

## Understanding digital period pedagogies: Exploring how young people navigate menstruation through embodied experience

Health Education Journal

2024, Vol. 83(4) 359–370

© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/00178969241234507

[journals.sagepub.com/home/hej](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/hej)



Marianne Clark<sup>a</sup>  and Clare Southerton<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Kinesiology, Acadia University, Wolfville, NS, Canada

<sup>b</sup>School of Education, La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

### Abstract

**Objective:** This paper examines the ways in which young people in Eastern Canada learn about menstruation and construct personal period pedagogies through embodied experiences and encounters with digital and social media.

**Design:** A qualitative exploratory approach was undertaken to elicit the stories and voices of young people who menstruate. Menstruation is conceptualised as a deeply bio-social phenomenon and knowledge was understood as created, contested and negotiated across settings and contexts.

**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine university students (ages 19–23 years) in Eastern Canada as part of a pilot project informing a broader study about menstruation education and menstrual experiences. To be eligible for inclusion, participants were required to have experienced one menstrual cycle in the past 6 months and engaged with social media at least once per week.

**Setting:** This project was conducted in a small University town in Maritime Canada.

**Results:** Young people interviewed learned about menstruation through knowledges assembled from conversations family members and peers, educational and medical settings and content encountered on social and digital media. Three themes were developed from the analysis. The first two capture how young people actively try to ‘Fill in the Gaps’ left by conventional menstrual education approaches and therefore turn to informal and narrative knowledges circulating on social media in efforts to answer the question ‘Am I normal’. The third theme describes how participants actively ‘Balance Authority and Intimacy’ when seeking menstrual information that resonates with their embodied experiences.

**Conclusion:** Substantial gaps exist in the menstrual knowledges available to young people, particularly in relation to the embodied and emotional dimensions of having and managing a period. Digital and social media have the capacity to contribute to personal period pedagogies by acknowledging and exploring aspects of menstruation not adequately addressed in other contexts.

### Keywords

Embodiment, feminist new materialisms, knowledge production, menstruation, social media, youth

### Corresponding author:

Marianne Clark, School of Kinesiology, Acadia University, 550 Main St., Wolfville, NS B4P 1B7, Canada.

Email: [marianne.clark@acadiau.ca](mailto:marianne.clark@acadiau.ca)

## Introduction

Digital spaces have become increasingly important sites for the production and dissemination of health-related information and play a salient role in the lives of young people navigating personal health and wellness as well as gendered identities, sexuality, politics and peer relationships (Boyd, 2008; Byron, 2021; Goodyear et al., 2019; Green and Brady, 2013). Communication scholars and digital sociologists have recently focused attention on how digital media shape the ways in which young people learn about and negotiate various aspects of sexuality (Albury and Hendry, 2022; De Ridder, 2017; Hendry, 2017). There is agreement that young people's everyday digital practices are deeply interconnected with their everyday embodied experiences of wellbeing and that sexual/health educational approaches are likely to be more effective when these relationships are acknowledged.

In this paper, we focus specifically on how young people learn about menstruation and examine the ways young people encounter and negotiate digital and social media content related to menstruation and menstruating bodies. Despite the proliferation of menstruation-related content on digital platforms, there are few if any theoretically informed analyses of how young people themselves navigate this content and integrate it within the wealth of offline modes of knowledge-making about menstruation. Therefore, we consider how these encounters contribute to their menstrual knowledges, in the form of what we here call personal 'period pedagogies'. Within this analysis, menstruation is conceptualised as a deeply bio-social phenomenon and knowledge understood as always created, contested and negotiated across settings and contexts.

In what follows, we provide an overview of relevant literature, outline our conceptual approach and draw from exploratory interviews undertaken as part of a pilot project with nine young people (ages 18–20 years) at a university in Eastern Canada. Specifically, we examine how and where young people encounter menstruation-related content circulating in digital and social media and, how this content is navigated, received and responded to by young people in relation to their own menstrual understandings and experiences.

## The period paradox: normal but taboo

Menstruation remains a socially stigmatising experience for many young people and adults across diverse cultures and settings (Cooper and Barthalow Koch, 2007; Jackson and Falmagne, 2013). Long regarded as a taboo topic of communication, menstruation is often positioned as something to be managed, silenced and sanitised in popular representations and social and medical discourse (Johnston-Robledo et al., 2020). Unsurprisingly, many young people report feelings of embarrassment, fear and confusion around early menstrual experiences and of feeling emotionally and practically unprepared (Orringer and Gahagan, 2010; Plan International Canada, 2020).

