



Research article

Exploring Collective Experiences: Menstruation-related Memes and Menstrual Narratives in Social Media as an Avant-garde Form of Life Writing

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Abstract

The increasing prominence of social media as a platform for collective expression has facilitated the sharing of diverse experiences, including emotions, challenges, and circumstances, within distinct social groups. Notable hashtag campaigns such as #Metoo, #HappytoBleed, #TimesUp, #HeForShe, #EverydaySexism, and #IWillGoOut exemplify this trend, as they address pertinent issues concerning women's rights and gender equality. In this context, menstruation narratives, communicated through various mediums such as stories, oral traditions, myths, and videos, are significant in conveying the collective experiences of menstruating individuals, and fostering camaraderie and support among those who share similar encounters. The advent and widespread utilization of social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, have provided menstruating individuals with an accessible avenue to share their experiences, concerns, struggles, and anxieties through diverse content formats, such as written posts, images, video blogs, and memes. Notably, memes have emerged as a particularly popular medium for articulating collective life experiences, encompassing the sphere of menstruation. Widely disseminated on social media, these memes have become influential tools for communication, encapsulating shared sentiments in a visually engaging and often humorous manner. Against this backdrop, this research paper scrutinizes social media's emergence as a novel platform for collective life expressions, with a specific focus on menstrual memes. It delves into the realm of life writing, exploring the varied ways in which menstruating individuals utilize social media to articulate their experiences. Additionally, it sheds light on the significant communicative potential of memes on menstruation, exemplifying their capacity to foster meaningful dialogues and challenge the societal stigma surrounding this natural phenomenon.

Keywords: collective experiences, life writing, menstruation, menstruation-related memes, social media



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Introduction

The proliferation of the internet has revolutionized communication and interaction, making it more accessible and convenient. Digital spaces have facilitated the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal connections, allowing individuals to find others who share similar interests (Imperato et al., 2023). Memes, which are images combined with text to convey ideas, have gained immense popularity in the online world. They serve as a prominent medium for individuals to communicate and share their thoughts and ideologies (Cabrera, 2022). Memes have been instrumental in promoting various ideas, including activism, criticism, and feminist ideologies, through social media platforms. Menstrual activism is one such movement that challenges the societal stigmatization surrounding menstruation, as dirty, impure, and irrational (Tomlinson, n.d.; Venkatesan & Peter, 2020). Hashtag campaigns and feminist activism have fostered discussions about menstruation, providing menstruators with a space to raise their voices in both traditional and new media (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). Concomitant with the proliferation of menstruation-related memes, the utilization of hashtag campaigns serves as a vehicle for the amplification of women's voices. The escalating prominence of social media as a conduit for communal articulation has engendered a facilitative milieu for the dissemination of an array of experiences, encompassing emotions, adversities, and contexts, within discrete social collectives. Evident within this paradigm are salient hashtag campaigns, notably exemplified by #Metoo, #HappytoBleed, #TimesUp, #HeForShe, #EverydaySexism, and #IWillGoOut, which manifest as illustrative instances thereof. These campaigns, notably focused on matters germane to women's rights and gender parity, exemplify the trajectory of this phenomenon. The inception of the "Happy to Bleed" social media campaign by Nikita Azad on November 21, 2015, stands as an illustrative exemplar within the realm of contemporary digital activism. This campaign encouraged menstruators to challenge menstrual taboos by sharing posts related to menstruation on their social media accounts (Azad, 2015). Kiran Gandhi gained attention as another menstrual activist when she participated in the London Marathon while on her period without wearing a sanitary pad, symbolizing her refusal to conform to societal expectations. Images of her with blood on her clothing at the end of the marathon went viral on social media (Hanafy, 2016). These individuals are pioneers in online menstrual activism. Numerous video blogs and videos address topics such as menstrual hygiene and alternative menstrual products like menstrual cups, promoting their usage (Sillence & McKellar, 2023). These activisms encourage women to openly discuss their pain, suffering, and mood swings during menstruation, fostering a discourse of period positivity (McHugh, 2020). Many activists utilize social media as a platform to spread menstrual awareness and challenge associated taboos. Video blogs, reels, memes, and posts have become new avenues for promoting menstrual awareness among the general public. These mediums serve to share the experiences of menstruation and empower women to voice their opinions. Consequently, within the emerging field of life writing, these forms of expression can be considered a new domain for expressing and reflecting on life experiences. This scholarly paper undertakes an exploration of the conceptual underpinnings of collective experiential phenomena and manifestations of solidarity, as encapsulated within the medium of internet memes. Through meticulous scrutiny of memes centred around the topic of menstruation disseminated across various social media platforms, a discernible revelation emerges, distinctly indicating the cultivation of a profound sense of camaraderie amidst women who share analogous experiential junctures. This

phenomenon finds resonance with other paradigmatic instances of autobiographical narratives authored by women. The principal objective of this scholarly endeavour resides in the meticulous examination of menstrual-themed memes propagated on the Instagram digital platform, effectively functioning as an instrument for the articulation of shared communal encounters and by extension, the broader spectrum of life's encounters.

