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# **A period of change**

## ***Menstruation in the media***

A 60-credit journalism project presented in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Journalism at Massey University

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August 2020

# Abstract

This project examines the portrayal of menstruation in news and other media. It provides an in-depth examination of New Zealand media coverage of the 'Positive Periods' petition for government funding of menstrual products in schools and explores how news coverage of issues can lead to social change movements. Additionally, it examines the use of framing, news values, as well as the practical limitations of journalists who have covered menstruation stories in New Zealand media.

# Acknowledgements

There are many people to whom I am extremely grateful for making this project possible.

Firstly, to my supervisor Associate Professor Jim Tully: Thank you for your wisdom, encouragement and for exemplifying what it means to be an empathetic journalist. Most importantly, thank you for helping me to draw this mahi (which I am so passionate about) out of myself.

Thank you to the many people who have shared their expertise on and experiences of menstruation with me: the journalists, advocates, menstruators and non-menstruators. It has been an immense privilege to learn from each and every one of you.

Thank you to my family for supporting me, emotionally and financially, to follow yet another passion and to my friends for the endless kind words and hot coffees.

Finally, thank you in advance to whomsoever might take up this mantle of research in future; to take it further, do it better and in doing so help us all understand menstruation, media, and each other, a little more.

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# Introduction

Menstruation is a complex subject which is often considered awkward or improper to discuss. Most cultures and individuals hold some form of belief or best practice about it. Different viewpoints can cause tension within communities and confusion for those who lack access to unbiased information.

This project aims to explore the role played by news media in shaping public perceptions of menstruation. It investigates why and when the topic arises in the news, how it is framed and what the implications of any approaches are.

Beginning with a long-form piece of journalism, the project gives voice to stories which have not been heard in news media before. It highlights different reactions to the government's initiative to provide menstrual products in schools, and explores what this means to different groups of people.

This article has been informed by the subsequent literature review, content analysis and survey. It is further informed by the experiences of journalists who have covered the subject and a menstrual health advocate who has worked with media.

Current literature on the portrayal menstruation does not exist from a news media-specific angle. It focuses instead on the effects of advertising and, to a lesser extent, other media, such as social media or film. The approach of this project was to analyse whether this literature could be applied to news media, in the absence of more directly relevant research.

It looks at New Zealand news coverage of the 'Positive Periods' petition as an example of menstruation in the media and examines whether this coverage supports or does not align with the currently existing literature.

It also includes the results of a survey which aimed to gather a variety of views on menstruation, held by members of the public as opposed to journalists or academics. These findings were then analysed against the literature and the news coverage of the 'Positive Periods' petition, to see how news coverage of menstruation in New Zealand could be improved in future.

## **Ethics**

This research has been approved by the Massey University Ethics Committee. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, ethical considerations needed to be taken into account during the research and writing of this project.

The main issues considered were ensuring the privacy of participants, being culturally sensitive and ensuring participants felt safe and comfortable whilst taking part in the research.

To address these concerns, I obtained consent from parents of any identifiable participants under the age of 18. I discussed the nature of my research and where it might be published when inviting people to participate. Participants had the option to opt out of the research and/or to choose not to be identified in the final work. My research included an exploration of

different cultural approaches to ensure I had some understanding of how menstruation might be approached by different people. I aimed to use appropriate/inoffensive language to discuss menstruation with participants by using proper terms and/or using the terms employed by participants. Each participant was given the opportunity for an open-ended discussion of what might be appropriate or important to them. Interviews were conducted in private, and participants were able to have a support person present if they desired.

# Long-form journalism article

## Supporting people with periods

It's 1999. The bell rings and I realise it's time to go back to class, lunch is over. I glance over to the outdoor toilets near my classroom and conveniently also near where I was playing. Can I make it without being too late to class? I decide to risk it and dash to the right-side entrance, the one with the familiar symbol of a 'girl' - the perfectly circular head, the isosceles triangle-shaped dress and the symmetrical limbs on either side.

When I pull down my pants, there's blood on my underwear. I pause for a second, a little shocked, and then remember I'm going to get in trouble if I don't hurry. I rush through the rest of my bathroom ritual and scurry back to class.

Now it's after school and I've been home for about 45 minutes, had a snack and generally begun to unwind after my busy typical 9-year-old's day. Then, I remember.

"Mum, I think I might be sick. There was blood when I went to the toilet."

My first menstrual experience was not entirely unusual, no matter how much it felt like it at the time. According to research released in 2018 by the University of Otago, about one in 16 girls start menstruating while of primary school age. Almost half of all girls have started menstruation before they start secondary school.

I guess I was just (un)lucky.

### Just the bloody right thing to do

I attended a Decile 10 primary school in Lower Hutt, Wellington. We received menstruation education in Year 6, the year after I began menstruating. In 2018, Otago University researchers suggested menstrual education needs to begin with younger students. Danika Revell, co-founder of *The Period Place*, a charity which aims to fight period inequity in New Zealand, agrees.

"Primary school, intermediate and high school students need very different levels of period education, but we need to be educating menstruators before they get their bloody period, not one or two years after it's started," she says.

"There are kids in this country that are getting their period at eight and nine. I know that's not many, but it's not fair that they're supposed to bleed alone for a couple of years until everybody else catches up. It's not acceptable."

While she was excited to see funding to provide menstrual products in schools in this year's budget, Revell says the programme must include more than "just throwing some products at the problem".

“If you only provide period products to the students it reinforces stigma that this is an issue that you need to go to the toilet and quietly deal with on your own. It also doesn’t educate the students on how to use the period products properly. We have had individuals in New Zealand tell us about how they, because of their cultural shame, didn’t use a tampon until they were in their thirties or they put the tampon in the wrong hole or they used the tampon but didn’t unwrap the plastic because no one told them you need to take the plastic off the individual tampon. Let alone talking to people about cycles, what’s normal, what’s not,” she says.

“All of that needs to be taken into account and explained and provided to the students who menstruate, but it also needs to be told to the students who don’t menstruate. I think at a very bare, bare minimum we need to have brochures and information packs handed out with the period products.”

The \$2.6 million investment in providing menstrual products at schools comes six months after a nationwide petition, signed by numerous advocates (including Revell), was lodged with the Government.

“We believe that our petition did have an effect, we believe that it really showed that there was support out in the country and out in communities for period products to be supported at a government level.”

Revell says it important to distinguish between period poverty and period inequity, as the former only describes a financial lack of access. “Period inequity encompasses the true scale of the problem, which is the stigma that is in the way, the lack of education and the lack of access to the products.”

She was one of a few campaigners invited to meet with Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to discuss the programme. Revell left the meeting feeling confident about the change coming, while also more determined than ever about the need for more work to occur in the period inequity space.

“I was just like oh, f\*\*k yes. thank you. Thank you for seeing us and hearing us and really giving a s\*\*t about this problem,” she says. “This is a personal private issue for the Prime Minister to start working on. It’s not something that her government, her team want or her advisors want, it’s something that’s really important to her so she’s paying out of her own Prime Minister’s kitty that they get to splash around on topics that are important to them.”

The government programme will work on an opt-in basis, which means it will not be mandatory for schools to take part. This means students who need access to menstrual products could miss out. “People might not want to be in it for cultural reasons, they might believe that it’s something that should be private and dealt with at home. There might be embarrassment, they don’t want people to think that their school need this. But what [would be] fantastic about rolling it out to every school is that should remove some of that shame and embarrassment from being on the register, because it’s not just the lower decile schools, it’s going out to everybody,” Revell says.

“Coming back to that period inequity comment I made earlier, you might live in Remuera and you might have the money to have access to every period product in your wildest dreams, but if

you don't have access to the education because you haven't had a proper lesson on it at school or from your parents ... well then you're lacking something, you're lacking in education. It's not just about financial poverty. It's about conversation, it's about education and it's about access."

Revel says the Government is taking an inclusive approach to the programme by using genderless language and consulting with Māori, an approach she says is particularly important when building a programme for young people.

"We brought up 'Why are you using genderless language, is it an accident?' and they were like 'No, we're doing this on purpose because it's really easy to include people, by just saying 'people', and we were like 'Yes, sister, preach'."

"It's so easy to be inclusive. It's harder, it's more of an effort to not be inclusive. Feminism was about giving women a voice, giving women power and I understand that, but it's like building blocks. The original feminism, pushing for women's rights was the first layer of the pyramid and the next layer came in in the seventies and then the next layer came in and we're up now to the third or fourth wave of feminism which is intersectional feminism which is using feminism as a way to say everybody deserves equal opportunities, equal rights, equal representation."

"Periods means different things across different cultures and this isn't our country first. This idea of Kiwi culture is always changing and evolving, any culture is, but it's really important to consider all cultures, especially the indigenous culture of a country when you're working on a programme this important and this intrinsic to people's identity.

"It's just the bloody right thing to do. It's the same thing about why use 'people with periods', well, why not?"

The Government programme will be administered by the Ministry of Education. Beginning in late 2020 at 15 schools in the Waikato, it will later be rolled out to all state and state-integrated schools (which decide to opt-in) in 2021.

Revell says there is plenty of work to be done, even once the Government programme is in full swing.

"Not everybody can physically attend school. There are students who are home-schooled, there are students who have children and so are removed from mainstream education," she says. "At the moment there are 33,000 people we believe every month who don't have access to the right products, so if we figured half of those were students, that's still 16 and a half thousand people a month that we need to be providing products to."

### **More than happy to hand over**

According to some reports, nearly 95,000 9-to-18 year olds may stay at home while menstruating, due to not being able to afford menstrual products. To Gus Row, this is not only ridiculous, but unacceptable.

Row was working for a small charitable foundation attached to an IT company in Hamilton, when he inadvertently became a menstruation champion. He attended an event where MP Louisa Wall spoke about period inequity a few years ago. The discussion inspired him to encourage the foundation to supply menstrual products to schools in the Waikato region.

“Louisa had done a promotion and was encouraging women to buy one give one, so if they were buying a pack of period products they would buy two and donate one,” Gus says. “I thought it was a great idea, but we felt it would be better to let the schools determine what product they needed ... so I made contact with school health nurses and asked them to let us know, one; how much of a problem it was and, two; whether they were being supplied elsewhere and three; if not, could we help and what sort of product would they want.”

Row left the foundation about 18 months ago. In his absence, it decided not to continue with the programme. “They had limited funds and a lot of call on their money and they chose not to continue doing it but I had enlisted some donors outside of the foundation who were interested in this period poverty.”

With the help of his wife, brother, and another couple, Row decided to continue funding the programme privately.

“Over the last two years we’ve expanded into Hawkes Bay and Bay of Plenty, so we’re currently doing about 35 schools in those three areas. We devised a bit of a formula based on the decile of the school and the female roll of the school and we went to the health nurses and said let us know what percentage of tampons and pads and liners you would want. We get an estimate, we supply half of that at the beginning of the year and then top up halfway through the year depending on how they’re going,” he explains.

“It’s now just a small group of individuals who are funding it and more than happy to hand over to the government because it’s not like we can’t do something else with the money!”

Row was surprised when he discovered most schools he reached out to did have a need for menstrual products, as he initially expected primary demand to come from Decile 1 and 2 schools. “In our conversations with say decile 7 schools, which is the highest end of what we supply, they’re all saying they’ve got a need. In part that’s because a decile 7 school may well still have quite a cohort of lower socioeconomic students attending it. It may average out as decile 7 but that’s because it’s got some effectively decile 9 students and some decile 2 students, a lot of schools have a range.”

Row is unsure if this need has grown over the five years the programme has been running as the group largely depends on schools and nurses to find sensitive ways to make products available to their students. “For us we’re just concerned with making the stuff available and then leaving it to the health nurses to distribute it,” he says.

“A couple of other businesses supply whole schools and do a big giveaway at the start of the year, so they got all the female students into the hall and they gave them all a packet at the start

of the year. We didn't want to do that because we felt it was inefficient and that all of your product would go to the whole school but then what happens three months later?"

Having Tongan grandchildren has helped him to become aware of differing cultural beliefs when it comes to menstruation, but Row believes most schools have a multicultural approach.

"I think this is a new area for most schools, but my observations and my work with the health nurses is that they're very sensitive to this, they're very aware. The moment we decided to ask them instead of just doing buy one and give it to the school, the moment we asked, all of the nurses came back with pretty clear indications that they knew their students. Some of them were just clear: 'There is no point in supplying us entirely with tampons, there are some of these students who will not use them'."

The group supplies schools with organic, compostable pads, tampons and liners. While menstrual cups have been raised as a possibility, they are too expensive to supply. "Also, a lot of schools do not have the kind of toilet facilities that are appropriate for girls using and cleaning cups."

The group plans to discontinue their private programme once the government initiative has fully rolled out. "There would just be no point in doubling up with the government. In one sense it's a lot of money for us, you know, it's thousands of dollars a year, but between the Ministry of Education and the DHBs, it wouldn't even cover their coffee money," Row says.

"If the Government's going to do it, and I personally think they should, then obviously the small group of us, we've kind of got a generous bent, and we might look at something else we could do with some of that money."

While he is pleased with the government initiative, Row is concerned about how funding will be spent. It costs his group roughly under \$20,000 a year to provide products to students in need across 35 high schools in Waikato, Hawkes Bay and Bay of Plenty.

"Now, look, I know there are a hell of a lot more schools in Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington, but if you times what we're doing by 20 that's still not a million dollars."

"\$2.6million is a hang of a lot of product, especially when they must be able to buy it at a trade price as a bulk supplier ... the thing that worries me is too much of it gets swallowed up in administration and my worry about this is that there'll be, excuse this if it sounds insulting, but there'll be people counting beans and sitting in offices organising all of this," says Row

### **Knowledge is power**

Tanya Stapley, Lyn Hurring and Michelle Holland all went to high school in Dunedin together, back in the early eighties. They've gathered virtually to drink wine and talk periods. Mentioning the Government programme to provide period products in schools is met with nods of approval.

"I think those products are expensive, they're a lot out of peoples budgets sometimes," Hurring says. "I remember always being a bit paranoid about having stuff with me in case I needed it, and so stuff at school, if you haven't got stuff with you then apart from the fact that it's costly as

well, but it also means there's something somewhere and you don't have to have any embarrassment about it."

She was around 11 or 12 when she had her first period and had learned about them earlier in the year at school. "It happened at home and I did get a fright, until my mother pointed out what it was and I was like 'Oh, yeah'. I knew about it, but when it happened I kind of was like 'Oh my god, what is this?'. It was probably just one of those things that you learn about but don't properly take in."

