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Padded assumptions: A critical discourse analysis of patriarchal menstruation discourse

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Padded Assumptions: A Critical Discourse Analysis
Of Patriarchal Menstruation Discourse

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ABSTRACT

In 2015, Rupi Kaur's photography project featuring a menstruating woman was censored on Instagram, a photo sharing social media platform. The menstruation censorship created a surge in public media discourse about what is and is not appropriate to discuss about menstruation. Menstruation communication is often discrete or invisible in dominant discourse and focuses of medicalization rather than the social norms of "performing menstruation". This thesis explores menstruation communication in public media discourse and examines how it empowers and disempowers the menstruating female body. Themes including the everyday language of menstruation, patriarchal censorship of women's bodies, shame and stigma in menstruation discourse, and medical ideology and essentialization are examined. Recommendations for future research suggest inclusive approaches to women's health research and expanding research approaches to women's health care research and studies on menstruation.

Keywords: menstruation, health communication, disruptive discourse, women's health, Instagram

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Menstruation, biologically and culturally, has often been regarded as the moment of transition in a young girl's life from girlhood to womanhood (Mamo & Fosket, 2009; Rembeck, Moller, & Gunnarsson, 2006). Girls are told this is the moment they officially become a woman, which is perceived as both exciting and nerve racking (Martin, 2001). However, after menarche, a girl's perception of herself changes regarding her body image and self-esteem (Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2005). Many cultures, including Western culture, often downplay these psychological shifts and almost exclusively discuss menstruation from a medicalized frame (Costos, Ackerman, & Paradis, 2002).

Biological approaches to menstruation often refer to menstruation as an act that is "natural" and "normal" to the human body and is spoken about in scientific terms, such as the uterus and fallopian tubes (Charlesworth, 2001, p. 16). While the biological aspects are important to understand, perceiving periods strictly as a bodily process can lead to medicalizing menstruation. Medicalization is the process of pathologizing a normal biological process to create a health concern that institutionalized and regulated (Koerber, Arduser, Bennett, Kolodziejcki, & Sastry, 2015). The medicalization of menstruation frames periods as a problem needing management rather than a natural process of the female body (Rierdan & Hastings, 1990). Educational materials about menstruation discuss it as a bodily process to privatize and not draw attention to, reaffirming medicalization's focus on management (Charlesworth, 2001). The biological approach to discussing menstruation frames the body as a problem, promotes women's silence, and reinforces period shaming.

Along with the medical frame, the social frame surrounding menstruation is important to consider because it influences how women view their own periods and come to terms with it as a process of emergent womanhood (Martin, 2001). In Jackson and Falmagne's (2013) study, women held a variety of views about how menstruation marked womanhood, from excitement for puberty to confusion over how their pre-teen bodies were considered to be womanly. Young girls (with women continuing this learned behavior) are taught that periods are to be kept away from public discourse (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Spek, 2009). Because their bodily processes are something women cannot ignore, they must confront the juxtaposition of biology and culture that dictates the social order of menstrual communication (Martin, 2001). This confrontation often manifests itself in period shaming.

Period Shaming as a Social Act

Period shaming is the social construction that menstruation is an undesirable bodily event (Bobel, 2008). While the phrase "period shame" is not used consistently in the literature, themes that build this shame are seen throughout research regarding women and their periods. However, the phrase itself is crucial to understand when exploring menstrual stigma because while guilt is reflected when someone has done something wrong, shame "focuses not on the act but on the self; one *is* something bad" (Schooler, Ward, Merriweather, & Caruthers, 2005, p. 325). Shame then affects self-esteem, with women reporting higher levels of bodily self-consciousness during their menstrual cycle which can have larger ramifications for perceptions of female self-worth. (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). The shame women feel toward their menstrual cycle can be seen in the way they conceal menstruation, their lack of communication about it, and how

they perceive themselves to be limited in what they can do during menstruation, such as exercising (Kissling, 1996). Shame toward menstruation is so deeply rooted that women could not even name one positive aspect of menstruation, with some noting they thought, “the answer could not exist.” (Stubbs & Costos, 2004, p. 41).

Period shaming also reinforces the cultural taboo that women are dirty during menstruation and medicalizes periods as a hygienic crisis (Schooler, Ward, Merriweather, & Caruthers, 2005). It also frames periods as an emotional crisis, with menstruation seen as the “cause” for women to be irrational and unstable, as if they are unable to control their emotions during a menstrual cycle (Sveinsdottir, Lundman, and Norberg, 2002). The perception of emotional menstruating women is also reflected in the demonization of Pre-Menstrual Syndrome, or PMS (MacDonald, 2007; Stubbs and Costos, 2008). Shame for one’s body and the actions associated with those bodily processes can make women distain the entire menstrual process and the cultural and biological baggage that accompanies it.

Menstruation is portrayed as a cultural taboo in negative media depictions of periods and women during menstruation (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). Women view depictions of menstruation in feminine product advertisements as a source of information for how to present themselves and perform their gender identity (Guthrie, 2007). For example, while some advertisements expect women to become overburdened with menstruation and its symptoms, others expect women to rise above and pretend any physical discomfort they may experience is not a problem, creating more dissonance in how to perform menstruating femininity (Guthrie, 2007). Women see commercials for feminine products and feel they must portray a similar emotion as the women featured.

Menstruation becomes not only a biological event for females, but also an all-encompassing event that becomes part of defining their feminine identity (Del- Saz Rubio and Pennock- Spek, 2009).

Shame influences how society talks about menstruation, which is often accompanied by social discomfort, uneasiness, and a lack of direct language to discuss menstruation (Kissling, 1996). Women are taught that periods are a private process, and while it is acceptable to know about your period, it is culturally unacceptable to let other people know about your period (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013, Kissling, 1996). Even in instances when women have to communicate about their periods, these conversations are riddled with euphemisms to skirt around having to say “blood” or “menstruation” (Kissling, 1996). Using euphemisms to discuss menstruation hides the shame of periods and the “offensive feelings associated with it” (Lee, 2007, p. 12).

Menstruation also symbolizes our general notion of femininity, and issues with femininity are not to be highlighted in male- dominated spaces, often making these conversations quieter or completely silenced (MacDonald, 2007). For example, when menstruation is introduced to boys, they discuss it in a very humorous way by mocking PMS and feminine products (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013). These fears of social ridicule are then reflected in women’s embarrassment about potentially bleeding through their clothing or having it become public knowledge that they are menstruating (Martin 2001). Communication about menstruation is unwelcomed in masculine spaces, which could spill into a discomfort of menstruation talk in dominant discourse.

Fighting Back: Disrupting Mainstream Discourse

The Internet has been known to be a space to foster counterhegemonic discourses, or messages that challenge dominant systems and refuse to accept ideologies about what is considered “normal, natural, or necessary” (Warf & Grimes, 1997). Counterhegemony acts to guide discourses in radical alternative media that aim to confront dominant frameworks (Downing, 2001) Disruptive discourses typically begin with intergroup dialogue, where marginalized groups can create a safe space outside of the existing dominant discourse for individuals to voice opinions that may be taboo to discuss outside of that group (Sanders & Mahalingam, 2012). The Internet serves as a backdrop for these disruptive discourses because many online spaces lack gatekeepers, which creates open lines of communication and participation (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell & Logan, 2012) In order to engage in non-mainstream discourse, groups must find ways to interrupt the dominant discourse with critical ideas and commentary (Sanders & Mahalingam, 2012).

Along with not only disrupting the mainstream dialogue, outsiders must be able to bring awareness to the public of their counterhegemonic discourse. To have a successful interruption of mainstream dialogue is to have convergence between online discourses and news media visibility (Guha, 2015). For example, during the Arab Spring, protestors were able to get audiences to watch as many videos produced by Egyptian citizens on the ground as the news media was producing about the conflict (Nanabhay & Farmanfarmaian, 2011). The videos represented disruptive discourses that competed directly with the mainstream and created a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse (Nanabhay & Farmanfarmaian, 2011). By addressing silences in mainstream dialogue,

disruptive discourse can shed light on marginalized or underserved narratives (Downing, 2001).

Networked digital media, in general, allows people to both consume *and* create social news streams, giving citizens the power to participate in the dialogue (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell & Logan, 2012). Feminists have embraced the capabilities of using social media to their advantage in order to disrupt mainstream discourses about women (Antunovic & Linden, 2015). Social media is also an ideal place to participate in disruptive discourse because most people turn to their social networks for news information; non-dominant groups can use the platform similarly and elevate their message to the same caliber as news media messages presented on social media (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell & Logan, 2012). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, have created outlets for feminists to participate in self-imagining, or when the artist is the object and subject at the same time, which poses a shift in social order and mainstream images (Olszanowski, 2014). Social media's reach, such as the ability to connect with a global audience, has given women a wider public sphere to engage in when promoting social justice (Kasana, 2014). When presenting non-conformist narratives on social media, participants must accept the fact that their images and stories are entering a global conversation, where anyone can participate (Darmon, 2014).

One social media tactic to disrupt mainstream dialogue is the use of hash tags to unite public posts and create communities surrounding the content (Thorton, 2014). Hashtags can rally support or raise awareness for an issue that communities want noticed by mainstream media (Guha, 2015). For example, the use of the #HERESPROOF

hashtag was to promote women's sporting events as worthy of public recognition and to challenge the mainstream notion that only men's sporting events are interesting (Antunovic & Linden, 2015). Hashtags and community building can also act to concretize the identity of social groups and how they resist dominant narratives (Vats, 2015). The parody hashtag "#PaulasBestDishes" allowed black Twitter communities to critique celebrity chef Paula Deen's racist comments by disrupting the usually white online space with commentary on her actions (Vats, 2015). However, when online gatekeepers and social media platform guidelines deny disruptive self-expression, it keeps marginalized groups from participating in community building and maintains the status quo (Olszanowski, 2014).

Context

Rupi Kaur is a student at the University of Waterloo (Canada). In the spring semester of 2015, Kaur was enrolled in a visual rhetoric class that involved a photography project (Gray, 2015). She decided to explore the social stigma surrounding menstruation and did a photography project visually examining women and their periods (Barrie, 2015). One of the photographs depicted a woman lying in bed with blood on her sheets and sweatpants. Kaur uploaded the image of the woman in bed to her personal Instagram account with the caption (grammar and spelling as presented in the original post:

“i bleed each month to help make humankind a possibility. my womb is home to the divine. a source of life for our species. whether i choose to create or not. but very few times it is seen that way. in older civilizations this blood was considered holy. in some it still is. but a majority of people. societies. and

communities shun this natural process. some are more comfortable with the pornification of women. the sexualization of women. the violence and degradation of women than this. they cannot be bothered to express their disgust about all that. but will be angered and bothered by this. we menstruate and they see it as dirty. attention seeking. sick. a burden. as if this process is less natural than breathing. as if it is not a bridge between this universe and the last. as if this process is not love. labour. life. selfless and strikingly beautiful.”

