

# **“How do men in Wales aged 18-30 interpret the representations of menstruation in progressive period product advertising?”**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Period product advertising has historically been a controversial business venture for many brands and consumers alike. In recent years however, with the ever-growing usage of social media intertwined with new ideas about body acceptance and positivity, there has been a wave of new and progressive menstruation adverts that has turned the taboo narrative on its head. The feminine hygiene market is estimated to be worth 37.4 billion globally (Statista, 2022) and it is because of this ever-growing figure that consumer expectations have forced many companies to provide a more accurate representation of menstruation within their advertising.

Menstrual product advertisements and the way in which the adverts construct a “tainted state of femininity” (Block Courts & Berg, 1993) has progressed, and more recent scholars have researched how women have reacted to the industry becoming more inclusive, diverse and accurate. However, there has been very little research into how men have perceived these progressive adverts and that is what this research project aims to discover. The need to explore this central dichotomy between representation and audience reception is vital in the study of representations of period products in advertising. Adverts of this nature may shock or offend some viewers however, they serve a larger cultural purpose to normalise such bodily functions and this entails screening the adverts to men, not just the intended target audience.

The purpose of this audience study is to establish whether young men feel comfortable watching and discussing the subject of menstruation in focus groups after screening these three progressive period product adverts:

- Modibodi - ‘The New Way to Period’ (2020)
- Bodyform – ‘#wombstories’ (2020)
- AWWA – ‘Period Lockdown: a short film’ (2021)

These adverts focus on accurate depictions of period blood and this is an essential component to the study as it was not until 2017 in the UK that period blood was shown accurately, previously being depicted as a blue liquid (Harvey-Jenner, 2017). Ultimately this research proposal will determine if cultural strides have been made in regard to the male perception of realistic menstrual representations.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Period product advertising dates back to the early twentieth century with many print and early television adverts depicting menstruation as a shameful taboo subject that incorporates messages of “social consequences of showing feminine hygiene” (Merskin,1999). Luke (1997) argued that the visual consumption of period product advertising and in particular the connotations of period blood creates a “boundary between women and society, as well as between women and men”, propelling the gender-biased discourse of stereotypical menstruating women within the advertising industry (Holmes & Marra, 2005). Most academic investigations of menstrual representations suggest that periods are a “source of social stigma for women” (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013) and use the example of menstruation to reflect on the wider cultural representations of womanhood being something to be ashamed of or to keep hidden away from others discovery (Block Courts & Berg, 1993). However, this theory goes against post-modern feminist theorists such as Bobel (2010), Jackson & Falmange (2013) and Woods (2013) who argue that such adverts objectify and misrepresent the meaning of being a ‘woman’. Consequently, they suggest that there needs to be a shift away from the societal need to be hyperfeminine and instead campaign for the media landscape to better represent periods as a natural bodily function that makes people feel proud to be a woman.

It is imperative to understand the impact that social media has on bettering gender representations and shifting the discourse from entertainment to education. Progressive theories of menstrual representations such as Gaybor (2020) suggests that in recent years young people have started to reject mainstream body ideals highlighting that the notions of menstruation have evolved. This study is highly valuable in relation to this project and the ideologies align with a similar hypothesis from both studies. However, it is important to note

that this research focused solely on women's perspectives in a Facebook group environment. Despite this study being conducted in a different way to this research proposal and targeting a different demographic, this research can be used as a solid foundation to build upon to see if men's perceptions align with the women's. This links to Agnew & Sandretto's (2014) study that researched menstrual discourses in classroom settings where they concluded that in order to change the social constructions of menstruation, the discourse first has to change on social media and popular audio-visual mediums. However, questions can be raised as to whether social media is as progressive as these theories suggest. Facebook in 2020 banned the Modibodi 'New Way to Period' advert stating that sharing "excessively violent" (Smiley, 2020) content-red period blood broke its guidelines, and that is why this proposal has chosen to screen that advert in particular. Facebook ultimately retracted its decision, linking back to Gaybor's argument that highlights the shifting discourse and progression in ending the stigma of menstruation in the social media era (Coleman & Sredl, 2022).

Period product adverts themselves tend to focus on the product 'fixing' the problem by portraying women trying to conceal or hide the fact they are menstruating from the outside world. The main narrative that adverts push is that women should be worried during their time of the month about leaking. The connotations of period blood from such adverts are that it is unclean and taints femininity, yet period blood is seen as more "aversive" than other bodily fluids such as semen (Goldenberg & Roberts, 2004). The screenings of adverts for this project have been chosen on the basis that they overtly show period blood as accurately as possible; to test whether the participants view period blood in the way the Goldenberg and Roberts study concludes. To contrast this, Saz-Rubio & Pennock Speck (2009) argue that this narrative should not exist at all in this century, but rather the representations in the adverts should be a 'celebration of womanhood' that empowers the female identity and breaks down taboos.