Holland can't quite remember when she first menstruated. For her, menstruation was just a normal thing that happened, neither special, nor scary. "It was an event, but it wasn't a rite of passage," she says. "I didn't feel like I was suddenly a woman or anything like that, it was just part of being a teenager and it was just something that happens... it wasn't scary or anything."

"We all went to an all-girls high school, so I don't know if that's changed the way we thought about it versus somebody who went to a co-ed school because, you know, everyone was doing it."

Stapley was 14 when she had her first period. "We got taken to the girl's bathroom and shown how to use the incinerator," she says. "I remember the boys trying to get into the girls toilets to see this incinerator thing."

Holland says menstruation education was a thing, but left a lot uncovered. "It was just like, 'here's a tampon, here's a pad, happens once a month, see you later'. There wasn't much conversation about endometriosis, there probably was the sex talk - you got your period, now you can have babies, be careful."

Hurring agrees. She knew what menstruation was and to expect it once a month. She thinks menstruation education has probably improved, based on how her son and daughter were taught about the subject.

"I'm pretty sure when we got taught about it at intermediate, which was boys and girls, girls were separated out and told about this and the boys never heard a thing about it. But when my children went through school, they were still separated so the girls got to hear about it and then the boys got to hear about it because they thought it would be awkward if they all heard about it together. Whether they still do that I don't know, but at least the boys were taught about it, whereas I don't think that they were in our day. They probably might've heard about it from their friends or possibly their mother or their sister if they had sisters, possibly, but I don't think that would've happened very often either."

While in some ways, menstruation has changed, in others it's the same old phenomenon which has existed for thousands of years. Stapley: "I mean, it's the same thing that happens, it's just we have newer stuff for it now. There's that new cup thing which I don't think I'd like."

"And a whole lot of different sizes as well. I don't recall back in the olden days that there was such a huge range of size and that you would work your way through the sizes, you just kinda had the same size and used it the whole way through."

Holland adds that the inconvenience of menstruating has not changed much, despite different products being available. “Back in the day, when you used to have applicator tampons they were made of paper, like cardboard, but the thing is that the ridges were just like so smooth that you’d never get a grip so it was just messy and ridiculous, and now they have these really beautifully shaped ones that are all contoured to your fingers and just beautiful, but now they’re made of plastic and of course nobody likes plastic. So if somebody could do the plastic ones in paper format, wonderful.”

“To be fair even as a 52-year-old I used to feel sick and, call a spade a spade, have blood stains on the bed. Nighttimes are just a nightmare for periods.”

Hurring thinks the way we talk about periods has changed. “I think it’s probably easier for kids in that way to ask questions, and it’s a lot easier for them to find out information that they might need than it probably was for us, without having to ask someone.

“It’s a little more out there as a subject that’s okay to talk about. I feel like when we were young you really only talked about it amongst your close friends, if at all, and maybe your mother. It wasn’t something that was a run of the mill conversation for me anyway.”

At this point, Stapley addresses her two friends directly. “I don’t ever recall talking about it with you girls at all. I mean, I had very irregular periods, I could go up to nine months without having them. You probably don’t even know that that was what it was for me, and I always had to carry something with me because I never knew when I was going to get it.”

Holland shakes her head, her forehead creasing “No, you never mentioned anything.”

“No, because it was an awkward subject that you didn’t really talk about!” Stapley sits back and laughs ironically.

She doesn’t feel an overwhelming need to see menstruation portrayed on television or read about it everywhere. Her main concern is that people understand what’s normal for them. “Nobody has the same experience. It’s all completely different, so I guess it’s just about finding what’s normal for you, or what’s normal-ish, so you know when things are wrong or you need to seek help.”

In future, Hurring would like to see menstrual products become more affordable. “I’d like to see products getting cheaper so that they’re more accessible for people.”

Holland says schools cannot cover everything, but should educate students about the basics. “Everybody has their own journey because of their own personality and their own backgrounds and you can’t change that. Obviously the schools teach it, which is a great thing, but not the logistics of it. Knowledge is power.”

### **It’s just how your body works**

10-year-old Sophie\* is happy to hear some students whose families can’t afford menstrual products will be provided them at school. “I think it’s cool, it’s helping,” she says. It is important for people to have menstrual products “just cause you need them”.

Sophie doesn't know of anyone in her class who is menstruating, however, research published in 2018 by the University of Otago showed 4.5% of girls will begin menstruation by the time they are halfway through Year 6.

She first learned about periods (she isn't familiar with the term 'menstruation') last year, while she was in Year 5, when 'Harold the Giraffe' came to her school. "There was the person who was in the van and it was about puberty. We got stickers with things on it and one of them was periods," she says. "If you didn't know what it was they said you could ask them...I got the period card and was like, 'what is this?' and then the person told me."

I ask Sophie what would happen if someone didn't feel comfortable asking the person about something they didn't understand. "You could go home and ask your parents," she shrugs. That's exactly what she did.

"When I got home, because they didn't give me that much information, just like it's something that happens when you have puberty, like they didn't tell you all the specific things and then after I went home [my mum] did," she says. "I was still asking what it was, kind of like just double-checking everything."

While the school programme taught her to expect menstruation, they did not tell her what to do if it happened. "No, my mum did. Well they told you a little, like you get pads."

She's heard of pads, tampons and cups, but has never heard of period underwear. She's seen pads in a dispenser at the swimming pool. "There's like a machine that gives you them for four dollars or something. One dollar maybe. If it is, it's actually a good bargain because it's like a pack of four."

She hasn't spoken to her dad about it and doesn't want to because she thinks it would feel "weird". If her mum wasn't available, she'd rather talk to one of her friend's mums.

Sophie's friends are in different classes, which made talking about what they'd learned slightly more difficult. "You were allowed to talk about it, but only the kids who'd already learnt, so I wasn't allowed to tell Jess\*," she says. "We were allowed to talk about it [after] because we all know now."

She thinks they may have talked about what they'd learned once they'd all had the class, but wasn't entirely sure what they'd discussed.

The sessions were held with boys and girls, which helped it to be less embarrassing, Sophie says. "Everyone in my class learned about it so there's nothing to be embarrassed about because everyone knows." One student in her class identifies as non-binary, so having a mixed-gendered lesson made the teaching more inclusive. "They said that if they had to go into a gender thing they would prefer to go with the girls."

Sophie says she doesn't mind talking about menstruation, but she's hiding her face with her hands as she says this. She hasn't experienced it yet, but tells me she is neither excited or scared.

“I’m just, meh,” she says. “I’m just like, it’s gonna happen anyway, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“It’s just how your body works.”

### **Education is vital**

Otago University’s Revell believes the wider problem of period inequity is easy to solve once there is proper funding. “On the one hand it’s bloody frustrating because it hasn’t been done yet, and on the other it’s great because there is an outcome that can be achieved.”

*The Period Place* is currently working towards a pilot programme of its own menstrual education programme, to be launched later this month. The organisation’s goal is to eradicate period poverty and make New Zealand the first period equitable country in the world by 2030. One of the steps towards this is to address the gaps in menstrual knowledge.

“It is going to be the biggest amount long-term for period poverty, that anybody’s done outside of the Government’s school intervention now. We’re going to be doing our own trial with 15 schools in Auckland, providing period products and providing period education. We’re going to do that not in competition with the government, we’re going to do that to support the government in what they’re doing. We want to show them why education is vital.”

*\*Names have been changed*

# Literature Review

Menstruation, the age-old phenomenon and universal symbol of female maturity, is a topic surrounded by taboo, secrecy and symbolism. Although ideologies on the subject differ, each group (and indeed, individual) holds a system of beliefs about the topic. These differing narratives, which have often been developed subconsciously, can cause tension within and between communities and individuals. The way we talk about menstruation (or avoid talking about it) is both a reflection of and a way to construct these viewpoints.

This review will examine research pertaining to the representation of menstruation. It aims to identify gaps in existing literature and answer the following key questions:

- How do we talk about menstruation?
- How should we talk about menstruation?
- What are the effects of these narratives on individuals who menstruate?

## **Menstruation in New Zealand**

Menstrual ideology in New Zealand has been shaped by many unique socio-cultural factors. Historically, our understanding of menstruation has been influenced by two main and often conflicting narratives; Te Ao Māori and the worldview introduced by European colonisers. Over time these two systems of belief have become intricately linked making it even more important for New Zealanders to be aware of not only what they believe about menstruation, but also how these beliefs were formed.

For Māori, menstruation or waiwhero (also known as ikura, mate marama, mate wāhine, te awa tapu and māui) is generally considered a time of restriction. Menstruators are not permitted to enter the marae or handle common food, for example (Potent not pollutant, 2016).

However, practices such as these may be a result of colonisation, as menstruation was a symbol of power in pre-colonial Māori society (Murphy, 2013, in Stodart, 2013). Māori traditionally celebrated the onset of a girl's menstruation through rituals such as hair cutting, ear piercing and feasting. She was tattooed on the chin and lips (moko kauae), and given gifts and new responsibilities (Stodart, 2013).

Although menstruation was viewed as a blessing by Māori, these narratives were rewritten by colonial ethnographers to erase language evoking female power.

Their dualistic thinking divided the world into a superior male, logical, white, Christian, civilised adult side, and an inferior female, dark-skinned, savage, immoral, child-like side. They rewrote the definition of tapu as sacred and superior when it applied to men, but as "unclean" when it applied to women, in the same way that Eve was portrayed in Christian teaching. (Stodart, 2013, p 13)

Conversely, Pākehā women in the mid-twentieth century often equated menstruation with being ill. There was a lack of language to describe intimate functions and any language which did exist was predominantly negative (Brookes & Tennant, 1998).

Menstruation, also known as 'being unwell', 'having your pain', 'pinny pain', 'the curse', 'Bloody Mary' and 'flying the red flag', was widely viewed as dangerous. Menstruators freedom was limited due to the inherent 'uncleanliness' and ill-effects menstruating was believed to have on one's wellbeing (Brookes et al., 1998).

Judith, experiencing menarche in 1957, was told not to wash her hair or do physical education at school. "They didn't want you near the swimming pool when you were 'like that'. – I often wondered if they were afraid of a shark attack as we were on the banks of the Waikato river". (Brookes et al., 1998, p 572).

Although no longer widely perceived as dangerous, menstruation in New Zealand is still a topic many regard as intensely private, and is predominantly tied to shame and governed by taboos. While some consider it distasteful to discuss, others believe it to be historically unchanging and, therefore, inconsequential (Brookes et al., 1998).

Menstruators experience anxiety about hygiene or view menstruation as an inconvenience, rather than as a celebration of fertility. "The lived body keeps subverting the ideal of femininity. The advertising continually reminds us of a state of perfection for the menstruating woman – active, odourless, and blood-free – that women know their bodies can never reach." (Brookes et al., 1998, p 578).

Menstrual education in New Zealand comes under sexuality education in the curriculum. During years 1–3 students are expected to describe changes in growth and identify body parts and developmental needs. In years 4–6 students learn about pubertal change and body growth and development, which may or may not include human reproduction. At years 7–8 students should learn how to support themselves and others during pubertal change and develop a positive body image (Sexuality education in the New Zealand curriculum, n.d.).

The curriculum advocates for a holistic approach to sexuality education, encompassing it into other subjects where possible. However, it is likely most schools refrain from doing this with menstruation due to its associated taboos. In fact, a 2019 review of period poverty in New Zealand suggests teaching about menstruation often does not occur at all during primary school (Beard, 2019). "This is problematic as there are many young women (and trans boys) who are going through puberty and may have started menstruating prior to intermediate school." (Beard, 2019, p 7).

Data on age of menarche (first menstruation) in New Zealand, collected for the first time by the Ministry of Health in 2014-15, indicated primary school was the correct place to educate students about periods and provide sanitary bins and pads (Education and support for menstrual periods..., 2018). The analysis found nearly half of all girls started menstruation before reaching secondary school. Researchers estimated around 11,700 girls began menstruating during intermediate and about 1,900 girls (6.3 percent or one in 16 girls) began at primary school.

## **A global phenomenon**

These findings align with international research, which suggests the average age of menarche is decreasing worldwide (Education and support for menstrual periods..., 2018).

With increasing globalisation and diversity, menstrual research needs to consider the experiences of all menstruators to be comprehensive. Dominant discourses of women's sexuality focus on the white, middle-to-upper class experience (Tolman, 2002, in Ussher, Perz, Metusela, Hawkey, Morrow, Narchal, & Estoesta, 2017).

A study which explored the sexual health experience of migrant and refugee women in Australia and Canada found a menstrual discourse of shame and a taboo of secrecy existed across participants from all different ethnic groups. "...while there may be conflict between sexual discourses and norms in migrant and refugee women's country of origin and country of settlement (Meldrum et al., 2014; Wray, Ussher, & Perz, 2014), there are also commonalities across cultures." (Ussher et al., 2017, p 1903).

Most participants had held a negative perception of discussing menstruation, describing it as 'gossip', a topic for 'naughty girls', 'disrespectful' and a sign 'you don't have respect for yourself'. They described concealing themselves during menstruation, as well as their menstrual blood, by practising various degrees of self-isolation (Ussher et al., 2017).

While some girls learnt about menstruation and sexuality from family members, others were educated about the connection at school following migration. The study noted the retrospective narratives of these adult women illustrated a global culture of secrecy, shame and silence, even though very few of the women currently adhered to the shame taboo. The majority expressed a desire to resist taboos by discussing menstruation with their daughters, though many expressed concerns about how to provide this education (Ussher et al., 2017).

Participants who had held such discussions had still avoided explaining the relationship between menstruation and sexuality, just as their own mothers had done. This demonstrates how we may inadvertently reinforce some taboos while actively working to resist others (Ussher et al., 2017).

A minority of participants from Tamil and South Sudanese backgrounds described rituals and ceremonies relating to menarche. These rituals were less common and less desired by young women after migration, as they did not wish to highlight their menstruating status (Ussher et al., 2017). This suggests migrants who previously held positive perceptions of menstruation adopted the negative taboos practiced in their new cultural environment.

Another study estimates about half the world's cultures celebrate menarche with rituals and ceremonies (Beausang & Razor, 2000, in Kissling, 2002). In countries such as the United States, celebrations of menarche are rare and the arrival of menarche is more commonly experienced in private, accompanied by shame or embarrassment (Kissling, 2002).