However, within two days of posting the image, Instagram removed the photograph for allegedly violating their community guidelines. Instagram’s community guidelines focus on female nudity, such as prohibiting photos of sexual intercourse, genitals, and female nipples (Instagram, 2015). The guidelines do not state that blood is a censorable offense (Dewey, 2015). Kaur re-posted the photo assuming it may have been a mistake, only to have it removed for a second time. The removals prompted Kaur to upload the photo for a third time, along with an open letter to Instagram condemning their censorship of women’s bodies (Sanghani, 2015).

In the following week, her photograph and response went viral and the controversy was reported by leading news outlets, including *The Washington Post*, *The Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *New York Times*, and *BBC*. The coverage of Kaur’s photograph and conversations about menstruation inspired from her story ranged from sympathetic to disapproving. The media’s response to Kaur’s photograph has the ability to influence public opinion regarding periods and whether the news either highlights or disregards periods as part of women’s health news (Sangster & Lawson, 2014).

History of Instagram Censorship

Instagram is a photo sharing, social media app and website with over 150 million users (Carlson, 2013). While Instagram has made the news for record-breaking accomplishments—like selling their company for \$1 billion after only two years—it also has a history of controversy surrounding its contradictory censorship policy (Olszanowski, 2014; Carlson, 2013). In the five years it has been open to users, the company has come under fire for censoring photos of women breastfeeding, female pubic hair, plus size women in their underwear (when other underwear photos were permitted), and accounts dedicated to screenshots of women being harassed on dating websites (Plank, 2015; Sollee, 2015; Warren & Warzel, 2015). What makes these controversies even more interesting is often these removals do not fall into the guidelines of what is prohibited. Pictures of body hair, menstruation, and certain body parts, such as female butts and chests (excluding female nipples), are not included in the prohibited list, but are routinely deleted from the site (Warren & Warzel, 2015).

Instagram has both a long and short version of their “community guidelines” or censorship policies. Their short version states, “We want Instagram to continue to be an authentic and safe place for inspiration and expression. Help us foster this community. Post only your own photos and videos and always follow the law. Respect everyone on Instagram, don’t spam people or post nudity” (Instagram, 2015). The guidelines imply Instagram is a space where “expression” and “nudity” do not coexist, creating a sense of “moral superiority” (Olszanowski, 2014, p. 87). These rules and norms established on Instagram allow for the promotion of dominant ideologies regarding female gender performance, such as hyper-femininity and heteronormativity (Tiidenberg, 2015). To

circumvent these censorship policies, women often post nude photos that cover parts of their body, often the nipples or genitals, so the body is still exposed but within the parameters of Instagram's rules (Olszanowski, 2014).

The long version of their guidelines reiterates these points, but with more detail. The social media platform has tweaked its guidelines several times since their fruition, highlighting that they continue to try and create as much transparency and clarity about what is allowed on the site (Constine, 2015). These clarities include specifying how someone can report offensive posts, if someone has the right to post non- original content under their profile, and what type of substance use is allowed to be featured (Constine, 2015; Keiler, 2015).

The long version of their guidelines uses rhetoric of "safety" and how the guidelines of censorship are there to keep communities safe on Instagram. The company says they will pull photos they think are inappropriate even when they are posted "with good intentions", such as photos of children that may be partially nude in fear of the photos being used by others as child pornography (Instagram, 2015). In regard to adult images, they acknowledge how people might want to post nude images because they are giving consent, but then still deny the action under the idea that it is not suitable for a "diverse audience". The long guidelines also touch upon creating interactions among real people (rather than spam or fake accounts), staying within the confines of the law, and maintaining an environment that does not support self- harm. Overall, the guidelines repeatedly enforce the idea of respect for other users and to always post with others in mind.

In this thesis, I will investigate how conversations about menstruation are presented in public media discourse and their impact on shaming and empowering women. To do so, I will use Kaur's Instagram controversy as a case study to examine mainstream news media responses to Kaur's period photograph published on Instagram. The analysis will be specifically focused on mainstream news outlets, rather than community-based blogging spaces online, because of the influence mainstream news media have on the general public's understanding of women's issues (Sangster & Lawson, 2014). I also will explore the conversation between Kaur and Instagram as well as her open letter to Instagram condemning their censorship of her images.

In Chapter Two, I will review past literature on period shaming in American culture, media depictions of menstruation, and social media's influence on female visibility. I will also review the role of mainstream media and its ability to influence and shape social norms. I also will discuss poststructural feminism as a theoretical framework for making sense of the case. Poststructural feminism focuses on reflecting, re-inscribing, and resisting hegemonic patterns, especially cultural patterns of power and dominance (Thompson, 2010). Poststructural feminism's emphasis on gendered identities and gendered subjectivities is important for this thesis because it will provide a lens through which to examine the constricting social norms of performing this (ab)normal feminine experience (Butler, 2004). A poststructural feminist framework can show how public discourse constitutes period shaming and the material consequences of silencing menstruation.

In Chapter Three, I will discuss how critical discourse analysis is used as my method of research. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides a lens for reflection that

critiques how power and dominance affect discourse and the creation of meaning (van Dijk, 1993). CDA should inherently take a socio-political stance and seek “change through critical understanding” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 252). I will also situate CDA in a larger qualitative inquiry and the importance of analyzing public texts to understand the communicative nature of social phenomena.

Chapter Four will present my analysis of media discourse surrounding the Instagram controversy. I will examine several themes that emerge from the discourse and how it relates to my research question.

Finally, Chapter Five furthers the analysis with discussion, followed by the limitations of the research and how future research can expand on this issue and my own findings. I also will discuss how to apply these findings to greater menstrual discourse.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Health Advocacy and Activism

Health advocacy encourages communication scholars to think more critically about issues of power and social structure when examining health issues (Zoller, 2005). However, advocacy in general in communication studies still remains broad and health advocacy specifically vaguely defined. Weberling (2012) explained that advocacy is often used as a catch- all word that can be applied to any communication strategies to shift public opinion or gain resources to support a particular issue. Viewing advocacy as broadly as this within a communication context is short sighted, as it undercuts the complexity of political and public engagement as well as processes of social mobilization (Servaes & Malikhao, 2010). Conversely, understanding health advocacy too narrowly can leave areas of advocacy under-theorized and under-researched in health communication (Zoller, 2005).

Health communication specifically can provide scholars with the tools to fully understand the extent and power of advocacy through critical research approaches that can address imbalances of power and quality in social realms (Wood et al., 2008). Health, when speaking from a social constructivist perspective, is governed and structured through systems of political and socioeconomic power (Malikhao & Servaes, 2010). Health communication inherently presents itself to face issues of power and social capital within its communication field. Advocacy can help make connections with problems and solutions to suggest ways to affect social and political change (Weberling, 2012). Health advocacy should align itself with empowerment strategies and social support for

communities facing health concerns in relation to power and marginalization (Servaes & Malikhao, 2010).

Within health advocacy studies, there is a need to concretize the differences between advocacy and activism. Zoller (2005) defines advocacy as having a focus on education, expert knowledge, and solutions that work within current structural systems or the biomedical model. Health advocacy is common in current breast cancer health campaigns, with their focus on screenings for cancer and medical advancements in curing cancer (Weberling, 2012). Some definitions of health advocacy include the concept of participatory-based advocacy, which focuses on cooperative, dialogic communication strategies (Servaes & Malikhao, 2010). While health advocacy strategies may be addressing issues regarding power, they may not point to a specific source of power and control and instead work for solutions within that system (Zoller, 2005).

Health activism, on the other hand, challenges the system and power inequalities through targeting the status quo, social norms, and embedded practices reinforced by majority cultures (Zoller, 2005). Activists often find themselves deeply linked to political issues and press for more policy reform than seen in health advocacy (Zoller, 2010). Health activism can include scientific, legal, and cultural evidence and arguments to make claims of why something needs to be changed. An example of health activism is Wood et al.'s (2008) example of indigenous leaders protesting the lack of marginalized voices on the Human Genome Project. They challenged power- structures, such as scientists who are considered expert knowledge, to point out injustices toward their community. However, health activism often gets painted in a poor light within communication studies, as it is perceived as distant and confrontational, with an emphasis

on force and pressure (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). With health communication being uniquely situated in issues of power, scholars need to use a deeply critical lens when exploring health advocacy and activism. Communication studies cannot privilege consensual dialogue as the only effective agent for social change, but rather all forms of activism and how they vary in effectiveness contextually (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012).

Health advocates and activists alike have achieved great strides in combating and changing opinions regarding social norms (Zoller, 2005). One health activism strategy is redemptive efforts, which are focused on individual betterment, such as the personal rejection of social norms. The focus is on small-scale change rather than efforts to address social issues at large (Zoller, 2005). One area within social justice that has benefitted from health activism is women's health care. Health activists have worked to create social change regarding income inequality, family planning, reducing violence, and other topics of concern to feminist health communication scholars challenging institutional dominance (Zoller, 2010).

Disruptive Discourses and Menstruation

To challenge structures of power, marginalized groups often push back against dominant discourses that place them in the margins of power (English, 2010). Disruptive discourses are often understood as marginalized groups creating spaces within dominant discourse to exist and question structures of power (Sanders & Mahalingam, 2012). Resistant discourses are more focused on challenging and changing hegemonic norms. Social structures create hierarchies of knowledge and resistant discourses attempt to break through these structures and allow contradictory voices to be heard (Quinlan & Bute, 2013). While resistant and disruptive discourse play an important role in analyzing

how structures of power shape reality, they function differently. Resistant discourses are intentionally challenging social norms with the goal of advocacy in mind; disruptive discourses aim to garner attention to a social norm but often do not offer a call to action for how to change that norm.

Women can participate in disruptive and resistant discourse in the way they perform their gender as menstruating women or in how they communicate about menstruation. Menstruation symbolizes our general concept of femininity, but more specifically the notion of feminine inferiority (MacDonald, 2007). Systems of power, particularly within Western patriarchal cultures, reduce female power by placing stigma upon menstruation by defining it as shameful (Marvan & Molina- Abolnik, 2012). Women can negotiate power, however, by participating in actions that contradict the hegemonic norms of silence regarding menstruation. Women can use menstrual discourse to resist hegemonic structures of shame and fear by using dialogue to create positive emotions about menstruation (Marvan & Molina- Abolnik, 2012).

Discourses are able to challenge or reinforce dominant social structures through language, text, and communication interactions (van Dijk, 1993). For example, women can resist dominant power structures by advocating for women to feel comfortable talking about menstruation in the public sphere. They can also disrupt discourse by simply discussing their periods in public or creating comfortable spaces within mainstream discourse to feel open about menstruation talk (Charlesworth, 2001). While public discourse is often bound by patriarchal power structures that shame menstruation, “open” talk among females puts women in less marginalized positions and disrupts the norms of a public discourse space (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013).

