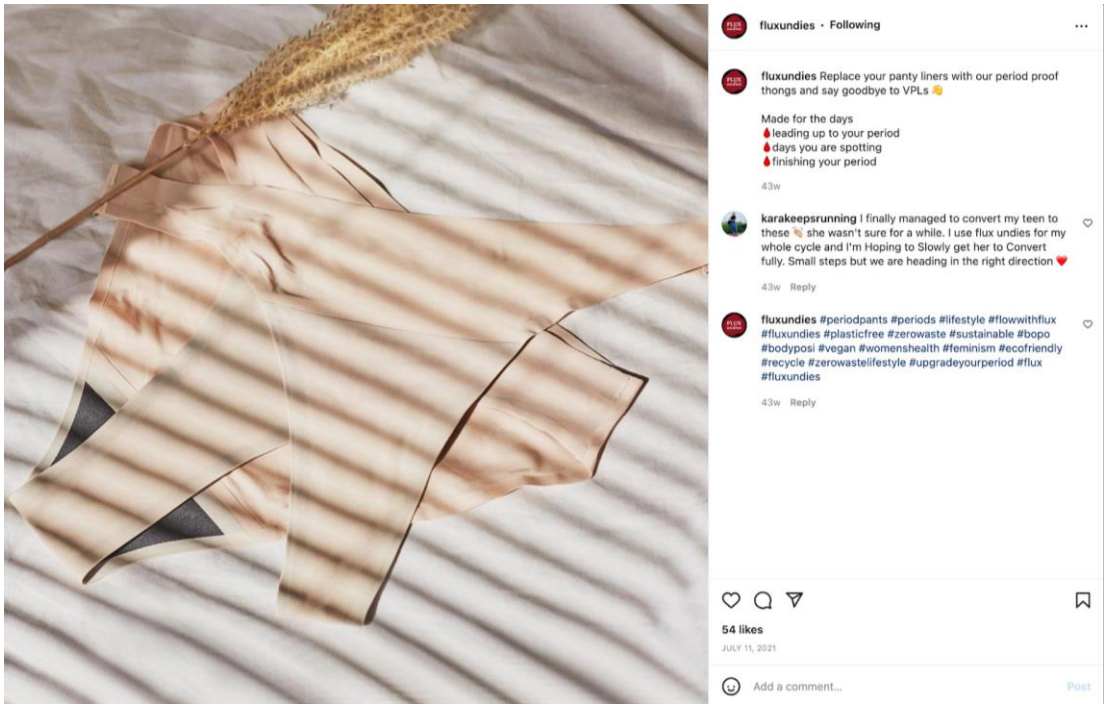

Fig. 6. Product-centric theme (Flux Undies [@fluxundies], 2021, July 11)

The employee-centric theme was not established, since only two instances of it were found across the dataset. However, during the analysis, another theme became apparent that did not fit into any of the themes within the brand identity framework by Zhou and Xue. It was frequent across the data set (N=62) and it had unique characteristics conducive to distinguishing it from other themes. This theme was named “educational” as it focused on the visual presentation of informative content. It often consisted of a symbolic illustration in the background with a text embedded on top of it, which was identified as an image macro. It was prevailing within two brands, Dame and Wuka. Most of the time the posts featuring this theme were designed as a carousel, thus a high number of visual data was identified within this theme. *Fig.7* presents a post with an educational visual content about the hormonal fluctuation before menstruation and its influence on food cravings. A couple of visuals were classified to the theme “other” (N=9) and they all came from the brand Wuka.

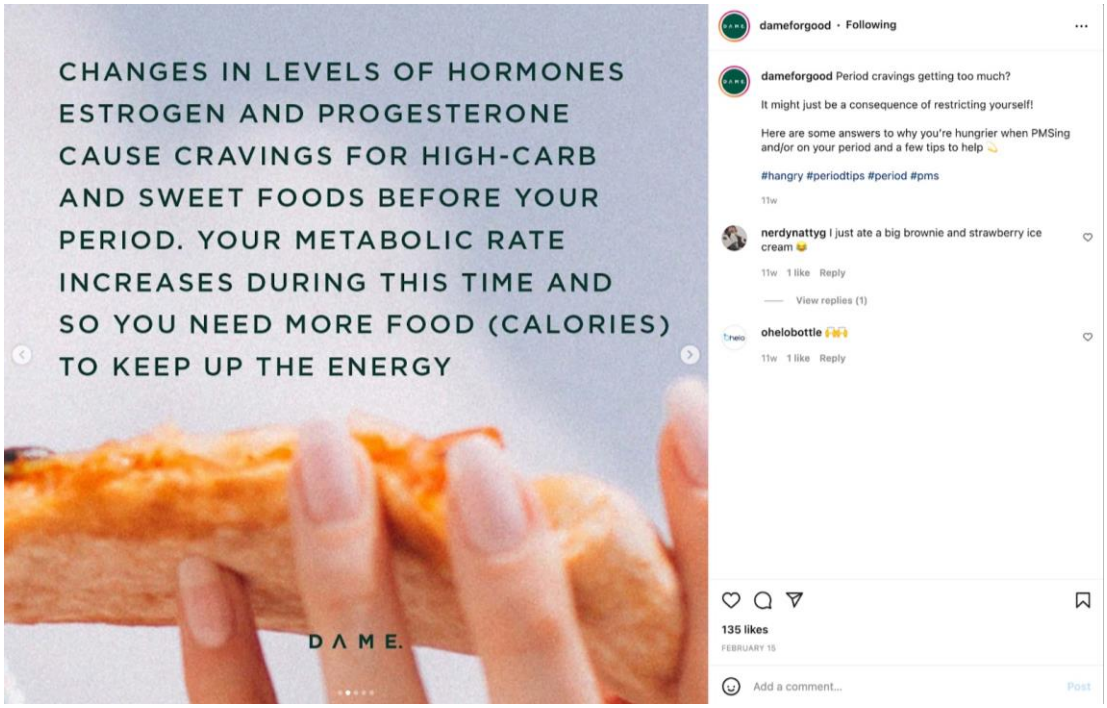

Fig. 7. Educational theme (Dame [@dameforgood], 2022 February 15)

In *Fig.8* a thematic model of visual communication of brand identity according to Zhou and Xue (2021) typology is presented.

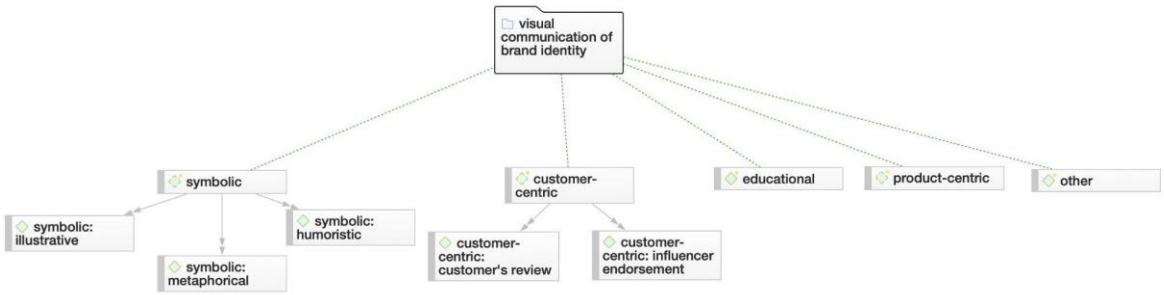

Fig. 8. Thematic model of visual communication of brand identity

All of the analyzed brands communicated using a combination of these themes, however for most of the brands one theme was prevalent over all the others. Taking into account the dominant themes together with other visual elements of the brand, it was possible to draw a profile of the brand identity for three out of five companies.

Callaly's visual communication is mainly based on a symbolic theme with visual content illustrating the copy from the caption and accentuating the message. Callaly uses a plain, distinct color palette with domination of blue and pink and a touch of bright yellow, orange and red. The colors are thoughtfully composed and consistent to create contemporary designs in packaging and visual communication. The brand font in the logo is designed in a

handwriting style and the shapes used by the brand in their visual communication are round and organic with no sharp edges, which could be referenced to female curves but also to naturalness (Grohmann et al. 2013). The name of the Instagram account @mycallaly implies that Callaly is the brand of choice. In 2020 Callaly was awarded the prize in the Red Dot design competition as the winner in sanitary brands (Red Dot, n.d.). The brand image of Callaly was described as “self-confident, engaging and open” (Red Dot, n.d., para 3). With such a brand identity Callaly might attract people who value creative and esthetic choices.

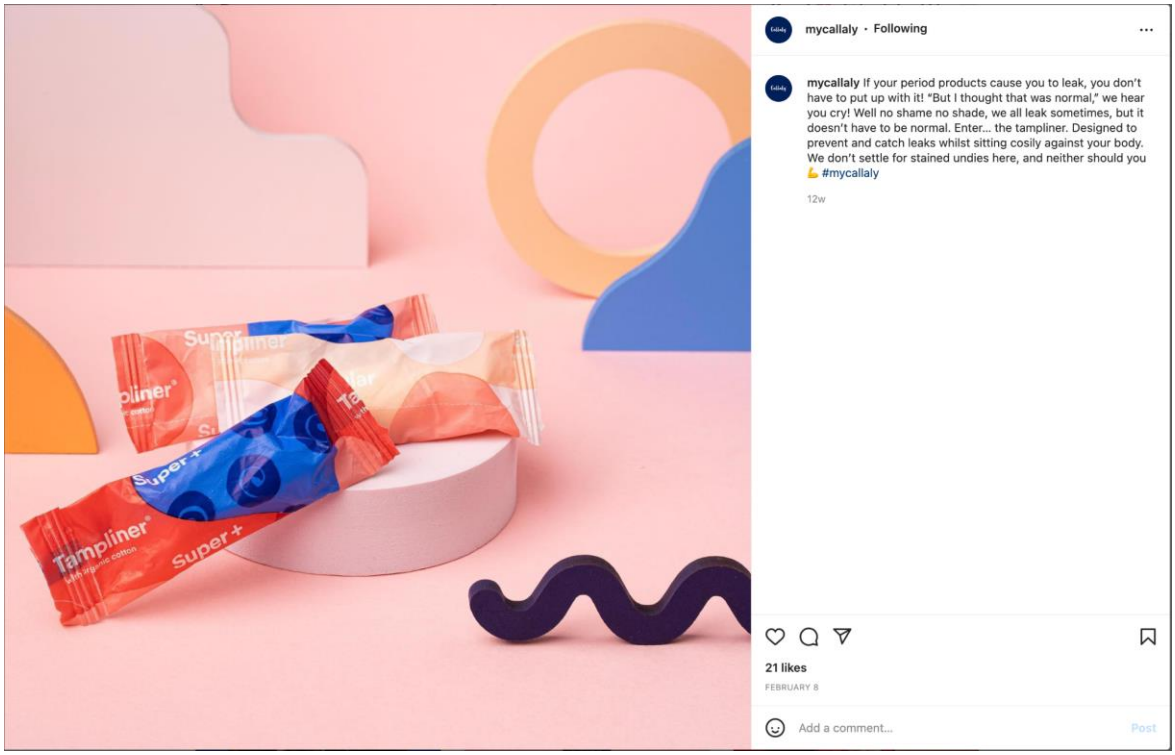

Fig. 9. Visual brand identity of Callaly (Callaly [@mycallaly], 2022, February 8)

Dame relies mainly on educational visual content, which aims to bring more awareness to subjects oriented around menstrual cycle health. The brand chooses earth-toned colors with dark green as their brand color, which suggest a connection to nature (Gopikrishna & Kumar 2015) but also sophistication (Cunningham, 2017). The typography of the brand and the logo are minimal, which favors clarity and simplicity. The product packaging is also kept in a natural and minimal design, which is associated with sincere brands (Orth & Marlkewitz, 2008). The overall brand identity aligns with the brand's purpose of providing sustainable solutions to menstrual management (Dame, n.d.). As such Dame rather appeals to older, conscious, ethically-oriented consumers.

