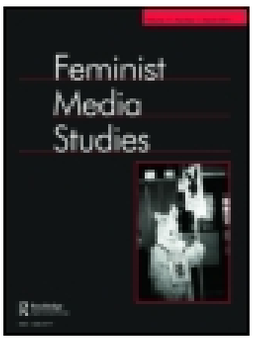

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Everyday (online) body politics of menstruation

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ABSTRACT

There has been a growing trend to resist mainstream body ideals via social media sites. From fat-acceptance, vulva-positive to menstrual-pride blogs, Tumblrs and Facebook groups, people use social media to question and challenge mainstream depictions of the female body. In this article, I look at social media culture and how the notions of the menstrual body are evolving online. I analyze these concerns with a case study based on a women-only closed Facebook group created to discuss issues around feminine health, sexuality, and wellbeing. I argue that by looking from the lens of everyday politics, it is possible to understand how political participation and social change can emerge through people's everyday practices. My findings suggest that the private Facebook group serves three purposes. One, as a pedagogical space to address a gap in knowledge about the menstrual cycle and menstrual health. Two, as a platform to break the silence around menstruation and make it visible to the public. Three, as a tool for building a caring community among the participants. This study illustrates how social media is used for everyday body politics, contributing to changing attitudes, beliefs, and values in daily life.

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Everyday politics; body politics; social media; Facebook groups; menstrual health

Introduction

There has been a growing trend to engage with resistance to mainstream body ideals via social media sites. From fat-acceptance to vulva-positive to menstrual-pride blogs, Tumblrs and Facebook groups, people are making use of social media to question and challenge the dominant culture around mainstream depictions of the female body.[1] A notable example of this effort is Kaur's "Period." photo series (Rupi Kaur 2015a) which sparked controversy on Instagram, as one of her pictures shows the artist lying down on a bed fully clothed with two spots of menstrual blood visible on her clothes and on the bedsheet. In this photo, Kaur re-signifies the menstrual body as something that should be neither hidden nor stigmatized. By showing a body that is publicly bleeding—red blood, not blue liquid—and by making a menstrual stain visible, the artist challenged socially established codes of conduct towards menstruation. Indeed, the picture was deleted twice by Instagram's censors because it did not follow their community guidelines, revealing how the taboo around the menstrual body operates and the corresponding

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difficulties of going against the deep-seated cultural stigma of menstruation. Kaur's reaction towards her censorship is as follows:

> thank you Instagram for providing me with the exact response my work was created to critique [. . .] as a part of my final project for my visual rhetoric course i [sic] created this image [. . .] to demystify the period and make something that is innate "normal" again cause [sic] rape categories in porn are okay. (Rupi Kaur 2015b)

Her post was shared thousands of times, and officials from Instagram eventually restored the content and apologized, stating that the images were "accidentally removed" (Kaur 2015b).

Projects such as Kaur's, taken together with the public backlash and the reaction from Instagram officials speak to the depth of stigma around a menstrual body. Such reactions also bring up important questions around content control and the gendered biases of social media community guidelines. As stated by Safiya Noble and Brendesha Tynes (2016, 2), the internet should be critically thought of as "a system that reflects, and a site that structures, power and values".

Kaur politicized something seemingly personal which is part of the everyday, but is traditionally seen as something that, if spoken about at all, can only be in relation to health or hygiene. It is not considered to be something suitable for artistic or political expression. The feeling of shame about menstruation encompasses the need to conceal it, and when something has to be concealed "we naturally believe that it contains an element that it [sic] is not acceptable to other people. [. . .] We are ashamed of menstruation [. . .], we are taught to hide all evidence of its existence, and we come to believe that there is something in the experience that is 'wrong'" (Paula Weideger 1976, 1–2). This has further implications as Deborah Schooler, Monique Ward, Ann Merriwether, and Allison Caruthers (2005, 325), state: "feeling shameful frequently evokes a critical evaluation of one's whole self, shame about menstruation is likely to extend more broadly to the body as a whole".