Conceptualizing Memes

The term "meme" was initially coined by Richard Dawkins to describe the transfer and imitation of cultural knowledge and ideas, indicating cultural change and development (Brodie, n.d.). Later on, internet users adopted the term to refer to viral ideas communicated through various media such as images, texts, and videos. Memes are created by combining images and texts, employing visual representation, semiotic elements, and wordplay to convey humour (Skórka et al., 2022). Internet memes typically consist of audiovisual materials or pictures with accompanying text (Dennis, 2021). A 2019 study revealed that memes were the second most widely shared content on the internet among Generation Z and millennial users (Tankovska, 2021). Shifman defines memes as "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which... were created with awareness of each other, and... were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users" (2014, p. 41). The content of a meme represents the idea conveyed, the form refers to the image, video, or text used to create it, and the stance represents the position taken by the creator (Wasike, 2022). Memes have had a profound impact on contemporary society, shaping communication, discourse, and cultural trends (Marvick, 2013). They have become a prevalent form of expression, particularly on social media platforms, due to their visual and humorous nature. Memes possess the power to disseminate information, influence public opinion, and create shared cultural references. Memes play a significant role in the construction and spread of internet culture, reflecting the values, beliefs, and ideologies of various communities (Shifman, 2013). They have the potential to shape collective understandings and provoke discussions on social, political, and cultural issues. Additionally, memes can contribute to the formation of online communities, fostering a sense of belonging and shared experiences among individuals. The influence of memes in society is evident through their viral nature and ability to quickly reach a wide audience, making them a potent tool for social commentary, satire, and even political activism (Dennis, 2021). Their impact on society is multifaceted, ranging from shaping popular culture to influencing public discourse and challenging established narratives. Overall, memes have emerged as a dynamic form of cultural expression that resonates with contemporary society and continues to shape the way we communicate and engage with information.

While some memes may convey wrong political messages or target specific individuals or communities, others contain positive content and have a positive impact (Wasike, 2022). Menstrual memes fall into both categories. Some memes generalize women as troublemakers and depict them as aggressive during their menstruation, while others offer support and solidarity with menstruating individuals. Menstruation-related memes create a sense of solidarity and connection among menstruators, fostering a collective identity. They provide a platform for women to openly discuss their concerns and challenges during their menstrual cycle, and the

humour element helps them relax and feel connected to others who share similar experiences. As a genre of life writing, memes express the collective experience of menstruators, becoming an emerging domain. Menstruators who share memes on social media contribute to a permanent space where their expressions are preserved and accessible to others, resulting in a lasting inscription.

Life writing, as an established genre, traditionally entails autobiographies, diaries, letters, and other forms of self-representation that divulge personal experiences and reflections. It serves as a platform for authors to discuss their unique lives and experiences (Abraham, 2021). However, the canonization and universalization of autobiography as the primary form of life writing have faced criticism from postmodern critics. While autobiography is the most commonly used and understood term for life narratives, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson highlight that it has been subject to intense debate in the wake of postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment subject (2001). In his book "Writing the First Person," Udayakumar explores self-articulations in Kerala and shares his similar findings (2016). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson propose that there are 52 distinct genres or domains for life narratives. These genres, selected by narrators to reflect their subjectivity and sense of self, serve as tools for self-expression. While certain genres, such as autobiography, have attained canonical status, new genres may emerge as narrators seek more suitable forms for their self-articulation, resulting in the shifting appeal of established genres (Smith & Watson, 2001). Smith and Watson identify a range of genres, including apologies, autobiographies in the first person, second person and third person, autoethnography, autofiction, autography, autobiography, autopathography, autothanatography, autotopography, bildungsroman, biomythography, captivity narrative, case study, and more. It has served as a mechanism for individuals to articulate their innermost thoughts, emotions, and life trajectories. However, the advent of the digital era has witnessed an unprecedented transformation in communication patterns and the emergence of innovative means of self-narration (Abraham, 2021).

Memes as New Domain of Life Writing

Memes have exerted a discernible impact on contemporary society, engendering a paradigm shift in communication dynamics, information dissemination, and cultural engagement. These pervasive units of virality encompass diverse formats, such as images, videos, and textual constructs, exhibiting an unprecedented ability to rapidly proliferate across digital platforms, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries (Cabrera, 2022). Manifesting as a form of cultural currency, memes encapsulate and mirror the collective experiences, humour, and values emblematic of a particular epoch. Consequently, they possess the capacity to shape public opinion, sway prevailing trends, and even influence the trajectory of social and political discourse (Shifman, 2013). Beyond their inherent capacity for entertainment and levity, memes have emerged as a potent vehicle for social commentary, enabling individuals to express their perspectives, critique established societal norms and amplify salient issues. Moreover, memes have emerged as a formidable tool of digital activism, facilitating the dissemination of social justice narratives and fostering collective mobilization around pertinent causes (Blackmore et al., 2000). Memes can strengthen social bonds and amuse, but they also have the potential to

perpetuate harmful stereotypes, spread misinformation, and contribute to cyberbullying. Understanding the multifaceted impact of memes requires careful evaluation of their content and broader implications, as they represent a significant mode of self-expression and collective identity formation in contemporary society. These attributes collectively endow memes with the status of an innovative sphere within the domain of life writing.

Memes, in this context, epitomize a novel form of life writing that diverges from conventional textual narratives. They encompass a diverse array of visual elements, such as images, graphics, and videos, often combined with succinct, pithy captions, showcasing the creative amalgamation of language and visual aesthetics. By harnessing humour, satire, or irony, memes poignantly encapsulate socio-political commentaries, shared experiences, and collective emotions, thereby transcending individual perspectives to manifest a collective consciousness. Crucially, memes thrive in the digital ecosystem, particularly on social media platforms, which serve as fertile grounds for their rapid dissemination and amplification. This virality facilitates a process of collaborative co-authorship, as individuals participate in the creation, sharing, and adaptation of memes, iteratively enriching the evolving narrative. Furthermore, the transitory nature of memes embodies the ephemeral essence of contemporary life writing. They encapsulate the temporality and volatility of societal trends, attitudes, and events, functioning as cultural artefacts that crystallize specific moments within the ever-shifting social fabric. In sum, memes, as a burgeoning form of life writing, epitomize the metamorphosis of self-representation and collective identity in the digital age. Through their amalgamation of visual and textual elements, their participatory nature, and their resonance with the contemporary cultural landscape, memes wield the power to capture and disseminate complex narratives, engendering a symbiotic relationship between technology and human expression in the twenty-first century. Walter Benjamin has observed that the emergence of mechanical reproduction, notably through photography and film, triggers a profound transformation like art. He explores how mechanical reproduction, within the framework of capitalist structures and mass culture, offers new ways of perceiving art through mass media and advertising. This democratization of artistic consumption, he suggests, can liberate art from exclusivity and bring it closer to a wider societal audience. Benjamin's inquiry delves into how artistic creation evolves within an era defined by mechanical production paradigms (Benjamin, 2008). This conceptual framework advanced by Benjamin finds cogent resonance with the prevailing cultural milieu, notably the ascendancy of memes as a pervasive mode of cultural expression in the contemporaneous era.