Menstrual discourses are embedded within broader discourses and socio-political frameworks related to sexual and reproductive health (Thomson et al., 2019). While increased menstrual advocacy efforts have sought to raise awareness of what is known as period poverty (the difficulty in affording and accessing menstrual hygiene products for many women around the globe) Thomson and colleagues (2019) suggest advocacy efforts ought to focus on shifting and challenging the social stigma associated with menstruation through education and changing socio-cultural belief systems. These efforts are important as the social shame and stigma associated with menstruation risks extending 'more broadly to the body as a whole' (Schooler et al., 2005: 325), constraining the way young people make sense of their menstruating bodies.

## Understanding menstruation in digital and social media spaces

Young people learn about menstruation through a variety of sources, including conversations with parents (mostly mothers), medical professionals and teachers, in classroom and medical settings and, more recently, through digital and online sources (Plan International Canada, 2020; Rubinsky et al., 2020). A 2019 survey of 3895 young people from 112 countries (commissioned by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO]) reports that ‘digital spaces’ are among the top three sources of information/education about the body, sexuality and relationships for 15- to 24-year-olds (UNESCO, 2020: 5). Similarly, a Canadian-based survey of 1095 young people (13–21 years) reported 30% of young people with periods learned *the most* about menstruation through online sources, after family members (mothers) and teachers/classroom settings (Plan International Canada, 2020).

These statistics align with qualitative research that has shown digital spaces are increasingly important for young people navigating socially sensitive or awkward topics such as sexual health and sexuality (McKee et al., 2018; Nikkelen et al., 2020). Scholars have identified the Internet as the first point of call for many young people when it comes to finding information about their bodies and sexual health (Lim et al., 2022), especially for trans and nonbinary youth (Haley et al., 2019). Digital and online spaces can act as generous spaces for the negotiation and expression of queer and gendered identities and for performing practices of care among young people (Byron, 2021; Kim and Ringrose, 2018). Digital and social media can also afford new channels for support and care for young people, particularly for those who may be underserved by conventional modes of healthcare and support (Byron, 2021).

While digital sociologists acknowledge the limitations and potential dangers of digital media use, they argue that a conceptual shift is needed when studying young people’s relationships with digital media and everyday media practices (Albury and Hendry, 2022; Byron, 2021). These scholars suggest digital technologies are embedded so deeply in the everyday practices of young people that they do not intentionally seek out or turn to online sources of information as much as they *encounter* meanings and knowledges circulating within their networked relations.

Social and digital media join a growing list of digital tools contributing to menstrual knowledges, including period tracking and fertility devices and apps. These devices fall under the umbrella term ‘femtech’ and are often marketed through the promise of empowerment, claiming to provide sophisticated and intimate knowledge about users’ bodies so they can take control over their menstrual and reproductive health (Moglia et al., 2016). Importantly, feminist scholars (Hendi and Jansky, 2022) have argued that the framings of these apps are underpinned by epistemic injustice as well as heterosexist and normative ideas of appropriate femininity and sexuality. The proliferation of period trackers and other biopedagogical tools targeting reproductive and menstrual processes also comes at a time when reproductive rights are being persistently eroded, and the potential for this data to put their users’ privacy and bodily autonomy at risk is very real (Kelly and Habib, 2023).

While period tracking devices have received abundant scholarly attention, our focus here is on menstrual knowledges within digital and social media more broadly. Menstrual health education emerges in these spaces as digital ‘infotainment’, where educational material is blended with strategies commonly employed in entertainment, such as the use of humour, music and popular culture references. Content creators range from popular social media influencers and small-scale peer educators sharing life experiences to those with formalised training, such as gynaecologists, sex educators and general practitioners (Duggan, 2023; Manduley et al., 2018; Southerton and Clark, 2022; Stein et al., 2022). An example of menstrual infotainment might include a video in which an obstetrician-gynaecologist humorously responds to popular myths about the menstrual cycle and

explains why they are untrue using accessible scientific language. Another example might be an Instagram post that uses a popular meme format to highlight when excessive pain during menstruation warrants speaking to a medical professional.