The fact that menstruation is made manifest through stains on clothes renders the menstrual body, according to dominant societal norms, unsuitable for the public space because of the social sanctioning that is associated with menstrual blood. There is a felt need to mask it and ensure that the body passes as a non-bleeding body (Sharra Vostral 2008). Thus, in her Instagram post, Kaur opened a venue for critical discussions around the social stigma of menstruation, and also raised important questions around the patriarchal structures upon which Instagram's community guidelines are built.

Reflecting on the Kaur case prompts us to consider how the stigmatized status of menstruation has important consequences for "women's health, sexuality, well-being, and social status" (Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan Chrisler 2013, 12). Along these lines, this article is guided by three key ideas. First, "the personal is political". The slogan coined by the feminist movement at the end of the 1960s, which was used to emphasize that the personal experiences of women are rooted in their structural inequalities, has had its scope extended in recent years and is being used in interesting new ways (Tim Highfield 2016). Facebook statuses, tweets, Instagram posts and Tumblrs are highly personalized spaces, described as "material extensions of our everyday lives" (Oona Morrow, Roberta Hawkins and Leslie Kern 2015, 526). They are just a few of the myriad of online outlets that "can bring about the further personalization of politics—not in terms of parties and politicians tailoring their messages to individuals, but in terms of

how we discuss and document our experience of political issues" (Highfield 2016, 3). Second, when referring to politics, my focus is on everyday politics, which Henry Boyte (2010, 36) describes as involving "people reclaiming politics as an activity owned and engaged in by citizens, in environments that reach far beyond the formal political systems". Using this view of politics allows us to disassemble the assumption that political practices are significant only if they lead to publicly visible outcomes, and if they are meaningful for institutionalized power. Third, while speaking about body politics as one form of "the personal is political", my focus is on how the embodied experiences of people can serve as an entry point for resistance against systems of patriarchal oppression.

In this article I aim to understand how social media culture and how the notions of the menstrual body are evolving online based on those who access and engage in social media sites. I analyze these concerns in more detail with a case study based on a women-only and Spanish-speaking closed Facebook group created to discuss issues around menstrual health, sexuality and wellbeing. Although past scholarship has focused on women's embodied menstrual experiences (Chris Bobel 2010; Karina Felitti 2016; Jacqueline Gaybor 2018), none has explored the activities and discussions happening in the digital space, particularly social media, among menstruating women and how these are contributing to a change in the current menstrual status quo.

It is relevant for the discussion of everyday body politics and social media to recognize that connecting with each other in the context of large online audiences is an everyday experience of modern life, as we rapidly communicate through wireless and mobile technologies many times a day. We live in a world networked by the wired Internet (Manuel Castells 2015). We are experiencing more possibilities of horizontal, fast, self-expanding and interactive forms of communication than ever before. Taking this phenomenon into account, I discuss the following: on the one hand, how the closed Facebook group functions as part of the larger picture of social support for networked menstrual women, where knowledge about the menstrual body is produced and democratized; and on the other hand, how creating a community in a Facebook group can lead to social change around the menstrual body in specific contexts. As mentioned earlier, and as described by Urszula Pruchniewska (2019), Facebook provides a distinctive online setting to construct communities and facilitate interaction. This is possible because the social media platform allows users to upload content, such as videos, books or pictures. Moreover, "by providing and updating identity information and responding to others, Facebook users can feel as though they are sharing, almost co-owning, the space" (Wendy Anderson and Kittie Grace 2015, 946). It is also designed to place certain limits, such as privacy settings, which give users the feeling of being in a safe space.

Everyday politics and social media platforms

Examining everyday politics is useful for expanding the understanding of how political participation and social change can emerge through people's everyday practices. The lens of the everyday considers politics

> As not just formal, as shaped and discussed by established political actors and the mainstream media, but highly informal. Everyday political talk features occasional contributions by individuals who are loosely connected (if at all), but who have their own personal interests, perspectives and issues of importance. (Highfield 2016, 7)

Borrowing from Boyte (2010, 37), everyday politics happens in settings "where people live, work, learn, worship, and play, social spaces such as neighborhoods, workplaces, families, schools, religious congregations" and in the online space (Highfield 2016; Pruchniewska 2019).