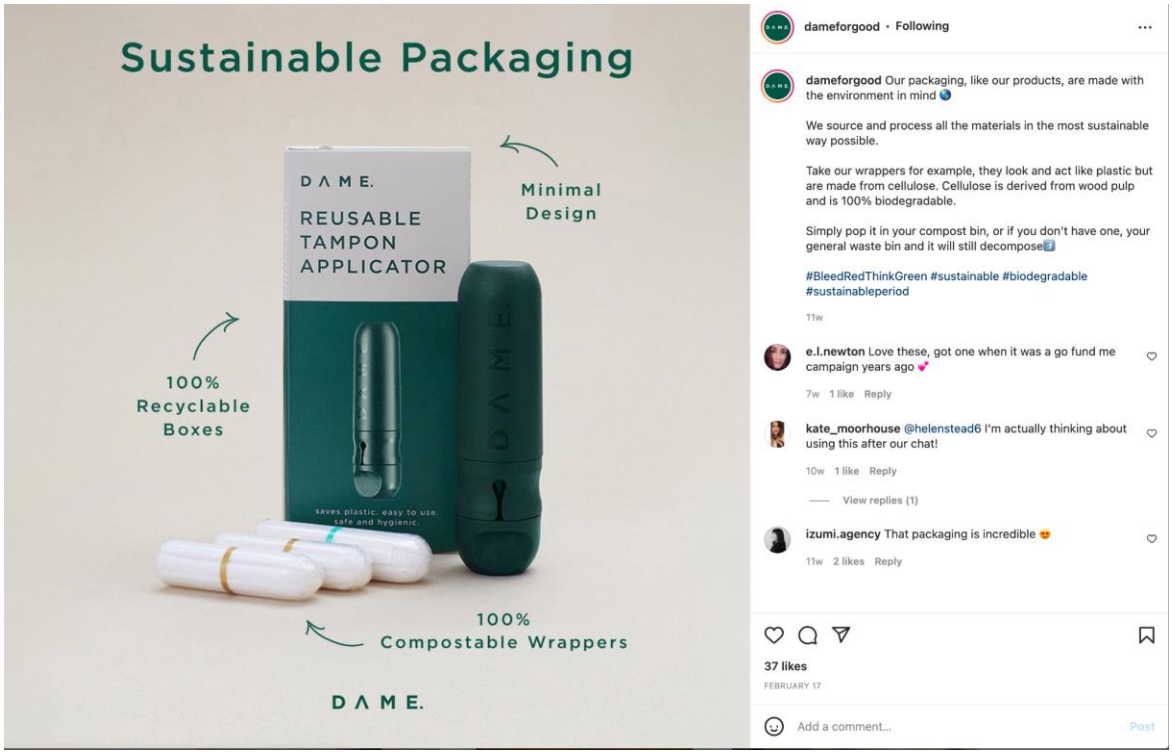

Fig. 10. Visual brand identity of Dame (Dame [@dameforgood], 2022, February 17)

Ohne is a brand that focuses mostly on micro-influencers endorsement in a customer-centric theme. They carefully chose ambassadors, who convey the brand personality by the way they present themselves with endorsed products. The brand uses eye-catching bright colors, mainly orange, accompanied by pink, red and purple. For the product packaging, the brand uses black and white colors, which is favored “by exciting brands” (Orth & Marlkewitz, 2008, p. 64). The name of the Instagram account, @im_ohne, insinuates customers’ self-identification with the brand. The bold font in typography, the choice of vivid colors, the names of the products (e.g. “yours hormonally”) and the style in which products are endorsed, give the brand daring, lively and playful identity, which entices younger customers, who appreciate originality and individualism (Cunningham, 2017; Grohmann et al. 2013).

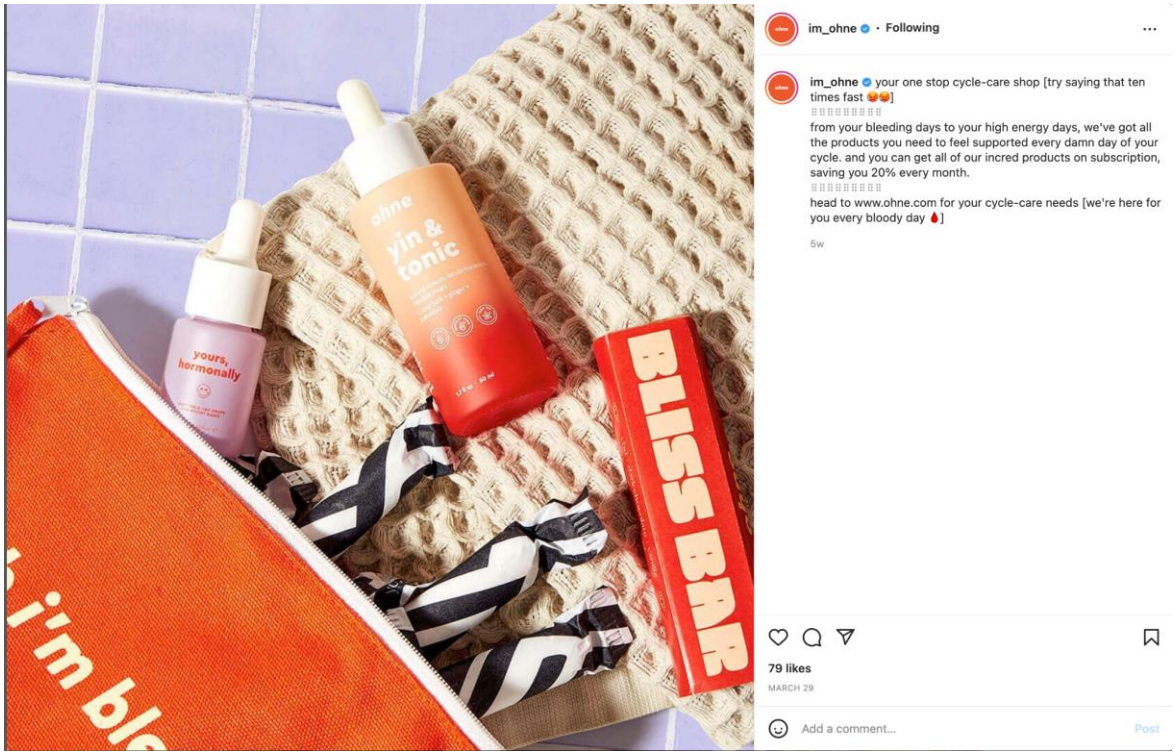

Fig. 11. Visual brand identity by Ohne (Ohne [@im_ohne], 2022, March 29)

In the case of the last two brands, Flux Undies and Wuka, deciding on what kind of brand identity of these brands was very hard. All the elements of brand identity: the logo, the font, the choice of colors and the overall tone of voice are very inconsistent. Such discrepancies in visual creation might compromise brand personality and diminish customer loyalty (Watkins & Lee, 2016). It is also almost impossible to determine what kind of audience these brands target.

Flux Undies concentrated equally on customer and product-centric visual communication. Wuka's visual brand identity was for the most part product-centric and educational. As per Zhou and Xue (2021), product-centric posts are the "selfies" of the brand and generate the most attention from consumers. It can be theorized that since both brands are highly engaged in product-centric theme, the visual communication about their products is the extension of their brand identity.

4.1.2. Menstrual product messaging

Out of the units of analysis focused on alternative menstrual product characteristics (N=139), the theme "eco-friendly" (N=34), which was identified as promoting pro-environmental aspects of the product, the theme "healthy" (N=16), which emphasized qualities assuring the health of menstruators, the theme "economic" (N=4), stressing the cost-

effective features of the product and the theme “accessible” (N=4) which promoted a monthly subscription of the customizable kit of period products delivered to the menstruator, were observed. These four themes correspond with the core postulates of menstrual product activism, promoting the idea that menstruation can be managed in a sustainable, safe (both for the planet and menstruators’ health), convenient and affordable way (Bobel, 2006, p. 333).

The rest of the product-centric messaging accounted for the theme “reliable” (N=34), which promoted protective qualities against leaks, the theme “comfortable” (N=32), which emphasized the physical comfort of using the product, the theme “looking good” (N=5), which praised the style-related characteristics of the product, the theme “hygienic” (N=4), which stressed either odor eliminating or washable qualities of the product and the theme “discreet” (N=3), which accentuated the undetectability of the product during use.

“Reliable” was among the most common themes, as it communicated the most basic quality of menstrual products, blood absorbency. However, such frequent messaging of reliable features resonates with what Simes and Berg (2001) stated that “pervasive emphasis on concealment (...) reinforces the shame and silence associated with menstruation” (p. 457). Products, which are advertised as reliable protection against leaks, are often considered to be able to emancipate women and give them the ultimate feeling of freedom and peace of mind. The concern with this type of representation is that it implies that a woman once successfully manages her menstruation, instantly becomes social, secure, confident, feminine, and attractive, and her body is not affected by menstruation anymore (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). This has two serious implications, as it reinforces the gender-stereotyped image of the ideal, sexualized femininity and perpetuates the notion that the most important responsibility of a woman during menstruation is to conceal it, rather than take good care of her physical and mental wellbeing. Similarly, themes “hygienic” and “discreet” are consistent with the findings of previous studies on menstrual product advertisements, which “convey that there is (...) something dirty and shameful about the female body itself” (Simes & Berg, 2001, p. 464). Therefore, such extensive promotion of menstrual products as protectors from leaks, stains, odor and any other signs of menses, cultivates stigmatizing views on menstruation.

The theme “comfort” is also known from previous studies on menstrual advertising, where it led to the narrative that only when choosing comfortable products one can feel confident and self, which bolstered the perspective that menstruation is a lousy state (Simes & Berg, 2001). However in the findings of this study comfort was more associated with relief

and consolation, without the implication of menstruation being worse than a non-menstruating state. The theme “looking good” was a novelty, not present in previous research. It was used in the case of period-proof underwear and imposed the idea that these products are not only protective but also pretty, therefore giving menstruators the chance to look appealing and wear their menstrual products with pride. It contradicts the common practice of advertising menstrual products as the most discreet and undetectable (Merskin, 1999). As such both themes, “comfort” and “looking good”, contributed to a destigmatizing discourse.

Most of the posts mixed a couple of themes in order to convey an attractive, competitive marketing message about various qualities of their product. *Fig.12* provides an example of a post by Callaly combining themes “healthy”, “eco-friendly” and “reliable”.