Manduley and colleagues (2018) suggest one of the strengths of social media as a site for sex education is that it offers the capacity to challenge and counter dominant discourses circulating in more formalised education settings as well as speak back to bias and discrimination that exists within the medical system and broader discourses more generally (Manduley et al., 2018). Young people may also find value in lay expertise based on experiential knowledge and expressed through personal accounts rather than a biomedical lens (Maslen and Lupton, 2019). However, the accessibility of these digital platforms is not experienced uniformly. Some social media platforms are unavailable in certain countries due to nationwide bans (Clausius, 2022). Lack of Internet access may also exacerbate existing social inequalities (Selwyn, 2004). However, in the Canadian context, access to social media has reached an estimated 85% of the population (Kemp, 2023) and, digital and online content provides a salient source of information about periods for many young people (Plan International Canada, 2020). Therefore, theoretically informed analyses that explore how young people engage with and make meaning of digital menstruation-related content may provide timely insights.

## Conceptualising periods and digital period pedagogies

Inspired by new materialist and feminist theory, we understand menstruation as a deeply bio-social phenomenon and trace the multiple social and material forces at work in the production of personal period pedagogies. While menstruation is socially and culturally coded along gendered lines, it is also profoundly bodily and material. Theoretical perspectives that consider seriously the complex relationships between the materialities of bodies, power and discourse have gained recent momentum among scholars interested in gendered dimensions of health and physical cultures (Clark and Thorpe, 2023; Fullagar, 2017; Thorpe et al., 2020). Through a socio-material lens, menstruation cannot be reduced to biology or discourse but rather is understood as both shaped by and generative of embodied experiences, dominant meanings and knowledges and broader political movements (Clark and Thorpe, 2023; Thorpe, 2016).

New materialist theory has also influenced the way in which embodied engagements with digital media are conceptualised (Clark and Thorpe, 2020; Lupton, 2020; Ni Shuilleabhain et al., 2021; Southerton and Clark, 2022). Taking up a vitalist or new materialist perspective when exploring people's engagements with digital media requires attending to the affective and embodied and relational dimensions of these engagements. Scholars have examined how these embodied and affective relations with media shape 'body pedagogies' which are defined as practices and activities taken up by individuals and organisations designed to 'designed to enhance individuals' understandings of their own and others' corporeality' (Rich and Evans, 2007: 41). These learnings and activities take place in 'formal' classroom settings and beyond, across multiple settings of daily life. Here, pedagogy and pedagogical practices are conceptualised as 'embodied, affective and material' (Ni Shuilleabhain et al., 2021: 4).

We build upon this thinking to understand (digital) period pedagogies as assembled and produced through overlapping encounters between discourse, embodied experience, media and technology. In line with Byron (2021) and Albury and Hendry (2022), we acknowledge how deeply entangled digital content and digital practices are in the ways young people make sense of their bodies and identities. Therefore, our intent is not to parse out, evaluate or construct boundaries around the knowledges that young menstruators glean from digital sources but rather seek to examine how they are assembled alongside other sources of knowledge.

## Methodological approach

This study was undertaken as a pilot study that will inform a larger, multi-site project conceived to explore young people's personal period pedagogies and menstrual experiences as well as the capacities and limitations of digital media in shaping period pedagogies. Ethical approval for this part of the project was granted by the Acadia University Research Ethics Board.

### *Participants*

A purposive, snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit participants at Acadia University. Eligibility criteria included having at least one menstrual cycle within the past 12 months and engagement with digital and social media at least one per week. Participants were recruited via an Instagram post appearing on the student association's Instagram account and through in-person announcements made in two undergraduate classes on campus by the first author. Recruitment materials described the focus of the study as an examination of how people learn about menstruation and the role of digital and social media in those processes. Eligible participants did not need to actively seek out menstruation-related information on social media but must have encountered it in their everyday digital practices. A total of 20 students indicated interest via email to the first author and interviews were able to be arranged with nine. All participants identified as woman and were between 19 and 23 years of age. Pseudonyms have been used throughout, in place of participants' real names.

Many of the recruited participants were from the School of Kinesiology, in which the first author is a faculty member. The others came from the Departments of Sociology and Women's and Gender Studies. All but one of the participants were fourth-year students and were not enrolled in any current or future courses taught by the first author. To further address the power relations at play interviews opened with an explanation of the aims of the project and an explicit acknowledgement of the personal nature of the topic and the potential for discomfort at sharing such information with a faculty member. It was emphasised participants could direct the conversation in line with their comfort level.