Social movement scholars have made clear distinctions between initiatives that encompass people's daily practices as the basis for a wider socio-cultural change in society and people that organize for transformation through collective action, which is mostly directed towards the state or authority institutions. Within this debate, there is an emerging research area where scholars investigate how the everyday practices of individuals in social media are connected to a broader political project, rather than limited to their individual satisfaction or concerns. Despite being an inherently new area, there are emerging empirical and theoretical contributions that help us understand "the ways that individuals engage with political and personal issues as part of everyday social media activity, and by extension what this means beyond the social media context" (Highfield 2016, 11). Everyday practices happening in online environments can be viewed as political and as contributing to social change without needing to be framed as *engaged in public party politics* (Highfield 2016; Hayley Mowat, Amie Dobson, Karalyn McDonald, Jane Fisher, and M. Kirkman 2018; Pruchniewska 2019). Or, as Sonja Vivienne (2016, 1) suggests, everyday practices can contribute to a form of "erosive social change," described as the "changes in attitude that take place slowly over extended time frames, profoundly reshaping social norms as they diffuse among networked publics."

The work of Pruchniewska (2019) is key to understanding the political potential of social media in an everyday setting. Her path-breaking study focuses on women-only closed Facebook groups for professional support, networking opportunities, and career development. Pruchniewska (2019, 14) contends that Facebook "affordances"—the technical possibilities provided by social media that enable communication with others (despite geographical boundaries) such as the use of text, pictures, videos, files or links, allows the creation of spaces "for feminist practices, *even though these groups are not overtly designated as 'political' or 'feminist'*". Pruchniewska utilizes the concept of "consciousness-raising", to describe a collective process "in which each person is encouraged to express her feelings and personal experiences. There is no sole leader, rhetor, or expert. All participate and lead; all are considered expert" (Karlyn Campbell 1973, 202). The relevance of the consciousness-raising process is that it "shows women their situation in a way that affirms they can act to change it" (Catharine MacKinnon 1989, 101). The discussions happening in this space are likened to the consciousness-raising circles of the second feminist wave of the 1960s and 1970s that recognize "the urgency with which feminists have always taken up discursive exchange as a form of necessary activism" (Rosemary Clark 2014, 1109). The Facebook closed groups, Pruchniewska concludes, are used as a platform where women can discuss their experiences of workplace harassment and discrimination and share advice, leading to raising awareness of the systemic nature of the problem and simultaneously empowering women to act. These encounters

through the internet may lead participants to embrace other understandings of community as also existing in the online space, and even feminism itself. Social media affordances and the rapid circulation of information facilitate the emergence of larger networked public and the creation of support communities more aware of feminist concerns (Carrie Rentschler and Samantha Thrift 2015).

Body politics in social media

Research on everyday online activities happening on social media sites is key to understanding ways to respond to mainstream social expectations of the body and the emergence of new knowledge about the body. In bringing into the discussion of social media the questions raised by Wendy Harcourt (2009, 13) with regards to "which bodies are producing knowledge about which other bodies?", we can show how embodied experiences of people are a key entry point into political engagement and knowledge production in online spaces. Such social media sites where the body is being discussed are situated by its users as supportive and safe spaces to share concerns, information and embodied experiences, fulfilling the function of a public agora for "lay-experts" (Kittie Grace 2010, 231). In these embodied sites, daily life issues and experiences of participants are deemed relevant and in this way become political. The work of Mowat et al. (2018) on vulva-positive social media sites brings interesting insights to this viewpoint. They argue that women use social media platforms in order to respond discursively, affectively, and pragmatically to gendered cultural expectations about female genital normativity. Their study reveals that people who post on social media sites "construct them as a pedagogical tool for overcoming limited knowledge of the vulva, as a source of support for and solidarity among women and girls, and as a means of challenging normative, idealized expectations of vulvar morphology" (Mowat et al. 2018, 12). Along similar lines, in her work on "Not Safe For Work" (NSFW) Tumblr bloggers, Katrin Tiidenberg (2014) discusses self-expression through selfies and photographs. She shows how sharing these posts, together with the interaction with other NSFW bloggers, help participants overcome body shame and homogenized standards about the body, imposed by our consumer society.