Prominent social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram offer hashtag functionalities, enabling content to reach a global audience beyond geographical and temporal boundaries. A post created by one individual can be accessed by others across different times and distances. Digital content remains permanently available online, ensuring that the life stories shared on social media have an enduring presence. Consequently, individuals who document their lives on these platforms provide their narratives with widespread readership, surpassing the limitations of traditional methods of life writing. This facilitates the inscription of collective experiences rather than individual ones, as human lives are inherently social and characterized by shared and interconnected experiences (Becker et al., 2023). Menstrual memes, too, contribute to a collective experience shared by all menstruators. From this standpoint, this research paper explores menstruation-related memes that cover various aspects, including mood swings, cramps, leakage

concerns, attitudes of men towards menstruation, and advertisements for sanitary products. Through this analysis, the paper explores the concept of collective experiences and solidarity expressed through these memes. By analyzing menstrual-related memes on social media, it becomes evident that these memes create a sense of solidarity among women who share similar experiences, aligning with other forms of life writing by women.

Theoretical Framework

Collective remembering, a phenomenon encompassing the act of recalling memories affiliated with a distinct cultural, religious, or familial collective, involves the generation and preservation of recollections by members within the group. These memories are often documented in various forms, such as photographs, videos, or written records. Contemporary scholarship has witnessed a notable surge in investigations delving into the intricate mechanics of memory and its multifaceted societal ramifications. Maurice Halbwachs, an eminent French sociologist, advanced the notion in his seminal opus "The Collective Memory" (1980) that memory remains intrinsically interconnected with social groups, rendering it rarely an exclusively individual or personal affair (Halbwachs, 1980). Within the realm of autobiographical acts, numerous components converge to shape the process of self-expression. These elements encompass coaxes, storytelling sites, the construction of the autobiographical "I," the subject's relationality, the intended addressee, modes of structuring self-inquiry, patterns of employment, the chosen medium, and the eventual consumer of the autobiographical narrative. Interestingly, the burgeoning domain of menstruation-related memes exhibits the presence of all these components, thus rendering it a novel avenue for self-discourse.

Autobiographical acts comprise several crucial components, each serving distinctive roles in the construction and dissemination of personal life narratives. These components encompass coaxes, sites of storytelling, the production of the autobiographical "I," the relationality of the subject, the addressee, structuring modes of self-inquiry, patterns of employment, the medium employed, and the consumer of the narrative. Coaxes in the autobiographical context are entities that serve as stimuli or catalysts compelling the speaker or author to embark on recounting their life story. Such coaxes can manifest in the form of individuals or institutions, acting as prompting factors behind the autobiographical endeavour (Smith & Watson, 2001). Central to the successful delivery of the autobiographical narrative is the site of storytelling, which holds paramount significance (Poletti, 2011). This site pertains to both the occasion and location where the act of recounting takes place, influencing the contextual backdrop against which the life story unfolds (Smith & Watson, 2001). The production of the autobiographical "I" assumes a pivotal role in the self-narrative. It encompasses distinct iterations of the self, as the autobiographical "I" in the present diverges from its portrayal in the past. The author, when recounting their life experiences, engages in an act of recollection rather than a direct reliving of those experiences. The relationality of the subject underlines the interconnectedness between the autobiographical self and the surrounding socio-cultural milieu. This dynamic interplay significantly influences the shaping and articulation of personal narratives. Equally consequential is the addressee, referring to the intended recipient or audience of the autobiographical act. How the narrative is crafted and presented can be

influenced by the author's awareness of the addressee's perspective, expectations, and socio-cultural background (Myers, 1992). Structuring modes of self-inquiry play a crucial role in the organization and coherence of the autobiographical account (Pinar, 1994). These modes reflect the author's introspective techniques and methods used to delve into their memories and experiences, lending depth and authenticity to the narrative. Patterns of employment pertain to the utilization of specific rhetorical or narrative strategies within the autobiographical act. These patterns serve to shape how the life story is portrayed, emphasizing certain events or themes while downplaying others. The medium employed to convey the autobiographical narrative also merits attention. Whether expressed through written text, oral discourse, visual representation, or other means, the chosen medium profoundly influences the reception and interpretation of the life story (Smith & Watson, 2001). Lastly, the consumer, as the recipient of the autobiographical account, assumes a vital role in the reception and interpretation of the narrative. The consumer's perspectives, cultural background, and receptivity can significantly impact the narrative's reception and potential effects. The autobiographical self, denoted as the "I," inherently establishes relationality with individuals beyond the author themselves. This relational bond materializes through the readers who engage with the autobiographical narrative. Interestingly, the nature and depth of this relationality appear to exhibit more pronounced attributes within women's narratives compared to those of male authors. For Smith and Watson, in every autobiographical act, a designated addressee exists, serving as the intended recipient or audience of the narrative. At times, this addressee may manifest as an alternative version of the narrator, particularly evident in life writing forms such as diaries (Smith & Watson, 2001). Notably, each narrator undertakes the act of narrating with the cognizance of an imagined reader, shaping the presentation and content of their accounts. Every instance of autobiographical expression constitutes a profound process of self-reflection and self-inquiry. In this endeavour, the author or narrator assumes the role of the architect, determining the structure and contours of the introspective exploration. The medium employed for conveying autobiographical acts possesses remarkable flexibility, encompassing oral, written, or even technical documentation. Memories and experiences find their repository in various forms, such as photographs, videos, or other documentary formats, each of which serves as a potent means for narrating life stories (De Kosnik, 2021).