### *Procedures and analysis*

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant.

The interview guide was structured to gain insights into how participants first learned about menstruation, their experiences of menstruation and their encounters with digital and social media content about menstruation and sexuality/sexual wellbeing more broadly. Interviews took place on campus in the first author's office or in the student lounge if it was not occupied, were audio recorded and lasted 35–65 minutes. Informed consent was collected prior to interview commencement, and interviews were transcribed for analysis.

Analysis was guided by our conceptual framework, which was attuned to the embodied and affective aspects of participants' experiences. As such, we conceptualise the empirical material generated through our interviews as extending beyond how participants represent themselves in speech to include being attuned to shifting comfort and discomfort. As Back (2012: 29) puts it, 'not being limited to what people say explicitly enables us to train a kind of attentiveness to tacit forms of coexistence'. Rather than seeking to settle or rectify moments of contradiction, or simply dismissing them as errors, we seek to dwell in moments of tension.

We now outline three lines of thinking that ran through the interviews, not in a coherent, seamless way, but in a way that drew attention to what we consider productive tensions and resonances. We name these: Filling in the Gaps, Am I Normal? and Balancing Authority and Intimacy.

## Results

### *Filling in the gaps*

Participants gathered, assembled and pieced together information about menstruation from a range of sources including family members (e.g. mothers and sisters), classroom settings and teachers, friends, health professionals, printed educational material, online sources and digital media. Many participants agreed that the period-related content taught in health and physical education classes was deeply disembodied and focused too much on anatomical, mechanistic understandings of menstruation than on the lived experience of menstruation (Curry et al., 2023; Schmitt et al., 2021). As a result, participants often looked beyond formal spaces (e.g. classroom settings and physician's offices) to interpersonal spaces, including peers and social media to 'fill in the gaps' and hear personal accounts and lived experiences that resonated with their own.

For example, Alice (age 21 years) described 'cobbling together' information through conversations with friends that helped her navigate things like how to use a tampon. She shared, 'I remember it was such a big deal and we were always like, "oh my gosh will it hurt? Is it gross?" and we learned together because no one really taught us'. Hanna (age 20 years) shared something similar saying, 'we didn't really know much but we could ask each other those embarrassing questions and it was a relief'. Other participants described turning to digital content. Edith shared an anecdote of feeling of being both curious and confused after a conversation about menstruation in a school health class and decided to use Google to try to make sense of the information:

I Googled it and like explored it on my own. I got in trouble because I didn't clear the search history of me trying to figure out what my body parts are. . . I filled in the gaps on my own, or amongst like weird truths, half-truths from friends and peers.

Edith's (age 20 years) anecdote highlights the taboo status of bodily and period-related topics, and the difficulty in talking about these matters openly, but also illustrates the desire and demand for information young people have about a bio-social process that impacts their embodied identities and lives. In this case, online content was resourced to fill in the gaps encountered in the classroom setting.

While Edith actively searched for information online, some participants described simply noticing period-related content in their social media feeds and clicking for further details. As Lucy (age 22 years) noted,

It wasn't like I actively searched out [the information], but I noticed some stuff popping up because I ah I follow some health um health educators and I was like 'oh what's this'? It was stuff about periods and also, like, you know, basically saying don't use jade eggs, but I really was looking just at the stuff about periods.

In this example, Lucy's encounter with period-related content was not actively sought out, which is in keeping with how people generally engage with digital content and aligns with Byron's (2021) argument that there has been a shift away from 'information seeking' towards more organic embeddedness in digital culture. When asked if seeing this post prompted her to turn to social media for period-related content more, Lucy replied.

- L: 'Um, it's not like I actively go out and look for it but I see it and I often just find myself reading it'
- M: Have you learned anything you didn't know before?
- L: Um yeah I guess some information about diva cups was new, like I didn't know if they were safe . . . but when the [OBGYN on TikTok] explained how they worked and said they were safe I was more interested.
- M: So you had heard about them?
- L: Oh yeah, I mean I don't know how I just sort of knew about them, I think my friend was talking about it and at first it was like, ew, you know the yuck factor but actually we started talking about it and it was like actually it's not gross . . . I guess that's kind of why I like all these gynos, they just talk about periods like they're you know natural . . .