However, it is probably too soon to assess the impact that the widespread circulation of these digitized narratives, strategies and responses may have on reducing and challenging different forms of mainstream body ideals. In other words, we need to be carefully optimistic. In any case, there are several strengths that come from social media, as they "afford the opportunity for different groups to contribute to, discuss, challenge and participate in diverse aspects of politics in a public, shared, context" (Highfield 2016, 10). The optimistic view on the potential of social media has to be placed alongside its limitations, which as pointed by Frances Shaw (2016, 274) "need to be examined in the context of [social media] production and consumption". Censorship of certain information over other information, concerns about privacy, surveillance and forms of monetizing information has lowered the more optimistic visions about social media and its role in addressing key (feminist) political issues. Facebook has been criticized for invading user privacy through its continuous surveillance for commercial purposes (Shaw 2016). Indeed, when it comes to issues of access and participation, for some feminist scholars, social media is a space where women experience new forms of marginalization (Aristea Fotopoulou 2017; Shaw 2016). Exploring different perspectives on online "body politics"

calls us to consider the new digital-media culture through an intersectional lens (Kimberle Crenshaw 1991), being particularly attentive to the reproduction of power relations in online spaces due to class, age, race, sexuality and gender.

Menstruation comes out of the closet

The battle to end the concealment of menstruation and to bring forward the possibilities of talking about the menstrual body has taken diverse perspectives and uses different narratives and strategies. Locating the origin and drawing the boundaries of these emerging proposals seem to be a complicated task. It arguably could be seen as a loose set of ideas and acts of self-exploration rather than a demarcated political movement. However, in both online and offline manifestations, there is a growing public awareness of menstruation as it emerges "from the closet".

The digital manifestation around menstruation body politics has drawn considerable attention and formed a growing and engaged public wanting to break the taboo around menstruation in the last years. Using photography, video, art campaigns and textual contributions on different social media sites, people have pushed for menstrual body acceptance and understanding of menstruation as a normal aspect of bodily functions. Much of these contributions have been on social media platforms such as blogs, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Within these manifestations is free-bleeding activism, which first went viral in 2015. Kiran Gandhi (2015) emerged as one of the icons of this form of activism. Gandhi ran the London Marathon in 2015 without using any menstrual management technologies (MMT), using the shock value of her own blood to combat the stigma and to illustrate that menstrual bodies are normal bodies; hence menstruation does not need to be concealed. She considered this form of protest as an incitement to have open discussions on the topic. Contrary to Kaur's experience, Gandhi's photos were not censored from Instagram, nor from other virtual platforms. However, both examples demonstrate that showing a female menstruating body that does not conceal its menstrual status before the public eye generates a significant debate.

The phenomenon of menstruation coming out of the closet has also extended to discuss menstruation as not only a female event.[2] Cass Clemmer, author of the period-themed book *The Adventures of Toni the Tampon* advocates for the recognition that menstruation also occurs in trans bodies. Clemmer posted online a photo depicting a period stain in their pants while holding a sign that reads: "Periods are not just for women #BleedingWhileTrans" (Clemmer 2017). Doing this through social media enabled Clemmer to bypass controlled mainstream media (Castells 2015) that for years have applied different forms of censorship to trans bodies and to menstruation, broadening the possibility for a larger networked public to become aware of and to engage in this discussion.