## **Discussing menstruation**

Menstruation is both a biological and a cultural event; neither can be separated from the other and any interpretation of menstruation is ideological (Kissling, 2002). Other cultural and social

theorists have also argued for a perspective with considers menstruation in its historical, cultural, social and institutional contexts (Repta and Clarke, 2013 in Sayers & Jones, 2015).

The negative representation of menstruation historically has been used as a means of patriarchal control. Young (in Sayers et al., 2015) argues we must unlearn menstruation in a patriarchal context and relearn the values inherent in menstruation from a female-centred perspective.

Originally believed to make women “impure, dangerous, and reckless” (Spadaro, d’Elia & Mosso, 2018), menstruation was later framed as a hygiene crisis in the twentieth century, with some experts arguing this is how the phenomenon is still framed today (Rembeck et al., 2006, in Jackson & Falmagne, 2013). The various lenses through which we discuss menstruation can be particularly confusing for younger women. “Girls are told that menarche is traumatic and upsetting, yet they should act “normal”; menarche is an overt symbol of sexual maturity, yet menarche is a mysterious, secret event (Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1980).” (Kissling, 2002, p 5).

Menstruation is still discussed internationally through euphemisms. Phrases such as ‘that time of the month’, ‘not feeling fresh’ and ‘the arrival of my auntie’ further reinforce the notion that menstruation must not be discussed (Mou, Yin and Wang, 2019). Even common euphemisms, such as ‘period’, are a way to avoid the use of more direct terms such as ‘menarche’ or ‘menstruation’.

“...their menstruation was separate from them, a foreign ‘thing’ that had, as Lee (1994) suggested, invaded their bodies, happening to them at menarche.” (Jackson et al., 2013, p 391).

In a further act of distancing themselves from the phenomenon, some menstruators replace both common euphemisms and direct terms with impersonal words such as ‘it’ or ‘this’. One study found this strategy was employed by all participants, even those who described menarche as ‘not a big deal’ or ‘nothing special’ (Jackson et al., 2013).

The internalisation of menstrual discourse begins even before menarche, as young girls begin to identify themselves as “future women in compliance with, or resistance to, discourses about gender roles and expectations in a society that continues to devalue women (Lee, 2009).” (Jackson et al., 2013).

Menstrual taboos have been categorised into three different themes: concealment, activity, and communication (Williams, 1983, in Spadaro et al., 2018). The basic premise of the concealment taboo is the idea that menstruation is shameful and should be kept private and undisclosed. The activity taboo regulates menstruators’ behaviour by prescribing allowed practices during menstruation. Finally, the communication taboo restricts women from discussing menstruation with others (Kissling, 1996, in Spadaro et al., 2018).

Of the three taboos described above, both concealment and communication reflect the narrative that menstruation must be kept secret, which concurs with Kissling’s findings that most social practices and understandings of menstruation in Western society are based on the idea that menstruation must be hidden (Kissling, 2002).

However, studies have also shown that menstrual communication is generally considered acceptable when referring to complaints, humour or commercial products (Kissling, 2006, in Spadaro et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2013).

People who resist dominant social rules by discussing menstruation do so by reiterating messages about the hassle and humiliation associated with menstruation and helping each other to conform to the societal rules of concealment (Chrisler, 2011, and Kissling, 1996, in Jackson et al., 2013). Menstruators commiserate or seek support for their shared experience of distress, rather than bonding over or celebrating their femininity (Stubbs and Costos, 2004, in Jackson et al., 2013).

### **Menstruation and advertising**

These taboos are often perpetuated by commercial companies in their advertisements and educational pamphlets (Erchull, Chrisler, Gorman, & Johnston-Robledo, 2002; Jackson et al., 2013). Advertisements are a particularly popular medium to conduct public discourse about menstruation in Western society (Erchull 2013, in Spadaro et al., 2018).

A large proportion of the literature relating to menstrual narratives comprises of advertising analysis. These studies found marketing served to reflect and reinforce menstrual shame. By not mentioning blood or naming the condition their products are designed to address, advertisements fail to offer alternative discourses surrounding menstruation and continue to enforce the silence taboo (Brookes et al., 1998).

The language of advertisements emphasises a binary form of existence (menstruating versus not menstruating), where menstruators are unclean, unfit and restricted. These shortcomings can only be rectified by using the product advertised which will then lead to cleanliness, femininity and freedom, i.e. as close as one can get to not menstruating without medical intervention.

In fact, many menstrual product companies include these narratives of freedom and protection in their names, for example, *Carefree*, *Stayfree*, *Whisper*, *Always*. Even *Libra* has phonetic connections to words like “liberation”.

References to these ideologies are even more predominant in sanitary product slogans, such as ‘Free to be’ (*Libra*), “Women who love freedom” (*Tampax*), and “Live life. Stay free.” (*Stayfree*) (The Libra range, 2020; Brookes et al., 1998; Frequently asked questions, 2020).

While it was previously more common for menstrual product advertising to use a scientific approach, highlighting concrete design details such as wings and size, the tone of advertisements shifted to an athletic narrative during the 1970s-1980s, when companies began depicting young women engaging in physical activities, such as dancing and swimming (Mou, Yin & Wang, 2019).

The ideals portrayed in menstrual product advertisements act as ‘powerful weapons in an ideological battle for control of women’s sexuality’ (Kane, 1990, p. 82, in Mou et al., 2019), promoting autonomy whilst also stimulating angst (Brumberg, 1997, in Mou et al., 2019). These themes also reflect the negative societal view of menstruation and reinforce the silence and shame surrounding it (Simes & Berg, 2001).

In China, menstrual product advertisements are regulated by the government and are restricted from airing on television during mealtimes and prime time (Gao, 2005, in Mou et al., 2019). As such, advertising mainly occurs as social media posts, which are less regulated and usually still focus on the 'health benefits' of the product.

While it is interesting to note males depicted in these posts are not portrayed as less competent, instead responding positively to menstruation (Mou et al., 2019), overall the posts do not advocate for celebration and acceptance of womanhood. Instead, they construct specific new identities for women to idealise, which are often a combination of traditional and modern values.

For instance, a number of promotion posts specifically reassure females that tampon products would not damage the hymen, so virgins would not have to worry about their virginity. Despite the sexual liberation trend, following Confucian values of virginity and chastity are still cherished by many in contemporary Chinese society (Chen, 2017). (Mou et al., 2019, p 445).

These values may explain why 70 % of American menstruators use tampons, compared to only 2 % of Chinese, who appear to prefer non-insertion methods of menstrual management. (Cotton Inc., 2015, in Mou et al., 2019).

Societal and individual perception of menstruation is further influenced by commercial companies when young people initially learn about menstruation, as educational material compiled by product companies are used all over the world.

A 2006 study in Tanzania found the *Always* information booklets were sometimes the only information available to young people about menstruation (Sommer Hirsch, Nathanson, & Parker, 2015).

Similarly, for teachers, the *P&G* puberty information leaflet, which provided factual content on pubertal body changes along with sanitary product information, was often kept on hand in the staff room because it was the only reference material about the topic. (Sommer et al., 2015, p 1304)

This is at odds with Power's (1995, in Allen, Kaestle, & Goldberg, 2011) argument that schools need to address the cultural ideology of menstruation and help students to deconstruct any negative messages, as menstrual product companies have a vested interest in feeding taboos to sell their products.

This in turn highlights another issue which affects menstrual discourse: who is responsible for providing positive and accurate information about menstruation to young people? Parents, teachers, peers, commercial companies or the media?

The answer to this question was clearer in the early twentieth century, as the 'intimate' role was considered unsuitable for schools or fathers and therefore fell to mothers to provide menstrual education. However, many mothers did not have the vocabulary or understanding required to

do this proficiently (Brookes et al., 1998).

Seeing the gap (and potential for promoting their products) companies began printing advice literature as early as the 1930s (Brookes et al., 1998; Mou et al., 2019), with some companies going as far as establishing educational divisions to supply teachers and mothers with these manuals (Brumberg, 1997, in Mou et al., 2019).

While doctors also produced health manuals (which were arguably more objective), those written by menstrual product companies were able to reach a wider audience and gave practical advice on the day-to-day management of menstruation in a more relatable context (Brookes et al., 1998).

Early versions took the form of conversations between mothers and daughters, such as the booklet entitled 'Marjorie May's Twelfth Birthday', used in New Zealand in the 1930s. (Brookes et al., 1998). By the 1960s these training kits provided tips directly to female adolescents on 'how to become a woman' and included advice on the various menstrual products which were becoming available (Mou et al., 2019).

### **Menstruation and media**

A large part of life in the 21st Century and an integral part of our visual culture, television and film simultaneously reflect and construct our understandings of the world we live in.

Film and television media which allude to menstruation may at first seem to be progressive, however, these representations usually also serve to reiterate menstrual silence and shame and reinforce gendered behaviour (Kissling, 2002). One example is that it is more common for a female character to exhibit or discuss premenstrual symptoms rather than menstruation itself (Kissling, 2002).

Representation of menstruation is usually limited to short scenes when a girl first begins her menstruation, "and the beginning of a female character's indoctrination into the practices of menstrual concealment." (Kissling, 2002, p 6).

Menarche is more integral to television plot than in film, and usually focuses on how a girl's parents deal with the change, rather than the girl herself (Kissling, 2002). It is used to highlight differences between men and women, which reinforces, rather than challenges, stereotypes. "The father who can comfortably discuss menstruation with his daughter is rare, and it is a mother's role, and some- times an older sister's supporting role, to facilitate the transition to womanhood. Counter-examples are rare." (Kissling, 2002, p 10).

However, the acknowledgment of menstruation on television at all challenges the silence taboo, given the proportion of female characters on television has not increased remarkably over the years (Kissling, 2002).

Very little of the literature examined or alluded to menstruation in news media, which indicates more research into this area is required. The few mentions there were indicated menstruation was mostly used to reinforce advertising messages.

Press coverage of menstrual suppression has been shown to overuse words like “choice” and “freedom”, which reinforces menstrual product advertisements in a positivist feedback loop. For example, a news article on the FDA approval of Lybrel (a hormonal birth control which also suppresses menstruation), had the headline: “Lybrel: Freedom. Period.” (Katz, 2007, in Chesler, 2013).

However, traditional media are no longer the only disseminators of news. Recent literature on media and menstrual representation has looked at menstruation in a social media climate. Social networking platforms are a type of grassroots media which enable ordinary citizens to contribute knowledge and create their own kind of news (Bowman & Willis, 2003, in Mou et al., 2019).

An historically silenced subject, menstruation may be more openly discussed virtually as research suggests people feel more accepted and are more likely to express their thoughts and feelings online (Baym, 2010, and Sunstein, 2009, in Thornton, 2013).

An analysis of Twitter posts identified four frameworks through which users discussed menstruation: anger and frustration; physical and emotional change; deceit, decorum, and disdain; and validation and bonding (Thornton, 2013).

Of these themes, anger and frustration, and deceit, decorum, and disdain were more commonly expressed by males, while physical and emotional change, and validation and bonding were more commonly discussed by females. These later two categories were also the most common for discussion overall.

The study found women may exaggerate as a way to commiserate, which reinforces stereotypes for themselves and others (Thornton, 2013). These findings concur with Kissling’s (2002) claim that it is acceptable to discuss menstruation through complaints, mocks or advertising.

Although social media provide a platform for uncensored expressiveness, they were “not used to advocate, enlighten or redress misconceptions. It was used to reinforce, act out, and seek or offer acceptance. The tweets from this study appear to validate and perpetuate a previously constructed reality of how menstruating women should be viewed and treated.” (Thornton, 2013, p 50).

Another study, which examined tweets about a specific event relating to menstruation in New Zealand, found posts combined emotion, reason and direct personal experience, data which rarely finds its way into empirical research (Sayers et al., 2015). Discussions about the event took place for more than a week, which researchers note was a long time to be nationally discussing menstruation.

The sudden national conversation about periods was astonishing, because menstruation is never discussed in organisational life. This silence is a sign violence of a sort is occurring. This process of silencing is accomplished by millions of women’s daily actions in ‘managing’ menstruation at and around the workplace. (Sayers et al., 2015, p 108)

An Indian social media campaign, which demanded policy changes to allow for better access to menstrual products and prevent young girls from leaving school early, gained attention from mainstream media in India and internationally (Fadnis, 2017).

In this instance, traditional media coverage may have increased public awareness of the social media campaign while also potentially easing the awkwardness of discussing menstruation in some households (Fadnis, 2017).

While some researchers note discussions and campaigns on such platforms often reflect the view of younger people from a background of higher education, caste and class, based on the platform's user demographics (Losh, 2014, in Fadnis, 2017), Twitter users in the USA are predominantly African Americans (Thornton, 2013), which may mean the platform gives a voice to those who may be less heard in traditional media.

### **Menstruation and gender**

It is important for any research about menstruation to acknowledge that not only women menstruate and not all women menstruate. My literature review revealed only one study focussing on the menstrual experiences of those identifying as transgender.

The study, which looked at the menstrual experiences of 'masculine of center people', ".. who identify as 'trans, butch, stud, aggressive, boi, masculine of centre, or gender queer'" (Chrisler, Gorman, Murgo, Barney, Adams-Clark, Newton, McGrath, & Manion, 2016, p 1242), found mixed attitudes toward menstruation. Overall, participants did not believe menstruation should be kept secret.

"Participants who menstruate (73%) said that they are open about their menstrual status; 96% said that people other than their sexual partners know that they menstruate and 94% said that people they told were not surprised to hear it." (Chrisler et al., 2016, p 1243).

While menstruation was considered by most to be annoying, it did not restrict them from engaging in any activities, nor require them to partake in any additional activities. Some masculine of centre individuals may actively dislike and resist any form of penetration, which can lead to a preference for menstrual products which are not inserted into the vagina (Chrisler et al., 2016).

Transgender individuals were less likely to believe menstrual secrecy was necessary if their friends were positive about their decision to be a menstruating masculine person, however, menstrual secrecy in public was more important (Chrisler et al., 2016).

Menstrual secrecy may be more important to transgender people for both safety and identity reasons, as they may fear being 'outed' by their ability to menstruate. Sixty-six percent believed most people held a negative attitude toward masculine people who menstruated. This may also explain why most participants held positive attitudes towards suppressing menstruation with medication (Chrisler et al., 2016).