However, there are moments where resistant and disruptive discourse needs to be examined reflexively to understand if it challenges or reinforces hegemonic norms. For example, medical advancements have led to menstruation-suppressing birth control giving women a period only once every four months (Johnston- Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). Medical developments are held under the guise of innovation when in reality they act to divorce menstruation from female biological processes. Minimizing menstruation through prescriptive drugs does not empower women's menstruating bodies and only gives power to social structures that tell women to conceal their bodily processes. This can disempower women from claiming their bodies as tools for their own gender performance; instead their body becomes a tool to perform within hegemonic standards of female identity (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013). Even when women believe they are disrupting norms by empowering themselves through controlling their bodies, they have a false sense of agency because they are only conforming to the hegemonic discourses that established their bodies as problematic in the first place (Johnston- Robledo, Sheffield, Voight, & Wilcox- Constantine, 2007).

Negative Attitudes Toward Menstruation and the Hygienic Crisis

Women experiencing menstruation struggle with the emotions they feel toward their periods, with many being taught not to accept the menstrual cycle as part of their feminine body, but rather as a troubling and problematic part of womanhood (Lee, 2007). Women's' menstrual cycles has been used throughout history as a tool to argue male superiority, from Aristotle to Freud (Roberts & Waters, 2004). Women are aware of these negative attitudes toward menstruation and often mirror them in their own self-objectification during menstruation. For example, when discussing their first periods,

women in Lee's (2007) study stated they felt ashamed and thought their bodies were "disgusting and defective" (p. 619). Female bodies are then scrutinized for being repulsive due to a biological process they have no control over. The shame stemming from this can be seen as overwhelming and pervasive. Sommer et al. (2015) stated menstrual shame, and the complexity of social norms regarding periods, is "an inevitable part of the social order" (p. 1303), leaving women no choice but to feel the shame and pressure from large social mores.

There are also negative attitudes toward the symptoms of menstruation and PMS (premenstrual syndrome). Media highlights the negative aspects of menstruation such as PMS by medicalizing or demeaning emotional women (Stubbs and Costos, 2004). Symptoms of menstruation are seen as making women irrational and unstable, as if they are unable to control their emotions during a menstrual cycle (Sveinsdottir, Lundman, and Norberg, 2002). In Lee's (2007) study, one of the biggest factors that caused girls fear of embarrassment during their periods was jokes about PMS and being too emotional. Prevailing notions of uncontrollable women are used to promote methods of birth control that help women be in control of their bodies, placing the onus back on women to control themselves (Lee, 2007). Menstruation then becomes not only a biological event for females, but also an all-encompassing event defining their feminine identity (Del- Saz Rubio and Pennock- Spek, 2009).

The negative attitudes toward periods are emphasized in the consumer culture that promotes products to control periods, associating menstruation with a "hygienic crisis". The menstrual hygienic crisis can be defined as the marketing of products that conceal and manage menstruation stemming from a place of fear, making women fear humiliation

when they are not able to conceal their periods (Roberts & Waters, 2004). The use of hygienic language regarding periods began with advocacy organizations working with low and middle-income countries trying to justify why menstrual education was a hygiene issue for women who had limited access to feminine products (Sommer et al, 2015). However, advertisers embraced the rhetoric of hygiene to promote their products that were deemed “gyno-cosmetics”, or unnecessary products seen to beautify or improve the vaginal area (Levine, 2002, p. 39)

The feminine product industry makes a large effort to highlight their products’ ability to promote cleanliness and discreetness. The language of “sanitary pads” even reinforces product use to remove “the unsanitary aspects” of menstruation, as if menstruation is a problem that needs to be extracted (Charlesworth, 2001, p. 15). Americans in particular view periods as an inconvenience to life in need of sanitation (MacDonald, 2007). Medicalizing menstruation as a hygiene crisis allows companies to push their products and shape the perceptions women have of what makes a “clean”—and conceivably—“good” body. Women are then told the only way to achieve such perfection is by controlling odors that come from the female body (Thomas, 2007). Women then claim they associate cleanliness with body confidence and feeling feminine, displaying the internalization of media that promote hygienic messages (Levine, 2002).

The taboos associated with the hygienic crisis affect women’s’ perceptions of their bodies and what an acceptable, sexual body looks like. Products that claim they help beautify or clean the vulva and vagina imply women’s bodies are “naturally defective and desperately in need of cosmetic improvement” (Levine, 2002, p 37). Women are told by cultural messages that their bodies are in constant need of

modification—such as sanitizing, exfoliating, and deodorizing—because female bodies in their natural state are unacceptable, particularly when placed in a sexual context (Roberts & Waters, 2004). For example, both male and female participants in Davis, Nowygrod, Shabsigh, & Westhoff's (2002) study described sex while menstruating as dirty and an act they would never consider participating in. The decision behind abstaining from period sex is not motivated by a medical choice, but a cultural one (Davis, Nowygrod, Shabsigh, & Westhoff, 2002). Advertisers have been seen to market hygienic products with the promises of improved sexual satisfaction to make them more appealing to women, even when the products had little to do with sex beyond being associated with the sexual organs (Levine, 2002). These conceptions of “dirty bodies” limit women's sexual actions while on their periods, thus devaluing female bodily autonomy (Charlesworth, 2001).

Communication and Visibility of Menstruation

One of the first places girls learn about their periods is from their mothers. Clear communication and positive attitudes from mothers can directly influence girls' perceptions of menstruation, as 89% of women in Lee's (2007) study who said they had positive memories of menarche reported they had an emotionally involved mother, who was either celebratory or helpful. However, when mothers do not talk about menstruation with their daughters, it can have negative implications. Many women reported they had rarely talked to their mothers about periods, and if they received messages from their mothers, they were predominately negative or highly scientific (Stubbs & Costos, 2004). In Costos, Ackerman, and Paradis' (2002) study, women reported that the messages they got from their mothers were either negative or, as half of the participants noted, non-

existent. Often these mothers relied on other sources for period information, such as educational pamphlets that came with feminine products or doctors. The medicalization of menstruation made women believe physicians had the most expertise, so mothers often deferred conversations about periods and puberty to their daughter's physician (Costos, Ackerman, & Paradis, 2002).

Mother- daughter communication about periods frequently focuses on the sexualization of puberty rather than the biological process of womanhood. Women said their mothers responded to their first period with messages about how they could get pregnant now and they must worry about the sexualization of women (Costos, Ackerman, & Paradis, 2002). Girls reflected this concept, with negative attitudes toward their period because becoming a woman had many responsibilities compared to being a child (Lee, 2007). When mothers do talk about sexuality with their daughters, they are still more likely to talk about pregnancy and conception than periods (Kissling, 1996). Menstrual conversations are either harder to have than other puberty talks or seen as less important.

Menstrual conversations beyond mother- daughter dialogues are also consigned to feminine spaces and allow for female participants only, as men are seen as either ignorant or judgmental (Kissling, 1996; Sveinsdottir, Lundman, and Norberg, 2002). When men are featured in feminine product advertisements, they are used to display ignorance or to place men in a position of lacking knowledge. In Del- Saz Rubio and Pennock- Spek's (2009) study, men in ads were used as foils to female characters and often did not know what any of the feminine products were. However, men are socialized into the etiquette surrounding periods that emphasizes keeping a woman's menstruation experience hidden from boys and men (Sommer et al, 2015). For instance, women reported being afraid of

the response and embarrassment that would occur if a man found out they were on their period (Kissling, 1996; Lee, 2007). Girls did not want their brothers or fathers to know they were menstruating because they feared being teased (Lee, 2007). Boys were also shown to discuss menstruation in a humorous context by making fun of girls in school who were seen with feminine products or dismissing and mocking PMS (Jackson and Falmagne, 2013; Sveinsdottir, Lundman, and Norberg, 2002). The shame of men finding out also fits in a heteronormative frame because of the assumption that a man's knowledge of a woman menstruating would decrease her perceived attractiveness and popularity (Roberts & Waters, 2004).

Along with period talk, feminine products fall in the social stigma of silence due to the notion that periods should happen out of the public eye. Women report feeling uneasy even purchasing feminine products, with participants in Kissling's (1996) study saying they make sure they can find a female cashier to check them out. With other feminine products, such as douches or sprays, women also were hesitant to discuss their needs and showed embarrassment toward using the product (Levine, 2002). Menstrual pamphlets mention having a special handbag only for feminine products so "no one will be able to see them" (Charlesworth, 2001, p. 18). Keeping feminine products from sight stifles any conversations about periods and feminine products in the public sphere. The products themselves are even marketed with this embarrassment in mind. Feminine products aim to hide women's periods and the notions of discretion, cleanliness, and modesty are all industry promoted (Charlesworth, 2001; Simes & Berg, 2001). The advertising industry has promoted these period-shaming themes and often reinforces negative narratives about menstruation.

Depictions of Periods in Advertising

One of the most prominent sources of media to see menstruation attitudes is in advertisements for feminine products. The introduction of feminine product advertisements in the 1970's, women's hygiene and sexual health became a space of social anxiety and conflicting perceptions of normative gender performance (Levine, 2002). Commercials often shape how we perceive female representations and determine what becomes valued in female identity. Beauty myths promoted through advertisements create tension with feminist thought because the ideology of beauty is still powerful and controlling over perceptions of women (Laware and Moutsatsos, 2013). These beauty methods can reinforce low self-esteem regarding women's bodies, as part of themselves are deemed unacceptable by media and cultural standards (Sheldon, 2010). For example, commercials in the 1970s used lines such as "having a female body doesn't make you feminine" in their scripts, reinforcing that the performance of that body is more imperative than the body itself (Levine, 2002, p. 36).

One of the roles women play in feminine product commercials is the embarrassed or "shy girl". Lee's (2007) study looked at one advertisement where the model repeated nervous non-verbals and never looked into the camera when discussing the feminine products she uses. Testimonial-style advertisements are common in feminine product ads because women create more sympathy and credibility talking about their experience or negative symptoms with periods than bodiless voice-overs (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). Commercials illustrate how feminine products capitalize on the hygienic crisis, such as the idea of discreteness. Del- Saz Rubio and Pennock- Spek (2009) discuss the Tampax Compak was designed to provide "the most discrete protection" with its

small design, allowing women to even hide the fact that they even own tampons (p. 2542). Even women fear of other people finding out that they are on their periods, with some saying they throw away feminine products in a secretive manner to not allow others to know they are currently menstruating (Jackson and Falmagne, 2013).