Linton (2007) focused on men's perspectives of menstrual advertising and highlighted the gender inequalities, misrepresentations, and showed how "representations of the period are strongly influenced by men". Despite this study focusing on adverts between 1920-1949 it is a highly valuable resource to this project as it is one of the only academic studies to

focus on the male perspective of menstrual advertising and it will be interesting to compare the findings to see if the discourse for men has changed over time. Another study to directly compare results with is Mondragon and Txertudi's (2019) analysis into the effects of progressive advertising and the effect it has on young people, hence the demographic in question in this study. They argue that "menstruation is understood in social, ideological and emotional contexts" and that newer more accurate adverts allow young people to frame discussions around menstruation with no prejudices, therefore increasing the effectiveness of the period product adverts.

### **EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH QUESTION**

After reviewing the relevant literature and determining the research gaps currently within the topic, the main question that this proposal aims to investigate is:

*"how do men in Wales aged 18-30 interpret the representations of menstruation in progressive period product advertising?"*

The qualitative study will focus on men aged 18-30 as this age demographic represents a generation brought up with social media, with a more diverse ideological sense of issues such as gender, race and class. The participants will be from Wales to narrow down the geographical location but will be chosen at random if in the age and location range. The study will focus on the depiction of accurate period blood representations within the adverts and analyse how the men react to these visuals. It is important that this research question focuses on 'progressive' adverts as historically menstrual advertising has been extremely censored and misrepresented.

In previous research there is much analysis of how menstrual representations in advertising are perceived by women, but there is a gap in terms of how men perceive such representations, and this study will provide more rounded conclusions to the way society as a whole reacts to progressive period product advertising. The findings from this research will also be valuable to future menstruation representation studies, and also for the benefit of wider society to analyse the ways men view women's bodies and ways in which this has

evolved overtime. The aim is to show that periods are realistic and not sensationalist entertainment for advertisers, and this research proposal will explore whether these messages have been communicated to men as well.

## **CONSIDERATION OF METHODS**

This project will be using qualitative research to provide an ideological analysis and evaluation of the participants interpretations of period product advertising. The primary method of research will be focus groups that involve a screening of three adverts followed by group discussion. This method allows the participants to “generate their own questions, frames and concepts” (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999) which is ideal for a diachronic research study to analyse whether participants perceptions have changed over time with the increased representation and realism of progressive period adverts.

The key word in this research question is “interpret”. Nietzsche believed that everything in society boils down to interpretation and there is “no limit to the ways the world can be interpreted” (Berger, 2020). This project builds upon this critical realism theory by understanding that there are social and cultural structures that shape people’s actions that exist independently of people’s awareness of them and allows us to “understand the interpretations that social actors have of the world” (Davies and Mosdell, 2006). When applied to the topic of menstruation it questions whether society through the media has influenced people’s perceptions of periods, or, if people’s individual beliefs have influenced the wider societal view as a taboo subject.

This research project will record the participant discussion for the researcher to analyse later. This will require participant consent and participants are within their rights to reject the use of data-gathering devices. This information will be provided to the participants before the research, but as a precaution an information sheet will be passed around before the beginning of the screenings to ensure transparency and informed consent. Participants will remain anonymous, given the names: Participant 1, Participant 2 etc. for the purposes of the recording transcript. Methods of anonymity should also be taken to align with data protection obligations (British Sociological Association, 2017). It is vital to have a safe

environment (Smith, 1995) and respectful relationship and with the participants and treat them how I would like to be treated. In the welcome talk I will acknowledge that not everyone will agree, but to respect each other's opinions. I will also state that participants are free to leave at any time and free to not answer any questions they wish not to. This ensures sensitivity to participant concerns as well as participant and researcher safety.

This project will be conducted over a timeframe of 3 months, starting with the formulation of questioning, through to analysis of the data. The location will be accessible to all participants by taking place in a seminar room available via Cardiff University, and travel expenses will be paid for to ensure participant involvement.

## **DETAIL OF METHODOLOGY**

This project is using focus groups containing a collective screening of three progressive period product adverts (Modibodi (2020), Bodyform UK (2020), AWWA (2021)) followed by a group discussion. Focus group interviewing generates a "much richer and more sensitive type of data on the dynamics of audiences" (Hansen & Machin, 2019) and requires active input from both researcher and participants. The role of the moderator is to encourage participation by asking broad questions to illicit deeper thinking and to be attentive to group dynamics.

To find suitable participants for the study, non-random sampling will be conducted. The participants will be selected based on the gender, age, and geographical criteria of the research question and based upon convenience of availability and want to participate. This study is not about the diversity of the participants and aims to "mimic the way that everyday media interpretations tend to be collectively constructed" (Deacon, 2021), so there is no need for stratified sampling. There will be two focus groups consisting of six participants each as this ensures balanced conversation and two samples to compare against each other. There will also be a pilot focus group to give direction and highlight any areas of concern that need addressing before the main study. Therefore, this project needs eighteen participants in total.

The next step is to create the materials, in particular the focus group guide. As seen in Appendix 1, the focus group guide welcomes the participants with an overview of the topic and reminds them of the structure and ethics of the focus group. It has a list of thirteen questions that the moderator will use to give the discussion direction and can be used to probe the group if they are struggling to get involved. The other material that needs to be sourced for the study is the three adverts. Currently, the adverts can be screened on YouTube, but this will need to be checked in the week leading up to the study in case they need to be sourced elsewhere.