Within this intricate tapestry of autobiographical creation, the consumer of such narratives assumes an equally significant role alongside the narrator. Readers, situated in distinct historical contexts and temporal frames, engage with the autobiographical content. While the narrator may be mindful of an implied reader during the writing or narration process, the actual reader inevitably differs from this construct. The reader's perspective and contextual background profoundly influence the reception and interpretation of the autobiographical act, enriching the multifaceted nature of the narrative encounter. All these components of autobiographical acts collectively contribute to the complex and multifaceted nature of self-narratives. The interplay between coaxers, sites of storytelling, the autobiographical "I," relationality of the subject, the addressee, structuring modes of self-inquiry, patterns of employment, the medium, and the consumer collectively shape how life stories are fashioned, communicated, and received (Smith & Watson, 2001).

In addition to the aforementioned aspects, relationality finds resonance in diverse manifestations of women's life narratives, elucidating the existence of a shared and interconnected self within various expressive forms (Smith & Watson, 1998). According to Georges Gusdorf, the concept of self is predominantly individualistic, whereas women and other minority groups often experience an imposition of group identities (Gusdorf, 1980). For women, their identities are often shaped by relational and collective factors, leading to the development of a collective self. Scholars such as Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodorow argue that women's sense of self is founded on interdependence and community, in contrast to men who tend to foster more isolated individualism (Friedman, 1988). Rowbotham contends that women cannot possess a separate and individual identity as it is constructed by the dominant male culture, likening this notion to Jaques Lacan's metaphor of the illusion in the mirror. Rowbotham introduces the concept of a hall of mirrors reflecting prevailing social orders, reinforcing the image of women already defined by the dominant male culture (Rowbotham, 1973). Consequently, isolated individualism becomes a privilege enjoyed by those in positions of power. Women, therefore, grapple with dual consciousness, one shaped by culture and another divergent from cultural descriptions, leading to a sense of alienation that can be mitigated through solidarity among women (Friedman, 1988). Nancy Chodorow's perspective supports the idea that the female self is inherently relational to others in the world. She posits that the foundation of this relationality is established in the mother-daughter relationship during psychological development. Boys typically detach from their mothers during this stage, whereas girls develop strong attachments. As a result, men tend to develop a separate self, while women tend to have a more collective sense of self (Chodorow, 1978). This notion is reinforced by other theorists like Dorothy Dinnerstein and Jane Flax (Smith, 1987). Additionally, French feminists such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Helene Cixous explore the concept of "feminine writing" or "*écriture féminine*" (Smith, 1987). They view women's writing as a means to challenge phallocentrism and the prevailing male-centric discourses and "masculine writing." Helene Cixous advocates for women to express their unique experiences through "feminine writing" (Cixous, 2010). The adoption of feminine writing as an opposition to masculine writing seeks to subvert notions of pollution and taboos associated with menstruation. In doing so, these women-authored memes serve as a powerful tool to dismantle oppressive societal norms and pave the way for collective empowerment and gender equality. This underscores the import of menstruation-related memes as an emerging realm within the purview of life writing.

Expression of Collective Selves through Memes

Menstruation memes have become a popular form of online humour that aims to destigmatize and normalize conversations surrounding menstruation. These memes typically employ relatable and humorous content to shed light on the experiences and challenges faced by individuals during their menstrual cycles. By using humor, these memes help create a sense of community and solidarity among people who menstruate, while also educating and raising awareness about menstrual health. While some may argue that these memes trivialize a serious topic, they intend to foster open conversations, break taboos, and promote menstrual positivity in a lighthearted manner. Menstruation memes have had a significant impact on women by empowering and connecting them through shared experiences. These memes serve as a means of breaking down

societal taboos and reducing the stigma surrounding menstruation. By normalizing and humorously addressing the challenges and realities of menstruation, these memes create a sense of camaraderie and validation for women. They provide a platform for women to express themselves, share their stories, and find support in a relatable and inclusive online community. Moreover, menstruation memes have played a role in increasing awareness about menstrual health, debunking myths, and encouraging open conversations about a topic that has historically been shrouded in silence. Overall, these memes have helped women embrace their bodies, feel more confident, and navigate their menstrual journeys with a sense of humour and solidarity.