The battle against silence and stigma exists side by side with discussions about period poverty, understood as the lack of access to MMT due to financial constraints. The fight against period poverty has expanded globally due to online campaigns seeking free access to MMT and campaigns against taxing MMT. These campaigns address the significance of menstruation in relation to core issues of gender equality, emphasizing that women need access to menstrual care in order to function in their daily lives. Yet, menstrual care is commonly simplified to mean free access to MMT or the elimination of taxes. Examples of period poverty campaigns can be found across the globe. The "#StopTaxingPeriod" campaign was launched

in 2014 in the UK to abolish the tax on disposable and reusable MMT (Change.org 2016). Other initiatives focus on achieving systemic change. The "#Menstruaccion" online campaign in Argentina demands that the State eliminates VAT and establishes free distribution of MMT in public spaces, and in addition emphasizes the need for scientific research on the broad topic of menstrual health to inform policy making (Economiafeminita 2017). These campaigns have brought menstrual care and discussions around the menstrual body into the public debate, achieving in some cases legal and policy reforms. In the UK, for example, the parliament accepted an amendment ending taxes on tampons "by 2022 at the very latest" (Change.org 2016).

Other initiatives directly tackle the concealment of menstruation, which are core issues in the advancement of a physically and emotionally healthy management of menstruation. On platforms such as the YouTube channel "Precious stars" (Bryony Farmer 2018), people have promoted an advanced education about the anatomy of the female body, self-examination, the menstrual cycle and how to use reusable MMT. Also, Menstrupedia is a digital platform originally from India consisting of a blog, comic books and videos created to bridge the information gap about the menstrual cycle in an easily compressible format, in different languages spoken across India and with attention to the values of the Indian context. There are other virtual platforms, such as Soy1Soy4 (I am one, I am 4) created by Erika Irustra, which functions as an online menstrual school and a community of menstruators. The platform is dedicated to learning about the menstrual cycle and to transforming the way menstruation is embodied (Erika Irusta 2019). Among these digitized strategies and responses are Facebook (closed) groups, which bring together people who aim to discuss health and sexuality issues collectively in a horizontal manner, thereby breaking the concealment around menstruation.

Methods

In order to explore everyday politics around social media and menstruation I have analyzed one specific online space, learning from the case study of a Spanish-speaking women-only Facebook closed group that by the end of April 2019, had more than 25,500 members.[3] This number however, constantly changes because of the flow of newcomers and leavers. I learned of the existence of this group in August of 2016 while I was conducting field work on menstrual activism in Argentina and I subsequently became a member of the online community. During my time in Argentina (August 2016 to January 2017), this Facebook group was continuously mentioned by my participants as an important space for learning, empowerment and connection with other women interested in learning and discussing issues around menstruation (Gaybor 2018).

Wall posts and their following comments were collected monthly from October 2016 to April 2019. During these two and a half years, I submitted inquiries into Facebook group's search engine using four terms commonly used as a synonym for menstruation in Spanish: menstruación (menstruation), ciclo menstrual (menstrual cycle), periodo (period) and luna (moon). I placed special attention on the dialogue/discussion dynamic happening among the members that took place after an entry was made. Contributions were in the form of text, photos, reading materials, links and videos. I retrieved a total of 421 wall posts. The number of wall posts was first narrowed down to 386 after removing duplicated content (for example: same links, advertisements, photos, pdf books and articles). I left the entries with more comments for the analysis. After retrieving the 386 unique wall posts, I then filtered them by

the number of comments that followed each entry: I selected the ten most commented posts per calendar year.[4] The sample then was limited to 40 unique wall posts, with a total of 3,165 comments.

As a method for data collection and analysis, I was inspired by a grounded theory approach which molded the way I simultaneously collected and analysed data (Kathy Charmaz 2006). To make the process more systematic, the empirical material was organized on Atlas.ti. Sections of data were categorized into open codes (Julliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss 1990) which were created inductively from the data itself, from field notes taken during my visit in Argentina and from other primary data.[5] Once the data were categorized, I identified emerging themes, created networks between the codes and developed analytical frameworks.