In these examples, the 'gaps' identified by participants were often related to the specific and intimate workings of their body, or the very material and 'messy' aspects of menstrual management. Online sources of information provided a less 'embarrassing' space in which to explore these topics and became part of our participants' assembled period pedagogies and helped them fill in the gaps in the knowledges passed on from family members and in educational settings.

### *Am I normal?*

The question 'Am I normal' played a central role in participants' experience and negotiation of menstruation. Many wondered what was normal when it came to multiple aspects of menstruation including the type and severity of symptoms and wanted reassurance their experience was normal. As one participant said, 'I just kinda want to know . . . like is it just me or no and how do I know if I should go to a doctor?' (Beth, age 21 years).

For many, this reassurance was not provided in health class nor my family members or physicians. As Alice (age 21 years) put it,

[In health class] you're taught how things work. like you know how long a cycle might be, why you bleed every month or whatever but it doesn't really get into you know the gory details . . . so it can be a it can be hard to know . . . is everything is normal?

Similarly, Lucy shared, 'periods are pretty complicated and messy and because society kinda um kinda you know shames them it's hard to talk about them which means it's hard to know if what's going on with you is normal'.

Some participants reported struggling to find sources of information they considered helpful and turned to digital resources and social media. Cassie (age 20 years) googled anaemia and periods because she was worried about the heaviness of her menstrual cycle. She described how her

. . . feed started popping up with people talking about periods and I found one gyno saying that the normal amount [of blood] can vary but if you're going through so many tampons or pads in so many hours you should probably go see a Dr . . . that was the first time I had heard that said like that and I was like oh crap I should definitely see a doctor.

For Cassie, the quantification of blood lost during menstruation in teaspoons did not translate to her embodied experiences of blood loss and she had no idea if her flow was 'normal'. The casual, non-clinical language used on social media was both accessible and reassuring and allowed her and Edith to reframe, affirm and situate her bodily experiences of menstruation within a

continuum of lived experiences. Edith shared, ‘there’s so many people on social media so you just get a wider range of experiences . . . it helps to know someone else might have experienced [something similar]’.

In Emily’s (age 22 years) case, it was content on social media that alerted her to the fact her symptoms (extreme cramps, heavy periods) could possibly be caused by uterine fibroids. She explained that her physician ‘just said it was like normal period stuff’ and consequently she believed she ‘just had to tough it out’. It was not until she saw a TikTok by an obstetrician-gynaecologist about period-related problems that she realised her symptoms might not be ‘normal’. She explained, ‘I realised I needed to go back to the doctor and like push because this just wasn’t normal’.

The bio-sociality of menstrual experiences and menstrual knowledges is highlighted in the above anecdotes. The knowledges conveyed in formal spaces such as physician’s offices and classroom settings bumped up against embodied, physical and emotional experiences of menstruation and left gaps in participants’ understandings. Participants’ insights also underscored broader social understandings of menstruation as shameful and stigmatising phenomenon and topic of conversation. Information encountered in digital spaces was integrated and negotiated alongside these other forms of knowledge and, at times, provided helpful insights that allowed participants to understand their experiences as ‘normal’, or, as in Emily’s case, to identify when their experiences might not be ‘normal’ and advocate for medical intervention. Emily’s example also underscores the limitations and in some cases inadequate care some people encounter within the medical system.

### *Balancing authority and intimacy*

Participants connected with the personal stories shared in the digital space that acknowledged and teased out the everyday aspects of periods. For example, Cassie explained that ‘seeing everyday people like so many different kinds of people share their stories makes you feel like, ok, they’re just like me . . . you know they’re not necessarily doctors but just average people’. When asked to elaborate she explained, ‘You know you kind of see this average girl saying, “you know what, have you ever wondered about this?” and she’s just like in her room or whatever . . . you feel like you can relate’.

Participants largely agreed embodied and emotional dimensions were missing from both formal medical/classroom settings and informal conversations with peers and family members. Alice explained,

No one talked about what it’s actually like to get your period you know and you kinda feel excited but also super nervous but it’s also linked to like sex so I remember it just being really overwhelming and no one really talking about how you might feel about it.

When asked about the potential allure of online content about periods, Edith (age 20 years) explained,

I think, predominantly, it’s just everyday people just talking . . . I’m just scrolling, and then oh here comes this video of someone talking about menstruation. If they’re in their scrubs and they start by saying ‘I’m a doctor and here is my study that I’ve done’ I’ll scroll past it . . . but if it’s just a person who’s in their PJs and also lounging, and they say, ‘hey, I saw this thing [on TikTok] and I want to talk about it, I want to engage with the stuff I’m also seeing on this platform’. I think it’s just more human and when things feel human we connect with them . . . more than when it’s a figure of authority or someone that has credentials . . . there’s more distance between that.