Due to the importance of secrecy and as a way to preserve masculine identity, transgender individuals may avoid discussion of menstruation, which may in turn result in a lack of knowledge (Chrisler et al., 2016).

Menstruators in the transgender community may also be more hesitant to bring up menstruation with people they don't know well.

Sometimes I want to talk to my butch friends about my period, but even though I'm ok with it, I'm afraid it will be triggering for them so I don't, which can feel isolating ... I feel hesitant to seek camaraderie with other butches about it until I know them better and can broach the topic sensitively. (Chrisler et al., 2016, p 1246)

The main concern highlighted was how people outside the circle of intimacy reacted to masculine menstruators (Chrisler et al., 2016). As these reactions can be informed by stereotypes and commonly held misconceptions about menstruation, the wider media has a role to play in acknowledging that not all menstruators are cisgender females.

Some progress has been made in this area by the commercial product sector. For example, the *Lunapads* website explicitly states its "users and staff are cisgender, transgender, nonbinary, and genderqueer individuals who span the gender spectrum," and *Thinx* recently updated its slogan to 'For People with Periods' (Chrisler et al., 2016).

Kissling (2013, in Chrisler et al., 2016) proposed the use of the term 'menstruators' to acknowledge that not all women menstruate and some men do. This is the approach I advocate for news media to adopt.

Another study suggests women in lesbian relationships are more likely to experience positive responses and support from their partners during premenstrual changes or distress (Ussher and Perz, 2008, in Jackson et al., 2013). This may indicate more understanding or empathy about menstruation between women, than from men.

An individual's knowledge about and perception of menstruation changes over time through cultural messages and expectations (Burrows & Johnson, 2005, Fingerson, 2005, Mansfield & Stubbs, 2007, in Allen et al., 2011). Studies show men perceive and react to menstruation differently to women.

Men tend to view menstruation as more debilitating than women do; women describe it as merely bothersome (e.g., Brooks-Gunn and Ruble 1980, 1986; Chrisler 1988). Men are also more likely than women to consider menstruation embarrassing, to report that their sources of information about menstruation have been negative, to associate menstruation with danger and stigma and to endorse more proscriptions and prescriptions for menstruating women's behaviour (Brooks-Gunn and Ruble 1986; Heard and Chrisler 1999; Marván et al. 2006). (Chrisler et al., 2016, p 1240)

Other studies suggest males, especially boys, experience menstruation as a wedge between genders (Allen et al., 2011). Knowledge about menstruation is more likely come from outside family networks as a young person matures and becomes influences by other networks (Epstein & Ward, 2008, in Allen et al., 2011), with some researchers suggesting the lack of a clear source of information for boys has contributed to delayed comprehension of and societal discomfort surrounding menstruation (Allen et al., 2011).

Women are not alone in absorbing and adopting negative menstruation ideologies (Fingerson, 2005, Schooler et al., 2005, and Wood et al., 2007, in Allen et al., 2011). Boys and young men also incorporate these ideologies into their world view and struggle with the implications, sometimes by further enforcing sexist attitudes but often by confronting and rejecting them (Allen et al., 2011).

Modern boys learn about menstruation at a time when the focus has shifted from menstruation as a marker for maturation and fertility to menstruation as a hygiene crisis (Brumberg, 1997, and Whisnant et al., 1975, in Allen et al., 2011). The dominant narrative of menstruation as unclean means girls are subject to the ultimate humiliation if menstruation is not hidden. This “ideology of freshness” is instrumental in the battle for control of female sexuality, fought through the construction of meaning (Merskin, 1999, in Allen et al., 2011).

One study found three types of developmental responses by males to menstruation: men who perceived menstruation as shameful and disgusting, or who were still uncomfortable talking about it; men who believed they were in the process of learning to take on a mature attitude about menstruation; and men who perceived themselves as already having a mature view of menstruation through their involvement in an intimate relationship with a woman (Allen et al., 2011).

Some men’s attitudes towards menstruation exhibited sexist beliefs about women as emotional and undisciplined, while others believed being able to handle menstruation was a sign of male maturation. Some men also appeared to experience menstruation envy, either as a symbol of entering adulthood or because of the accessories that come with menstruation (Allen et al., 2011).

Menstruation can be used to gain power in interactions between genders (Allen et al., 2011). Participants described situations where girls used menstruation to gain the upper hand, for example, by discussing the subject to make boys uncomfortable or to leave the room. This was usually done by older girls to younger boys and by younger people rather than adults (Fingerson, 2006, in Allen et al., 2011).

More commonly, menstruation was used by boys as an opportunity to make fun of girls. Younger girls, or girls who exhibited signs of menstruating, were disadvantaged in social interactions as boys would use the girls’ fears to empower themselves (Fingerson, 2006, in Allen et al., 2011).

These interactions legitimatise the idea that boys should feel uncomfortable about menstruation and that being associated with menstruation in any way is shameful or dirty. Some boys hold onto these attitudes into adulthood (Allen et al., 2011).

In this way, menstruation is used either as a source of knowledge which empowers girls, or as a source of shame which boys use to empower themselves while simultaneously disempowering girls. Discussing menstruation gives interactional power to both genders, while also reinforcing the idea that menstruation separates men and women.

This view of menstruation as a barrier between genders is also highlighted by the 'women's problems' narrative, which reiterates the "prevailing ideology that boys and men should not concern themselves with understanding menstruation." (Allen et al., 2011, p 145).

Men who held this perception considered menstruation only in regards to the impact on their own lives. One respondent noted that he was happy so long as his girlfriend's menstruation did not interfere in his life or his sexual satisfaction; "I like to think of the time as 'blowjob week'." (Allen et al., 2011, p 146).

By indicating that it is not their problem and that they do not want to hear or see anything about menstruation, men frame the female body as a problem to be contained; they devalue an essential part of womanhood to something ugly that should be denied and concealed. (Allen et al., 2011, p 152)

Some participants described the menstruation of a partner as if participating in it themselves and perceived themselves as more mature than other men. Rather than expressing annoyance at premenstrual syndrome or disgust at menstrual conversation, these men used their relationship with menstruating women to close the gender gap by demonstrating empathy, respect and care for their partners (Allen et al., 2011).

Allen et al. argue this development of mature attitudes towards menstruation can be viewed as an unacknowledged rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, acting as a mirror to menarche's role as a rite of passage from girlhood and womanhood.

Many of the men felt sharing 'sensitive' information and feelings about menstruation was a sign of how close they were to their girlfriends, however, the private nature of these disclosures also serves to reinforce the perceived inappropriateness of menstruation as a topic for public discussion. The narratives of men who had experienced such discussions lacked the misogyny evident in those who associated it with grossness and unreasonable behaviour (Allen et al., 2011).

While the study concluded that one-on-one empathetic communication with women appeared to be critical for males to reach a stage of maturity regarding menstruation, it also noted that sharing confidences had not succeeded in instilling the perception that menstruation belongs in the public arena any more than the teasing.

## **Discussion**

My analysis of the current literature has led me to believe there is a lack of research regarding menstrual representation. While some research does exist, this predominantly relates to advertising media, which I believe tells a biased narrative as commercial companies have a clear agenda.

I argue that the general research available focuses on the menstrual experiences of white, middle-class women, while predominantly ignoring those who identify as a minority, for example, people of colour, non-binary or transgender. It is telling that more research mentioned the implications of menstruation on men than on the transgender people who actually experience it.

Transgender communities in the Western world are growing in size and prominence, however, their healthcare needs are currently underserved due to long-standing marginalisation (Reisner et al., 2015, and Unger, 2015, in Chrisler et al., 2016).

Research which looks at women from non-Western countries tends to focus on those of lower income, perhaps reinforcing stereotypical notions that menstruation no longer needs to be discussed in more developed countries.

Studies show that knowledge about menstruation is essential to moderating relationships between men and women, menstruators and non-menstruators, shamers and the stigmatised, while also helping individuals to critically appraise public discourse about menstrual shame (Thomas, 2007, in Spadaro et al., 2018).

Girls may be inadequately prepared for menarche due to menstrual shame (Uskul, 2004, in Ussher et al., 2017), with research linking this shame to increased sexual risk-taking (Schooler et al., 2005, in Ussher et al., 2017). Women who experience menstrual shame may also be more embarrassed about other reproductive functions, such as breastfeeding (Bramwell, 2001, Johnston-Robledo et al., 2007, in Ussher et al., 2017) and childbirth (Moloney, 2010, in Ussher et al., 2017), which has implications for the wider health of our societies.

Shame caused by a lack of knowledge about menstruation can lower self-esteem (White, 2013, in Spadaro et al., 2018). Girls commonly experience menstruation-related harassment and are forced to be constantly vigilant to ensure they aren't exhibiting signs of menstruating (Power, 1995, in Allen et al., 2011). This has repercussions on the performance and attendance of girls at school.

In fact, the perception of menstruation as 'dirty' has wider effects on society and can lead to inequality in other spaces, including workplaces and government (Martin, 1986, in Sayers et al., 2015; Spadaro et al., 2018). The wide perception of menstruation as a taboo topic for discussion may reinforce menstrual stigma and influence the public environment that menstruators face. As such, menstrual education has become a prominent feature in wider gender equality movements (Merskin, 1999, in Allen et al., 2011).

Young people rely on peers and the media for more sex-positive advice, as parents tend to give more precautionary advice (Ballard et al., 1998, Epstein et al., 2008, in Allen et al., 2011). Current discourses about menstruation tell girls menstruation is healthy and natural, while simultaneously preaching that it is debilitating and embarrassing (Wood et al., 2007, in Allen et al., 2011). These narratives admonish girls' bodies for menstruating, and are perpetuated by the menstrual product industry (Charlesworth, 2001, Merskin, 1999, in Allen et al., 2011). Even the words we use to describe or explain menstruation, such as "weak", "expelling" or "disintegrate" are linked to failure and poor health in a way that other biological processes are not (Martin, 1986, in Sayers et al., 2015).

Lack of attention to how and what boys learn about menstruation impacts their private understanding of reproduction and has consequences on ideologies about gendered relationships (Allen et al., 2011).

While there is a clear lack of research relating to menstruation and news media, results of research relating to menstruation and social media or advertising could be applied to news, as these media formats are avenues for public discourse on menstruation.

The way our societies react to and represent menstruation reflects how we perceive the phenomenon. “Families, peers, educational systems, the media, and society at large communicate and reinforce the notion that boys and girls are fundamentally different, and girls are lower in status than boys.” (Eisenberg et al., 1996, Lorber, 1994, in Allen et al., 2011).

At the same time, these representations also serve to strengthen existing ideals and narratives by becoming the normal frameworks through which we form our understanding. Therefore, it is important to ensure representations of menstruation are inclusive, contain accurate information and help to empower menstruators, rather than perpetuate stereotypes.

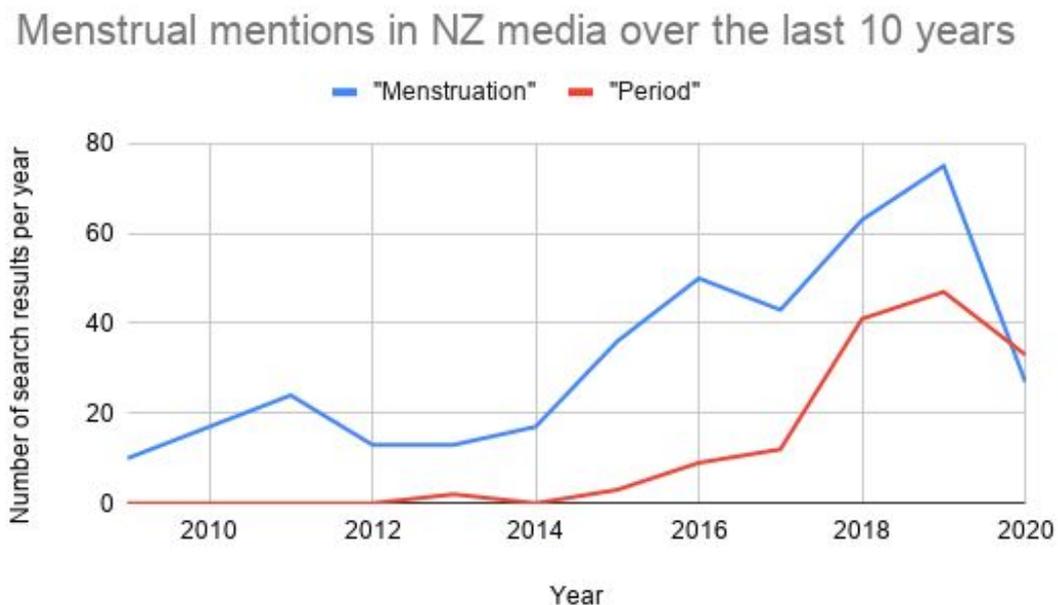
## Content analysis

This content analysis will explore how the literature about menstruation applies to New Zealand news media. Most literature on the portrayal of menstruation comes from a marketing perspective, so this analysis aims to investigate how this research applies to news.

As the purpose of this research is to create a better understanding of how journalists can cover menstruation, it is important to understand how and why journalists currently create stories in the way they do.

This analysis will first look at the quantity of menstruation-related news items over the last decade. Then, it will examine news coverage of one menstruation-related issue in greater depth. This coverage will be related back to the literature reviewed, as well as observations made by journalists who have covered menstruation. Finally, it will briefly consider the links between news media and social change initiatives, using menstruation as a vehicle for discussion.