Concerned about the privacy of the group members[6] and aware that privacy violations can happen when "extensive amounts of personally identifiable data are being collected and stored in databases" (Jeff Smith, Sandra Milberg and Sandra Burke 1996, 172) all identifying information and personal data were deleted immediately after the data were downloaded: e-mail addresses, phone numbers, geolocation[7] and the day when the post was made have been excluded (leaving the month and the year). Names were replaced by numbers. Data were stored in SURFdrive, a cloud storage service that complies with all Dutch and European privacy legislation. Inspired by the work of Tiidenberg (2014), I altered the wording of post outtakes in order to minimize their reverse-searchability while ensuring that the meaning of the sentences is the same.

The reading materials and conversations are available in Spanish (translated by myself into English for this study).

Results

The Facebook group was created in 2012. It is a diverse group in terms of the content that is discussed. It mainly covers topics on sexuality and health, although it expands towards discussions on abortion, advice about same-sex parenting and conversations about sexual diversity.[8]

Of the 40 wall posts and the total of 3,165 comments, 3 main overarching themes stood out in the coding process: knowledge about menstrual health; breaking the silence and stigma of menstrual blood; and the co-creation of a community of care.

From the posts collected for this study, it is possible to infer that a large number of group members are from Latin American countries. This is based on posts where members mention their nationality, on where the advertised events are held, or in other cases, occasions when members had geolocation activated. Nonetheless, it is not possible to fully understand other categories such race, class, age or ethnicity. However, the group explicitly excludes cis-men and given their access to internet and types of issues under discussion, women were mostly from a middle socio-economic class.[9]

A pedagogical space to address a gap in knowledge about menstrual health

From the total of 40 wall posts collected, 23 were around the topic of sexual and reproductive health, and a recurrent theme was menstrual pain. On this regard, one member posted:

> Hello women! [. . .] I always suffered from my menstruation due to the intense pain in the first days. It is hard for me to naturalize it and to think that it is normal that it hurts SO MUCH. I have gone to different doctors and they only tell me to take birth control pills so that it does not hurt … To which I refuse. Someone else happens to feel the same? Do you know of something that will help me alleviate the pain? [. . .]. Thank you for reading! (2018)

The post received 52 replies. Many of the group members identified with that situation by sharing their empathy with the pain, with the despair of not knowing what to do and with the unwillingness to take birth control pills as a way to numb the pain but not as an effective solution. One of the members replied, "DO NOT TAKE THE PILL!!!" (2018, capitalization in original). Some of them shared their negative experiences with the medical system regarding how their pain was rendered insignificant or not receiving the necessary answers and solutions:

> [. . .] If it's your wish to use the pill, go ahead. But listen to your body … Also be aware that your body might need another thing … They [the doctors] will always want to medicate you without listening to your real needs. Kisses! (2018).

There were other participants that proposed alternatives to solve menstrual pain based on their own experiences outside the strict medical framework. Such recommendations referred to the importance of changing eating habits or incorporating certain foods into the diet. There were others that recommended the use of specific medicinal plants to make homemade remedies, also based on their own experiences. One member wrote: "my recommendation is that you do vaginal steaming with plants, like chamomile, mugwort [. . .]" (2018). Another participant added, "raspberry leaf: I take a microdose and it is great" (2018). Four participants pointed to the need for switching from disposable to reusable MMT, one added that that is "a way to build a better relationship with the menstrual cycle" (2018).

Posts around menstrual health also focused on consulting and discussing clots or other unexpected variations during their menstruation. For instance, a member posted a picture of a clot which she mentioned that she had collected using the menstrual cup together with the following text: "Help. Hi beauties. I got my period yesterday and I collected this clot, I made this picture because I was surprised. What do you see?" (2017).