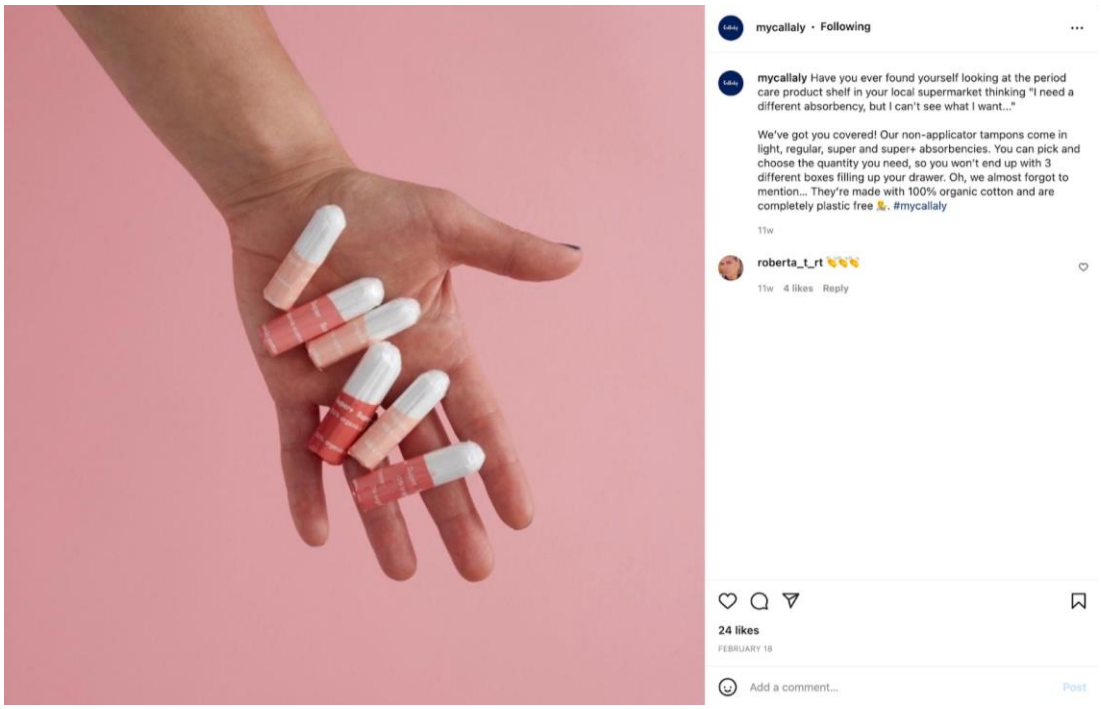

Fig. 12. A post featuring marketing messaging about the product (Callaly [@mycallaly 2022, February 18)

In some posts the references to the poor characteristics of conventional products were mentioned in order to highlight their inferiority in comparison to the alternative menstrual products. The subthemes, identified within the theme “drawbacks of conventional products” (N=21), were: “environmentally harmful” (N=13), “unreliable” (N=4), “unhealthy” (N=4). These themes exposed the inconveniences and risks of conventional menstruation management and promoted the alternatives, therefore are considered a part of menstrual product activism messaging (Bobel, 2006).

4.2. Representation of menstruation

This section provides the results of an examination of the way in which menstruation was portrayed within the dataset. It was particularly considered whether menstruation was manifested in conventional terms - as shameful, embarrassing, dirty - or if a more progressive approach, aligning with menstrual product activism assumptions, was present.

4.2.1. Breaking with shame

This theme was established from posts that had a common characteristic of either undermining stigmatizing stereotypes about menstruation or imposing a narrative that menstruation is a normal biological process that should not be shamed (N=27). They commonly used a period emoji to emphasize the main point of the message. It appeared predominantly across three brands: Callaly, Dame, and Flux Undies.

The first subtheme promoted the urgency of menstrual education and open conversation about menstruation as a way of breaking the foundations of menstrual shame, therefore it was named “normalizing conversation” (N=15). An example of this subtheme is provided in *Fig.13* in a post by Callaly, where the brand advocates for an honest discussion about menstruation and the body. The argument encouraging one to be more open about their own body was backed by a photograph of a woman, precisely the close-up on her body. The post used a range of hashtags to support the arguments in the caption, such as #thewholebloodytruth, #bloodhappens, #periodtalk, #letstalkperiods, #unlearningperiodshame, #periodtaboos.

Fig. 13. Theme “breaking with shame” (Callaly [@mycallaly], 2021, August 27)

The posts within this theme disrupted the menstrual communication taboo, according to which menstruation should be kept secret by using euphemisms, refraining from describing the process or even talking about it at all (Kissling, 1996; Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). As such it aligns with the findings by Hodge (2019) in a theme “normalizing periods”, which consisted of posts that “involve presenting the real side of periods; presenting the fact that they are annoying and can be difficult to deal with, unlike the advertisements which suggest that they are easily managed with the right choice of product” (p. 75). Ultimately, as Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2020) suggested, talking openly about menstruation drives females to have more positive attitudes toward menstruation and to further challenge the menstrual stigma that they encounter.

The second subtheme was manifested by acknowledgment of the state of menstruation and its physical outcome, the blood, and it was categorized as “admitting menstruation” (N=12). These posts were focused on an explicit message that menstruation is not a shame with expressions like “periods are nothing to be ashamed of”, and “periods are not dirty” (see *Fig. 14*). Some of the posts within this group admitted menstruation by showing an infamous tampon string, which is commonly expected to be hidden, like all other signs of the menstruating body (Simes & Berg, 2001). They implied that this kind of acknowledgment of menstruation was the reason for empowerment, claiming “be LOUD and

PROUD about your period products" (Dame [@dameforgood], 2022, February 9). In this aspect, the subtheme corresponds with Hodge's "empowerment: challenging", which emphasized period positivity (2019, p. 52).

Other posts within this subtheme concentrated on visual depictions of menstrual blood or expressions like "we don't bleed blue" (Flux Undies [@fluxundies], 2021, July 16). This tactic of "in-your-face" verbal/visual narratives about menstruation are typical of menstrual product activism (Bobel, 2006) and also resemble the "resistance: challenging the taboo" theme by Hodge (2019, p. 70). Nonetheless, in this data set the menstrual blood was embodied only through symbolic visualization (see *Fig.2*) or comic-like images.

An example of this kind of post can be found in *Fig.14* where a graphic design shows a woman lying in her underwear with one leg up so that she presents her underwear with a red stain in the crotch and a tampon string sticking out. The copy on the image reads "It's only blood". The image shows the woman's body hair under her arms and on her legs, rejecting another body-related taboo of female body hair and the common requirement of its removal (Williamson, 2015). The caption of the post follows with the reassurance that menstrual bleeding is a natural process, until the moment when it reads "And remember, you don't have to worry about leaks in our comfy, leak-proof period pants." Suggesting the importance of using a reliable product that can conceal menstruation is the continuation of a stigmatizing discourse suggesting that menstruators need salvation from their menstrual state (Simes & Berg, 2001) and contradicts the rest of the message that aims to empower all menstruators and comfort them, that they should not be ashamed of menstrual blood.

Fig. 14. Theme "breaking up with shame" (Flux Undies [@fluxundies], 2021, October 11)

The theme as a whole was classified as destigmatizing as its main goal is to open up the conversation about menstruation and menstrual shame. The subtheme "admitting menstruation" opposed the ubiquitous expectation, very common in menstrual advertising, of menstruators' to be discreet about their menstruating status and conscious that "seen menstrual products are signs of menstruation in progress" (Simes & Berg, 2011, p. 461).

Nonetheless, as shown in the example above, this goal was often compromised by the marketing messaging which imposed a contradictory idea, that menstruation should stay in the sphere of the body that is unrevealed. It demonstrated that maintaining menstrual concealment and secrecy are important marketing strategies (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). Furthermore, posts within this theme were intended to be groundbreaking in terms of imagery by showing menstrual blood, but most of them were just symbolic or cartoonist imitations. Only one post within the entire data set showed a piece of underwear with a red stain on it, which was realistic enough to conclude that it represents period blood. However, this photo served as an illustration of the caption about unwanted leaks and the marketing message about the reliability of a certain product by the brand. Therefore it was radical in terms of showing a realistic representation of menstrual blood, but when put in context, the blood was used to convince the audience that leaks should be controlled and tamed, otherwise they are equal to shame and worry, which support the stigmatizing

discourse (Simes & Berg, 2001). It should be taken into account, however, that a very rare depiction of real blood could be caused by the fear that posts will be removed from the platform if reported as shocking/inappropriate by other users (Hodge, 2019; Watson, 2020), and as such indicates the limited openness of Instagram users to encounter such images.

4.2.2. Menstruation as a burden

This theme consisted of posts that focused on the notion that menstruation is the reason for worry and stress due to its uncertainty and possible leakage (N=21). The theme appeared mostly in product-centric posts promoting the protective qualities of menstrual products, using expressions like “worry-free” (Flux Undies [@fluxundies], 2022, January 30), or “fun without the panic” (see *Fig.15*). The theme was observed mainly across four brands, Callaly, Flux Undies, Ohne, and Wuka. It was also represented in posts suggesting that menstruation restrains menstruators from certain activities, imposing limitations on their lives unless they use an appropriate product, which will help to feel comfortable and reassured. Such a narrative is used in *Fig.15* in the post by Wuka, suggesting that swimming and menstruating are mutually exclusive, except when a product by the brand is used.

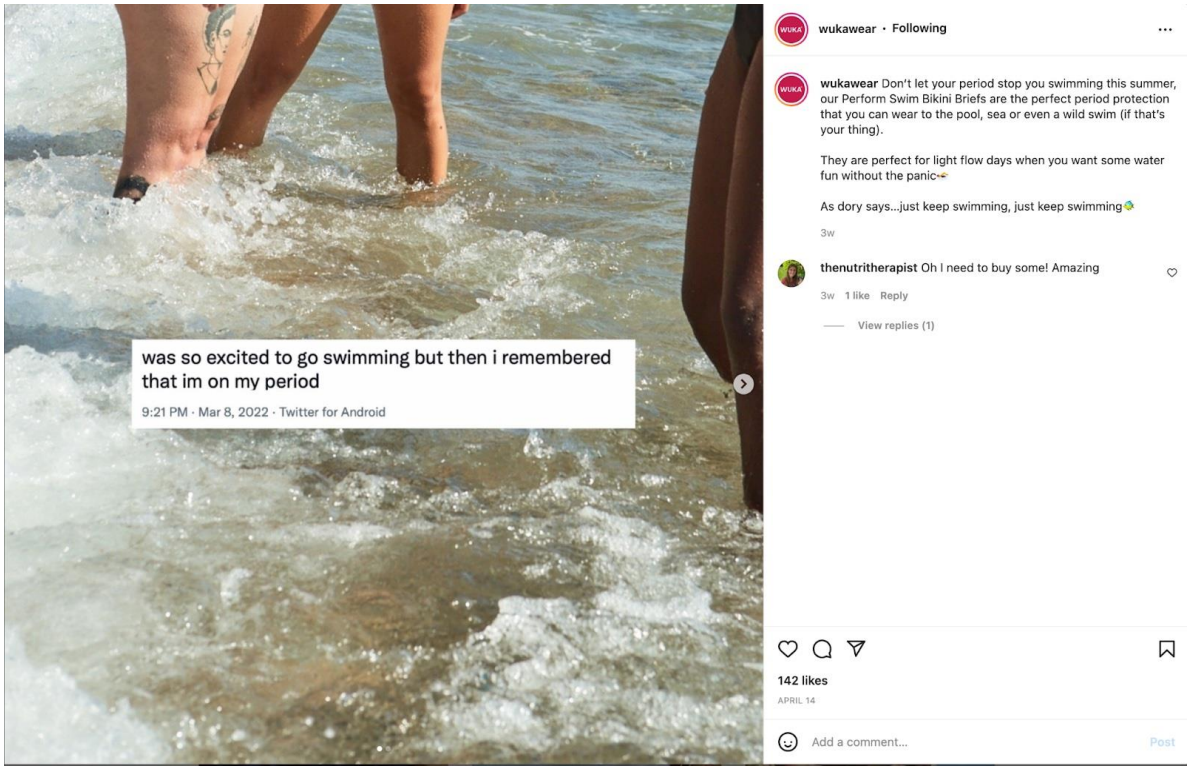

Fig. 15. Theme “menstruation as a burden” (Wuka [@wukawear], 2022, April 14)

In some cases the burden of menstruation was represented in a visual form, either by a pair of dice, suggesting hazard and uncertainty or with memes joking about the

unexpectedness of bleeding (see *Fig.3*). A drawing comparing menstrual blood leakage to sweat in intimate areas, separated with a “fine line”, suggests that crotch sweat is a normal occurrence and should be socially acceptable, as opposed to the period leak (see *Fig.16*). Although the post aimed to normalize another body function perceived as shameful, the sweating of intimate body parts, it still perpetuated the idea that period leaks are inadmissible (Chrisler, 2011).