This account speaks to the affordances of social media platforms to cultivate a sense of intimacy, familiarity and closeness between content creator and their audiences (Abidin, 2017; Albury and Hendry, 2022; Byron, 2021; Southerton and Clark, 2022). While a lack of qualifications and authority has been flagged as an indicator of a lack of credibility and trustworthiness when it comes to health information on social media (Wang et al., 2019), our participants were largely not seeking expert advice but wanted experiential accounts of menstruation to draw on to build their body pedagogies (Rich and Evans, 2007). Content creators offering advice from the position of a relatable friend is a well honed skill for an influencer, described as the ‘calibrated amateurism’ that Abidin identified in her studies of influencers, which involves cultivating an aesthetic of authenticity, relatability and ‘everydayness’.

The personal accounts shared on social media also provided participants access to multiple perspectives instead of the sole perspective of one family member or doctor. This meant there was more opportunity for participants to encounter an experience that resonated with their own. One participant, Joy (age 21 years), described what TikTok offered her compared with speaking to a doctor or even using a search engine and uses the following example to highlight her point.

My doctor would want me to try [a medication] for my acne, and I would immediately go home on TikTok and search the medication. And it would be someone being like, ‘hi, this is [my experience with this medication]’, . . . and they would be basically me. And then I would get to hear another side of it . . . whereas if you just had Google, it was way different because that’s all just websites and stuff, but TikTok, it’s actual people. And then you can kind of filter through [and find] Yeah, like ‘I’m a 22 year old hot girl’. I’d be like, oh my god, that’s just like me.

For Joy, it was significant that she could identify with the personal accounts on TikTok and see herself and her own experiences reflected in the content. While participants like Lucy had described stumbling across relevant content, Joy described an active process of seeking out relevant content on TikTok. However, this process still diverges from traditional ‘information seeking’, as she navigates by feeling personally connected to the creators by looking for people who she perceives to have a similar lived and bodily experience. The TikTok content she described was compelling – and informative – because it was conveyed through personal narrative and allowed Joy to imagine and anticipate what she might also experience.

The young people we spoke to also demonstrated an understanding of the complex relationship between social media and the broader socio-political context in which it is embedded. In one conversation, Vicky (age 21 years) spoke to this relationship, reflecting on the ways medicalised knowledge is deeply gendered and the capacity of social media to counter and resist the problematic practices that result. In a tangential conversation about intrauterine devices (IUDs) as a form of contraception and period management and her own personal decision-making processes, she reflected,

A lot of [the content] is how women’s needs aren’t heard in modern medicine. Sort of saying if this was a procedure for a man then they’d absolutely would not be conscious for it or would have some form of [pain management]. You still hear about people getting pregnant while they are on the pill and have an IUD. Not that that’s my main concern, I’m really more focused towards like monitoring or managing my period. But I would say that [social media content] sort of highlights people’s negative experiences and . . . it brings out why it’s not super positive for women.

Vicky’s reflections illustrate the capacity of social media to provide voice and space for those experiences not widely acknowledged in more formal knowledge spaces. These reflections align with existing scholarship emphasising the value digital spaces provide for groups marginalised by

mainstream medicine, such as African Americans in the USA (Asiodu et al., 2015; Francis, 2021), people living with chronic illnesses (Maslen and Lupton, 2019) and gender and sexuality diverse young people (Byron, 2021; Manduley et al., 2018).

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the ways young people learn about menstruation through active knowledge creation processes. Our results suggest substantial gaps exist in the knowledges available to young people, particularly in relation to the embodied and emotional dimensions of having and managing a period. As a result, participants in this study often turned to online sources in efforts to assemble more robust period pedagogies that resonated with their embodied experiences.

While not all participants actively sought out menstruation-related content online, all described encountering menstruation-related content on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram which extended and augmented their understandings of menstruation. Participants identified the value of information conveyed through personal narratives, as it helped them affirm and re-situate their experiences on a continuum of ‘normal’. This sat in contrast to the medicalised depiction of menstruation available through formal education settings and the limited range of experiences offered by personal networks.