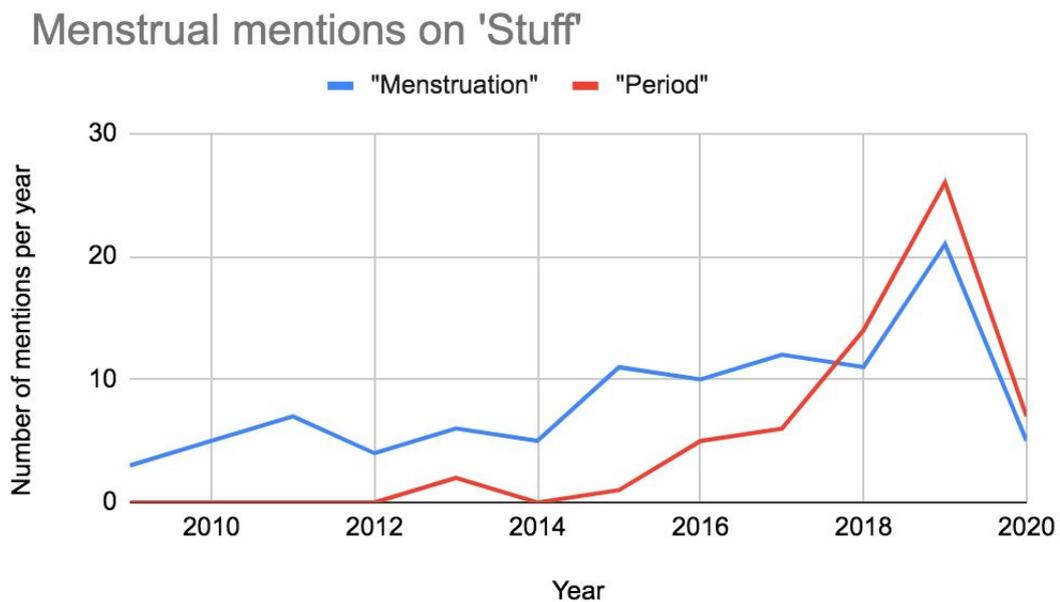
To gain an initial overview of how often menstruation has been mentioned in New Zealand news media, I conducted a search of the terms 'menstruation' and 'period' on a number of mainstream news websites\*. These websites covered a range of news platforms, including digital, radio, tv and print. The results were then sorted by year to see how many stories were found for each search term, on each news platform, for each year between 2009-2020\*\*.



In general, this search revealed that the number of times 'menstruation' or 'period' were mentioned had increased, with a few spikes in some years which seem to be attributable to specific events, such as in 2011 when Employers and Manufacturers Association chief executive

Alasdair Thompson stated women took more sick leave than men, due to menstruation. Coverage of the 2016 American presidential election reiterated Donald Trump's 2015 inference that a reporter's questions were affected by menstruation.

Years that did not show a spike still seem to indicate a general upward trend. The general increase in the use of 'period' could also indicate that, like advertising companies, news media are also moving away from the clinical framing of menstruation which was previously common.



While it does appear that menstruation is mentioned more in news publications than it was 10 years ago, there are some limitations to this search which are important to consider.

Firstly, this overview relies on the search results made available on various news websites. Therefore, this information may more accurately provide insight into past information which is currently available, rather than information which was available at the time of publishing.

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\*The search included results from *Stuff*, *New Zealand Herald*, *Radio New Zealand*, *1 News*, *Newshub* and *Newsroom*. No results were found on *Newstalk ZB*. *Newshub* did not have a search bar on their website, therefore, results for this news organisation were sourced through *Google* by searching 'Newshub menstruation' and 'Newshub period'. Results not relating to menstruation or Newshub New Zealand were omitted.

\*\*Data for 2020 is incomplete as this search was conducted in early July 2020. However, it is included for interest as it may be useful for future researchers into this area.

While searching for both terms may have extended the scope of the articles considered, it will inevitably lead to some articles being counted twice. Most news organisations use the words period and menstruation interchangeably, so some stories mention both words within one article.

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Some platforms did not have results available for all years, which may indicate either a lack of coverage, coverage which is no longer available on the website, or that the news platform did not exist in the earlier years searched.

The results for 'period' are less reliable for the purposes on this research than the term 'menstruation', as period is an ambiguous word which has a variety of meanings. Therefore, the discretion was with the researcher to decide whether the article related to menstruation, either at a glance or by skimming the story. However, the importance of searching for both words cannot be denied, as 'period' is the most common euphemism for menstruation and is more widely used, outside of academic and clinical circles.

This search can only indicate the number of articles mentioning one of these words, but does not tell us how much the article actually related to menstruation. For example, some articles were about student care at Otago University, with menstruation mentioned at the end as an example of other stories involving controversial conduct by the same organisation.

As well as the quantity of menstruation-related stories, it is important to consider the types and nuances of stories covered. Most New Zealand news stories about menstruation have centred around a few different occurrences, with each story covered by multiple news organisations.

The latest story to receive coverage was the 2020 news that a New Zealand supermarket was renaming their menstrual products section to 'Period and Continence Care', rather than 'personal care and sanitary products'. The story also featured in international news publications based in places such as the United States, the United Kingdom, India and Armenia. This may be due to the global focus on New Zealand in other areas of interest, including the Christchurch terror attacks and our response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

The largest story of 2018 was about Otago University's student magazine, *Critic*. One issue of the magazine covered a range of menstruation-related stories and featured artwork of a woman menstruating on the front cover. The wider news stories about this topic focussed on the censorship of the magazine by University authorities.

### **Positive Periods**

The most coverage in 2019 was about whether menstrual products would be provided freely to school students. Articles included coverage of a petition to government, the publication of academic research, trials held in schools and a national hui on 'period poverty'. While recent coverage of this ongoing story extended to include the allocation of funding for this purpose in the 2020 budget, articles published this year will not be considered in this analysis.

The story first found its way into the news when Jacinta Gulasekharam, co-founder of menstruation-related social enterprise *Dignity NZ*, wrote a paper to Education Minister Chris Hipkins describing the state of period poverty in New Zealand.

She was approached by *Newshub* for an interview, which compelled her to change the paper into a petition (*Positive Periods*) to fund period products in schools.

“The media coverage was the reason behind giving it some framing, because that’s how people can rally behind the cause,” Gulasekharam says.

“It was *The AM Show* story that kicked us off in terms of okay, there’s now a campaign in New Zealand to get period products in all schools ... there’s now communication to a wider audience.” (J. Gulasekharam, personal communication, May 9, 2020)

I also spoke to two journalists who have covered menstruation. The first story to be published about *Positive Periods* was by *Newshub* political reporter Mitchell Alexander.

Alexander was interested in the story due to its current nature - while period poverty had previously been covered in New Zealand, there had been no prior coverage of the campaign.

“It was something that certainly the public would care a lot about and so I guess when we’re trying to figure out or decide on a story the impact that it has on other people is certainly a huge indicator,” he says. “The news bosses take into account a number of things like, how current is it, what sort of impact, is it topical, how much discussion would it generate, that sort of thing.”

Another factor was that the story was given exclusively to *Newshub*. “If we’ve got it and no one else has got it then it’ll go higher up in the bulletin or it’ll be put on the front page of the newspaper,” Alexander says. “My producers were more willing and keen to essentially go bigger with the story. I was able to push for [Jacinta] to have a live studio interview with Duncan Garner on *The AM Show* on the morning that it went live.

“There’s a number of things that get taken into account when a news organisation decides to take a story on or not and as a reporter it’s my job to try and fight for that.” (M. Alexander, personal communication, May 27, 2020)

Reporter Kristin Hall has covered menstruation for *Seven Sharp* and *1 News* since 2016.

She initially became interested in period poverty as there had been no stories published about it in New Zealand. At the same time, international news organisations were publishing stories about countries which were considering removing tax on menstrual products.

“There was stuff picking up overseas but I noticed that nothing had really been done on the issue at all in New Zealand, so the initial newsworthiness was the fact that it wasn’t really something that had been addressed in the media in New Zealand. Then, the more I got into it I realised that for some families and for some young women getting their period meant not going to school that week or not going to school for a couple of days that week because of the price and the stigma and the fear of having an accident if they didn’t have what they needed. That made it extra newsworthy to me because it was also an issue that was affecting the education of young women in New Zealand.” (K. Hall, personal communication, May 29, 2020)

## **Method**

I analysed 13 articles which discussed the provision of menstrual products in schools. While most articles discussed the *Positive Periods* campaign, one article was about a separate local government initiative.

These stories were sourced from a range of news publications, including five from *Stuff* and two each from *Radio New Zealand*, *Newshub*, the *New Zealand Herald* and *1 News*. The articles were located under various categories online, including health (4), life and style (3), general news (4) and politics (2).

To analyse these stories, I employed Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) five generic frames, as well as considering other factors relevant to the portrayal of menstruation, based on literature.

The frames used were: attribution of responsibility, human interest, conflict, morality and economic framing. This framework is commonly used in the context of news content analysis (Mou et al., 2019).

I applied a simple yes or no system to the framing questions developed by Semetko and Valkenburg. By attributing one point to every yes answer, I was able to gain a percentage to see how closely each story aligned with each frame. The story was then coded with the frame showing the highest percentage match.

This simplification of the framing questions is not without flaws, the main one being that it does not allow for different weighting to be applied to questions. It also relies on a necessarily subjective interpretation by the researcher. However, this method is sufficient for attaining the broad overview which this analysis seeks.

Other aspects analysed were the visual imagery accompanying the story, who reported on the issue, the sources approached and the words or language used.

## **Results**

Of the 13 stories analysed, nine fit the responsibility frame, three fit the economic frame and one fit the moral frame.

The responsibility frame discusses a story by attributing responsibility for the issue to an individual, group, organisation or government. The use of this frame for the majority of these articles is understandable given the story revolves around a petition to the government, which in itself indicates the government is believed by some to be responsible for acting on the issue.

Iyengar (1991) suggested that television news encourages attribution of responsibility for social problems to individuals, by covering an issue through an event, occurrence or individual rather than by discussing the larger social context (Iyengar, 1991, in Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). In this instance, however, responsibility was consistently attributed to the government by all types of news media and even by politicians interviewed.

The predominance of the responsibility frame "suggests the importance and potential influence of political culture and context on the framing of problems and topics in the news" (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000, p. 106). If New Zealand were a less liberal country or if politicians

expressed outright opposition to the campaign, it would be more likely for this story to be told through a conflict frame instead.

The economic frame discusses a story in terms of the financial implications of an issue and could include outcomes for an individual, group, organisation, region, country or globally.

Semetko and Valkenburg found newspapers were more likely to use the economic consequences frame than television news. They suggested this could be because “print news is more thematic or analytic than the predominantly episodic television news, with the result that economic consequences may receive more attention”. (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000)

However, the three stories which used the economic frame in this scenario were predominantly radio and television outlets. This may be because the stories were retrieved from both organisation’s websites and were also accompanied by a written article - providing more opportunity for analysis as suggested above.

Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) noted the morality frame was the least prevalent in both print and television news. When used, it was often done indirectly through the use of quotes or inference, due to the “professional norm of objectivity”. (Neuman et al., 1992, in Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000)

The sole story which fell under the moral frame looked at menstrual shaming more broadly before discussing the petition, which may explain why it was framed differently to the other articles analysed.

Alexander says discussion around the campaign was more about the nature of solving the issue and identifying all the relevant information, rather than whether period poverty existed. This explains why the conflict frame was not applied to any of the stories analysed.

“In terms of who was on what side of the argument, Jacinta [Gulasekharam, of *Dignity NZ*] wanted more funding and ensuring there was sanitary items in schools. The Minister said that she wanted to help address period poverty, so it wasn’t as if they were completely on different sides of the issue, but it was just giving them each an equal voice in order for it to be a balanced story.” (M. Alexander, personal communication, May 27, 2020)

The broad range of instances when menstruation has been covered in news media appears to support the suggestion that any frame used will depend on the story’s wider context. While this story was not predominantly framed as a conflict or moral issue, it is likely the story about the controversial Libra advertisement, which depicted red liquid instead of the usual blue, would be.

Hall says it is important to be sensitive when considering how to frame any story about menstruation.

“Often I find that when I do these stories people always go ‘Oh well, it’s the parents fault that they can’t buy this stuff for their kids, so it shouldn’t be anybody else’s problem’, so I try to frame the stories in a way that doesn’t attribute any kind of blame to any [one person]. It’s just

kind of 'this is the way it is, it's affecting schooling of young women in New Zealand and it sucks and something should be done about it', rather than really going into any great detail about why they're in that situation." (K. Hall, personal communication, May 29, 2020)

All 13 stories used text as the main medium for story-telling. All except one showed at least one still image, and six had videos embedded into the article.

These videos varied in relevance - some showed clips of politicians pledging support or of advocates lodging the petition, while others were republished videos of older stories (from up to three years earlier), both local and international.

Images included a range of stock photos and photos of people quoted in the articles. Stock photos predominantly showed pads, tampons and menstrual cups sometimes held by hands, otherwise placed on a surface. Most models appeared to be caucasian and the colour pink was featured in most (but not all) stock images, such as a pink menstrual cup, pink nailpolish or a pink hot waterbottle. Some stock images had a flower placed next to the menstrual products.

Halls says a story about menstruation can be challenging to cover visually. "Obviously every line of script you have to cover with some kind of vision and New Zealand (and I daresay the world) isn't ready to see the actual process of menstruation on national TV, which leaves you with shot after shot of sanitary products on the supermarket shelf, which also can get pretty boring to look at," she says.

"There have been times where I've been like, yeah, it would be an advantage to just be able to write about this rather than having to show it, but also there are advantages in the sense that I find when you're doing an interview with people who are affected by this issue, like the young women that I've spoken to about it over the years, the courage to speak about having your period and not having the products you need on national TV is quite a big deal. I think people find it quite confronting when they see teenage girls talking about their experiences on tv and it maybe makes the issue a little bit more real to them. You can see the emotion, you can see the vulnerability, so there are advantages as well." (K. Hall, personal communication, May 29, 2020)

The most common source approached for these articles was a menstrual health advocate or campaigner (quoted by 11 articles), followed by the Minister for Women (seven) and a menstrual health researcher (five). A charity spokesperson, the Prime Minister and a spokesperson for the Opposition party were each quoted twice, while an MP for another party, a council spokesperson, the president of the New Zealand Union of Students' Association's president, a spokesperson for the Human Rights Commission and a budgeting service spokesperson were all quoted once.

Most of these sources would fall under either 'the power elite' or 'celebrity' grouping in Harcup and O'Neill's proposed contemporary news values. Some, such as the prime minister, could arguably be both. Stories concerning powerful individuals, organisations or institutions, and/or people who are already famous are more likely to be selected for publication (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001).

Many of the sources used within sub-categories were all the same person - for example, the researcher quoted by five articles was the same. While this may be unavoidable if there are not many researchers qualified to speak on a subject, it may also limit the scope of perspective provided by the stories.

Articles also referred to research including a nationwide youth survey, a survey by a children's charity, a survey by a menstrual product company, research published by a university, a survey by the Ministry of Health and an overseas study.

None of the articles gave voice to a student or person experiencing period poverty, but Hall says it is important to speak to the people who are most impacted by an issue.