Fig. 16. Theme “menstruation as a burden” (Callaly [@mycallaly], 2021, September 30)

The theme was categorized as stigmatizing for its promulgation of the conventional notion that menstruation causes a stressful experience of possible leakage and that it should remain central for menstruators to conceal menstrual blood effectively so that menstruation will not result in unpleasant consequences. This notion was established as prevalent by early studies on menstrual advertising (Coutts & Berg, 1993; Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009; Merskin, 1999; Simes & Berg, 2001) and is still strongly emphasized even by menstrual activist brands. The theme also promoted the idea that menstruation is a time when many activities can not be performed unless a suitable product is used, which aligns with the stigmatizing advertising standard (Kissling, 1996). This means the acceptance of the construction of menstruation as a limitation and women as “hostages to their own biology" (Coutts & Berg, 1993, p. 189).

The posts within this theme implied that the menstrual product should be both reliable and comfortable so the menstruator feels like a “normal self”, meaning non-menstruating. This narrative reinforces beliefs that menstruation is an inferior state of femininity and supports the male-defined ideal of an ultra-feminine woman (Coutts & Berg, 1993; Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). The fact that the theme appeared mostly in posts that acclaimed the competitive qualities of a particular menstrual product confirms the observation from previous studies, that demonizing the inconveniences of menstruation, such as leaks, is an auxiliary marketing tool used for sales increase by period product producers (Bramwell, 2001; Thomas, 2007; Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009).

4.3. Menstrual and body education

Within this section themes associated with educational content about menstruation and the body are presented. The first theme consists of three subthemes, the second and the third were not split into subthemes, as they are rather homogeneous.

4.3.1. Menstrual education

This theme occurred in the dataset 54 times and its main focus was the informative content about “menstruation and other activities" (N=29), “symptoms of (pre)menstruation” (N=19), and the “physical course of menstruation” (N=7). The first subtheme was made of posts that tackled multiple concerns and questions about engaging in different activities while menstruating. Particularly it touched upon sex, exercising, swimming, and drinking alcohol during menstruation. There was also one post that explained the practicalities of post-partum menstruation and one which dealt with a common concern about whether it is possible to lose a tampon inside a vagina. This theme was observed to contradict the notion that menstruation is a limitation and women should wait to engage in certain activities until past the period, which usually connects to efforts of not revealing their menstrual status to others (Chrisler, 2011). Similarly to the next subtheme, “symptoms of (pre)menstruation”, this theme provided a factual explanation of how certain activities impact menstruation and vice-versa. Of particular importance is the narrative eliminating the feeling of cringe from the conversation about sex during menstruation, the topic that ususally evokes highly polarized attitudes (Fahs, 2020). An example of the theme is provided in *Fig.17* in the post by Dame about how hormonal changes in the menstrual cycle influence sexual desire. The caption assures the

audience that engaging in sexual activity while menstruating is normal and might be even helpful with certain menstrual symptoms.

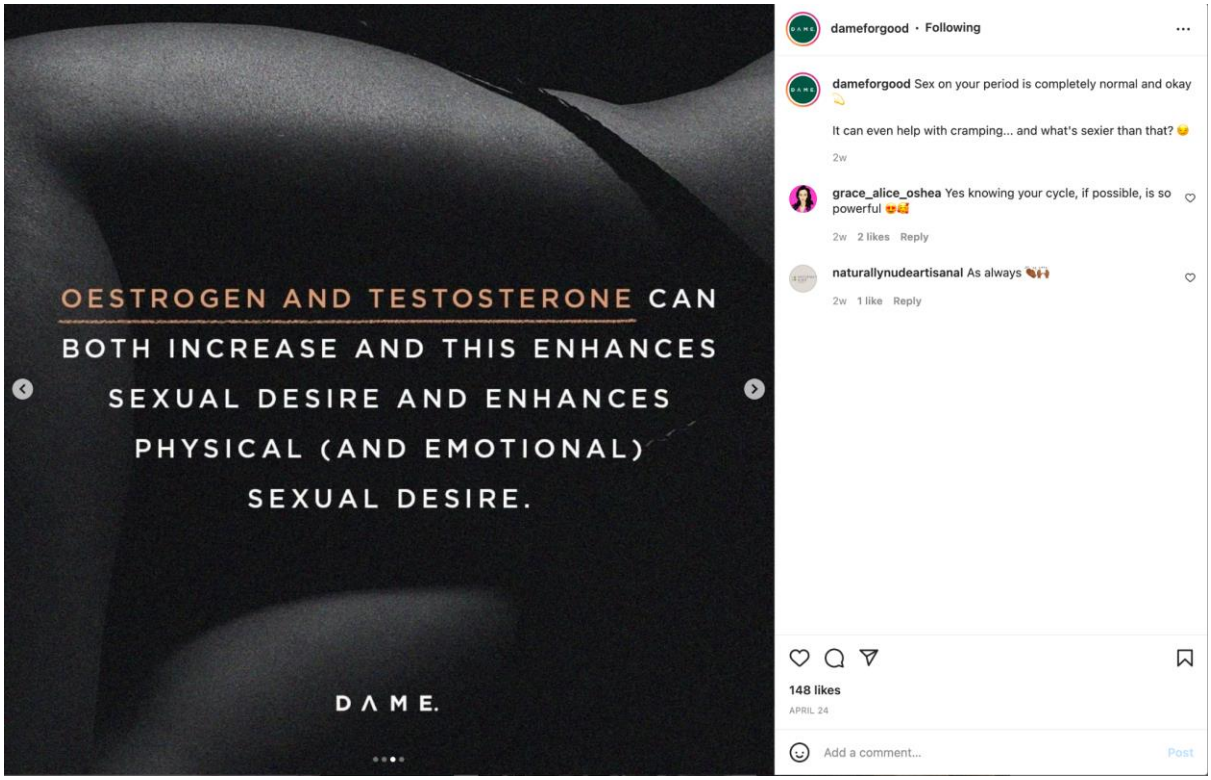

Fig. 17. Subtheme “menstruation and other activities” (Dame [@dameforgood], 2022 April 24)

The explanation of the subtheme “menstrual symptoms” focused on either physical symptoms such as pain, cravings or drop of energy, or mental inconveniences such as feeling heightened emotions. The symptoms' roots were often clarified from a physiological perspective, mostly by the change in hormonal balance (see *Fig.7*). Historically women were fed with information that before and during menstruation their hormones, not themselves, are in charge of their bodies and emotions, which led them to feel uncertain and powerless (Stubbs & Sterling, 2020). The theme of menstrual symptoms still somehow sustains this narrative, but provides further explanation of hormonal processes, so that women would feel comforted, not scared, of what is happening with their body and mood.

The “physical course of menstruation” was brought by a description of menstrual norms in blood flow during one menstrual cycle as how much blood is passed during menstruation. An example of this theme is presented in *Fig.18* in the post explaining what is a light menstrual flow in practical terms. Stubbs and Sterling (2020) noted that providing the information of the average flow and at the same time trying to assure menstruators that there is not one normal flow, instead a whole range of them, is contradictory and confuses menstruators about when they should react if their flow is somehow irregular. This

contradiction was also observed within the theme, however, it emphasized the message of every flow being different, which conveyed consolation and inclusivity of menstrual experiences. Furthermore, it also emphasized the need for every menstruator to be aware of their own body and be vigilant about any signs of abnormalities that might indicate some serious health problems.

Fig. 18. Subtheme “physical course of menstruation” (Wuka [@wukawear], 2022, May 1)

All of the posts within the theme were of educational form, providing specific expertise on the physiology of menstruation. Therefore, the theme was determined as destigmatizing, as both menstrual product activism and critical menstruation studies imply that period education is the foundation for the normalizing discourse of menstruation (Bobel, 2006; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011) and helps especially young females to create a healthy relationship with their bodies and positive comprehension of their own sexuality (Stubbs & Sterling, 2020). Furthermore, the theme acknowledged period symptoms as a natural reaction of a human organism and upgraded period pain and heightened emotions to the level of any other pain and emotional struggle, requiring recognition and understanding. As such it opposed the stereotype of a PMSing woman, explained and exemplified in section 4.4.2. “Monstrous feminine”. Lastly, as Stubbs and Sterling (2020) suggested, the choice of language in which information about menstruation is conveyed plays an important role. This theme practiced a rather non-alarming style, which contributes to the comforting undertone of

the message and on the contrary of alarming style does not cause the feeling of anxiety and vulnerability (Stubbs & Sterling, 2020).

4.3.2. Reproductive body education

The theme "reproductive body education" (N=36) consisted of posts that were focused on sharing scientific facts about reproductive health (except for menstruation, which belonged to the previous theme) and informative tips on how to take care of it. It focused on different parts of the body that participate in reproductive functions: the vagina, breast, pelvis, or the hormonal system, considering its influence on the reproductive cycle of the body. Within posts concentrated on the vagina, there was an observation of vaginal positivity, made up of expressions that either in an instructive or empowering way presented the vagina as a source of feminine power and pride rather than shame (see *Fig.2*). They also informed that the vagina has self-cleaning qualities, does not need any special hygienic treatment and has its own natural smell which should not be deodorized or douched away. There were four posts that did not consider a particular part of the body, but they promoted normalization of the body, its functions, and different health conditions. These posts educate about female body hair, female orgasm, sweating of intimate body parts, and experiencing endometriosis.

Some of the posts within the theme underlined the need of seeking medical advice in case any symptoms related to the reproductive body parts or cycle were considered disturbing. Also, similarly to the previous theme, they promoted the comforting idea that all bodies are different and all are normal and that it is important for everyone to know their own body. An example of a theme "reproductive body education" is provided in a post in *Fig.19* which informs in the caption about the symptoms, causes and methods of prevention and treatment of vaginal fungal infection. The caption suggests that the presence of this type of infection is not an isolated experience, creating a reassuring message for people who have ever struggled with it. The caption is accompanied by an abstract illustration of the vagina.

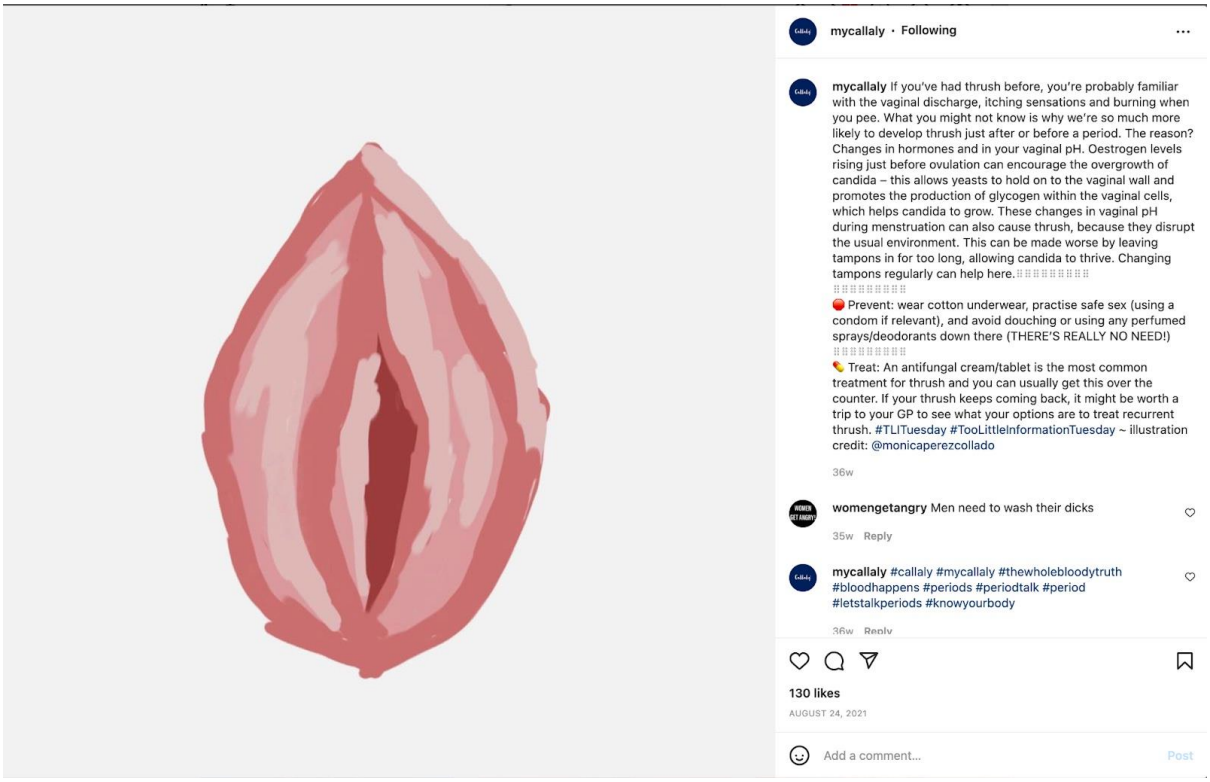

Fig. 19. Theme "reproductive body education" (Callaly [@mycallaly], 2021, August 24)