The pilot study will be conducted three weeks before the main study to allow time to make improvements, extra materials, or refine ideas. By having a pilot study, it will improve the data collected (Breen, 2006) in the main investigation, and I can gain valuable feedback from this group regarding the questioning and effectiveness as a moderator.

## **HYPOTHESIS**

Once I have collected and analysed the data from the focus groups, I hypothesise that the findings will show that men aged 18-30 in Wales do not accurately understand the realities of menstruation and will be shocked by the imagery in the progressive adverts. However, I believe they will interpret the adverts as a positive step forward in accurate representation from previous depictions of period blood as a blue liquid and will hopefully impact the way they view this cultural stereotype. Ultimately, I believe this study will highlight the social constructs that obstruct men from learning about menstruation and how this shapes societies perception of periods as something that should be kept private (White, 2013).

## **LIMITATIONS**

There are limitations with using focus groups for this study, related to the group dynamic. One participant may dominate the conversation whilst another participant may be too shy to get involved. Similarly, there may be a conflict in opinion which disrupts the group relationship or environment. Semi-structured interviews allow the participants to control

the discussion however this means the moderator has less control over the data sample that is collected and makes it harder to analyse. Practical limitations include the need for all participants to turn up to the focus group to go ahead, and the adverts to still be available to screen on YouTube.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, I propose that this study will take place over the course of a three-month period. The schedule, seen in Appendix 2, is a realistic representation of the time it will take to make progress through this study whilst also allowing flexibility in the case of unexpected events. Using aids such as Survey Monkey and feedback from the pilot focus group, I will dedicate two weeks to refining the project to ensure it is structured and designed for the best results. I have also dedicated three weeks to listen to, transcribe, and analyse the data as this will be the lengthiest and most important step in the study. The appendix also includes the focus group guide which lists the questions to be used in the semi-structured group interview. These may be subject to change after the pilot study.

This research study will record focus group discussions to analyse how the participants react and interpret the visuals in the progressive period adverts, in particular the depictions of realistic period blood. It aims to provide conclusions to the way societies judgement of periods has evolved overtime through the media and advertising, and hopefully benefit future menstruation studies.



## **Appendix 1: Focus Group Guide**

- 90-minute session consisting of the screening of 3 adverts and followed by a group discussion surrounding views on period product advertising.

### **Welcome and Introduction**

- “Thank you for participating in our research on men’s interpretations of menstruation in progressive period product adverts. Your contribution is much appreciated and will help us determine whether cultural strides have been made on this once taboo topic. we are interested in your opinions on the use of period blood in these adverts in particular so please share your thoughts freely. If you don’t mind this conversation will be recorded so that I can benefit optimally from the information you all provide but will be treated with utmost confidence. The recording will only be listened to by me, and your contributions will be anonymised in the study”.
- Distribute paper in case participants wish to take notes during screenings.
- Double check approval for recording by reading out ethics sheet.
- Explain briefly that there is no right or wrong answer. I will ask some broad questions throughout to get conversation started but I encourage participants to speak freely, debate with each other if necessary, and go with the flow of the conversation.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are your first thoughts after screening these adverts?
2. Would you say menstruation is still a taboo topic?
3. Does it make you uncomfortable to talk about?
4. If yes, why?
5. If no, why?
6. Are you aware of how unrealistic period product advertising has been in the past?
7. How do you think this has affected people who menstruate?
8. Why do you think period blood has been portrayed as a blue liquid up until 2017?
9. Is it any different than other bodily fluids that may be shown in advertising?
10. How much responsibility should the media take in the misrepresentations of periods?
11. How do you think these progressive adverts that you have watched benefit people that menstruate, if at all?
12. Do you see yourself in the future feeling more comfortable speaking about periods?
13. Has your opinion changed at all from before this discussion?

## Appendix 2 – Proposed Timeline of Study

RESEARCH STAGE	ESTIMATED DATE OF STARTING	ESTIMATED DATE OF COMPLETION	PLACE
Clarifying proposed idea, topic, and methodology.	3 <sup>rd</sup> October	14 <sup>th</sup> October	N/A
Securing formal approval for study – ethics, location, governance committees.	10 <sup>th</sup> October	14 <sup>th</sup> October	N/A
Securing participants through non-random sampling.	17 <sup>th</sup> October	28 <sup>th</sup> October	Contact via Email
Creating focus group questions and guide.	31 <sup>st</sup> October	4 <sup>th</sup> November	Survey Monkey. Guide to be printed.
Pilot focus group	10 <sup>th</sup> November	10 <sup>th</sup> November	Seminar room in JOMECC
Get feedback from pilot study and refine questions and make any needed changes to study.	11 <sup>th</sup> November	25 <sup>th</sup> November	Feedback after pilot study in JOMECC.
Main study – data collection.	1 <sup>st</sup> December (group 1)	2 <sup>nd</sup> December (group 2)	Seminar room in JOMECC
Data analysis and write up of results.	5 <sup>th</sup> December	23 <sup>rd</sup> December	N/A

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