Other commercials take a more positive approach to feminine product advertisements. In Del Saz- Rubio and Pennock-Spek's (2009) study, they found both the image of the empowered female and the distressed female present in tampon advertisements. The empowered woman is one that acts as if her period is not a factor in her daily activities. One advertisement in the study from Spain even alluded to having sex on your period, suggesting that women can be sexy and confident during their menstrual cycle, which challenges other prevailing narratives (Del Saz- Rubio and Pennock-Spek, 2009). Other commercials in the study showed women intensively playing sports, in all white clothing even. However, while this may seem like a positive depiction of menstruation, it can also have the same effects toward silencing menstrual narratives. If advertisements never actually depict women experiencing the biologically adverse effects of menstruation, such as cramps or nausea, then those who experience it may think they are abnormal and their discomfort is unusual, which could potentially have negative consequences toward women's reproductive health (Guthrie, 2007)

Poststructural Feminism

The cornerstones of poststructural feminist theory are critiquing power and questioning how meaning is constructed and established in social contexts (Weedon, 1997). The theory attempts to destabilize institutionalized knowledge through inquiring how language and meaning are enforced as the norm through sources of power

(Buzzanell & Liu, 2005). Discourses shape reality through negotiations of power that happen within everyday interactions (English, 2010). Poststructural feminism can contribute to health advocacy studies because it attempts to deconstruct dominant ideologies and creates visibility for marginalized populations and their health identities (Moffatt & Norton, 2005).

Poststructural feminism is valuable to communication studies in the way that it approaches and examines discourse. From a poststructural lens, discourse acts as the means to employ language into cultural narratives and concretize their normative meanings (Barrett, 2005). Discourse can be seen as an important element in communication research, revealing how talk shapes the way we understand and make sense of our identities and culture. Health identities help us make sense of ourselves and how we want to communicate who we are to other people. Carmack (2014) stated that identities are constantly in flux and are processed through growth and interaction. English (2010) echoes this notion through poststructural feminism, stating identities are shaped through everyday discourse. Our identities possess various degrees of power that are negotiated through discursive acts. Poststructural feminism can contribute to health communication by critically exploring how discourse shape health identities.

Health identities are medically and socially constructed, often through a health issue that may be viewed as an interruption to an individual's previously understood identity (Carmack, 2014). Health identities are crucial in understanding the complexities of health and how it influences interpersonal and cultural perceptions of individuals. Poststructural feminism focuses on how power and discourse can build identities and shape reality (English, 2010). Communication interactions help us come to constitute our

identities in relation to others and overall social structures. Poststructural feminism views these interactions as experiences of power and agency, which can give us more or less control over the power we have in a situation (English, 2010). For example, female veterans experience health identities shifts when going from active duty personnel under military structural power to veterans that can make more autonomous health decisions (Villagran, Ledford, & Canzona, 2015). Poststructural feminism addresses how discourse, such as discourse of making health decisions, contributes to identity construction. Poststructural feminism highlights the importance of having marginalized narratives present, specifically female voices, because the theory initially aimed to critique power structures that equated all female experiences, rather than acknowledging the myriad of different voices and lives of women (Pierce, 2011). If communication scholars want to examine discourses of identity, such as the identity of menstruating women, they can employ poststructural feminist frameworks to question the knowledge and language used in those discourses to establish structural powers that influence identity.

While poststructural feminism addresses the role of institutionalized knowledge, it also questions how meaning is created within a language and contributes to knowledge construction (Barrett, 2005; Moore, 2014). Poststructural feminism states language constructs reality and how structures of power define language meanings influences how we perceive reality (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005). Health identities are often marked by language use that is defined through cultural contexts (Carmack, 2014). However, it is important that language is not taken only at cultural face value. Health communication researchers can examine why these words hold power through their culturally ascribed

definitions (Moore, 2014). Poststructural feminism questions how systems of power reinforce language meanings, such as survivor and victim, and determines these identities are empowering and disempowering. Language, such as this, can also give or remove agency from an individual in how they perceive their own health identity. For example, an individual may be perceived as a victim because they experienced a sexual assault and discourse about sexual assault reinforces power dynamics that labels the individual as a victim of violence. However, they may want to resist the power structures that deem them victims and reinscribe their identity as survivor—a use of language that give them power back through discourse. The language of these health identities enables and disables individuals from performing identities they perceive as valid to their self- concept and whether they align with the culturally normative expectations of that identity performance. Communication scholars can engage in these language constructs and untangle them from roots of power to understand their role in creating knowledge and identity (Thompson, 2010).

Poststructural feminism can also help scholars advocate for health issues that are not fully understood by the medical community. Certain health identities, such as those regarding mental health, are not perceived in the same way as health identities that fit within the biomedical model, such as treatable or chronic illnesses (Carmack, 2014). For example, the health identity of having Asperger's—or being an "Aspie"—resists the biomedical model because the community identity defines Asperger's as an aspect that is positive and crucial to their identity construction. (Carmack, 2014). The Aspie population resists the negative hegemonic norms of mental health identities by transforming the discourse on Autism to focus on positive attributes. Through poststructural feminism,

scholars can explore how these resisting identities deconstruct cultural reproductions of dominant social norms (Moffatt & Norton, 2005). Communication studies often poses questions of power, privilege, and discourse. Poststructural feminism possesses all of the tools to address these questions from a critical, theoretical context. By applying poststructural feminist theory into future research in health communication advocacy, scholars can extend their questions and findings of power dynamics and offer more solutions for addressing health inequalities.

Summary and Research Questions

While poststructural feminism is concerned with discourse and power, it is often under-utilized within communication studies. However, poststructural feminism can explore the role of discourse and language as tool of power and resistance to social structures. The role of power structures shaping discourses spaces is important to understand when exploring the roots of period shaming. Communication acts that disrupt hegemonic discourses of concealment help women challenge social suppression and empower their identity as menstruating women in public spaces. However, while women can perform acts of disruption and resistance, it is crucial we understand how dominant discourses, such as the media, interpret and represent these disruptions. The media play a critical role in reinforcing social norms and have the potential to introduce counterhegemonic discourses in public spheres that question social norms. The following two questions will be explored through discourse analysis to understand these communication acts.

RQ: How do public media discourses about Kaur's disruptive actions empower and disempower menstruating bodies?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Defining Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative research aims to explore how people ascribe meaning to materials, such as texts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative researchers want to uncover those specific, individualized meanings (Hodder, 2000). Patton (2014) explained how researchers can study and document how human beings create and subsequently attach these meanings to things in their reality. Human beings do not just stumble upon knowledge; rather, humans make systems of knowledge that construct concepts and models that are used to understand the world (Schwandt, 2000). Qualitative inquiry operates under the auspices that reality is socially constructed and researchers must not suggest there is one singular way to explain reality.

The foundation that ties methodologies of qualitative inquiry together—such as ethnography, focus groups, etc.—is the desire to understand other people’s realities as individualized and contextualized experiences (Patton, 2014). One way qualitative inquiry explores how experiences are understood individually is through the role of the researcher as the instrument of inquiry (Patton, 2014). Knowledge of social realities comes from the interdependence of the researcher and the research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Qualitative inquiry is a point of intersection between the personal and the professional (Patton, 2014). One feature of becoming the research instrument is acknowledging the fact that there are multiple realities and not a particular “truth” that is inherently valid (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Asking questions that call for qualitative methods are seeking answers focused on meaning and furthering our interpretive understanding of a subject (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001). By asking questions that evoke

examination through qualitative inquiry, researchers can expand knowledge by digging into deeper, rich descriptions of what we know as human beings and how we know it (Tracy, 2010).

Textual Analysis as a Qualitative Methodology

One of the benefits of qualitative research is the inclusion of various methods of analysis that all aim to analyze how human beings construct and attach meaning to their experiences (Patton, 2014). Textual analysis in particular allows researchers to examine language, symbols, and discourse presented in existing records or texts (Kreps, 2008). However, textual analysis is often perceived as residing farther away on the qualitative spectrum from methods that engage with people directly, such as interviews or focus groups. The ways other qualitative methods incorporate narratives, such as interviews or focus groups, should not detract from textual analysis's ability to examine the human experience. The examination of texts, or as Hodder (2000) refers to them as mute evidence, is an important element to qualitative inquiry. Textual analysis fits the criteria for qualitative methodologies well because it embodies qualitative characteristics, such as an ambiguous nature connecting theory and method, and the goal to describe, decode, and come to terms with meanings in the world (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The broad, overarching description of qualitative research is employed in order to include as many methods within the umbrella of qualitative research.

Textual analysis in qualitative inquiry is particularly important because it can guide us to pay closer attention to material culture and interpret what texts are communicating in various contexts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Meanings do not solely live in a text; it is up to the researcher to extract and understand the text's meaning (Hodder,

2000). Researchers have to come to understand a text in order to give it life and illustrate the meaning given to it by others. Meaning within a text is always socially constructed and can be seen as contradictory overtime due to changes in meaning (Hodder, 2000). Textual analysis addresses the socially constructed nature of texts that reflect how individuals create their own meaning, which is a foundational element to qualitative inquiry.

To fully understand socially constructed realities, however, qualitative researchers must also recognize the importance of contextual sensitivity (Patton, 2014). Because realities are constructed through multiple, individual interpretations, it is crucial to understand the context in which individuals built those realities (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). One of the goals of qualitative research is to study things and interpret their meaning in their natural setting in order to recognize its context (Deznin & Lincoln, 2000). Textual analysis also follows these guidelines because documents require contextualized interpretations to grasp the full meaning they attempt to communicate (Hodder, 2000). Fursich (2009) referred to the study and analysis of texts as “reading”, evoking the idea that the texts are being read within their existing, intended context, which is ideal for a well- rounded examination of their communicated meaning.

Rigor Within Textual Analysis

Textual analysis demonstrates rigor in similar ways to other forms of qualitative methodologies, but it may manifest in different ways. Communication scholars struggle when defining rigor because it often lacks a textbook definition and relies on unspoken standards for research (Davies & Dodd, 2002). While qualitative scholars have made it clear that qualitative and quantitative research need different rigor standards, little is

specifically focused on textual analysis and how it fits in qualitative rigor framework that privilege other qualitative methods.

Davies and Dodd (2002) suggested ethics are an essential part of rigorous research. However, the conceptualization of ethics often illustrates ethical gray areas in interview processes (Davies & Dodd, 2002). Textual analysis allows for the researcher to examine texts closely without influencing the data directly—as perhaps could occur in other qualitative data collection situations—so the researcher can be the instrument of inquiry without directly influencing the narratives presented in the text (Fursich, 2009; Hodder, 2000). Tracy (2010) also suggested qualitative research can be viewed as rigorous when it makes use of rich, complex, data that employs a variety of theoretical constructs, data sources, and contexts. Textual analysis can provide a broad or narrow focus, depending on the research question's aims, and can provide the depth and variety Tracy suggests is needed in qualitative research.

Textual analysis demonstrates rigor in the way it can resonate with an audience and be relatable if the audience is familiar with the text. Tracy (2010) explained that rigorous qualitative research provides insight into the lives of individuals and has an element of transferability. Texts are often long standing artifacts that build social environments, hold historical context, and shape cultural practices (Hodder, 2000). Textual analysis can highlight these relevant characteristics and relate them to the audience in how the messages communicated in the text transfer to their lived experiences.