Multiple studies imply that body education promotes positive body image, which is inextricably linked to attitudes toward the menstruating body and menstruation itself (Fahs, 2014; Johnston-Robledo et al., 2007). Body education, especially if implemented in adolescence, can enhance a healthy relationship with one's own body parts and is a foundation of positive sexuality (Stubbs & Sterling, 2020). Such body awareness promotes sexual agency (instead of sexual subjectivity) and functions as a shield against sexualization and objectification of the body, which as explained in the Theoretical Framework, contribute to negative attitudes toward reproductive body functions, including menstruation (Stubbs & Sterling, 2020). Furthermore, a positive vaginal attitude, exemplified within the theme, breaks with the common perception of a vagina and menstruation being disgusting and unhygienic (Merskin, 1999). Normalized standards of genital appearance lead to women's higher satisfaction with their vulva and labia and prevent them to seek surgical alterations (Stubbs & Sterling, 2020).

In the analysis of menstrual product activism by Bobel (2006), the awareness of one's own body was regarded as liberating women from the oppression of social stigma. Guided by this reasoning, the theme of body education that emerged in this research was considered destigmatizing.

4.3.3. Mental selfcare

This theme was made out of posts, which emphasized the idea of selfcare, particularly related to mental wellbeing, during menstruation and throughout the whole menstrual cycle, and the information on how mental health is affected during particular phases of the reproductive cycle (N=11). The common denominator within this theme was promoting the idea of relaxation and letting go whenever any signs of mental overload and distress were recognized. In many instances, the theme featured an educational narrative about changes in the hormonal balance during different phases of the menstrual cycle and how they can influence the mental state of a menstruator. *Fig.20* shows an example of the theme "mental selfcare" in a post by Dame, which explained why a menstruating person can experience a drop in energy at the start of menstruation and recommended rest during this time.

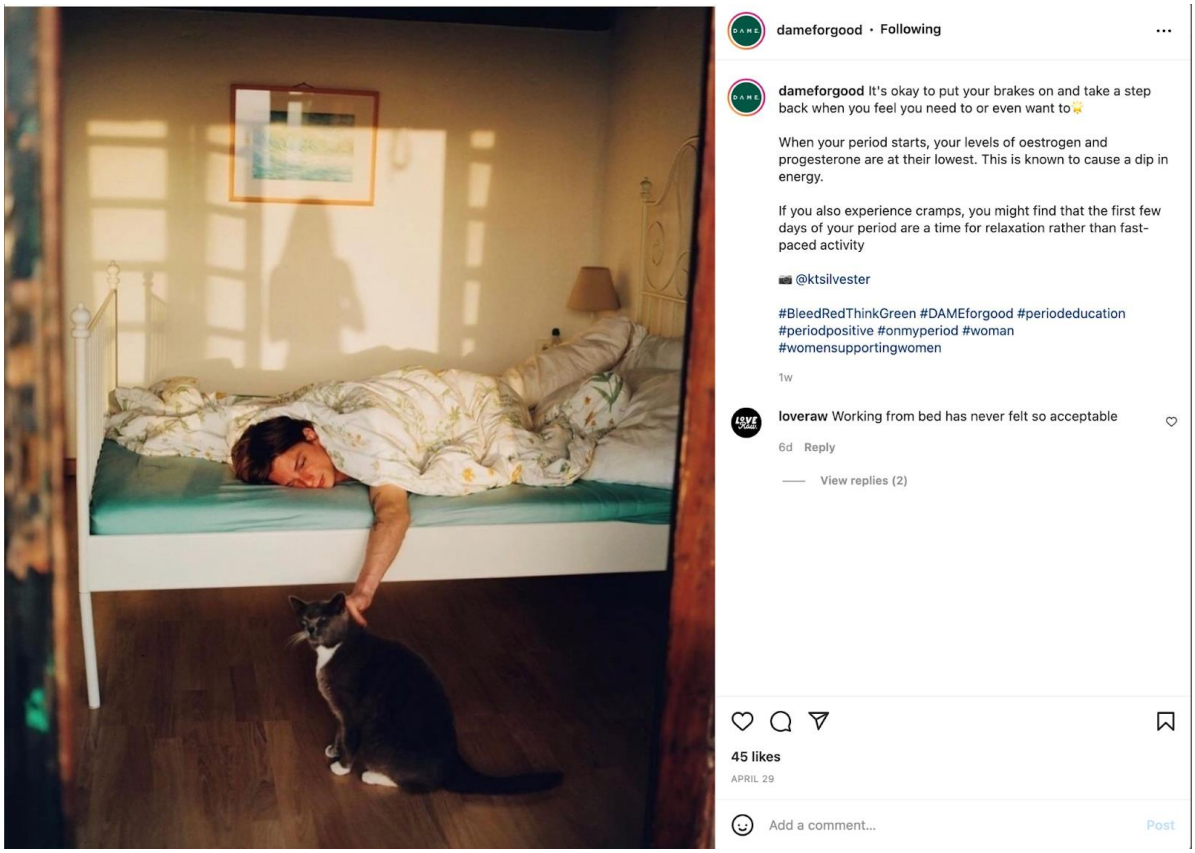

Fig. 20. Theme "mental selfcare" (Dame [@dameforgood], 2022, April 29)

The theme of "mental selfcare" was classified as destigmatizing, as it contradicts the idea, strongly promoted in the Western public discourse, of menstrual happiness and positivity, which implies that a person's issue of activity and well-being while menstruating depends on the ability to effectively manage menstruation, which menstrual products are supposed to provide (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). The theme acknowledged that menstrual pain and mental discomfort are legitimate inconveniences and should be treated

with appropriate care and caution. It also extended to an overall recognition of negative mental experiences as such and the urgency of proper selfcare in that aspect. The attention given to the topic of mental selfcare during and beyond the time of menstruation particularly resonates with one of the characteristics of Gen Z being more open to admitting and reporting their mental health struggles than any other preceding generation (Bethune, 2019).

4.4. Image of a menstruator

In this section, the results from the analysis of the image of a menstruator and the body are presented. It was explored whether the menstrual activist brands subjected to the analysis perpetuated the hegemonic image of objectified women or whether they created any alternatives. The characteristics considered were body type, gender and race as operationalised in section 3.2.2.1.

4.4.1. Progressive femininity

It consisted of images of women, who appeared in the photos in enticing poses, wearing make-up, a hairdo, jewelry, revealing clothing, or fancy lingerie. It appeared mainly across producers of period proof pants, Flux Undies, Ohne, and Wuka. Females depicted in the images presented the brands' merchandise, therefore naturally they only wore underwear in their bottom parts. Their bodies were contained in tight photo frames that focused mainly on their corps. Of all of the images within this theme (N=60), most of them (N=39) were reposts from the accounts of micro-influencers or brand ambassadors who promoted the product, which implies that in these cases brands did not create the representation of a menstruator according to this theme, but reproduced it. On the other hand, it could be theorized that since the posts were featuring micro-influencers, probably their appearance and the way in which they presented the product were curated by the brand, but this could not have been confirmed in any credible way. Nevertheless, the captions of these posts mostly expressed appreciation of the appearance of the model. Within this theme, there was also a relatively high representation of women of color (N=32).

Many posts featuring this theme contained hashtags such as #breakthestigma or #breakthebias which imply efforts of changing the stereotyped image of a menstruator or hashtags suggesting women empowerment such as #girlssupportinggirls, #womensupportingwomen, or #feminism. An example of progressive femininity is shown in *Fig.21.* presenting a reposted photo of a black woman who sits on a bed in a confident

manner and looks straight into the camera, wearing a top revealing her body, period-proof underwear pants and body jewelry.

Fig. 21. Theme “progressive femininity” (Ohne [@im_ohne], 2022, April 3)

This theme is closely associated with the type of femvertising described by Lazar (2006), “power femininity” (see 2.4.2.1), but with a more progressive approach to body and race representation. In many cases within this theme women's appearance departed from Western beauty standards, for example by presenting their flawed body characteristics such as cellulite, fat rolls, stretch marks, or in general fuller figures (Chrisler, 2011). Therefore, the theme was closely linked to the notion of body positivity, which normalizes body standards and stands for equal representation and appreciation of a diverse range of body types (Cohen et al. 2019). Many of the women posed looking straight into the camera, creating the image of being unapologetic and proud of their bodies. Although the way in which femininity was depicted in these photos was considered sexual, it was not recognized as sexualized, as the photos were aimed to promote underwear and they were mostly addressed to the female audiences. Also, the reposts were authored by women themselves, which was understood as owning agency. In these cases, the theme could also have been regarded as a reflection of current Instagram trends of self-presentation. That being said, this was a subjective judgment

and these images could have been interpreted as sexualized as well, if the agency of the posing women was not considered conclusive. Furthermore, current studies confirm that body-positive images do not contradict sexual objectification just because they portray diverse body sizes (Vendemia et al., 2021).

Although progressive femininity could be seen as a form of femvertising (because of its associations with "power femininity"), it was recognized as destigmatizing, as it promoted a positive image of a woman, who owns her sexuality, accepts her body, and breaks oppressing beauty standards, which leads to acceptance of body functions, including menstruation (Roberts & Waters, 2004). The theme presented a variety of body appearances without promotion of a particular beauty standard, which contributes to the creation of an "alteration of an ideal" compared to which women and girls self-objectify themselves (Roberts & Waters, 2004, p. 17). It included a fair representation of women of color, which is considered a deviation from the conventional depiction of a menstruating woman as white (Merskin, 1999). Furthermore, it opposed menstrual positivity promulgated by current Western advertising and described as "thinned, whitened, and transformed when utilized toward the sale of menstrual gear" (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020, p.376).

4.4.2. Monstrous feminine

This theme included data where the (pre)menstruating woman was portrayed as not being in control of her body, emotions, and behavior, succumbing to cravings, hysterical reactions, and rapid changes of mood, which affected herself and potentially people in her surroundings (N=11). The theme corresponded with the "humoristic" subtheme of visual brand identity and it was mainly manifested through jokes or memes (N=9), or women's confessions of experiencing menstrual symptoms and changes in their behavior (N=2). The theme was recognized across three brands, Dame, Flux Undies, and Ohne. Many times the theme was associated with PMS (premenstrual symptoms) or PMT (premenstrual tension) by the use of hashtags #pms or #pmsproblems. An example of "monstrous feminine" is presented in *Fig.22*, where a meme shows a woman, who is crying while eating. The embedded caption implies that due to experiencing period she can not control her emotions, thus even a simple activity such as eating overwhelms her and causes a hysterical reaction.