Coaxers, as the impetus for autobiographical narration, can emanate from individuals or institutions that spur the speaker or author to divulge their life stories. In the context of menstruation-related memes, these coaxers are embodied by the multifarious experiences related to menstruation, encompassing aspects of pain, mood fluctuations, suffering, societal taboos, and the attitudes perpetuated by patriarchal structures. Such encounters with the realities of menstruation serve as compelling stimuli, motivating individuals to share their personal experiences through the medium of memes. The storytelling sites, represented by menstruation-related memes, provide the backdrop for the unfolding narratives. Here, the medium of digital communication platforms and social media serves as fertile ground for the dissemination of autobiographical accounts. Menstruation-related memes, being shared widely across online communities, become sites of narration and collective engagement, allowing for the expression of diverse menstruation-related experiences. Within these narratives, the autobiographical "I" takes shape, serving as a focal point for self-representation. The subjective experiences and reflections of the individuals find articulation in the first-person voice, which bridges the gap between the private and public spheres, enabling the construction of a cohesive autobiographical narrative. The subject's relationality further shapes the contours of menstruation-related memes, as the experiences shared are often embedded within a broader socio-cultural context. The addressee, whether explicitly stated or implied, plays a crucial role in influencing the tone, content, and tenor of these autobiographical acts. The intended audience influences the form and depth of self-disclosure, fostering a sense of belonging and empathy among individuals with shared experiences. The structuring modes of self-inquiry within menstruation-related memes are evident in the thematic patterns and stylistic choices adopted by the creators. These memes exhibit varying degrees of introspection, humour, and vulnerability, reflecting the unique modes of self-exploration and self-expression undertaken by the individuals behind them. The patterns of employment in menstruation-related memes refer to the creative strategies employed to depict menstruation-related experiences. Through the use of humour, visual imagery, and symbolic representations, individuals navigate the terrain of self-disclosure with artistry and ingenuity. Lastly, the consumers of these autobiographical acts are the wider online audience, who engage with and respond to menstruation-related memes. This interaction facilitates a feedback loop, reinforcing the significance of this new domain of self-expression. Thus it can be seen that menstruation-related memes epitomize a contemporary form of autobiographical acts that encompass coaxers in the form of menstruation-related experiences, storytelling sites within digital platforms, the construction of the autobiographical "I," the subject's relationality, the addressee's influence, modes of self-inquiry, employment patterns, and the receptive consumer base (Smith & Watson, 1998, 2001). Through these comprehensive components, menstruation-

related memes emerge as a transformative space for the expression of individual and collective experiences related to menstruation.

Like other forms of life narratives by women, memes offer support and solidarity to fellow women who experience difficulties during their menstrual cycle. Different types of menstruation-related memes address topics such as mood swings, pain or cramps, bleeding, leakage, commercials for sanitary products, and the attitudes of men. Menstruators often experience mood swings as a symptom of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and during their menstruation. Menstruation-related memes humorously portray the challenges faced by menstruators during PMS and menstruation. These memes depict fluctuating emotions, the struggle to control emotions, feeling irritable, crying over minor inconveniences, fatigue, anger towards everything, and simultaneous feelings of anxiety and sadness (kossetcare, 2020; Menstrupedia, 2022i, 2022j; period memes, 2021a; *Uterus Be Like....*, 2022).



Figure 2: The depiction of mood swings during menstruation using a scene from the American sitcom 'Friends'. Source: Instagram (kossetcare, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CC2772QDrx1/>)

Figure 2 illustrates the fluctuating nature of mood experienced by women throughout the menstrual cycle. It showcases the abrupt shifts in emotional states, ranging from euphoria to irritability or sadness that are commonly observed during different phases of the cycle. The figure demonstrates the cyclic pattern of mood changes, with peaks and valleys corresponding to specific hormonal changes that occur during menstruation. In this particular depiction, mood swings assume the role of the coxer, prompting the creation of the meme. The site of storytelling for all these memes is consistently Instagram, serving as the platform through which these narratives are disseminated. The creator of the meme has adeptly employed humour as a creative strategy to portray and convey the experiences and challenges faced by women. Through this humorous lens, the suffering endured by women during menstruation is artfully communicated, encapsulating a complex blend of emotion and shared experiences. In Figure 3, the focus shifts towards the challenges women encounter in regulating their emotions during menstruation due to hormonal fluctuations. It emphasizes the profound impact of hormonal changes on emotional well-being and highlights the struggles that women may face in managing their feelings during this time. The figure reveals a significant increase in emotional instability, with heightened sensitivity and vulnerability as a result of hormonal imbalances. This visual representation

underscores the intricate interplay between hormones and emotional regulation, shedding light on the physiological basis for the emotional challenges experienced by women during menstruation. The caption of this meme highlights the interconnectedness among women, as it states, "Just an inch away from losing it if I don't get my #period rest. Are you resting on your menstruation? Tell us" (Menstrupedia, 2022j). Through this meme, the creator seeks to inquire whether women, during their menstrual cycles, are prioritizing sufficient rest and concurrently extending solidarity with other menstruating women. The use of the autobiographical 'I' in the meme further underscores the personal expression of the creator, describing her emotional state if she fails to obtain adequate rest during her period (Smith & Watson, 2001). The targeted addressee of this meme is woman, with the creator seeking responses and engagement from individuals who share similar experiences (Chodorow, 1978). Moving on to Figure 4, it portrays the difficulties encountered by women in making decisions and the rapid fluctuations in emotional states experienced throughout the menstrual cycle. This figure highlights the impact of hormonal fluctuations on cognitive processes and decision-making abilities. It demonstrates how emotional states can rapidly shift, influencing clarity of thought, concentration, and the ability to make rational choices. The caption of this meme, "#Moodswings is always difficult to explain. Here's our attempt. How do you feel during your menstruation?" (Menstrupedia, 2022i) effectively fosters a sense of solidarity among women who experience pronounced mood swings during their menstrual cycles (Smith, 1987). The meme encourages women to share their emotional experiences, acknowledging the challenges in articulating such feelings, and thereby creating a space for collective understanding and support among those facing similar hormonal fluctuations.