Textual Analysis in Health Communication

Textual analysis has the potential to explore a wide variety of areas within health communication by uncovering influences of communication in health care and the structures that influence health processes (Kreps, 2008). While quantitative analysis may be more common in health communication research, it is crucial to understand and appreciate the role of qualitative health communication research because of the depth and meaning it provides to health situations (Kreps, 2008). Textual analysis can assist in illuminating the depth of research in health communication by understanding the larger scope of a health issue, highlighting voices and interactions in health, and create relatable and accessible research for the public sphere.

Texts can help us see the big picture of health issues, especially when looking at mediated texts. Texts build the environment for social relationships, so to understand discourse and situations of power, researchers must examine material evidence and texts that are part of the social experience (Hodder, 2000). Exploring texts can allow us a more expanded picture of public perceptions of an issue that may not be as well understood or seen through traditional qualitative research methods, such as focus groups and interviews. While texts may be seen as projecting a particular version of reality, Fursich (2009) argued that using media texts in particular can help scholars understand the “dominant sense of reality” (p. 246). This can help communication researchers understand dominant power structures and how their construction of reality influences other’s perceptions of the world around them.

Textual analysis can help us connect health communication principles to everyday interactions and allow for multiple voices to be heard on the same topic. Interviewing

people directly about a health issue will get a clear, personal perspective on a health issue, but texts could illuminate more realities regarding individual experiences, group identities, or public perceptions. For example, McNicol and Weaver (2013) textually analyzed a comic book's depiction of peanut allergies. The choice to use textual analysis to address this health issue allowed the researcher to explore not only how individual characters present their health issue, but also how public discourse frames conversations about allergy and stigma. Textual analysis provides a different, varied lens to observe a health communication topic and can help to foreground "the voices of patients [and] professionals" in health care (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 27).

Textual analysis also can give more perspective to communication acts affecting health care professionals directly. Carmack's (2010) textual analysis of benevolence laws demonstrates the communication need to explore texts that are ambiguous and how their policies are enacted within healthcare settings. Textual analysis can explore texts that aim to make health information more accessible, which makes space for health communication research to reflect that accessibility (McNicol & Weaver, 2013). Accessible texts addressing health topics, such as news coverage and articles, can allow communication scholars to examine how public knowledge is framed (Carmack, 2014). Health communication can also shed light on texts that do not make health information accessible and suggest future considerations for health promotion to take in order to communicate their information effectively to the public.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis, or CDA, is a method of inquiry focused on studying language and discourse's influences on power and social structures and practices

(Wodak, 2001). CDA narrows its focus on issues of power, dominance, and inequality that are reinforced and created through texts and discourse (van Dijk, 2001). Approaching texts with this intent presents researchers with the goal to expose social inequality in communication and the ways our language enacts those moments of inequality. CDA does not have a unitary theoretical framework; rather it has a particular set of tenets researchers are expected to uphold through their research practices (van Dijk, 2001). van Dijk (2001) explained these tenets are focused on power relations being inherently discursive and to look at discourse as historical, ideological, a form of social action, and an element of society and culture. Researchers doing CDA are also expected to take a political stance and address data from a critical lens. Having a critical approach means that scholars must view the data within social contexts, take a political stance on the issue, and include self-reflexivity moments throughout the research process (Wodak, 2001). CDA provides researchers the opportunity to make sense of social members' practices in social relationships, assign blame and responsibility to structures within culture, and also present themselves as part of or within the discourse being addressed (Tracy, 2001).

The focus of CDA scholars often revolves around notions of hegemony, ideology, class, gender, race, discrimination, reproduction, institutions, social structure, and social order (van Dijk, 2001). These actions display types and levels of power that controls and enables people's action and communication. Although language may be a building block to enforcing these structures, it is important to note that language is not powerful on its own; language gains power by the way dominant structures and people employ the language (Wodak, 2001). Understanding the meaning behind language and how stable

they are or how they are acted upon can give the researcher an idea of the power of language in certain contexts (Tracy, 2001). CDA positions power as a central component to social relationships (Wodak, 2001). However, power is rarely absolute and completely in control by one social group or structure (van Dijk, 2001). Although groups may have more or less control and power over others, power is understood through various situations and social domains, which creates more opportunities for exchanges of power (van Dijk, 2001). CDA explores how these moments of control are communicated in texts and understood through daily discursive practices.

CDA is concerned with “analyzing opaque and transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in language” (Wodak, 2001, p. 2). The power of dominant groups can be reflected in social texts and normative behavior, such as laws, rules, norms, habits, and thus are understood as hegemonic practices of that social context (van Dijk, 2001). CDA aims to critique these structural practices and examine instances of resistance. When discourse resists dominant structures, it is seen as breaking conventions of discursive practices (Wodak, 2001). CDA may be seen as a reaction against the dominant formal paradigms and a critical stance against dominant social powers (van Dijk, 2001).

van Dijk (2001) explained CDA offers a different perspective to theorizing and analyzing texts and language. It is regarded as a way of analysis that promotes multidisciplinary approaches to research. Communication studies is an ideal place to explore multidisciplinary approaches because of the openness to other modes of inquiry (Tracy, 2001). However, this openness acts as a double-edged sword, with other academic disciplines finding communication research less distinct and often overlook the

contributions communication studies has offered to the interdisciplinary discourse community (Tracy, 2001). CDA has caused tension even within communication studies between the goals of rhetorical criticism and discourse analysis (Tracy, 2001). What makes CDA distinct from rhetorical critical approaches is the focus on language as an everyday social practice (Wodak, 2001). Discourse analysis is more interested in the ordinary and unremarkable areas of social life than rhetorical texts (Tracy, 2001). These everyday discourses communicate social order and shape relationships of power and dominance in society (van Dijk, 2001). It is crucial we look at these micro level discourses because they play a role in reinforcing and enacting social norms from macro sources of dominant power.

Data Collection

My thesis data consisted of three discourse events: (1) Kaur's initial post on Instagram, (2) her responses to Instagram after deleting her photos, and (3) news media coverage of Kaur's story. For this thesis, the captions she wrote for her photos will be considered part of her response to Instagram. It is important to note that only discourse included with Kaur's posts will be considered and I will not be doing an analysis of the photo series itself. Her text is important to analyze because it communicates her experiences of period shaming. I also will not be considering comments on the articles or photos she posted, as it detracts from the primary discourse regarding the photos and response to Instagram's removal of her photos. The comments from other participants are too vast to include within the scope of this analysis.

I engaged in two rounds of data collection. For the first round, I used Google and Google News search engines to collect news coverage about Kaur's photo. Because

Kaur's photo acted as a catalyst for more news coverage of period shaming, there were a number of national and regional news articles. I used the search terms "period shaming Instagram", "Rupi Kaur Instagram period", and "Instagram menstruation controversy". The search yielded 26 articles from mainstream news media outlets. The second round of data collection occurred two months later to see if any articles were missed during the last collection. I wanted to focus on the initial coverage of Kaur's photo, as well as analyze articles specifically focused on her. This eliminated news articles about other instances of women supporting communication about menstruation (many articles found in the initial search mentioned Kaur anecdotally in stories about other menstruation advocacy efforts).

I also set time perimeters for data collection. Articles that met the topic criterion were included if they also appeared the last two weeks of March and first week of April (March 23, 2015 to April 5, 2015). These dates were chosen because Kaur's photo was removed from Instagram March 27th. After eliminating articles that did not fit the criteria, a total of 35 articles were included in the analysis. Articles were downloaded into a Word document to preserve the texts, resulting in 78 pages.

Data Analysis

I engaged in the constant-comparative method of analysis to discover themes in the texts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I went through the initial process of open coding, which is crucial to begin with as to explore the text thoroughly and in an unrestricted manner (Strauss, 1987). I read through the articles several times and noted themes that emerged from reading. Strauss (1987) emphasized the importance of examining the text multiple times as the researcher's relationship with the text is more important than the

sheer, untapped potential of the text alone. Once theoretical saturation had been reached and no other themes emerged (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Using Owen's (1984) three criteria, a theme was considered salient if there was 1) recurrence (similar meaning was communicated but different words were used), 2) repetition (the reiteration of key words and phrases), and 3) forcefulness (indicated by vocal features such as inflection, volume, or pausing that set off certain portions of an account from others). I grouped themes into various complimentary categories, identifying the meaning behind the themes. I used a variety of quotations from the texts to illustrate the themes, demonstrating rich rigor, thick description, and concrete detail (Tracy, 2010). All texts have been left in their original form, including grammar and spelling errors and inconsistencies. Edits have only been made if it improves the readability of the quotation.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

After reviewing the data through a critical discourse analysis approach, several themes emerged. These themes related back to the research question examining how the discourse acted to empower and disempower menstruating bodies. For this analysis, I will be using the term “public discourse” to refer to the articles included within the data. They are acting as representative for public discourse at-large and give a sense of the larger discourse that is disrupted by marginalized discourse. Themes that emerged include the everyday language of menstruation, patriarchal censorship of women’s bodies, shame and stigma in menstruation discourse, and medical ideology and essentialization.

Everyday Language of Menstruation Discourse

The language throughout the public discourse often referred to Kaur’s menstruation as a “stain” or “leak” on her clothing. In the public discourse analyzed for this thesis, fourteen of the articles (40%) referred to her blood as a stain or “staining herself” (Birch, 2015; Cafolla, 2015; Dewey, 2015; Lynch, 2015; Maggs, 2015; Mortowala, 2015; Romano, 2015; Rozzi, 2015; Sanchez, 2015; Sanghani, 2015; Thacker, 2015; Tolentino, 2015; Williams, 2015). A handful of articles referred to the leaks of blood on her bed and body (Brodsky, 2015; Driscoll, 2015; Gray, 2015; Zamon, 2015). The discourse disempowers menstruation within social contexts by repeatedly referring to it as a “stain”, which carries a negative connotation. Staining implies the female body is dirty, soiled, or unkempt, even though this example of unexpected menstruation is a universal experience for women. Discourse concretizes meaning, so the more menstruation is associated with dirty or negative language, the more it will be presented as undesirable process. By calling it a “stain”, it also stigmatizes menstruation

experiences by making women feel dirty for not being prepared for menstruation at all times. Using negatively connoted language such as staining and leaking makes menstruation appear as if it is uncontrollable, suggesting women's bodies cannot be managed into normative expectations of femininity. However, one article juxtaposed negative language, like staining, with positive language, such as beauty, with the headline, "Your beautiful, feminine period stains are against Instagram's guidelines" (Tolentino, 2015). This use of the language challenges the established meaning of the word stain and attempts to present it in a frame that empowers menstruation as a beautiful, feminine action.

The public discourse also discussed the use of language to subvert menstruation by referring to it with metaphors or euphemisms. Cafolla (2015) mentioned how women are secretive about their periods "...so no one knows we are "on the blob" or that we have "the painters in." Other ways writers referred to menstruation included a "women's time of the month", "Aunt Flow", "riding the crimson wave", "on the rag", or "the curse" (Lynch, 2015; Rozzi, 2015; Sanchez, 2015). Dominant power structures oppress women by making inherently female actions, such as menstruation, so problematic to talk about that people must use euphemisms to discuss female issues. While the use of euphemisms was not the norm throughout the public discourse, it is important to point out that writers who reported on menstruation employed euphemisms that avoided saying menstruation—whether that was intentional or a byproduct of social norms to not discuss menstruation directly. The meanings of the euphemisms are established through institutionalized knowledge, which imply shame toward menstruation. It is also important to note that many articles within the discourse referred to menstruation as a "period", and although

we have normalized the word period, it is still a euphemism for menstruation.