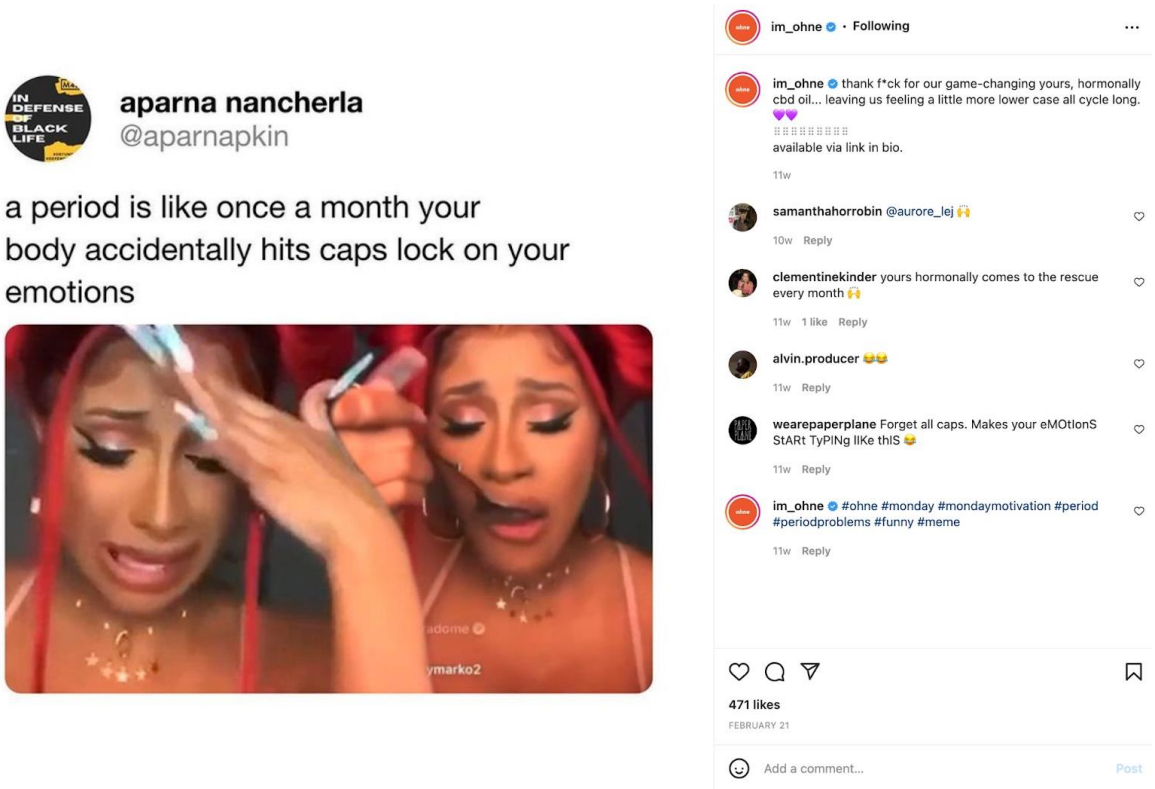

Fig. 22. Theme “monstrous feminine” (Ohne [@im_ohne], 2022, February 21)

Przybylo and Fahs (2020) argued that menstrual justice depends on the recognition of “menstrual crankiness”, an approach that acknowledges “pain, leaking, trauma, discomfort and dysphoria” (p. 386). Nevertheless, even though the theme exhibited these inconveniences, it was considered stigmatizing, as the prevailing message of the theme was the woman’s inability to control her emotions and behavior before or during menstruation. Therefore legitimate feelings such as anger and discomfort are compromised by the notion of being out of control and in the case of this theme mocked by a satirical approach.

Furthermore, some feminist critics argued that the common interpretation of menstrual symptoms as PMS, a medically established diagnosis, is a pathologization of natural occurrence which is a part of every woman’s experience (Ussher & Perz, 2020). Ussher (2004) implied that women blaming their “improper” behavior on their bodies is a form of self-policing in the efforts of maintaining the status of conventional femininity (as cited in Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011). It can be then concluded that this theme consolidated the prevailing stereotype of out-of-control menstruating women, that is very common in advertising of corporate period product producers (Campbell et al., 2021).

4.4.3. Non-binary menstruator

This theme consisted of posts where the gender diversification of menstruators was recognized (N=9). This theme was identified in posts, that either depicted transsexual men, stated that the image presents a non-binary person or was based on an inclusive language such as “menstruating person”, “every body that bleeds”, and “assigned female at birth individuals”, which replaced the ubiquitous word "woman" in the context of experiencing menstruation. The use of these expressions was however mostly accompanied by the images of female menstruators, thus the overall tone of such posts was halfway inclusive. The theme was observed across four brands Callaly, Ohne, Flux Undies, and Wuka. Additionally, the two latter brands offered period-proof boxers and marketed them as gender-neutral. The example of a “non-binary menstruator” theme can be found in *Fig.23* presenting a man recognized as transsexual due to signs of mastectomy, accompanied by two other individuals, who from their appearance could be recognized as women. All of them, as the caption of the post reads, wear gender-neutral period-proof boxers. The hashtags used by the post, #transgenderawareness, #nonbinary, and #genderneutral indicate that the theme of the post aims to acknowledge non-binary menstruators.

Fig. 23. Theme “non-binary menstruator” (Flux Undies [@fluxundies], 2021 November 22)

The theme “non-binary menstruator” was not frequent in the data set, but was determined to be a meaningful sign of destigmatization. Critical menstruation studies and

menstrual product activism argue that the recognition that “not only cis-women menstruate and not all women menstruate” (Kissling, 2020, p. 866) is a necessary step toward dealing with menstrual shame and stigma in an inclusive way (Bobel, 2006; Rydström, 2020). This is specifically true in communication with young generations, who are significantly more open to non-binary gender classification than their predecessors (Kenney, 2020).

Bobel (2006) however, in case of menstrual product activism, recognized menstrual gender inclusivity as a trend but not a “common awareness” (p. 341). The fact that the theme was so rare in the data set for this research arouses concerns that trans representation in menstrual advertising is used as a token to assure the alignment with gender inclusivity standards in business communication (Kenney, 2020).

4.5. Conclusion

The focal point of the analysis for this research, the representation of menstruation/menstruator delivered eight main themes. Six themes were classified as destigmatizing, namely: “breaking with shame”, “reproductive body education”, “menstrual education”, “mental selfcare”, “progressive femininity” and “non-binary menstruator”. These themes proposed new perspectives on menstruation/menstruators, detached from shame and secrecy by emphasizing the need for a candid conversation and education.

Two of the themes were particularly controversial in terms of being fully applicable to a destigmatizing classification. “Breaking with shame” overall was regarded as a genuine effort to eliminate embarrassment and secrecy from the menstrual narrative. However in many cases, it was inconsistent and in the end unintentionally promoted one of the stigmatizing paradigms, the need for menstrual concealment (Coutts & Berg, 1993; Roberts & Waters, 2004). “Progressive femininity”, although promoting diversity in terms of body shape and race, which is traditionally uncommon in menstrual advertising (Campbell et al. 2021; Merskin, 1999), as well as body consciousness and acceptance, oscillated around (self)sexualization of a woman’s body, which according to the feminist studies contributes to menstrual stigma (Roberts & Waters, 2004). Both themes were assessed as to whether they set a new destigmatizing direction in menstrual/menstruator’s representation and this interpretation outbalanced any stigmatizing traits. The thematic model of destigmatization of menstruation is provided in *Fig.24.*

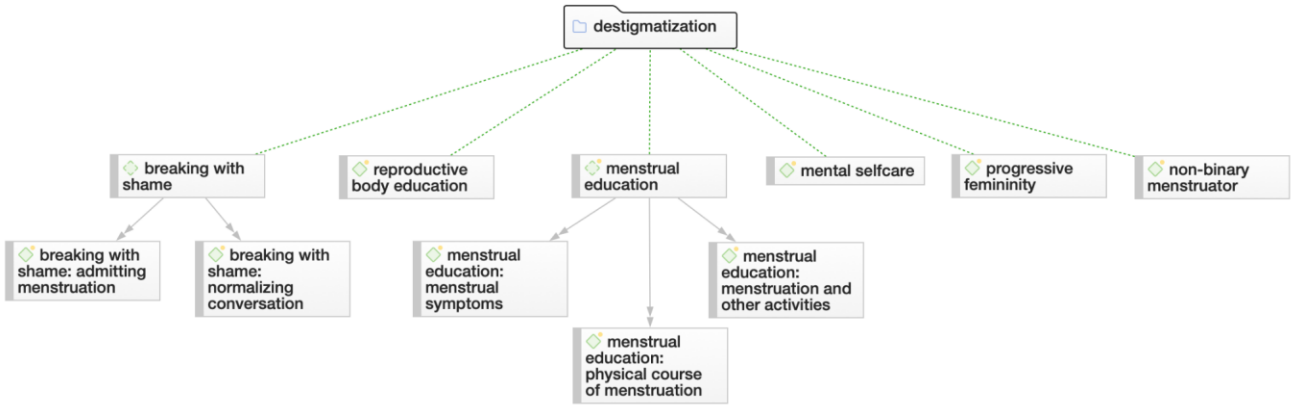

Fig. 24. Thematic model of destigmatization of menstruation

Two of the established themes were categorized as stigmatizing, precisely "menstruation as a burden" and "monstrous feminine". The first one was dictated by the desire for market gain, therefore was exemplified in product-centric posts, which focused on the reliability of promoted menstrual products. The second one was manifested by a mocking approach to (pre)menstrual women, which is very common in public menstrual discourse (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011). It brings the menstrual experience, often endured with pain and other inconveniences, to the level of a joke and downplays its importance. Both themes perpetuated popular stigmatizing narratives present in the media for decades (Coutts & Berg, 1993; Simes & Berg, 2001). A thematic model of stigmatization is demonstrated in *Fig.25.*

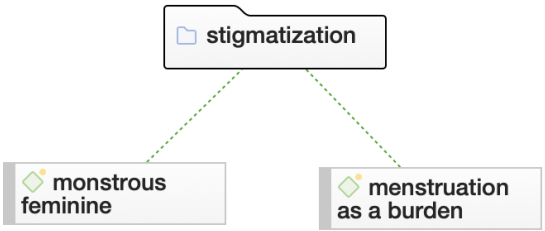

Fig. 25. Thematic model of stigmatization of menstruation

Provided results have shown that menstrual activist brands communicate with younger generations in a diverse range of themes that are intended to rebrand menstruation. The above-mentioned themes correspond with visual communication of brand identity identified across brands with an educational theme being the new addition to the already existing framework created by Zhou and Xue (2021). It was observed that particular forms of

visual communication of brand identity correlate with specific themes of menstruation/menstruator representation.

The most frequent themes of visual communication identified in the dataset were symbolic and educational. Dame created most of its posts with educational visual elements, and the brand was also observed to be the leader in the theme of "menstrual education", but also substantially added to the theme "breaking with shame". By the selection of a particular theme of menstrual communication, but also the choices of brand identity elements, Dame tries to target socially and environmentally conscious and concerned customers, who also value sophisticated brands.

Callaly on the other hand used the most symbolic visuals and it was identified as the most frequent brand featuring the theme "reproductive body education". Moreover, some inconsistency was observed in the menstrual narrative, as the brand was equally observable within the themes "breaking with shame" and "menstruation as a burden". Callaly created the most suggestive visuals and was focused on allegorical communication which supplemented the content included in the caption. Their brand identity is well thought through, consistent and, by the choice of particular visual elements such as shapes and colors, feminine but with a contemporary twist.

Most of the content produced by Ohne was customer-centric, featuring micro-influencers, and accordingly significantly contributed to the creation of "progressive femininity". This brand was identified as the most Gen. Z oriented as, according to Nanda (2020), this cohort is shaped the most by niche influencers. Furthermore, the choice of visual elements of brand identity also indicates that Ohne aims to target young, individualistic and bold female customers.