"To kind of normalise it more, to centre the women and girls who are actually dealing with this problem in the stories rather than just going to the charities constantly and people who speak on behalf of people who struggle to get sanitary products and struggle to get the basics. I know from personal experience that it's not always easy to find someone who's willing to talk about it but I do think it is important to try and find someone who can speak about their experience, not just because I think its important in general to have people who are dealing with any particular issue to speak about what's happening to them, but also because it just makes stories more compelling, rather than it just being this spokesperson says, that spokesperson says.

"Over the years I've found it easier to find young women who will speak about it. When I did my first story with a young woman who was skipping school, I spoke to lots of schools who said 'Yeah, we have lots of students in that situation but they'd never go on camera,' ... then I finally found one. We had to film her non-I.D., which was totally understandable because she was still at school and didn't want to be bullied about it, but since then, like in the last couple of months when I've done stories, it's actually been pretty easy to find young women who'll go on camera and talk pretty candidly about it." (K. Hall, personal communication, May 29, 2020)

Of the reporters named seven were female and four were male. One was identified as an Auckland reporter, another as an Auckland millennial issues reporter, and a third as an Auckland health reporter. Three were political reporters, while another was a senior reporter. At least three of these reporters discussed the issue across multiple stories, reflecting Harcup and O'Neill's "follow-ups" news value which states stories about subjects already in the news are more likely to be published (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001).

Hall does not believe that menstruation should be covered by solely female journalists. "I'd be very happy to see more men reporting on these issues, as long as they did it with a level of understanding and not judgment," she says.

"Since the issue has gotten more popular in the media there have been male journalists who have reported on it, particularly as the issue has gotten more political and more politicians speak about it." (K. Hall, personal communication, May 29, 2020)

Alexander found the experience of covering menstruation personally rewarding and educational. "I think it's an important issue as a male," he says. "If another male reporter was looking at doing something along those lines, I just think that they should have an open mind

and be willing to learn and to try and understand some of the issues that face women all across the world.” (M. Alexander, personal communication, May 27, 2020)

### **Language used**

I identified 28 words and phrases which were used across the articles to describe menstruation, menstrual products, people who menstruate and systems relating to menstruation (for example, ‘period poverty’ or ‘menstrual health’). These words were included in the body of the articles, the headlines and in image captions.

The word ‘period’ was more commonly used than the word ‘menstruation’. Of the 13 articles analysed, eight did not use the word menstruation at all. Four of the 13 articles mentioned neither word unless as part of a wider phrase, such as ‘period poverty’.

This is consistent with research which suggests people often distanced themselves from menstruation by talking about it vague terms (Jackson et al., 2013).

When referring to people who menstruate, most articles used the term ‘girls’, closely followed by ‘women’, which was interesting given the story was about providing menstrual products to young people in schools. ‘Students’ came in as the third most-preferred word, with ‘children’ or ‘kids’, ‘daughters’, ‘people’ and ‘those who menstruate’ all scoring on the lower end of the scale.

In terms of describing products used, ‘sanitary products’ was used 77 times in total, with the next most popular word, ‘tampons’, used only 18 times. ‘Pads’ and ‘period products’ were in a similar range, while ‘menstrual cups’, ‘menstrual products’, ‘period underwear’ and ‘sanitary pads’ were all mentioned less than 10 times. The terms ‘feminine hygiene products’ and ‘feminine hygiene’ were not used at all.

To discuss systems surrounding menstruation, the term ‘menstrual health education’ was most popular, likely due to its encompassing nature. ‘Menstrual education’ and/or ‘menstruation education’ were mentioned six times, ‘menstrual health’ four, ‘menstrual management’ twice and ‘period education’ once.

Other words relating to menstruation which were analysed included ‘period poverty’ (65), ‘stigma’ and ‘taboo’ (14), ‘period pain’ (4), ‘blood’ or ‘bleeding’ (3) and ‘menstruates’/‘menstruating’ (2).

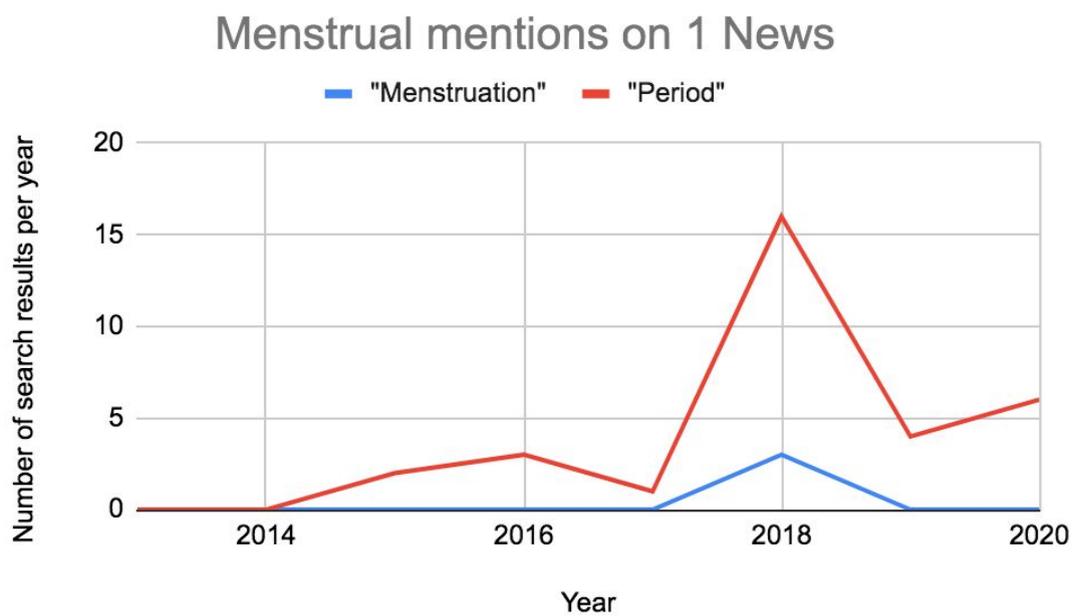
Gulasekharam says using the correct language when discussing menstruation is important.

“We’re a lot more aware now of using terms like period products, menstruation, menstruators or students rather than girls or sanitary items,” she says.

“Language is really important and a lot of the outlets don’t get it right sometimes and that’s okay. I think that’s gonna be a shift over time but if more of us that are in this advocacy stage can use those words then those terms get picked up and then they can get more widely used so I think language is really important and helpful.” (J. Gulasekharam, personal communication, May 9, 2020)

Hall says the language used by journalists is sometimes dictated by those in more senior positions. “Some of that is producer driven, like the fact that a lot of them would like the script to be quite sanitised, so to speak. They don’t really want to hear the word period or menstruation or any of the actual terms for it, they’d prefer you to skip around the issue like ‘time of the month’, ‘sanitary products’ over ‘pads and tampons’, so I’ve had to factor that into my script which is frustrating because I’d rather just use the words, but if it means the story is going to get to air when previously it might not, that’s not a hill that I’m willing to die on.” (K. Hall, personal communication, May 29, 2020)

The search for stories containing the word ‘period’ described above showed that *1 News* did appear to prefer the word ‘period’ over ‘menstruation’, which is consistent with Hall’s experience.



The disparity between the low use of terms relating to menstrual education and the high use of ‘period poverty’ and terms relating to menstrual products shows stories were covered from a particular angle, as the petition called for an improvement to menstruation education in New Zealand, as well as better access to products.

This may relate to the “magnitude” news value proposed by Harcup and O’Neill, wherein “stories which are perceived as sufficiently significant either in the numbers of people involved or in potential impact” are favoured for publication. While a change to menstruation education would only affect students and their parents, the provision of menstrual products, and its obvious associated costs, would directly affect all taxpayers (Harcup and O’Neill, 2001).

#### Reporting

*Stuff* reporter and former editor of student magazine *Critic* Joel McManus (2020) says whether a publication covers menstruation depends on a number of factors.

McManus was the editor of *Critic* when the controversial menstruation issue was published in 2018. As a student magazine, he says *Critic* is able to cover smaller stories, whereas a larger organisation like *Stuff* would probably only cover menstruation as part of a larger feature.

“The first thing about a student magazine is that you can be extremely local because you’re literally just focused on your university and so you can very much have a targeted focus on specific things at the university...stories don’t need to be as big.

“A little thing about there being not quite as many sanitary bins in university bathrooms as they officially advertised was something that was a story in the student magazine which might not make national media, but sometimes it’s those little things that make the difference and really matter. At *Stuff* I can’t imagine them picking up something like that unless it was part of a larger feature about period poverty or if some major study had come out about it, but those little things about one institution doing something which matters to a few thousand people quite a lot, maybe wouldn’t make *Stuff*.”

He also noted there was a difference between news publications and magazines. “The other thing obviously being that *Critic* was a magazine and so we had some magazine-style features in first-person and what not, which maybe mainstream news couldn’t do but something like *The Spinoff* could certainly do really well, just in terms of style.” (J. McManus, personal communication, May 12, 2020)

Alexander says while story selection will depend on the bigger picture, such as the size of the organisation and what other stories are available, television can be particularly competitive. “The producers or the people who put the show together they expect from a reporter to essentially produce something really, really great in order for it to make it, whereas on the radio, as an example, it’s a lot more instant, there’s something new every half an hour or something new every hour, so from a radio perspective it would just be like ‘Yeah, let’s just get it out there.’” (M. Alexander, personal communication, May 27, 2020)

Hall and Alexander both came across the story through one of their contacts, a colleague and an external contact respectively.

“The general boss of the Wellington newsroom suggested that story to me but he wasn’t the boss of the show, so then it was an ordeal to get the story idea past the boss of the show at that time because he didn’t like it at all, he was grossed out by it,” Hall says.

Hall is not entirely sure why the tip was given to her, but believes she may have been the only female journalist in that newsroom at the time. “He also knew that I was a bit of a feminist at times, so he probably knew that I would have a level of interest in the story anyway. That might have had something to do with it or it might’ve just been that he heard of it and thought it was a good story but wouldn’t be the right fit for news.” (K. Hall, personal communication, May 29, 2020)

Hetherington (1985, in Harcup and O’Neill, 2001) noted most journalists assessed the value of a story by instinctually asking whether it interested them. In this way, menstruation could be

covered more when at least one journalist in the organisation has a personal interest in the issue.

All three reporters interviewed agreed it could be difficult to convince editors about the newsworthiness of menstruation-related stories.

“Internally, I’m not gonna lie it’s always been a struggle. I don’t think I’ve ever pitched a story on this subject and I’ve had a producer be like ‘Great, really waiting on a story on this,’” Hall says. “Now that I’m on the news, on 6 o’clock rather than *Seven Sharp*, the stories will always be buried in like the third break, just before the sports.” (K. Hall, personal communication, May 29, 2020)

McManus was also not initially keen on a menstrual theme for *Critic*, which he now attributes to his own lack of awareness at the time. “It wasn’t about it potentially having a vast enough audience, I think the majority of our readers were women. It was more that I was a little confused at first as to how we would do an entire issue about something that perhaps was relatively specific. In the end that was not an issue at all, there was plenty of content and a good variety of it that it didn’t just feel like the same story.” (J. McManus, personal communication, May 12, 2020)

## **Discussion**

Content analysis is a valid method for research into how, why and when a topic is covered by news media. However, as Harcup and O’Neill (2001) point out, while a content analysis may inform us about stories which have been published, it will not provide information about stories which remained unpublished, nor why.

Menstruation is often regarded as “historically unchanging”, which may lead to less coverage compared to similar phenomenon (Brookes et al., 1998). It seems to be viewed as a more newsworthy topic when discussed in conjunction with other social issues, for example, poverty, equity and education in the case of the *Positive Periods* story, or censorship in the *Critic* menstrual issue and *Libra* advertisement stories.

Editors and newsroom decision makers control when a story about menstruation gets published, as with any other issue. The journalists interviewed all mentioned some hesitation on the part of the editor of their publication regarding a story about menstruation.

All three journalists interviewed for this project also mentioned audience reaction to their stories. Comments, tweets, and social media likes and shares are all part of the modern journalism vehicle which a content analysis cannot take into account.

Hall says stories about menstruation are often popular with news consumers. “I’m passionate about the issue so I always think that it deserves a lot of attention, but then the funny thing is that it doesn’t seem to matter how little enthusiasm there is for the stories in the editorial team, they always go really massive online. The website will always be like ‘yay, Kristin’s got another story about sanitary products’ because the engagement is always really massive,” she says.

“My most recent story, which is talking about how the government has very silently allocated \$2.2 million in the budget for it, I tweeted about it just saying that that’s what the government had done and that there’ll be more at 6 o’clock and it blew up. It got a thousand likes and heaps of retweets, which I never get for any of my stories ever, so I think that just goes to show that people do care and just because it can be kind of an awkward issue to talk about it doesn’t mean that people don’t care.” (K. Hall, personal communication, May 29, 2020)

This may be one reason that menstruation-related stories appear to be growing in quantity - with the rise of social media statistics and Google analytics, it is possible for editors to see whether stories are popular, gain readership, have enough of an audience and generate engagement.

It is clear from events surrounding the coverage of the *Positive Periods* campaign that journalistic coverage can impact the menstrual experiences of people in New Zealand, and vice versa.

Gulasekharam says she and her co-founder were originally inspired to embark on a social enterprise business model after seeing a news item about period poverty in New Zealand. “The whole reason that Dignity started was this first news media piece at the end of 2016 when Kristin did that for *Seven Sharp*,” she says.

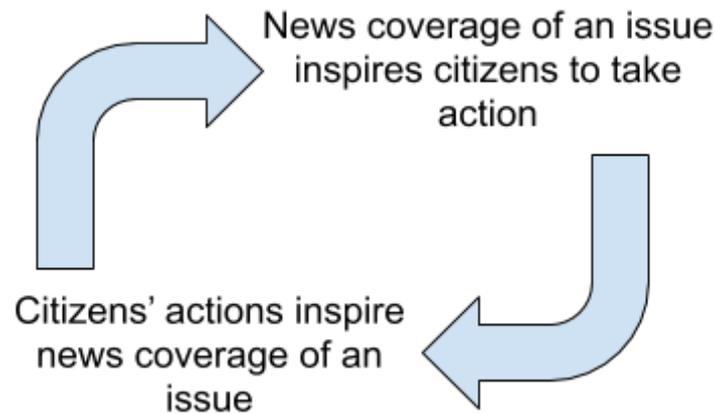
“Miranda and I were diving into *Dignity* as a business but didn’t have that buy one give one model at that stage. That story made us who we are in terms of, the impact model that we have today was because of that story and that feels very similar to Lisa King, she saw that John Campbell story about children not having lunches and decided to create *Eat My Lunch*. I think the media plays such an important part to expose issues that get people thinking to start initiatives.” (J. Gulasekharam, personal communication, May 9, 2020)

New media also helped her to shape the *Positive Periods* campaign, which was covered by multiple news media. This coverage led to 3,105 signatures on the petition urging the Government to fund menstrual products in schools.