Controlling your emotions while on
your period is an extreme sport



Figure 3: The depiction of the struggle to control mood swings during menstruation. Source: Instagram (Menstrupedia, 2022f <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ch7IZuRORwg/>)



Figure 4: The depiction of the difficulty in describing the mood during. Source: Instagram (Menstrupedia, 2022f<https://www.instagram.com/p/ChuQb6IOESL/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>)

Together, these figures provide a comprehensive visual representation of the emotional and cognitive challenges faced by women during the menstrual cycle. They underscore the intricate interplay between hormonal fluctuations, mood swings, and decision-making abilities, shedding light on the complex nature of emotional regulation in the context of menstruation. The comments accompanying these memes indicate that menstruators can relate to the emotions conveyed and feel a sense of connection with others who experience similar challenges. Through the sharing and commenting features on social media, they establish identification with the meme creator and other menstruators.

Another theme addressed by these memes is the physical pain, cramps, and related issues encountered by women. The physical pain endured by women during menstruation acts as the coxer in these types of memes. These memes depict the struggles women face in appearing unaffected by severe cramps in public settings, highlighting the pressure to conform to societal expectations (femfetti, 2022; lilypadsreusableproducts, 2023; Menstrupedia, 2022e; period memes, 2021b). Figure 5 and Figure 6 exemplify the significant difficulties menstruating women encounter in presenting a facade of normalcy during their menstrual cycle, reflecting the societal demands shaped by patriarchal norms. These memes serve as a medium for exposing the creator's self, revealing insights into the lived experiences of women. As per feminist theoreticians, the formation of women's self is heavily influenced by dominant patriarchal ideologies that subject menstruation to the notion of pollution, consequently rendering it a taboo within society. Consequently, women are compelled to conform to societal norms and downplay the distressing effects of severe menstrual cramps, masking their pain and discomfort. These memes aptly portray the predicament of women, where their sense of self is shaped by the patriarchal framework, a reality that finds reflection in the themes and content of the memes themselves (Rowbotham, 1973).



Figure 5: The depiction of the concern to act normal during severe cramps. Source: Instagram (femfetti, 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdPJzpxh7YU/?igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==>)

When you are suffering from
period cramps but need to click
pictures too 🤔



Figure 6: The depiction of acting normal during severe cramps. Source: Instagram (Menstrupedia, 2022c <https://www.instagram.com/p/CginlCOoc8I/>)

The social pressure to appear unaffected and actively participate in a myriad of activities, despite the presence of pain during menstruation, emanates from deeply ingrained taboos and notions of impurity associated with menstruation, which are perpetuated by patriarchal norms and cultural constructs. Memes, as a medium of expression, further highlight the challenges women encounter in managing and alleviating menstrual cramps, offering a visual representation of their experiences. The meme depicted in Figure 6 features the following caption: "Never let your game

down! This is for all the #girls who have to do those photoshoots on #menstruation. How do you manage?"(Menstrupedia, 2022e). This caption exemplifies the interconnectedness and relationality among women, as well as extends solidarity to those women who endure severe pain during menstruation. The meme acknowledges the shared experiences of women engaging in professional activities, such as photo shoots, despite menstruating, and it invites them to exchange insights and coping strategies, thereby fostering a sense of support and unity within the community of women facing menstrual challenges. Figure 7 vividly portrays the extremities to which women are compelled to resort to cope with the intensity of menstrual cramps. The image underscores the severity of the pain endured, capturing the desperation and extraordinary measures undertaken by women to find relief from this physical distress. Such visual representations elucidate the profound impact of menstrual cramps on women's lives, accentuating the need for more comprehensive understanding, empathy, and support for individuals navigating the challenges imposed by menstruation.

periodtalk

Me on my debilitating period cramps position



Figure 7: The depiction of the difficulty of period cramps. Source: Instagram (Menstrupedia, 2022c <https://www.instagram.com/p/Chezr20s5eN/>)



Figure 8: The figure shows what period cramps look like and how it feels like. Source: Instagram (Menstrupedia, 2022a https://www.instagram.com/p/CftgprepMD_q/)

Within the realm of memes, there exist portrayals that effectively capture the stark contrast between the perception of period cramps by external observers and the actual lived experience of intense pain endured by individuals afflicted by them (Menstrupedia, 2022b, 2022g). These

memes serve as a means of highlighting the disparity between the common perception and the reality of the excruciating pain associated with menstrual cramps. Figure 8, in particular, employs a visual representation in the form of a drilling machine to depict the severity of the pain experienced by women during menstruation. This imagery aims to evoke a visceral understanding of the intensity and distress accompanying period cramps. By utilizing this visual metaphor, the meme emphasizes the significant gap between the external perception of this pain and the internal reality faced by individuals. Such memes contribute to a broader discourse surrounding menstrual health, challenging societal misconceptions and fostering empathy towards those who suffer from menstrual cramps. They provide a platform for raising awareness and understanding, encouraging individuals to reevaluate their preconceived notions and engage in more informed and compassionate conversations regarding the experiences of menstruators. These memes serve as a source of solidarity among women, evident from the target audience comprising women themselves, as indicated by the captions accompanying the memes (Chodorow, 1978). For instance, the caption accompanying Figure 7 reads as follows: "Don't surrender to your pain girls! Extremely painful menstruation is not normal. Have you gone to a doctor for #periodpain?" (Menstrupedia, 2022g). This caption conveys vital awareness to other women regarding the significance of addressing severe menstrual cramps and the necessity of seeking medical consultation for such issues. By doing so, these memes challenge the patriarchal construct that expects women to silently endure suffering without voicing their concerns, thereby fostering a sense of unity and support among women who encounter intense pain during menstruation.