Flux Undies showed a relatively high number of customer-centric posts as it also had a significant share in product-centric posts. It was the only brand that was focused on communicating both of these themes simultaneously. As well as in regards to brand identity, it was observed that the brand is not consistent in its menstrual representation. It contributed to the theme of "progressive femininity" but as well to the "monstrous feminine", similarly, it co-created the theme "breaking with shame" as well as "menstruation is a burden".

Another mainly product-centric brand was Wuka and it was identified the most frequently within the theme of "progressive femininity" and "menstrual education". Similarly to Flux Undies, the inconsistency found in the brand identity of Wuka, was extended to the whole brand communication on menstruation, as the brand contributed to the theme

“menstruation as a burden”, mainly by communicating the reliability of its products as the equivalent of a worry-free experience.

All the posts communicating products’ characteristics equally focused on eco-friendly and reliable qualities, as well as comfort. These results imply that menstrual activist brands aim to resonate with younger generations, especially Gen Z, by communicating their ethical stance (Nanda, 2020). However, above all they are still consumer brands that focus on messaging their competitive features that are the most desirable to see in menstrual products, namely providing comfort and protection against leakage.

5. Conclusions

The following chapter states conclusions drawn from the results of the analysis to provide a detailed answer to the research question, “Destigmatizing menstruation: how do menstrual activist brands from the UK represent menstruation and menstruators online and challenge the perception of young generations?” Also, the scientific implications of the research are discussed, followed by societal and managerial implications. The last section considers the limitations of this research and possible directions for future research.

5.1. Conclusions to answer research question

Menstrual activist brands were studied to be diverse in terms of brand identity and the visual communication that they convey to younger recipients. The use of visual elements of branding in most cases was determined to align the overall look and feel of the brand as well as the choice of a particular menstrual narrative. Ohne is playful, daring and dynamic, Dame chooses a more sophisticated look and down-to-earth narratives, Callaly appeals to the audience with strong, suggestive visual language, Flux Undies and Wuka communicate their brands simply by promoting the competitive qualities of their products.

It was determined that menstrual activist brands build their brand identity around challenging menstrual invisibility, providing body and menstrual education and creating a new image of progressive menstruator. More precisely, they enforce the imagery suggesting the menstruating body with the use of visual symbols and metaphors for vagina and bleeding and inform the audience about numerous dimensions of menstruation, from purely physical to emotional and social. Nonetheless, the common use of metaphorical imagery suggests that still the visual representation of menstruation as it is in reality, so the real depiction of menstrual blood, is not common even among menstrual activist brands.

Moreover, the results of the analysis sustain the argument based on terror management and objectification theories, that the perception of menstruation is inextricably linked to the representation of the female body (Chrisler, 2011; Johnston-Robledo et al. 2007). Therefore menstrual activist brands pursue the attempts to familiarize the audience with intimate topics related to the reproductive body and its parts and impose the discourse of shame-free self-body consciousness. Most of the studied brands adopt the notion of body positivity extending from the recognition of diverse body types and appearances to the appreciation of particular body parts. They also promote the image of a sexually aware

female with a sense of pride and empowerment of femininity and its manifestations. The acknowledgment of menstrual pain and emotional struggle during menstruation gives space to the recognition and acceptance of "menstrual crankiness", opposing the overly positive depiction of a menstruating woman in conventional Western advertising (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). To some extent communication of menstrual activist brands gives recognition to non-binary menstruators, however, the experiences of "forgotten menstruators" (as described in section 2.2.3.) are underrepresented. For example, the data set did not mention the subject of period poverty and limited access to menstrual products by certain menstruators, which is actually one of the main symptoms of menstrual inequality and discrimination recognized by menstrual activism (Bobel & Fahs, 2020).

Furthermore, communicating the possibilities of managing menstruation in an environmentally friendly way, which was observed many times across the dataset, is a form of challenging the conventional narrative on menstruation, as a cause for generating tons of polluting disposables (Bobel, 2006). It especially resonates with younger generations, who value ethical, sustainable consumption (Nanda, 2020). The novelty that was found among period-proof pants producers was the notion that menstrual products can be also fashionable and worn with pride. This product quality was endorsed by micro-influencers, which was another strategy to appeal to younger audiences (Nanda, 2020).

Additionally, it was discovered that menstrual activist brands detach the stigmatizing concept of impurity from the notion of menstruation (Bramwell, 2001). Nonetheless, it was established that destigmatizing menstrual narratives were contradicted by the perpetuation of two popular paradigms of menstrual stigmatization: the fundamental need for menstrual concealment equal to the avoidance of stressful blood leakage as well as the image of out-of-control (pre)menstruating woman. The first one is linked to the notion of menstrual secrecy, which is rooted in the concept of shame (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011). The second one is the ramification of the concept of menstruation as a curse (Chrisler, 2006; Ussher & Perz, 2020).

It was assumed that since menstrual activist brands declare their eagerness to fight menstrual stigma and end period shame, the narratives that they communicate on Instagram are destigmatizing. The results showed that these brands challenge the perception of young generations on menstruation and menstruators through the open and honest educational approach to the body, its biological functions, and physical features, by promoting a progressive outlook on femininity and sexuality, by eliminating the concept of menstrual impurity and environmental noxiousness and to some extent by discovering empowerment in

the process of menstruation. They however appear to be torn between the pursuit of delivering on promises to break the narrative of menstrual shame and sustaining fears of unfavorable circumstances and consequences of menstruation, which fosters greater interest in their products (Bramwell, 2001; Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009; Thomas, 2007). Although the stigmatizing traits were not as apparent in the dataset as the destigmatizing ones, the fact that they were observable in the communication of menstrual activist brands calls for a re-evaluation of their efforts to normalize menstrual representation.

5.2. Academic implications

As for now many researchers focused on the analysis of stigmatizing strategies of communication among menstrual product producers and its effects. This research aided with the theoretical implications of studies on menstrual stigmatization ultimately contributed to the creation of the framework of menstrual destigmatization. It confirmed indications from the previous studies, mainly regarding objectification and terror management theories, that the discourse about menstruation can not function detached from the narratives about the menstruator and the body (Chrisler, 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Goldenberg et al., 2001). Therefore in order to achieve menstrual destigmatization the image of a menstruator and the body should be diversified and devoid of stereotyping.

Furthermore, this research, compared to the findings from previous studies, shows the development of menstrual narratives by period product producers toward more genuine, educational and normalizing. Ultimately, this conclusion implies that the ongoing efforts of feminist and CMS scholars and menstrual activists force change and bring tangible effects in breaking the menstrual stigma. Nevertheless, the work on destigmatization should continue to further progress with the ultimate goal of changing social perception.

5.3. Societal and managerial implications

This research examined the commercial destigmatizing strategies which could serve as a blueprint for brands that genuinely want to contribute to the normalization of menstrual discourse. Based on a thorough analysis of related theory on the stigmatization of the female body and menstruation this thesis traced communication strategies that can effectively build a new inclusive, open, shame-free empowering, and comforting narrative on such a fundamental process as menstruation.

Nonetheless, it also found stigmatizing messages, which should be successively eliminated from the communication of menstrual brand activists, and hopefully ultimately all period product producers'. The most important implication of this kind is that marketing communication emphasizing the fundamental qualities of the products still aligns with the stigmatizing discourse that blood leaks are unacceptable and that the menstruator should make every effort to avoid them. It takes a cumulative effort of advertisers, educators, scholars and menstruators themselves to turn this stigmatizing discourse into the one that considers menstrual leaks and stains as a normal occurrence. According to CMS studies, any efforts toward menstrual destigmatization are actually a contribution to gender equity and improvement of the position of females and all menstruators in society (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011).

5.4. Limitations and recommendations for future research

The limitations of this study, as in the case of many qualitative studies, concern the reliability and validity of the research. Reliability can be defined as the possibility to replicate the study and its results using a similar method (Ritchie et al., 2014). The validity is understood as whether the research is designed and conducted in a way that measures what is claimed to be measured (Ritchie et al. 2014). Certain choices and characteristics of this study, which could influence the reliability and validity of the research, are made explicit hereto.

In terms of reliability, this research was focused on the examination of latent concepts, which recognition involved a high degree of subjective judgment. Subjectivity is an inherent characteristic of a qualitative approach, and particularly of thematic analysis, where the process of coding and themes' development is iterative and interpretative. Therefore, as advised by Terry et al. (2017) the quality of the research was reassured by "reflection, rigor, a systematic and thorough approach and (...) engagement rather than focusing on coding 'accuracy'" (p. 20). To ensure higher reliability, a thorough study of related academic literature was performed prior to the research and the understanding of all latent concepts was grounded in theoretical assumptions and explained thereafter. Ultimately to achieve higher transparency, the explanation of obtained themes, subthemes and their definitions was provided in the appendix to the research.

The methodological decision, which could compromise the validity of the research, considered the exclusion of video posts. It was chosen to discard them, as some of them were extremely lengthy (up to 40 minutes) and they were not equally distributed across the brands'

accounts, as some had much more videos than others. Due to the time limitations of the study, including the videos in the data set would take place at the expense of excluding a certain number of posts consisting of still images. Therefore, for the sake of feasibility, it was decided to focus only on the posts composed of still images. Further research could direct attention to the analysis of the video posts of the brands to investigate if a different medium of menstrual representation possibly brings distinct findings in the context of destigmatization.

Additionally, the operationalization of the menstruator and the body was considered in a rather binary way, however, for the sake of investigating menstrual destigmatization it was important to establish whether an image of a menstruator and the body derives from the stereotype of a white, slim female menstruator or not. Perhaps a detailed examination of the representation of the menstruator by menstrual activist brands can be a subject of a separate study.

It would be also recommended to analyze the reception of particular Instagram posts among the brands' audiences by looking at the number of likes and reactions in the comments. This could complement the findings of this research with the actual consumer perception of particular tactics that menstrual activist brands use to (de)stigmatize menstruation. Another way to examine the perspectives of the recipients of menstrual activist brands' communication would be by conducting in-depth interviews.

Furthermore, future research could focus on particular aspects of menstrual activist brands' communication linked to destigmatization that became apparent in this study, e.g. menstrual education, representation of the body, or portrayals of the female, and investigate them in-depth to bring further development in the analysis of the destigmatization.

Lastly, as this research studied destigmatization in the Western context, it would be interesting to compare it to the analysis of menstrual narratives created by brands in the Global South, where menstrual activism has rather different assumptions and priorities than the West (Bobel, 2019).