Negotiations of power happen in daily discourse and the choice to use a euphemism to refer to menstruation removes power from the act and reinforces normative expectations of period shame.

Some articles made the distinct choice to use the qualifying language of “menstrual blood” or “period blood” when referring to Kaur’s photos (Barrie, 2015; Gray, 2015; James, 2015; Rogers, 2015; Rozzi, 2015; Tamarkin, 2015; Valenti, 2015; Zhang, 2015). Making the choice to refer to it as menstrual blood isolates it from the rest of the blood in the human body, as if menstrual blood could be considered distinctly different because of the sexual connotation. The blood is presented as less acceptable because it is associated with menstruation. However, blood generally is not necessarily rejected from dominant discourses. For example, the public discourse explained the sight of menstrual blood makes people uncomfortable, yet explicit violence, which often features blood, is a media norm and acceptable on Instagram (Gray, 2015; Rozzi, 2015). Kaur noted this difference in perception when discussing the fear of menstrual blood but embrace of blood in the media:

“we are not outraged by blood. we see blood all the time. blood is pervasive in movies, television, and video games. yet, we are outraged by the fact that one openly discusses bleeding from an area that we try to claim ownership over” (Kaur, 2015).

Kaur tries to reclaim the visibility of blood in her art and responses to Instagram because she recognizes the double standard established through period shaming.

Other public discourse articles commented on the acceptable nature of some blood over others, particularly on Instagram. Instagram acts as a “cultural gatekeeper” to reinforce established norms and determine what is or is not acceptable in large media discourse (Sanchez, 2015; Sanghani, 2015). Instagram does not have a policy against blood censorship and a user can search for explicit posts with even the simple hashtag of #blood. For example, photos of accident—such as sports accidents—are acceptable within Instagram’s online platform, which prompted the question from authors, such as “bloody accident photos are fine, but periods are ‘inappropriate?’” (Williams, 2015). Other writers discuss the double standard of posting photos to Instagram saying, “Not to mention, if I were to post a photo of me having fallen off my motorcycle with blood all over my jeans, no one would care, because that blood didn’t come out of (gasp) a vagina” (Moore, 2015). Images of bloody sports accidents and injuries—typically viewed from a masculine perspective—are allowed on Instagram even though Kaur’s images of menstrual blood have been censored (Williams, 2015). Blood is acceptable to be seen if it is presented within a masculine frame, such as violence, but for it to be seen within a feminine frame causes dominant structures to deem it inappropriate. However, Kaur was aware of these tensions of discomfort and stated, “Abuse is okay but [pictures of menstruation] makes [people] uncomfortable. That’s what this work is supposed to do: make you as uncomfortable as you should feel when you watch others get abused or objectified” (Horton & Hudson, 2015).

Patriarchal Censorship of Women’s Bodies

The discourse about Kaur’s photo and censorship commonly began with references and discussion of Instagram’s “community guidelines” and featured

Instagram's safety rhetoric (James, 2105; Lynch, 2015). However, the public discourse expanded beyond this and highlighted instances of fear and protection in their guidelines, as well as in their response to Kaur. Instagram details in their community guidelines that they have the right to remove photos that display nudity, sex acts, or violence (Birch, 2015). Other articles mention how Instagram's guidelines can also block images that are "unlawful, infringing, pornographic, or sexually suggestive" (Cacich, 2015). Kaur's photo features a clothed, menstruating woman. Nowhere in the Instagram guidelines is any mention of menstruation or blood (Rogers, 2015). Because menstruation or blood is not included, authors within the discourse questioned if Kaur's photos could "even break the guidelines created for users" (Brodsky, 2015). By claiming the image violates these guidelines, the censoring of the photo reinforces sexualized notions of menstruation, as if the act of menstruating is inherently sexual because of its relation to women's reproductive and sexual anatomy. Sexualized behavior is then characterized as amoral and "infringing" on the safety of the online community.

Headlines in articles often included direct questions asking why images like Kaur's are still being censored, such as "Most women have about 600 periods in their lifetime, and they're not going anywhere anytime soon—so why are they still being censored?" and "Why did Instagram censor this photo of a fully clothed woman on her period?" (Cafolla, 2015; Dewey, 2015). By questioning the censorship in the headline, the issue of removing the photos becomes the first thing the authors want the audience to know about the issue, elevating its importance to the overall discourse. Kaur's response to Instagram embraced the language of their Community Guidelines, saying:

thank you @instagram for providing me with the exact response my work was created to critique. you deleted a photo of a woman who is fully covered and menstruating stating that it goes against your community guidelines when your guidelines outline that it is nothing but acceptable. the girl is fully clothed. the photo is mine. it is not attacking a certain group. nor it is spam. (Kaur, 2015)

She points out that her photo of a fully clothed woman menstruating does not involve nudity or feature a sex act, even though the photo was banned under those rules (Barrie, 2015; Holden, 2015). Kaur also included other parts of the community guidelines, such as posting only original content and not posting spam on Instagram. Acknowledging the disconnect between the photo and the guidelines questions the intent of Instagram's censorship and what qualifies as sexually explicit material.

Instagram reinforced their rhetoric of safety in their initial message to Kaur after deleting her photo. When her photo was deleted, Instagram said to her, "Please read our Community Guidelines to learn what kinds of posts are allowed and how you can keep Instagram safe" (Birch, 2015). The response was impersonal and scripted, as if it was automatically sent to all users who had photos removed because of these guidelines. The blanketing of all deleted posts as unsafe positions women's natural bodies as a danger to the general public. Kaur noted Instagram's history of censorship in her response, particular when it involves the female body in what is deemed as "too natural" (Dewey, 2015; Escobar, 2015; Kaur, 2015). Menstruation does not present a threat to others, yet Instagram wants to keep its online community "safe" from seeing it. Kaur responded to this in her interview with *The Post*, stating, "How dare they tell me my clothed body, the way I wake up at least once every month, is 'violating' or 'unsafe'?" (Dewey, 2015).

Kaur comment highlights the everyday actions and ongoing performance of “being female” by mentioning menstruation as reoccurring. By using the justification of safety, Instagram puts themselves in a position of power to decide what is “considered unfit for public consumption” and to shape language in a way that limits the visibility for women’s bodies in public discourse spaces (Escobar, 2015).

The censorship of Kaur’s image also speaks to a larger issue of a cultural fear of menstruation (Gray, 2015). Blocking photos of female bodies communicates Instagram, and social media as a whole, is “frightened of female bodies presented honestly” (Tolentino, 2015). Instagram effectively acts to “police bodies” through censoring images of menstruation (Brodsky, 2015). Understanding why it was considered to be inappropriate is important to recognize when mapping out the structural constraints of female expression. Although Kaur’s photos were eventually replaced with an apology from Instagram, it does not negate the actions and intentions of censorship.

Community guidelines not only establish a standard of protection, but also a standard of decency in public discourse (Tolentino, 2015). Patriarchal structures of power can shape how we understand “decency” and whether that includes all bodies. Valenti (2015) stated the language of decency acts as a way to protect men from women’s bodies when they are presented in cultural undesirable forms. For example, Brodsky (2015) noted the censorship of Kaur’s menstrual cycle demonstrates how non- normative images of women’s bodies “offends Instagram’s misogynist sense of propriety.” If codes of safety are written from a patriarchal stance of decency that limits the agency of women’s bodies, it assumes that controlling or concealing women’s bodies can keep men (and other women to an extent) safe. Decency protects the male gaze by limiting visibility of

women that do not fit the dominant frame of desirability. When female bodies do not serve “our sexual egos”, it disrupts acceptable, normative performances of body (Kaur, 2015). Menstruating bodies become stuck in a double- bind with these expectations, because menstruation is associated with women’s sexual bodies (i.e. vaginas) and therefore is sexualized. However, the process of menstruating is seen as dirty and unattractive, so the body is seen as sexually undesirable. Women cannot escape being constantly sexualized because they simply exist as women.

However, while bodies are presented as inherently indecent, dominant discourse expected women to conform to norms to be perceived as desirable, such as cultural beauty standards. Instagram still allows sexualized images of female bodies on their website that fulfill the male gaze. Kaur directly commented on patriarchal censorship in her responses to Instagram, stating she “will not apologize for not feeding the ego and pride of misogynist society that will have my body in underwear but not be okay with a small leak.” Western culture, which is structured through patriarchal influences, often censor women’s bodies when they are seen as “natural” and celebrate sexualized performances of femininity (Dewey, 2015). Social media reflect mainstream discourses and if digital media continue to “sanitize and sexualize images of women’s bodies”, men—and women—will be presented with unattainable and unrealistic forms of the female body (Valenti, 2015). Photo sharing platforms like Instagram were created to allow users to document their lives, which means having the ability to document all parts of life and not just the attractive parts (Williams, 2015).

Menstruation stigma is a “form of misogyny”, which can be understood through the ways menstruation experiences are presented as strictly a women’s issues and as an

undesirable topic to discuss (Sanchez, 2015). Equating a female- only experience with stigma negates any value in the menstruation experience. However, the public discourse questions if this stigma would exist if both men and women experienced menstruation (Sanchez, 2015). Rozzi (2015) stated that if men experienced menstruation, “penis tampon companies would proudly sponsor race car drivers.” The patriarchal censorship of Kaur’s photos can stem from feelings of male discomfort regarding menstruation. However, the photos are intended to make the audience uncomfortable. Kaur emphasized this point when she tells the audience directly, “If the photo of my period made you uncomfortable, ask yourself why” (Kaur, 2015). Driscoll (2015) referred to these negative responses as the “anti-period” problem that is magnified in public discourses spaces that are formed by male- dominated cultural norms.

When there is discourse about menstruation, it is often only acceptable when spoken in female spaces by labeling them as “women’s things” (Driscoll, 2015). Men either ignore menstruation or speak negatively about it. Cafolla (2015) said dads often look the other way when their daughters place tampons in their shopping carts and avoid the gaze of cashiers. Boys and girls are separated when learning about menstruation, creating confusion over what is known about menstruation or how boys learn about the female body (Rozzi, 2105). These moments of avoidance “filter out [women’s] bodies” (Cafolla, 2015) and continue to erase the realistic parts of the female experience; the unattainable female ideal is more complex than a body type but rather the expectation of what *is* woman. Censorship policies toward menstruation pressure women to “shrink to fit a culture that simply doesn’t allow us to be women” (Driscoll, 2015). Both women and

men are responsible for creating spaces to talk openly about menstruation in order to normalize these experiences (Driscoll, 2015).