In this way, news coverage of an issue can inspire members of the public to begin initiatives or take action to address social issues and create change. At the same time, initiatives to create change are likely to become news stories in themselves, due to their unexpected nature (Harcup and O’Neill, 2001).

News media can therefore be a powerful tool when it comes to creating social change. Both Hall and Alexander gave keeping pressure on the Government as a reason for continuing to report on menstruation, beyond the initial petition.

By seeing themselves as responsible for holding the Government to account and being a voice for the public, Hall and Alexander, along with other journalists who covered the issue, demonstrated what Compton proposed is “...a broadly held belief that journalists themselves have a responsibility to a higher social calling”. (Compton, 2004, p. 3)



This aligns with Diaz et al., who state news media can provide visibility, legitimacy, and credibility to issues and to the organisations advocating for change.

By selecting some events and not others for news coverage, the media send a signal to the public about what is important and worth thinking about. The media also provide advocates with an avenue to reach those people whose power can help move the issue on the policy agenda. Put simply, the news media communicate to opinion leaders and influential people, as well as the general public, what issues they should think about, how they should think about them, and who has worthwhile things to say about the issues. (Diaz et al., 1999, p.3)

News media also act as a mouthpiece for advocates and the general public, who may not be able to directly address those with the ability to create change, such as politicians.

For various reasons, advocates often cannot speak directly or effectively to these people: Maybe they don't return phone calls, or maybe they make promises in private meetings but then do not deliver. Media can be a powerful tool in opening that private conversation up to the entire community and speaking to decision makers. Seeing the issue covered in the news may make decision makers feel that the entire community is in on the conversation and expecting them to act. (Diaz et al., 1999, p.4)

An example of this in the menstruation issue is the change in stance of then Minister for Women Louise Upston. In a 2016 interview with Hall, Upston said she believed menstrual products were affordable and that removing tax on these items was not a priority for her ("Too poor to have a period?", 2016). In a 2019 interview with Alexander, once the issue had been in the news multiple times, she indicates there are some people who struggled to access menstrual products and that this is an issue.

"We haven't actually seen any change, I think what the real issue is is there's an increased pressure on the cost of living. Women that were struggling before with paying for sanitary pads will be doing it even harder now. I think that's the real crime." (Upston, in Revealed:..., 2019).

Of course, there may be additional reasons for Upston's change in stance, including the fact that her political party was no longer in government by 2019, but it cannot be denied that being held to account in the public eye may have been a partial motivator.

Gulasekharam says the journalists whom she spoke to treated the issue with sensitivity. "I was quite scared in terms of benefit blaming or things like that, like really nasty entrenched beliefs that people have in terms of poverty in New Zealand, that people are spending their money on smokes and not on these things. They did ask me the questions but then at the end of my interview that first time with *The AM Show*, [presenter Mark Richardson] said they were necessity items."

She believes menstruation is relevant across a number of different news publications and mediums. "We have been covered in *NBR* and we've been in *Woman's Weekly* and we've been in *Stuff* and *The Spinoff*.

"Those angles are better understood to those different audiences, so I think it's great if it hits both of those angles, because at the end of the day periods affect half the population and it's something that all audiences should have an awareness of." (J. Gulasekharam, personal communication, May 9, 2020)

Diaz et al. say marginalised groups who do not feel represented by media try to leverage the medium to support their desired outcomes.

The emergence and spread of media advocacy over the last decade has been fueled by a growing frustration among progressive groups who feel their voices have not been heard and their issues not seen. At the same time, it reflects an increasing sophistication about how social change happens. Rather than cursing the news media, or complaining about their indifference or outright hostility, people are now trying to harness the power of the media to advance their social policy goals. (Diaz et al., 1999, p.ix-x)

Harcup and O'Neill (2001) discuss 'pseudo-events', where stories covered are not actually reports of events or occurrences, but are rather a reiteration of advertising or a public relations agenda. They suggest that as well as external sources, media may also be responsible for such news items.

Alexander says the key to covering menstruation is to be empathetic, while also remaining balanced. "Showing empathy and still remaining balanced, because as a reporter that's what you're supposed to do, but just trying to understand and see it from not your shoes, because you're not the one who's obviously having to deal with the issue." (M. Alexander, personal communication, May 27, 2020)

Hall would like to see menstruation discussed more in news media. "It's not an issue that's going to go away, especially as people are going to find their finances getting more and more dire this year, so I would like to see the pressure being kept up and that the government doesn't just say 'Oh we've given this amount and now we can wash our hands of it and just forget about it. I would like to see more reporting on the issue until it's something that girls don't have to worry about at school.'" (K. Hall, personal communication, May 29, 2020)



# Survey

As well as examining the circumstances surrounding menstruation in news media from a journalistic perspective, it is important to consider the viewpoint of the end user. The audience, reader or listener may have opinions on how and when menstruation is and should be covered by news media which differ from those held by industry professionals.

## Method

To explore this alternative perspective, I created a survey which asked for opinions on menstruation in the media. The survey was disseminated on Facebook, via multiple public and private pages. Respondents volunteered to take part and answered a range of questions about their personal experience of menstruation, menstruation in general, and in advertising and news media specifically.

The survey was open to all genders, ages and locations. Respondents were predominantly either raised in New Zealand or currently lived here, identified as female and believed menstruation to be a topic which should be discussed more.

This is unsurprising, given the self-selection model the survey was based upon and its dissemination through local Facebook groups. However, it is worth considering why males or people who hold a less positive view of menstruation do not participate in discussions regarding it, and whether this is telling in itself.

## Participants

146 people responded to the survey, of which 133 had menstruated at some point in their life and 13 had not. 127 respondents identified as female, 12 as male and seven as non-binary or gender diverse.

116 respondents were either raised and/or currently lived in New Zealand, while 30 respondents indicated they were raised and currently lived in a country other than New Zealand. Most of these were from the United States, however, people from Australia, Canada and New Caledonia also responded to the survey.

The majority of respondents were between the ages of 30-34 (29%), but people aged 20-24 (19%), 25-29 (22%) and 35-44 (20%) were also well represented. Those aged 15-19 and 45-54 were less represented (6% and 3% respectively) while no one aged under 15 or over 54 took part in the survey.

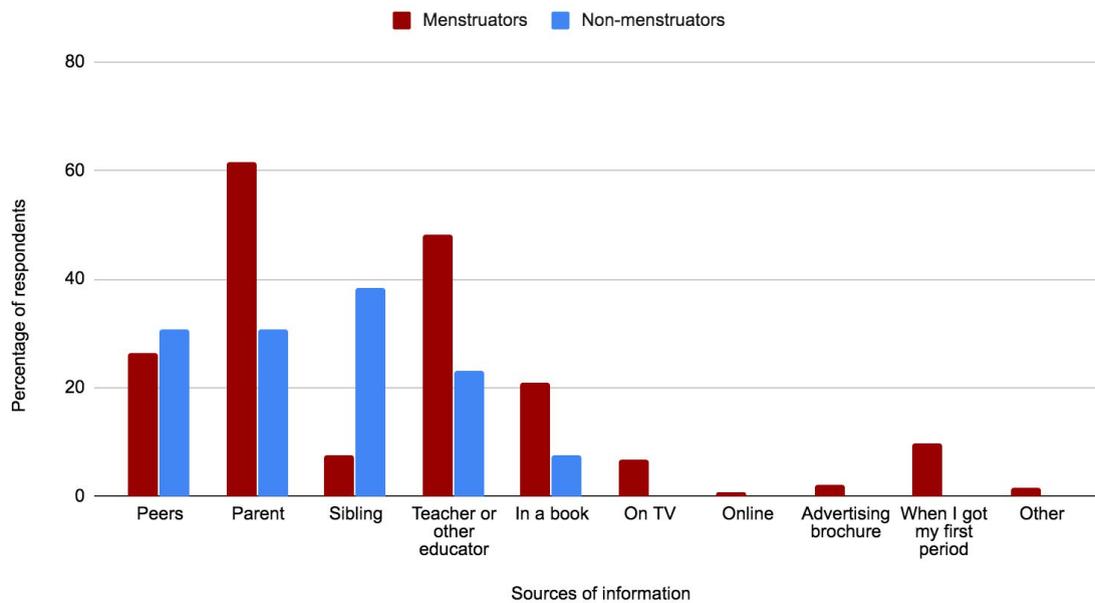
One of the drawbacks of this data is that the range of respondents was not as ethnically diverse as our population: 80% of respondents were of some type of Caucasian descent (62% pākehā and 15% white North American, 4% European). Participants identifying as Māori or Indian each accounted for 4% of respondents, Cook Islands Māori and Asian (other) for 1% each, while Chinese, Pacific Island (other), African American and Jamaican were each represented by one respondent only. Nine participants (6%) preferred not to answer this question.

## Results

The mean age of menarche indicated by both international and New Zealand respondents was just over 12-and-a-half years old. Most participants first learned about menstruation between the ages of 10-14.

Menstruators were more likely to learn about menstruation from a parent, while non-menstruators were significantly more likely to learn about menstruation from a sibling.

Where respondents first learned about menstruation



Menstruators were also more likely to rate their level of confidence in their knowledge of menstruation as “very confident”, while non-menstruators were more likely to rate themselves as “somewhat confident”.

Most respondents who had experienced menstruation agreed with the statement “I understood what menstruation was but learned more about it after I started menstruating”, while fewer agreed they were “fully informed about menstruation” before they began menstruating. Three respondents had never heard of menstruation until they began menstruating, while one noted they had “actively avoided” learning about menstruation until it was absolutely necessary.

Most respondents indicated some kind of negative association when asked to describe their first impressions of menstruation, describing various degrees of fear, worry, disgust, anger and embarrassment. “I started crying as soon as I started menstruating. It was my understanding from my peers that it was gross. It was to be kept a secret - if you started menstruating and if anyone found out, you would be made fun of mostly by male peers.”

Many described a combination of positive and negative associations. “Proud at first because I felt like I was growing up. Annoying because I had to suddenly wear sanitary items. Embarrassed because I didn't know it was coming and my underwear had blood on it.”

“On one hand, mum taught me it was something to celebrate - becoming a woman. On the other hand, my sis made me feel embarrassed as I was too scared to use tampons (she made me think pads were gross). It was also embarrassing menstruating so young.”

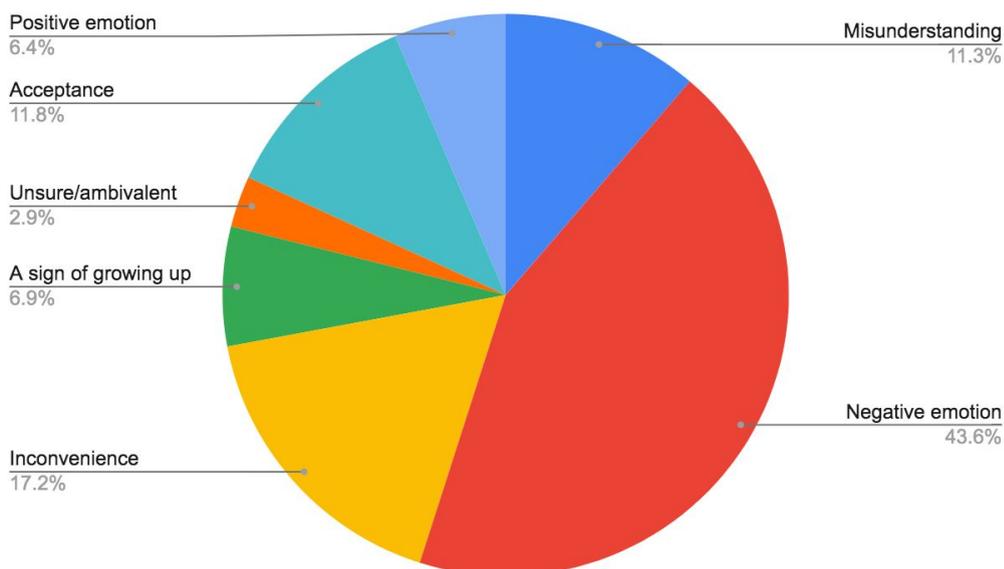
Menstruators described wondering if their experience was normal and a perceived need to keep menstruation a secret. “Denial and shock. What’s happening to me? This can’t be my period - is this brown stuff blood?”

“Remember it being annoying (nothing’s changed) and don’t think I recall being taught about different types, like different discharges or colourings. I just expected one type of ‘blood’ and that’s it.”

Some non-menstruators expressed relief they did not have to experience menstruation. “The boys in our all-boys college with a notoriously sexist culture would mention it in relation to our experience of puberty in sex ed classes. I think I felt sorry that girls had to go through the ordeal.”

“Glad I don’t have to deal with it personally - gross! (classic teen).”

### Initial responses to menstruation



*\*Comments coded by researcher*

Respondents largely indicated their perception of menstruation had not been affected by any advertisements. Those who had discussed false narratives and an unrealistic portrayal of menstruation. For example, women in advertisements wore white clothes and exhibited high energy levels, whereas respondents noted they would avoid wearing light colours and felt tired while menstruating.