Menstruation-related memes often serve as a medium to convey the pervasive discomfort and persistent concerns surrounding excessive bleeding and potential leakage that menstruators face throughout their menstrual cycles (period memez, 2021c). These memes offer a platform for individuals to express and relate to the challenges associated with uncontrollable bleeding, which frequently proves unpredictable. The coxer behind the creation of these memes can be attributed to the presence of taboos surrounding menstrual blood and the apprehension related to potential leakages. Societal associations of pollution with menstruation and menstrual blood compel women to vigilantly inspect for stains, thereby instilling a fear of wearing white attire. This fear is rooted in the notions perpetuated by patriarchal norms, influencing women to refrain from challenging the patriarchal framework by openly acknowledging or revealing their menstrual blood. Figure 9, in particular, elucidates the difficulties linked to excessive bleeding during menstruation, emphasizing the lack of control over the flow. This visual representation aims to capture the inherent unpredictability and the consequential anxiety and inconvenience experienced by menstruators. By depicting this aspect, the meme sheds light on the practical challenges, emotional distress, and potential social implications that arise due to excessive bleeding. Ultimately, these memes foster a sense of solidarity and empathy among menstruators while encouraging broader societal awareness and understanding of the multifaceted experiences related to menstruation.

When you sneeze on your period



Figure 9: The meme depicts the sudden flow of blood during menstruation. Source: Instagram (paddlingfoundation, 2023 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cnyyx2EtA1y/?igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==>)

Numerous memes humorously depict the issue of uncontrollable flow during sneezing while menstruating, highlighting the uncomfortable situation and the fear of leakage experienced by menstruating women (Menstrupedia, 2022c, 2022h; yesshecanuk, 2023). Although presented humorously, these memes shed light on the genuine concerns of menstruators regarding potential leakage. Additionally, some memes portray women's preoccupation with constantly checking for leakage and their desire to conceal it from the public eye. Figure 10 employs humour to illustrate the persistent discomfort and constant apprehension about leakage that women experience throughout their menstrual cycle. The meme cleverly employs the image of a woman in a white dress on a red carpet as a metaphorical representation of women during their menstrual cycle.

When you're on your period & need to
double check if you're not leaking



Figure 10: The figure shows the constant concern of women to check for blood stains during menstruation. Source: Instagram (Menstrupedia, 2022d <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ch1-1fUuf7v/>)

Memes also serve to highlight the impurity and taboo associated with menstruation. Some memes depict the reluctance to discard new or favourite clothes due to the fear of leakage (Menstrupedia, 2022f). Additionally, certain memes reflect women's lack of confidence in wearing white or light-

coloured garments during their menstrual cycle, stemming from concerns about potential leakage and the exposure of menstrual blood (Menstrupedia, 2022a, 2022c; period memez, 2021c; sironahygiene, 2023). This apprehension can be linked to the patriarchal society's attitude towards menstruation and menstrual blood. Notably, social media movements like #HappytoBleed hold significance in challenging these norms by encouraging women to publicly share pictures of their sanitary products and menstrual blood. Furthermore, some memes shed light on the challenges faced by women due to excessive and uncontrollable bleeding. These memes serve as a medium for expressing feminine writing as a counterpoint to masculine writing. Through these memes, creators prominently showcase period blood and address the various challenges associated with menstruation, thus effectively reshaping and revising the prevailing masculine notions using their powerful articulation. In this creative process, these meme creators employ "menstrual blood" as a potent form of ink, emblematic of their struggles and concerns. This parallels the concept discussed by Helene Cixous in her work "The Laugh of the Medusa" (2010), where she posits women's use of "white ink," symbolizing their milk, to inscribe their narratives. In the context of these memes, women symbolically utilize "red ink" - representing their menstrual blood - to convey their experiences, effectively subverting conventional patriarchal paradigms and asserting their agency through this alternative form of expression.

Menstruation-related memes also offer criticism towards the portrayal of menstruation in commercials for sanitary products. These memes critique the oversimplification of menstrual difficulties in such advertisements. Women depicted in these commercials are often portrayed solely as concerned about leakage while neglecting to address the physical pain and other mental challenges experienced by women during their menstrual cycle (adira4u, 2020; jamselfcare, 2020; memesagainstpatriarchy, 2021).



Figure 1: The figure brings in the contradiction between the depiction of women in the commercials of sanitary products and the actual condition of women during menstruation. Source: Instagram (memesagainstpatriarchy <https://www.instagram.com/p/CM9aa2hmk5g/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>)

Memes play a proactive role in expressing dissent towards these commercials. The coxer behind the creation of these memes can be attributed to the erroneous or idealized representations of menstruation prevalent in commercials. As depicted in Figure 11, the commercials often fail to accurately represent the actual hardships experienced by women during menstruation, presenting

a simplified and overly positive portrayal of happy women. This starkly contrasts with the reality of menstruation. By downplaying the emotional and physical challenges faced by menstruators, these commercials convey a misleading message that suggests selecting the right sanitary products can effortlessly resolve all menstrual issues. Meme creators critique this misrepresentation and highlight the omission of the genuine experiences of menstruating individuals. The portrayals of menstruation in commercials are reflective of an underlying patriarchal ideology, which tends to shape and influence societal perceptions of this natural bodily process. In response, women resort to memes as a means of "feminine writing" to authentically express the genuine experiences related to menstruation. Through the creation of these memes, their creators engage in a critical examination of the phallogocentric constructs surrounding menstruation, dismantling and challenging the dominant male-centric perspectives by candidly bringing forth the reality of women's menstrual experiences. Additionally, they criticize the portrayal of period blood as blue, which deviates from its actual colour. Figure 12 presents an alternative approach to depicting women in commercials for sanitary pads or tampons. The meme humorously portrays a woman who is crying, in pain, and experiencing food cravings, reflecting the authentic reality of menstruation. This humorous depiction provides meme creators with an avenue to critique the unrealistic and deceptive portrayal of menstruation in these commercials. This particular figure exemplifies a manifestation of "feminine writing," wherein conventional masculine notions and depictions are dismantled by articulating the distinctive experiences encountered by women during menstruation, experiences that are uniquely representative of the female perspective (Cixous, 2010).