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Appendix A

Table A1. Offerings and descriptions of the chosen brands

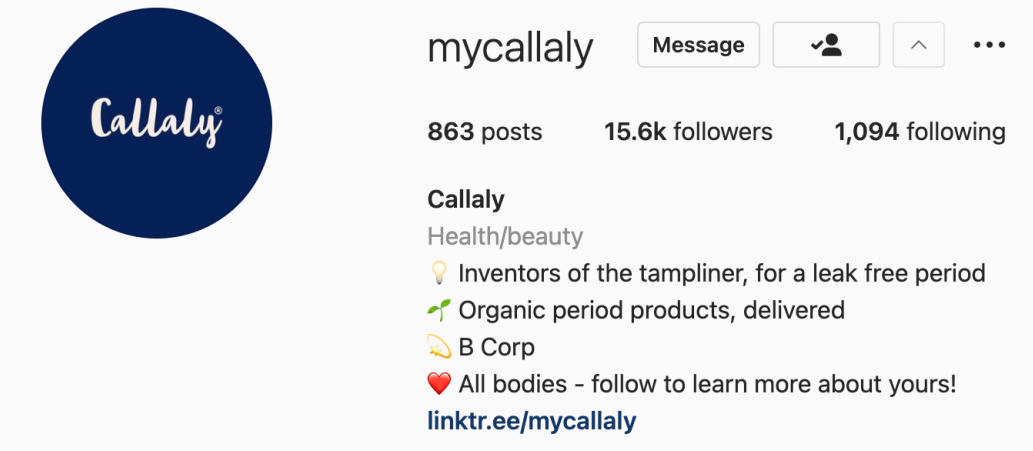
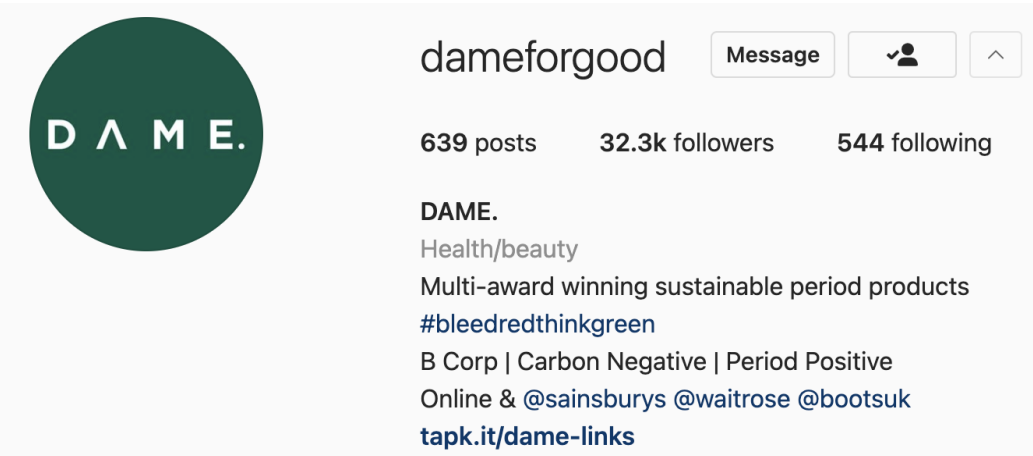
Logo	Offering	Menstrual activist practice
Callaly®	Organic cotton tampliners, tampons, pads and liners	B-corp[1] producer of innovative eco-friendly, non-synthetic, inclusive period products in biodegradable packaging, contributing to charity goals to fight period poverty. The mission of the company: “Reinventing Period Care” (Callaly, n.d.; Red Dot, n.d.)
DAME.	Reusable tampon applicators, organic cotton tampons, reusable pads, period proof underwear (soon to be launched)	B-corp producer of reusable and organic period products committed to environmental sustainability, menstrual product accessibility and acceptability of all menstruators. The mission of the company: “make periods positive” (Dame, n.d.)

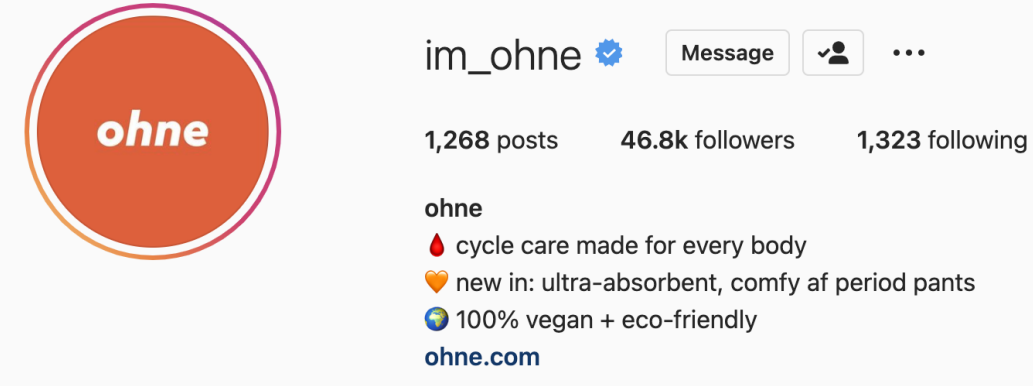
[1] B-corp is a short form for B-corporation, which is a certification for for-profit companies that demonstrate high pro-social and pro-environmental performance and meet strict standards of transparency and accountability.

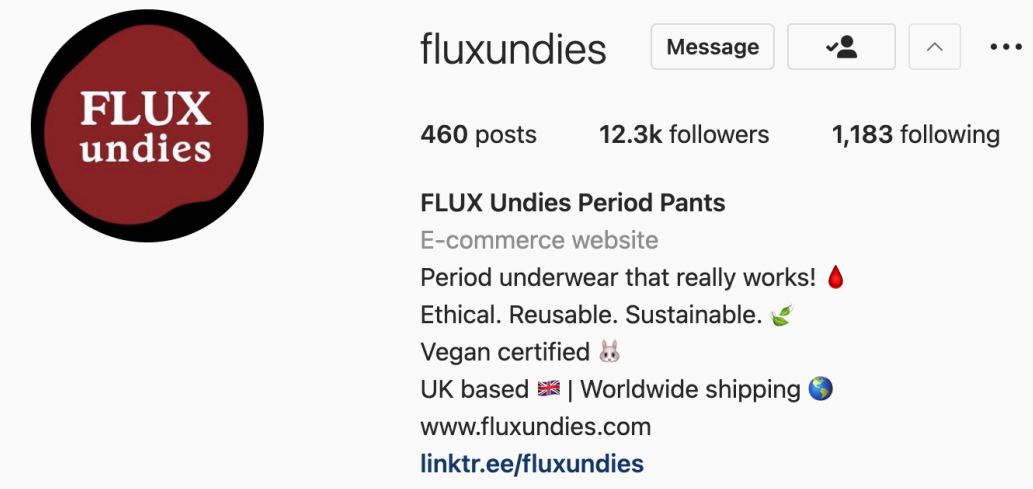
FLUX® undies	Period proof underwear	Producer of period proof pants made of biodegradable TENCEL™ modal[2]. The company regularly donates to environmentally and socially oriented NGOs. The mission of the company: “empower menstruators, improve access to menstrual care and end period poverty, encourage open discussion and end the stigma” (Flux Undies, n.d. a; n.d. b)
ohne	Period proof underwear, organic cotton tampons and pads, biodegradable applicator tampons, digestibles for cycle care (based on herbs and botanicals e.g. CBD), body balm for menstrual pain, accessories	Producer of organic, non-synthetic period products in biodegradable packaging, committed to inclusion and diversity in menstrual health, contributing to charity goals to fight period poverty. The mission of the company: “shame-free, toxic-free, plastic-free periods. because our bodies and our planet deserve the best” (Ohne, n.d.)
WUKA®	Period proof underwear, accessories	Producer of period underwear made of GOTS[3] organic cotton, TENCEL™ modal, and Econyl[4]. The company regularly supports environmentally and socially oriented charities, is engaged in anti-period pants tax campaigns and menstrual education. The mission of the company: “WUKA stands for ‘Wake Up Kick Ass’ because we believe nothing should hold you back on your period. Wake Up, Kick Ass, break taboos and accelerate a sustainable world” (Wuka, n.d. a; n.d. b)

[2] Modal branded with TENCEL™ is sustainably sourced from beech trees and manufactured in an environmentally responsible way.
[3] GOTS stands for Global Organic Textile Standard, a certification which ensures organic status of textiles.
[4] Econyl is a recycled nylon manufactured from plastic waste.

Table A2. Instagram profile description

Name of the brand	Instagram brand description
Callaly IG @mycallaly	 (Callaly [@mycallaly], n.d.)
Dame IG @dameforgood	 (Dame [@dameforgood], n.d.)

Ohne IG @im_ohne	 (Ohne [@im_ohne], n.d.)
Wuka IG @wukawear	 (Wuka [@wukawear], n.d.)

Flux Undies IG @fluxundies	 (Flux Undies [@fluxundies], n.d.)

Appendix B

Table B1. Thematic map

Category	Theme	Subtheme	Definition
visual communication of brand identity	customer-centric	customer’s review	Visual form of citing customer reviews about menstrual product of the brand
		influencer endorsement	Micro-influencer endorsing the product of the brand, the person is tagged in the post and therefore it can be traced that the person is employed to cooperate in the promotion of the product
	educational	N/A	Visual representation of informative content about different aspects and dimensions of menstruation, the body or any other educational material
	product-centric	product in context	Lifestyle photos of a product in a curated scene
		product in graphic design	Photos of a product after they were graphically reworked and contain additional elements such as text, logos, frames, etc
		product in studio	Photos being shot in a professional studio setting and photos of a product or a model

			presenting a product cut and embedded on a plain background.
	other	N/A	Visual representation of messages that were not classified in any other theme.
	symbolic	humoristic	The use of a “meme” for a representation of menstrual process, its symptoms, experiences of menstruators, social perception of menstruation or any other aspect that links to menses
		illustrative	Visual illustration of the caption of the post, devoid of metaphorical meaning, emphasizing the mood or the story conveyed in the caption
		metaphorical	Visual representation of metaphors epitomizing the process of menstruation e.g. bleeding or intimate body parts e.g. vulva
menstrual product messaging	qualities of alternative menstrual products	accessible	Promotion of convenient subscriptions of menstrual products delivered to home address
		comfortable	Promotion of physical comfort of using the product
		discreet	Promotion of undetectability qualities of the product during use
		eco-friendly	Promotion of environmental sustainability of the product

		economic	Promotion of affordability/ economic sustainability of the product
		healthy	Promotion of qualities of the product assuring the safety of menstruators
		hygienic	Promotion of odor-eliminating or washable characteristics of the product
		looking good	Promotion of style-related qualities of the product
		reliable	Promotion of protective qualities against leakage
	drawbacks of conventional products	environmentally harmful	Messaging emphasizing environmental unsustainability of conventional period products regarding its disposability and on-time-use cycle
		unhealthy	Messaging emphasizing toxicity of ingredients used in the production of conventional period products as well as ingredients being undisclosed to the public information
		unreliable	Messaging emphasizing poor protective qualities of the product resulting in leaks and staining
representation of menstruation	breaking with shame	admitting menstruation	Acknowledgement of menstruation and its physical outcome (menstrual blood), the use of

			menstrual products (e.g. visibility of tampon string), explicit messaging about menstruation not being shameful/dirty etc., messaging of menstruation as a reason for pride and female power
		normalizing conversation	Promotion of the the urgency of menstrual education and open conversation about menstruation as a way of breaking the foundations of menstrual shame
	menstruation as a burden	N/A	Messaging that menstruation is the reason for worry and stress due to its uncertainty and possible leakage and that it imposes limitations on menstruators lives, stops them from engaging in certain regular activities e.g. sport, sex
menstrual and body education	menstrual education	menstruation and other activities	Informational content explaining the appropriateness and safety of engaging in different activities while menstruating
		physical course of menstruation	Informational content explaining the physical outcome of menstruation: the blood flow and any concerns about its color or amount.
		symptoms of (pre)menstruation	Informational content explaining different physical and emotional symptoms experienced during menstruation or the days leading to or after the actual bleeding

	reproductive body education	N/A	Informational content sharing scientific facts about reproductive health (except for menstruation) and tips on how to take care of it. Includes different body parts engaged in reproductive health, their image, physiology, needs for eventual proper treatment/check ups and explains their role and participation in the process of menstruation and changes that occur in them during this process
	mental selfcare	N/A	Promotion of mental selfcare and informative content of how mental health is affected during particular phases of the reproductive cycle
image of a menstruator	monstrous feminine	N/A	Promotion of an image of a (pre)menstruating woman as not being in control of her body, emotions, and behavior, succumbing to cravings, hysterical reactions, and rapid changes of mood, which affects herself and potentially people in her surroundings; usually occurring in a form of a meme
	non-binary menstruator	N/A	Promotion of the gender inclusivity in the representation of menstruators and the recognition of non-binary menstruators
	progressive femininity	N/A	Promotion of an image of a woman in enticing poses, wearing make-up, a hairdo, jewelry,

			revealing clothing, or fancy lingerie, creating the impression of emphasizing her sexuality and femininity as well as proud ownership of diverse body types and their qualities often not-conforming with prevailing beauty standards