

Introduction

In recent years, menstruation has been defined by the pervading patriarchal attitudes that have obscured the perception of women into positions of inferiority. Menstruation has been institutionalised to be perceived as unclean in both private and public spheres, leading to gendered divisions of power. Although product advertising has redressed some misconceptions at the macro scale, the media “form[s] relatively rigid beliefs about what is considered ‘appropriate’ behavior for both boys and girls, women and men.”¹ Menstrual advertising has thus perpetuated the dirty connotations of the menses throughout western societies. Women continually internalise these messages into humiliation, where they are socialised to hide any indication of menstrual practices. The silencing of periods at the micro level reinforces the stigma, which inevitably “support[s] the status quo of male dominance”² and female subordination. As a result of the ongoing public discourse of the tax inequalities, legislative action has occurred, however, its dissenting reception indicates that the taboo has prevailed. This perpetuation of menstrual taboos in the western world reinforces the social construct of gender, whereby women are shaped by the distorted view of natural biological processes.

Hence, my hypothesis states that *‘Despite sexual liberation, menstruation is highly stigmatised and remains a social and cultural taboo in western societies.’* Thus, the objective of this study is to examine the contention surrounding menstruation and its impact on the representation of women in society. This study will evaluate the notions of femininity in how western societies degrade women for menstruating, instead of validating the menses as an embodiment of womanhood.

Academic secondary sources were used to provide an objective and deeper understanding of the topic. Beneficial sources include texts such as *The Social Construction of Menstruation: A Historical Study of Menstrual Product Advertising*³ by Natasha S. Carvalho which investigated the consequences of contemporary menstrual adverts overtime. Academic journals such as *The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma*⁴ by Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan C. Chrisler explored the effect of stigmatised menstruation on women and thus, provided greater reliability.

¹ Lindsey, L. L. 1997. *Gender roles: A sociological perspective*. Prentice Hall, New Jersey, pg. 310.

² Carvalho, N. S. 1997. *The Social Construction of Menstruation: A Historical Study of Menstrual Product Advertising*, University of Manitoba, Manitoba, pg. 10.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Johnston-Robledo, I. & Chrisler, J. C. 2011. *The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma*, Springer, New York.

Primary research supplemented my knowledge, including an online questionnaire⁵ which gathered 113 valid responses. This was valuable in obtaining quantitative data that supported my secondary research, however, as this was a meso-level study, it does not fully reflect macro world perspectives. Notably though, this can provide a comparison on the perceptions of menstruation between private and public spheres. Furthermore, an interview was conducted with professor Dr. Jessica Kean⁶ who provided authoritative insights which consolidated my findings through the critical discernment of my secondary research. Macro sphere representations were incorporated through the use of a visual content analysis⁷ of menstrual product advertisements to provide qualitative results. This was beneficial in conveying the changing nature of advertising overtime, although this method is subject to bias as it was based on personal interpretation.

This PIP analyses gender as a cross-cultural study with an examination of women and the taboo associated with menstruation. The institutionalised power of media reflects the social mores of androcentric hierarchical structures and thus socialises individuals to continually stigmatise menstruation. Women are identified to a lower status, disempowered by the cyclic gender constructs controlled by the macro world. Therefore, this topic is relevant as it investigates how menstruating women are silenced by public attitudes through their portrayal in the media.

⁵ Questionnaire, see Appendix A.

⁶ Interview, see Appendix B.

⁷ Visual Content Analysis, see Appendix C.