Shame and Stigma in Menstruation Discourse

The public discourse surrounding the Kaur controversy focused on the nature of taboo and how menstruation is “still a taboo in most societies” (Sanghani, 2015). Articles cited Kaur’s project goals as breaking taboos of menstruation (Holden, 2015; Lynch, 2015). However, the public discourse never fully fleshes out what exactly creates or maintains the taboo. By examining how the discourse presents menstruation, the taboos—or structural cultural norms that limit or prohibit behaviors—can be understood through how language creates knowledge of stigma and how stigmatized language shapes behaviors of shame.

Of the taboo elements presented in the discourse, many of the authors focused on the perceived filth of the menstruating female body. Several articles featured the word “dirty”, referring to both the process of menstruation and the natural state of women’s bodies (Birch, 2015; Brodsky, 2015; Dickson, 2015; Driscoll, 2015; Gray, 2015; Zamon, 2015). Periods themselves are perceived as a strictly negative process that is “dirty, disgusting, sickening, or hilarious” (Driscoll, 2015). Some authors noted how others see menstruation as “messy”, projecting the notion that women are unable to contain their periods (Tolentino, 2015) or control their bodies. The language of filth disempowers women during menstruation by portraying it as a dirty, uncontrollable process and adds to menstruation stigma.

Additionally, Instagram is a structure that is involved in shaping menstruation stigma. In taking down Kaur’s photos, Instagram actively continued to “promote a long

tradition of shaming people who menstruate, most but not all of whom are women, as though their bodies are naturally dirty” (Brodsky, 2015). Women's bodies are then seen as “gross” and “offensive” because they are outside of the normative, patriarchal frame that shapes dominant discourse (Cafolla, 2015).

The emphasis of “dirty” language also reinforces a culture of “the hygienic crisis” that is present in menstrual product advertisements, but with a shift toward the female body (Roberts & Waters, 2004). While the hygienic crisis is more focused on the dirtiness of menstruation, this discourse goes beyond menstruation and connects filth language directly with the female body, suggesting that women inherently are “dirty, sick, [or] a burden” (Dickson, 2015). If bodies are perceived dirty, it suggests they are flawed by hegemonic standards, causing women to be pushed to the margins of dominant discourse.

While language influences knowledge, the absence of language can also shape social norms surrounding menstruation, specifically the presence of silence or being told not to speak. Kaur’s photos themselves were silenced by dominant discourse, as controlled by Instagram, when they were deleted. However, many of the public discourse authors echoed the role silence played in their experiences with menstruation (Cafolla, 2015; Driscoll, 2015; Rozzi, 2015). Driscoll (2015) explained that menstruation is an experience women are taught to “hide or never speak of.” Kaur emphasized this in her own interviews concerning the censorship of her photos, stating the pain of being silent is something women can all relate to; “what women are expected to endure in silence is real, and that silence hurts them” (Kaur, 2015; Williams, 2015). The stigma toward

menstruation keeps women from feeling like they can speak about their pain or frustration with their period, which only further limits the discourse on women's health.

When women do find space to talk about menstruation, it is often kept secret or hushed from public spaces. Language of whispering or secrecy was seen in the public discourse (Caffola, 2015; Driscoll, 2015; Kaur, 2015). Women rarely talk about menstruation, often because they do not want to experience the backlash of creating dialogue about a topic that is deemed "private" in dominant discourse (Driscoll, 2015). Kaur (2015) explained the dominant discourse about menstruation wants to "censor the pain" women experience by restricting period talk. Yet, the discourse calls to action the move to start talking about menstruation. Rozzi (2015) asked why Western culture does not talk more honestly about menstruation and the frustration women feel when the conversation is silenced. However, the shift to a more open discourse on menstruation may have begun to some degree in response to Kaur's work. Referring to the response to the project, Kaur (2015) explained, "We were finally talking about the period without any shame. The word wasn't whispered anymore."

Silence is also reflected in the behaviors and menstruation rituals women perform to conceal the fact that they are menstruating. Women are taught to be in constant fear that someone will "find out" that they are menstruating. The public discourse describes how women would hide their tampons as they went to the restroom or only privately ask other women if they had spare menstrual products because they ran out (Cafolla, 2015; Driscoll, 2015; Kaur, 2015; Gray, 2015; Rozzi, 2015). The authors explained the act of hiding tampons and pads from others in almost identical terms, all employing the language of "hiding" or "concealing" their menstrual status from others. The public

discourse also mentions planning life and experiences around your period to conceal it; as Kaur said, “you won’t go on vacation because of your period or you change your wedding date” so your menstrual cycle will not interfere or be known by others (Holden, 2015). These behaviors reinforce norms of silence by also keeping any visual marker of menstruation hidden from public view. Patriarchal structures can be understood to constrain or disable women from performing menstruation beyond the expected gender norms of silence and secrecy. Cafolla (2015) explained this process of concealment works to “filter out our bodies and [...] create an image of women that is unrealistic and unattainable.” Filtering language suggests that women’s bodies can be seen in public discourse, but only if they have parts of their bodies and experiences removed.

The stigma that women feel about hiding menstruation from others leads to overwhelming feelings of embarrassment (Cafolla, 2015; Driscoll, 2015; Gray, 2015; Rozzi, 2015; Sanchez, 2015). Stigmatized language can shape and enforce a culture of shame that teaches women that getting a period stain in public is one of the most embarrassing things that can happen to them (Sanchez, 2015). Feelings of embarrassment and shame is noted in the discourse as happening throughout life, even as early as childhood, as Rozzi (2015) explained,

A boy in [kindergarten] class told me...disgusting secret stuff happens “down there”. I felt embarrassed. I also felt dread that I soon would have to deal with ruining my jeans every month for the next 35+ years.

Women are taught at a young age to be embarrassed or ashamed of their period, even before they get it (Dewey, 2015). The public discourse emphasized how this shame is especially worrisome for young women; as such, they are conditioned to protect

themselves from others knowing about their menstruation and making them a public spectacle for menstruating (Driscoll, 2015; Sanchez, 2015). Gray (2015) mentioned the fear of public humiliation saying, “We’re laughed at in public if we have leaks. It goes on and on really.” The never-ending fear of embarrassment reinforces menstruation as a shameful experience (Zamon, 2015).

Medical Ideology and Essentialization

Rather than fall into a medicalized frame that pathologizes menstruation as a disease or condition, the public discourse emphasizes a biological frame that justifies the visibility of menstruation because it is natural. However, while the biological emphasis may not follow the same pitfalls as medicalization, it does create a biological narrative and imperative women must follow to align with social norms of menstruation.

Biological representations of menstruation essentialize women’s bodies as reproducers or potential reproducers (Inhorn, 2006). Women’s health research often focuses on women’s ability “to reproduce, to give birth, to mother their children, [and] to reproduce the generations” which can narrow the understanding of women’s health and influence other female health narratives (Inhorn, 2006, p. 350).

The public discourse privileges the biological narrative as the acceptable narrative for menstruation. One part of the biological narrative stems from the essentialization of women as reproducers. The public discourse argued that menstruation is necessary to be seen and understood because it is a “vital part that helps make humankind a possibility” (Barrie, 2015). Several articles explained how menstruation is the reason humankind exists and the importance of acknowledging women as bringing life into the world (Birch, 2015; Driscoll, 2015; Kaur, 2015; Mortorwala, 2015; Rozzi, 2015). Because

menstruation serves a biological purpose that enhances the greater good, it is more acceptable—or at least should become more acceptable. Kaur used the process of creation as part of her original argument for the photo project, stating, “as if the [menstruation] process is less natural than breathing. as if it is not a bridge between this universe and the last. as if this process is not a love. labor. life. selfless and strikingly beautiful” (Kaur, 2015).

Women are perceived as the key to connecting life and rather than presenting this process as only necessary, Kaur attempted to represent it as beautiful in its own right.

Menstruation is also presented in the public discourse as a reoccurring, expected part of the overall female narrative. Dickson (2015) explained the menstruation narrative is so common that women have “experienced it at least once in their post-pubescent lives. Periods happen.” Menstruation “goes everywhere with you”, so it becomes a foundational part of the biological narrative and an “everyday female experience” (Driscoll, 2015; Escobar, 2015; Holden, 2015; Lynch, 2015; Zamon, 2015). The menstruation narrative is also characterized as something women are familiar with (James, 2015; Moore; 2015). However, Romano (2015) explained that the images and experiences of menstruation are “natural to women, but taboo to society.” For example, when blood is “juxtaposed to a vagina”, it is deemed inappropriate and vulgar, as compared to blood in any other medical or biological context (Escobar, 2015). Even though they are well- known to women, these experiences are still not acceptable in dominant discourse spaces, creating tension between the biological narrative and the hegemonic female identity expectation.

While expanding medical ideology from pathologizing language to biological language presents a less “disease”- like view of menstruation, it is not without reservations. Essentializing women through biological reproductive characteristics can be potentially constraining to a cultural understanding of femininity (Inhorn, 2006). Expectations for menstruation can create a biological imperative that reinforces norms for biologically female experiences. What separates the biological imperative from the biological narrative is the expectation that women will and must go through these biological processes, such as pregnancy. However, the imperative can create expectations for normative female performances of womanhood. For example, through the discourse, the word “normal” was used in 10 articles and “natural” was used in 12 articles (28% of the data and 34% of the data, respectively), which suggests menstruation is normal and natural to all women (Barrie, 2015; Birch, 2015; Cacich, 2015; Dewey, 2015; Dickson, 2015; Escobar, 2015; Lynch, 2015; MacMillen, 2015; Maggs, 2015; Mortorwala, 2015; Romano, 2015; Sanchez, 2015; Sanghai, 2015; Tamarkin, 2015; Thacker, 2015; Tsjeng, 2015; Williams, 2015; Zhang, 2015). However, even when they use language of normalcy to argue the process is innate to woman, the public discourse also used normal language in terms of education, such as educating the public discourse that menstruation is normal and should be accepted (Birch, 2015). It is important to note that natural and normal, while often used together, function differently. While natural may be more focused on the biological process, normal implies more of the biological imperative that women are expected to menstruate regularly. The notion of normalcy can create tension among women who suffer from health problems that makes menstruation more of an abnormal process (Rozzi, 2015).

While the biological imperative is present in the menstruation process, the discourse does not create a necessity for reproduction. Kaur (2015) directly addressed the expectations for women to be reproducers saying in her original post, “My womb is home to the divine. A source of life for our species. Whether I chose to create or not.” She acknowledged the naturalness of menstruation without specifically tying it to the process of reproduction. The separation of these characteristics is crucial to understanding the essentializing of women. Female bodies have specific biological processes that do not all have to be linked back to the essentialization of women as sources of reproduction. Understanding these processes as separate and in conjunction to each other can help “eliminate hateful behavior toward women” and their biological processes and embrace it as an element of female experiences (Sanchez, 2015).