Others found advertisements to be empowering and helpful in rethinking the limits of menstruation, giving them new information or normalising it. “Some TV commercials about girls

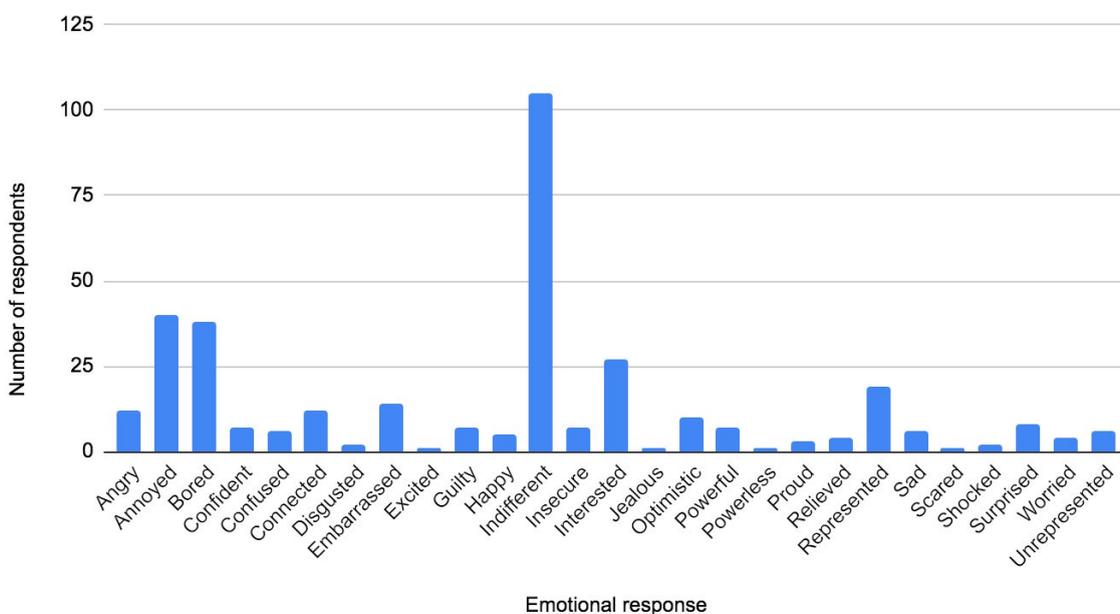
playing sports and doing cool stuff while on their period made me feel better about it, when I was a kid.”

Many comments mentioned cliches and sanitised images of menstruation. One of the most predominant examples cited was the common use of blue liquid in menstrual product advertisements, instead of red. As one respondent put it: “It’s very hush-hush-flowery-female”.

Respondents were asked to select words which described their emotions when they saw an advertisement for menstrual products on television, radio, online or in print.

A large proportion reported a feeling of indifference, with a smaller amount expressing annoyance or boredom. While 19 respondents indicated they felt represented, six reported feeling alienated or not-represented. One respondent noted that as a transgendered person who menstruated, advertisements for menstrual products left them feeling “dysphoric”.

Emotional responses to menstrual product advertising



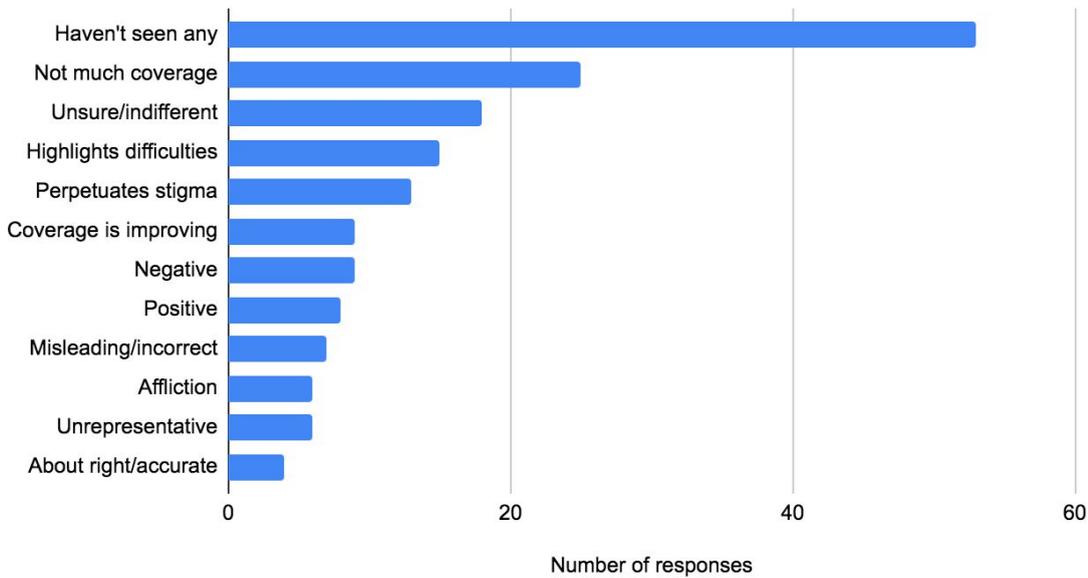
Most respondents could not recall an instance where menstruation had appeared in news media. Those who could indicated there was not a lot of news coverage, but the coverage there was seemed to highlight the difficulties some people faced due to menstruation. This was usually framed as a positive, though some respondents expressed concern about comments made in the comment sections of articles. “Recent news articles about period poverty - it makes me feel relieved that we are acknowledging period poverty and acknowledging that periods actually exist!”

“The comments people write following news articles that make you feel ashamed to be a women [sic].”

Some participants thought news stories were too vague or indirect, perpetuating taboos, while others expressed the opinion that coverage of menstruation was changing or had improved over

the years. These views were expressed in the form of comments, with some answers indicating more than one of the following themes:

### Portrayal of menstruation in news stories

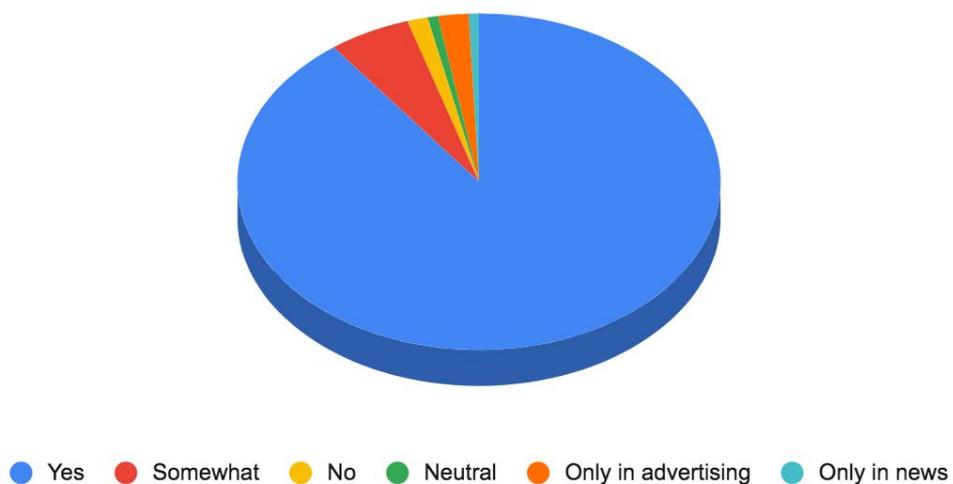


*\*Comments coded by researcher*

Those whose impression had been affected by news stories mainly described how discussion of menstruation raised their awareness of other social issues, such as poverty, inequality in schools and workplaces, environmental concerns and gendered language.

Respondents overwhelmingly supported coverage of menstruation in media. Some supported it tentatively, either expressing confusion as to when it would be newsworthy or caveats about specific situations in which it should be covered. Two respondents did not want to see menstruation in news stories or advertising.

### Does menstruation belong in media?



## Discussion

The content analysis aimed to explore how general literature about menstruation applied to New Zealand news media. As most literature on the portrayal of menstruation came from a marketing perspective, it aimed to investigate whether it could also be applied to news media.

The analysis shows while some journalists want to provide more menstruation-related coverage, this can be difficult to achieve in the competitive newsroom environment. Indirect language and sanitised language may also be prescribed by those in higher editorial positions. Most news publications used the same sources for comment and did not include comment from individuals who experienced menstruation. Gendered or trans-exclusionary language was common.

Many of the themes which are relevant to menstrual product advertising are also relevant to menstruation-related news media. Until there is further research on menstruation in news media, research on menstruation in other areas must be carefully applied to cover any gaps in the literature.

Advertisements, public relations and news stories sometimes intersect, such as in the case of the *Libra* advertisement and more indirectly, *Dignity NZ's* involvement with the *Positive Periods* story. Both often use language which is evasive, gendered or implies that menstruation is unclean. At the same time, both advertisements and news stories can be useful to those wishing to start a dialogue about menstruation.

One of the key differences between advertising and news media is what Compton described as “a core tension within journalism between professional idealism and the craft’s material conditions of existence”. (Compton, 2004, p.3)

The barriers between journalists and providing the best menstrual coverage are often logistical in nature, rather than idealistic. Most journalists want to expose social issues and cover them sensitively, with the right information and in a balanced manner. However, finding sources, editorial decision-making by higher-ups and lack of available information can all lead to imperfect coverage. Most news organisations are pressured by time and financial constraints.

While there is currently no particular resource for journalists who wish to use the right language when discussing menstruation, being aware of different connotations and taking note of what language menstrual health advocates are using could be helpful in reducing negative perception of menstruation.

In particular, journalists should work to avoid terms which imply menstruation is unclean, such as ‘feminine hygiene’ or ‘sanitary products’, and instead employ more accurate and less vague phrases, such as ‘menstrual products’. Similarly, it may be helpful to use the word ‘menstruation’ instead of ‘period’ where possible, although it is understandable many news organisations want to speak in language used by their audience/readers. Avoiding gendered language when discussing menstruation and, unless pertinent to the story, language which excludes certain age-groups may also improve representation.

Editors, or those in charge of making decisions about final publication, should actively consider their own biases or perceptions of menstruation before disregarding menstruation as a news story.

Finally, while approaching official persons or organisations may lend a sense of legitimacy to the story, it is important to provide space for the voices of those directly affected, in this case, people who experience menstruation.

The findings of the survey indicate that most respondents want more news media coverage of menstruation. In particular, they wanted coverage of a wider variety of menstrual experiences, including the experiences of trans and gender diverse people. They would like to see more direct, less gendered language and images. A generous proportion indicated they would like to see the inclusion of alternative menstrual products, such as menstrual cups and underwear, in news stories which discuss pads and tampons.

The average age of menarche for respondents of this survey was slightly lower than the age found by researchers at the University of Otago, which was 13.2 years (University of Otago, 2018). That research suggested the correct place to educate students about menstruation was in primary school, however, most respondents of this survey indicated they learned about menstruation between the ages of 10-14 years old, which correlates with Year 5 or 6 - Year 9 or 10 in the New Zealand schooling system (New Zealand Now, 2020).

Menstruators were more likely to learn about menstruation from a parent, while non-menstruators were more likely to gain knowledge from a sibling. Research suggests there is a lack of a clear source of information about menstruation for boys (Allen, Kaestle and Goldberg, 2011), which may explain why non-menstruators were more likely to indicate a more even spread of sources for menstrual knowledge and less likely to participate in the survey.

The initial negative impressions of menstruation indicated by the majority of respondents is consistent with almost all of the literature discussed previously.

While most respondents indicated their impression of menstruation had not been impacted by advertising, it is possible any impressions left by marketing material were subliminal and unnoticed by respondents. The same can also be said for the lack of impressions indicated for news media.

This question may have also had different results if answered by younger people who are still learning about menstruation or less aware of general menstrual discourse. As no one under the age of 15 responded to this survey, further research may be required to explore this possibility.

When participants did recall news stories on the subject it was often in relation to other social issues. This is consistent with the findings of the content analysis, which showed news publications often discussed menstruation as part of a wider problem, such as education, inequality or poverty.

Respondents predominantly believed menstruation belonged in the media. This belief was reflected in the comments made by the journalists interviewed, who noted stories about menstruation were often popular with news consumers.

The few respondents who did not believe menstruation belonged in news media expressed confusion about when the subject would be newsworthy, rather than a belief that it was taboo or an unappealing topic. This supports research which shows some people believe menstruation to be historically unchanging and, therefore, unnecessary to discuss (Brookes and Tennant, 1998).

Most respondents indicated they found advertisements about menstrual products to be annoying, which should be of note to news organisations, given that literature has found news stories often reinforce menstrual product advertisements (Katz, 2007, in Chesler, 2013).

In terms of language, respondents indicated they would generally welcome the use of more direct words when discussing menstruation. This was also suggested by a journalist and menstrual health advocate interviewed, but will likely need to be a longer-term societal change, rather than solely a newsroom issue.

### **Limitations**

If this research was to be replicated, it would be important to ensure a wider range of ethnicities and ages were represented. The countries which overseas respondents were raised and currently lived in are, for the most part, culturally similar to New Zealand. Separating data by New Zealand and international respondents did not result in any notable differences. This may not have been the case if overseas respondents from a wider range of countries had taken part.

Most respondents believed menstruation was an important topic for discussion. Gathering the opinions of people who were less convinced of this, though logistically difficult, would provide a better understanding of how society as a whole perceives menstruation.

While there are gaps in the data collected by this survey, it is a useful tool to begin to examine menstruation in the media from the perspective of the audience or reader.

Bell (1991, p. 11) argues that “the audience is arguably the most important and certainly the most researched component of mass communication. Media live by the size and composition of their audiences.”. Meanwhile, Weaver says news values are less influenced by the information citizens want or need, but are more “a reflection of organisational, sociological and cultural norms combined with economic factors” (Weaver et al., 2007, in Harcup and O’Neill, 2016).

Whichever the case may be, the end purpose of news media content is for it to be digested by news consumers. The perspective of the audience or user is therefore important to consider when trying to understand how news media can better communicate with the communities they serve.

## Conclusion

This project explored the relationship between menstruation, media and social change. It also examined New Zealand news media coverage of the 'Positive Periods' petition in greater depth.

News coverage of menstruation is now more common than ever before, which may reflect a wider societal shift towards acceptance and discussion of menstruation. At the same time, there is room for improvement in the way stories are told, which could lead to more inclusive and less stigmatising news coverage. As news stories influence public perception of an issue, sensitive topics need to be covered mindfully and consciously. As the old proverb states, 'with great power there must also come great responsibility'.

Menstrual news coverage is challenged by the current media climate, which includes the limited time to cover stories and the lack of resources available to journalists. However, some of the changes suggested for menstrual news coverage are possible despite these limits, such as taking care of the language used in a story.

Though these details may seem insignificant in the scheme of things, the literature reviewed and the survey responses indicate a positive impact when implemented. While readers and viewers want to see and hear more about menstruation in the media, they want to be told about a broader range of personal experiences. Learning about issues which sit alongside menstruation is important, and positive stories about social change are also welcomed.

To this effect, this project highlights the influence of both media and menstruation on the New Zealand public's perception of different issues. Both have been used to draw attention to areas of society where change is needed and inequalities exist. Combining the two appears to not only address the state of menstruation in New Zealand, but also other areas of importance, such as education, poverty and gender equality.

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A period of change : menstruation in the  
media : a 60-credit Journalism project  
presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of  
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2020

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