Figure 12: The figure depicts the actual condition of women during menstruation which is contradictory to the commercials. Source: Instagram (girl.issues_, 2019<https://www.instagram.com/p/Byij0tQHxak/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>)

The memes related to menstruation also delve into the attitudes of men towards this natural process. They often incorporate the dialogue "No Uterus, No Opinion" from the well-known American sitcom *Friends*, which serves as a means to criticize men who exhibit a lack of empathy or understanding towards menstruating women. This sentiment is illustrated in Figure 13, reflecting the meme creators' perspective on the topic.

When I have cramps and guys say it
can't be that bad

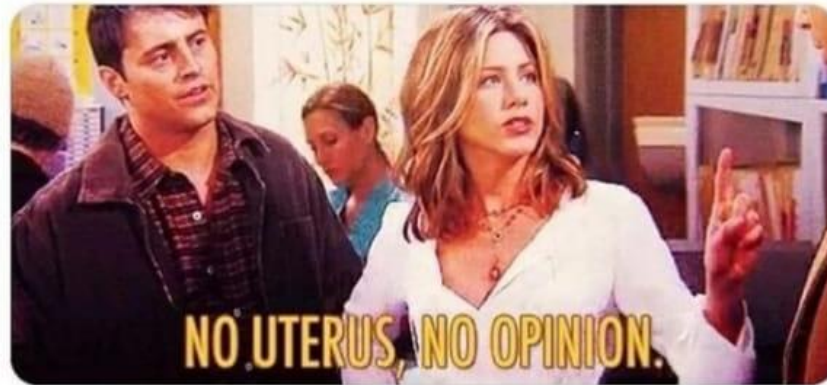


Figure 13: The meme criticizes the attitude of men towards menstruation. Source: Instagram (thrivingminds_in, 2021<https://www.instagram.com/p/CVSJ0rRNKVP/?igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA%3D%3D>)

Furthermore, the memes addressing menstruation also employ humour to imagine how men might behave if they experienced menstruation themselves. The addressee of these memes comprises men who may not adequately acknowledge or take seriously the hardships endured by women during menstruation. The caption accompanying the meme depicted in Figure 14, "Maybe then they will realize our pain! It will be a big deal for sure. What do you think? Tell us!" (Menstrupedia, 2022k) explicitly indicates that the meme is directed towards men. The use of the phrase "our pain" in the caption further signifies the sense of solidarity conveyed through life narratives among women. This creative approach is used to highlight the stark contrast between the experiences of menstruating individuals and the lack of empathy or understanding exhibited by some men. In Figure 14, the meme humorously depicts men in hospital beds, emphasizing the idea that if men had menstruation, their condition would be considered critical, thus shedding light on the disparities in perception and societal attitudes towards menstruation.

If men had periods



Figure 14: The meme mocks men for lack of pain tolerance. Source: Instagram (Menstrupedia, 2022g <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ch9tNOSMwsb/>)

Moreover, the memes related to menstruation serve as a means for women to express their discontent with patriarchal norms and challenge societal attitudes. These memes provide women with a platform to critique the behaviour of men who tend to boast about their possessions, even extending to hypothetical scenarios like the size of tampons they would use if they experienced menstruation (Menstrupedia, 2022d). By employing humour, these memes effectively expose the double standards and cultural biases that perpetuate gender inequalities. The memes empower women to voice their frustrations and confront the patriarchal structures that diminish the significance of women's experiences.

Conclusion

Memes, facilitated by the hashtag feature on social media platforms, afford women a distinct agency to engage in self-expression and share their perspectives, akin to other forms of life writing. In contrast to men, women demonstrate a collective and unified sense of identity through their life writings, using them as a means to articulate their concerns and viewpoints, thereby fostering solidarity with fellow women who share similar experiences. This interconnectedness is evident across various manifestations of life writings authored by women. As such, memes can be considered an innovative domain within the realm of life writing, empowering women to vocalize their lived experiences and forge connections among them. Specifically, menstruation-related memes serve as a medium for articulating the physical and emotional challenges endured by women during menstruation, thereby facilitating connections with others facing comparable struggles. Although presented humorously, these memes effectively convey potent opinions and critiques regarding patriarchal norms and the associated taboos surrounding menstruation. In crafting these memes, women employ components commonly found in life writings, such as coaxers, storytelling sites, the autobiographical 'I,' the addressee, the consumer, and self-inquiry, thus rendering them a form of life writing. Through these memes, women convey the difficulties encountered during their menstrual cycles, fostering self-acceptance of their womanhood and challenging societal taboos and superstitions related to menstruation. Moreover, these memes serve to enhance men's understanding of the physical and emotional burdens women face during menstruation, prompting them to offer support during such times. Furthermore, these memes can be viewed as a manifestation of "feminine writing" or "écriture féminine," as proposed by Helene Cixous, where women utilize "red ink"—representing their menstrual blood which is often subject to pollution and patriarchal taboos—, instead of "white ink" she metaphorically used in her work, to express their unique experiences. As an emergent genre within life writing, memes encapsulate the collective experiences of individuals. Given their digital nature, as disseminated through social media platforms, these genres contribute to the broader domain of life writing by providing enduring accessibility to these life inscriptions, transcending temporal, geographical, and cultural boundaries.

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