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Through the use of critical discourse analysis, four key themes emerged from the data. The themes of everyday menstruation language, patriarchal censorship, menstruation shame and stigma, and medical ideology and essentialization all speak to the research question of how media discourses empower and disempower menstruating bodies. The analysis speaks to larger issues beyond these themes, however, leading to the discussion of the power behind disruptive discourse, the filtering of women's bodies in dominant discourse, and the dichotomy of decency and desirability regarding female bodies.

Disrupting Dominant Discourse

One of Kaur's main goals for her project was to disrupt the dominant discourse about menstruation by posting photos that showed menstruation realistically (Kaur, 2015). Her initial goals were to start a conversation about menstruation; however, it is important to note that she did not intend for her project to create issues with Instagram and by chance became "ground zero in Instagram's latest censorship war" (Tsjeng, 2015). Once the issues of censorship began, she extended her goals to critiquing Instagram as a representation of dominant discourse and kept posting as "a form of protest" (Cacich, 2015). After her first picture was deleted, she posted, "This just goes to show who is sitting behind the desk. And whose controlling the show. Whose controlling the media and who is censoring us" (Kaur, 2015). She continued to re-post the photo and asked for support from her followers to share and like the photo, gaining support from thousands of Instagram users (Rogers, 2015). However, while Kaur's protest and disruption of

menstruation visibility norms seems successful, with Instagram finally reinstating her picture, it also existed on Instagram's terms.

By posting her photos on Instagram, she has accepted the terms of Instagram's discourse, meaning that because they host the space, they have some level of control over the discourse content. A disruption can only do so much within the confines of a dominant discourse space; to some degree it must conform to the dominant structure in order to even be accepted in the space. For example, Kaur's photo may have been perceived differently if it featured a woman exposed rather than a clothed woman. She conformed to some norms of acceptable female body visibility, presenting a clothed woman, in order to disrupt the norm of menstruation visibility.

The need to fit within some standards of the social structure stems from feminist writer Audre Lorde's (1984) argument of the "master's tools". In her book, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, she explained,

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (Lorde, 1984, p. 2)

In Kaur's case, the master's tools are forms of social media that reinforce and establish social norms about the presentation of women's bodies. Protesting within that space and with the tools provided by Instagram can temporarily create consciousness of the problem, but may not be able to create foundational change for the social structure itself. However, infiltrating the dominant structure may be the best way to have a message become known in the public sphere. If a disruption occurs but the public is not aware of

it, is it successful in questioning the dominant discourse? Feminist social change movements need to be aware of this delicate balance between appealing to dominant discourses while also having a disruptive message be heard.

Additionally, the public discourse at times reinforced norms of menstruation stigma, even when they were agreeing with Kaur's argument for visibility. The use of language such as "leaks" while also isolating menstrual blood as outside of the acceptable norm establishes that menstruation should not be seen. The use of euphemisms as discussed in the analysis also adds to the stigma of speaking about menstruation directly. The dominant discourse then uses language that reinforces stigma, which could potentially misconstrue the intended message of Kaur's project. If disruptive discourse is misunderstood after being filtered through a mainstream lens, it can lose its original power and meaning.

Filtering Female Bodies

The case of Instagram's censorship of Kaur's menstruation images speaks to the larger issue of filtering women's bodies in public discourse. Instagram has a "long history of censoring photos that it deems "too natural" that reflects the norms of Western society at large" (Dewey, 2015). As discussed in Chapter 4, Instagram and other forms of dominant discourse aim to keep women's bodies out of the public gaze—or more specifically the male gaze—out of fear of revealing women's "natural bodies" and creating tension with idealized forms of the female body. Menstruation is not the only form of the "natural" body that is censored in public discourse (or on Instagram). In their discussions of menstruation, many of the public discourse authors made the analogous connection to the social media censorship of female body hair, breast-feeding, and plus-

size bodies (Barrie, 2015; Dewey, 2015; Driscoll, 2015; Escobar, 2015; Maggs, 2015). Everyday experiences of women are “airbrushed out of daily life” through online forms of expression, causing issues of body insecurity and anxiety among women (Driscoll, 2015).

Social media lauds itself as a place of self-expression, but then censors and shames women and those expressions that do not fit within the social norms of femininity. Women may believe they have the power to control the discourse they post, but it is still regulated by patriarchal standards that suppress non-normative body expression. Feminist movements such as selfies culture, the #freeyourpits movement to embrace underarm hair, and the popularity of body positive posts showcasing cellulite or the lack of a thigh gap, are adding to the overall movement to celebrate women’s bodies in all forms (Bennett, 2014; Holley, 2014; Valenti, 2015). These movements echo Kaur’s sentiments to create spaces for female visibility, which Murray (2015) referred to as “a politically oppositional and aesthetic form of resistance” (p. 490). Kaur’s project adds to the increasing growth of online feminist movements that act to create digital social and political protest spaces (Hunt, 2015). As these feminist movements gain recognition online, they also help to bring more women into dominant discourse spaces and hopefully those voices can influence perceptions and expectations of women in society.

Decency and Desirability

The analysis of the public discourse revealed a growing tension between the expectations for women to be desirable while simultaneously labeling female biology, such as menstruation, as indecent, setting specific and unachievable standards of femininity. Language about menstruation in the discourse presented the menstruation

process as undesirable and indecent, yet still inherently sexualized, and sexualized female bodies are seen as desirable. These opposing perceptions of femininity may create cognitive dissonance for the audience when considering how they view expectations for women in society. The fact that decency language is even present in the public discourse indicates a sense of morality—as if the visibility of menstruation is immoral. Social norms establish socially acceptable—and, by extension, morally acceptable—forms of the female body. Presenting menstruation as a desirability issue reinforces standards of hegemonic femininity within a frame of morality.

The tension between desirability and decency brings to light the dangers of labeling the female body and the often-contradictory nature of the female ideal. The social norm of the female ideal problematizes the hygienic crisis, as explained in Chapter 2, by introducing decency language that connect to specific moralities. The language of filth and decency surrounding menstruation shifts the feminine ideal to a biological level; attaining the image of the perfect woman is more than achieving a certain physical appearance. The biological feminine ideal relies on dominant medical ideology to construct claims for what is ideal for the female body. Science acts as a social institution that can shape ideology used to justify and explain actions within a culture (Lenworth, 1992). If menstruation discourse continues to use medical and scientific approaches to menstruation to frame its lack of decency in dominant discourse, it will continue to erase the social significance of women's experiences with menstruation.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this case study approach. One of the limitations of the thesis was the size and timeliness of the discourse. In order to have a focused case

study approach to the discourse analysis, the data were limited to articles specifically about Kaur. With only 35 articles, the data set was small; however, it did focus on depth of the controversy surrounding Kaur. The time frame for the data was also quite limited. The mainstream discourse response to Kaur's photos and the controversy surrounding the censorship spiked over a three-day period—March 23 to March 26—and then lasted only until April 5, 2015. The two-week window included rich, but limited, data. The data set also did not include any articles that may have referenced Kaur any time after April 5.

The case study approach focusing on Kaur also limited the discourse from including other menstruation activism cases. While this approach is effective for a specific focus on menstruation discourse, it does not shed light on greater menstruation discourse in mainstream media. 2015 was referred to as “the year of the period” (Gharib, 2015). Media coverage about menstruation activism included stories from Kiran Gandhi's free-bleeding during the London Marathon to the increased sales of environmentally friendly menstrual products (Ganhhi, 2015; Gharib, 2015). Focusing solely on Kaur limited the focus of the research questions to only her menstruation activism rather than an inclusive approach to menstruation activism occurring at the same time.

Additionally, another limitation was the use of public discourse from mainstream newspapers. Limiting the discourse to only include full-length articles, including ones from blogs or newspapers, filtered out other discourses, such as user comments on the articles and the responses Kaur received on her Instagram photo. As of March 2016, Kaur's photo had 15,600 comments on Instagram and 6,400 comments on Facebook. Including the comments would have been too much data for the scope of this research

study and would have taken the focus away from analyzing mainstream discourses. The comments also included discourse such as emojis (emotional icons) and spam comments unrelated to Kaur's photo. However, the comments directly addressing her photo could have given more insight into how people understand dominant discourses and react to either reinforce or resist the norms established.

Future Directions for Research

There are a number of future research directions health communication and feminist advocacy scholars can explore related to menstruation activism. First, future studies should incorporate more instances of current menstruation activism. Currently, there is little research on menstruation activism and most is focused on feminist "zines", feminist websites, and the early rise of menstrual activist movements (Bobel, 2006; Bobel, 2008). With the increase of feminist hashtags and collective movements online (Hunt, 2015), it is crucial that researchers look at current forms of menstruation activism. By examining and comparing other acts of menstruation activism or disruptive discourse regarding menstruation, researchers may be able to identify how dominant discourse uses menstruation language and other ways people disrupt dominant discourses.

Research on women's healthcare also needs to also have a more inclusive approach. The language throughout the public discourse privileged the cisgender female experience. A focus on medical and biological language that discusses "natural women" can isolate trans* women from conversations about women's health. While trans* women do not experience menstruation, language emphasizing the biological aspects of femininity experienced by cisgender women may create divisive rhetoric that isolates

trans* women from other conversations. Also, using language of normalcy to refer to menstruation can isolate women who do not experience menstruation for various reasons, placing them in a position of abnormality. Women's health care should not be defined by biological imperatives because it marginalizes women who struggle with biological processes, such as fertility, hormonal imbalances, and other health issues specific to women. Women's health researchers need to be aware of language that normalizes experiences that may not be universal across all women and more research must be done on these marginalizes female experiences.

Finally, communication studies research needs to expand its approach to women's health care research and studies on menstruation. Communication studies research on menstruation is quite limited, and the focus in health communication specifically only narrows this field. Most of the research used in writing earlier chapters of this thesis was from other disciplines, such as psychology, women's studies, and linguistics (Charlesworth, 2001; Del- Saz Rubio and Pennock- Spek, 2009; Guthrie, 2007; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Stubbs & Costos, 2004). Communication scholars can give insight into the ways women talk about menstruation and can critique the language that constructs social norms surrounding menstruation. Also, communication scholars need to expand their field of inquiry in women's health care. Women's health care research in health communication studies is beginning to include more "everyday experiences of women's health", such as breastfeeding (Foss; 2013, Striley & Field-Springer, 2014). However, more health communication research specifically is needed in order to explore diverse, intersectional female experiences and capture the everyday communicative interactions and actions that embody women's health care.

Conclusion

Kaur's photo project is a clear example of the strides feminist advocacy is making in online discursive spaces. Women are working to make their experiences more visible in the public sphere and it is crucial that communication scholars study these moments of disruptive discourse to see how they can influence social structures as a whole and advocate for change. Menstruation activism continues to grow as a field with the hopes for progressive feminist advocacy on cultural, consumer, and governmental levels. Menstruation activism will continue to question social norms, because as Kaur (2015) stated in her response to Instagram, "Their patriarchy is leaking. Their misogyny is leaking. We will not be censored."

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