Existing forms of education and information about menstruation tend to be depersonalised, disembodied and ‘clinical’, underlining the need for menstruation-related content that makes space for its messy, bodily and emotional dimensions. By providing a platform through which people can express and share negative (or positive) experiences within the medical system, digital spaces may support more nuanced conversations about menstruation. These conversations may enable those whose experiences are not meaningfully acknowledged in more formal knowledge spaces to feel seen and understood. Although the lay knowledges that circulate in digital spaces may not be understood as legitimate or as making the truth claims characteristic of medical discourse, we suggest it is this false dichotomy between truth and untruth that forecloses greater understandings of the value and capacity of lay knowledges.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Marianne Clark  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9007-9829>

## References

- Abidin C (2017) #familygoals: Family influencers, calibrated amateurism, and justifying young digital labor. *Social Media+ Society* 3(2): 1–5.
- Albury K and Hendry N (2022) Information, influence, ritual, participation: Defining digital sexual health. *Journal of Sociology* 59: 628–645.
- Asiodu IV, Waters CM, Dailey DE, et al. (2015) Breastfeeding and use of social media among first-time African American mothers. *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic, and Neonatal Nursing* 44(2): 268–278.
- Back L (2012) Live sociology: Social research and its futures. *The Sociological Review* 60(Suppl. 1): 18–39.
- Boyd D (2008) Why youth (heart) social network sites: The role of networked publics in teenage social life. In: Buckingham D (ed.) *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 119–142.
- Byron P (2021) *Digital Media, Friendship and Cultures of Care*. New York: Routledge.
- Clausius M (2022) The banning of TikTok, and the ban of foreign software for national security purposes. *Washington University Global Studies Law Review* 21(2): 273–292.

- Clark M and Thorpe H (2020) Towards diffractive ways of knowing women's moving bodies: A Baradian experiment with the fitbit–motherhood entanglement. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 37(1): 12–26.
- Clark M and Thorpe H (2023) 'I just don't trust my pelvic floor': Examining the bio-social barriers to maternal health and physical activity participation in a sample of mothers' from New Zealand. *SSM–Qualitative Research in Health* 3: 100261.
- Cooper SC and Barthalow Koch P (2007). 'Nobody told me nothin': Communication about menstruation among low-income African-American women. *Women & Health* 46(1): 57–78.
- Curry C, Ferfolja T, Holmes K, et al. (2023) Menstrual health education in Australian schools. *Curriculum Studies in Health and Physical Education* 14(2): 223–236.
- De Ridder S (2017) Social media and young people's sexualities: Values, norms, and battlegrounds. *Social Media + Society* 3(4). DOI: 10.1177/2056305117738992.
- Duggan J (2023) Using TikTok to teach about abortion: Combatting stigma and miseducation in the United States and beyond. *Sex Education* 23(1): 81–95.
- Francis DB (2021). 'Twitter is really therapeutic at times': Examination of Black men's Twitter conversations following hip-hop artist Kid Cudi's depression disclosure. *Health Communication* 36(4): 448–456.
- Fullagar S (2017) Post-qualitative inquiry and the new materialist turn: Implications for sport, health and physical culture research. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 9(2): 247–257.
- Goodyear VA, Armour KM and Wood H (2019) Young people and their engagement with health-related social media: New perspectives. *Sport, Education and Society* 24(7): 673–688.
- Green L and Brady D (2013) Young people online. In: Hartley AM J, Burgess J and Bruns A (eds) *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 461–471.
- Haley SG, Tordoff DM, Kantor AZ, et al. (2019) Sex education for transgender and non-binary youth: Previous experiences and recommended content. *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 16(11): 1834–1848.
- Hendry NA (2017) Social media bodies: Revealing the entanglement of sexual well-being, mental health, and social media in education. In: Allen L and Rasmussen ML (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Sexuality Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 509–526.
- Hendi T and Jansky B (2022) Tales of self-empowerment through digital health technologies: A closer look at 'Femtech'. *Review of Social Economy* 80(1): 29–57.
- Jackson TE and Falmagne RJ (2013) Women wearing white: Discourses of menstruation and the experience of menarche. *Feminism & Psychology* 23(3): 379–398.
- Johnston-Robledo I, Chrisler JC, Bobel C, et al. (2020) The menstrual mark: Menstruation as social stigma. In: Bobel C, Winkler IT, Fahs B, et al. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kelly BG and Habib M (2023) Missed period? The significance of period-tracking applications in a post-Roe America. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 31(4): 2238940.
- Kemp S (2023) Digital 2023: Canada (DataReportal–Global Digital Insights), February 9. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-canada>
- Kim C and Ringrose J (2018) 'Stumbling upon feminism': Teenage girls' forays into digital and school-based feminisms. *Girlhood Studies* 11(2): 46–62.
- Lim MSC, Molenaar A, Brennan L, et al. (2022) Young adults' use of different social media platforms for health information: Insights from web-based conversations. *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 24(1): e23656.
- Lupton D (2020) Australian women's use of health and fitness apps and wearable devices: A feminist new materialism analysis. *Feminist Media Studies* 20(7): 983–998.
- Manduley AE, Mertens AE, Plante I, et al. (2018) The role of social media in sex education: Dispatches from queer, trans, and racialized communities. *Feminism & Psychology* 28(1): 152–170.
- Maslen S and Lupton D (2019). 'Keeping it real': Women's enactments of lay health knowledges and expertise on Facebook. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 41(8): 1637–1651.
- McKee A, Albury K, Burgess J, et al. (2018) Locked down apps versus the social media ecology: Why do young people and educators disagree on the best delivery platform for digital sexual health entertainment education? *New Media & Society* 20(12): 4571–4589.

- Moglia ML, Nguyen HV, Chyjek K, et al. (2016) Evaluation of smartphone menstrual cycle tracking applications using an adapted APPLICATIONS scoring system. *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 127(6): 1153–1160.
- Nikkelen SWC, van Oosten JMF and van den Borne MMJJ (2020) Sexuality education in the digital era: Intrinsic and extrinsic predictors of online sexual information seeking among youth. *Journal of Sex Research* 57(2): 189–199.
- Ni Shuilleabhain N, Rich E and Fullagar S (2021) Rethinking digital media literacy to address body dissatisfaction in schools: Lessons from feminist new materialisms. *New Media & Society* 25: 3247–3265.
- Orringer K and Gahagan S (2010) Adolescent girls define menstruation: A multiethnic exploratory study. *Health Care for Women International* 31(9): 831–847.
- Plan International Canada (2020) Let's talk periods! Plan International Canada & Always. Available at: <https://www.always.com/en-us/lets-talk-periods> (accessed 10 May 2023).
- Rich E and Evans J (2007) Rereading voice: Young women, anorexia and performative education. *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* 9. Available at: <http://junctures.org/index.php/junctures/article/view/63>
- Rubinsky V, Gunning JN and Cooke-Jackson A (2020) 'I thought I was dying':(Un) supportive communication surrounding early menstruation experiences. *Health Communication* 35(2): 242–252.
- Schooler D, Ward LM, Merriwether A, et al. (2005) Cycles of shame: Menstrual shame, body shame, and sexual decision make. *Journal of Sex Research* 42(4): 324–334.
- Schmitt ML, Hagstrom C, Nowara A, et al. (2021) The intersection of menstruation, school and family: Experiences of girls growing up in urban cities in the USA. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 26(1): 94–109.
- Selwyn N (2004) Reconsidering political and popular understandings of the digital divide. *New Media & Society* 6(3): 341–362.
- Southerton C and Clark M (2022) OBGYNs of TikTok and the role of misinformation in diffractive knowledge production. *Journal of Sociology* 59: 610–627.
- Stein K, Yao Y and Aitamurto T (2022) Examining communicative forms in #TikTokDocs' sexual health videos. *International Journal of Communication* 16: 1309–1331.
- Thomson J, Amery F, Channon M, et al. (2019) What's missing in MHM? Moving beyond hygiene in menstrual hygiene management. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 27(1): 1684231–1684215.
- Thorpe H (2016) Athletic women's experiences of amenorrhea: Biomedical technologies, somatic ethics and embodied subjectivities. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 33(1): 1–13.
- Thorpe H, Brice J and Clark M (2020) *Feminist New Materialisms, Sport and Fitness: A Lively Entanglement*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- UNESCO (2020) *Switched on: Sexuality Education in the Digital Space*. UNESCO. Available at: [https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco-switched\\_on-technical\\_brief.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco-switched_on-technical_brief.pdf) (accessed 10 May 2023)
- Wang Y, McKee M, Torbica A, et al. (2019) Systematic Literature Review on the Spread of Health-related Misinformation on Social Media. *Social Science & Medicine* 240: 112552.