One of the group members left a link to a website about how to "self-diagnose" menstrual blood. Others recognized the type of clot and shared similar experiences, emphasizing that it was normal to produce those types of clots. One member added: "As a doctor I can tell you is totally normal. The clots derived from proteins that the body releases during menstruation and cause the blood in the uterus to coagulate" (2017). There were other opinions, however, some based on their own experiences and others on knowledge about Chinese medicine, which pointed out that "clots indicate imbalances in the liver" (2017). These remarks were followed by recommendations from other women about natural plants to restore the balance in the liver and dissolve the clots: "Try taking sage infusions every day" or "chamomile [. . .], artemisia, rue, and calendula" [. . .] (2017). Other group members joined the conversation without answering the question nor providing guidance, but interacting with the comments with statements such as: "this is so useful, thank you" (2017), or "excellent, thanks" (2017). In addition, it was possible to see how some participants disagreed with certain comments, showing the different perspectives on the subject which enabled discussions: "Excuse me sister, but rue is

a very powerful an abortive plant, I would not recommend that for clots. Stay with the chamomile, artemisia and calendula" (2017).

A third recurrent topic involving menstrual health was endometriosis. Posts requesting information about this illness, and (alternative) healing treatments, experiences and emotional support were very common. One woman initiated a discussion with the following post:

> [...] Is there anyone here with endometriosis? I have been told there is no cure. I do not want this in my life, I am not going to accept it, and I am not going to stop looking for alternatives. I need to hear your experiences, natural healing alternatives, words, hugs. I am from [...] and here there is almost no information about this (2017)

This post yielded 87 comments. The entries were about similar personal stories, advice on where to find information, guidance on how to live with this disease and suggestions on how to reduce pain through exercises and diets. In the conversation that followed two participants claimed to be cured of endometriosis. One wrote: "I had endometriosis in both ovaries [...]. After a year of homeopathic treatment, I was cured [...]" (2017). The other woman said that despite having received a diagnosis of infertility,[10] she had become a mother. More women joined the conversation, asking for detailed information about how to act and enhance the control over their own bodies. The woman who said that she had become a mother despite a contrary prognosis explained that she had received treatment at a private clinic for two years and had changed her eating and exercising habits.

Breaking the concealment and making menstruation visible

A selfie of a smiling woman showing her face covered with menstrual blood was accompanied by a long post that explained the multiple health benefits of the menstrual blood, pointing that it is a source of stem cells. The written post was, according to the author, based on a scientific study[11] that was not cited. The author of the picture and post added, "If menstrual blood has these benefits for our body, imagine what it does for our skin and hair [...]" (2017). The entry was followed by 48 comments, in which none expressed dissenting views. In one of the posts it reads: "Have you applied menstrual blood to your face? Or is it Photoshop? Did it work for you? How long have you done it?" (2017). A long conversation followed from these questions, in which other members also participated. One of them added: "I love it! I've done it for two months now and my facial skin has improved a lot" (2017). Stories involving other people in the use of menstrual blood as a beauty treatment were also part of the conversation, "Is this only for personal use?" (2017) to what another member replied: "My husband also applies it to his hair" (2017). Another member took the conversation into a different direction: "This is revolutionary! Go sister. We do not bleed blue, our blood is not garbage, nor do we have to hide it. I will try it" (2017).

The visibility of menstruation into the public eye, through images, was also used to request for more precise opinions. A member of the group posted a picture of an underwear with drops of brownish blood together with the following text:

> "Hi girls, a question for those who are mothers. My baby is 11 months old, I am still breastfeeding. When did your period return? Three days ago, I spotted what you see in the picture, and then it stopped (2018).

The post was followed by 67 comments, which ranged from book recommendations, to sharing related photos to explain similar experiences or textual replies. These posts engaged with the posed picture and the related concern. One member replied:

> After 9 months of breastfeeding, I first spotted something like you did but even browner, and two months later I got my period back! Just be patient (2018).

Some members expressed dissenting views regarding the picture, "I understand that you use the photo to request information, but I would be embarrassed to post that" (2018). Another member commented: "Yes, I agree with you" (2018). Other questioned the embarrassment: "No need to feel ashamed hahaha, it is just blood that we all have" (2018).

Creating a community of care

Out of the 40 wall posts, 2 of them are from the group administrators where they explain the group's objectives. One of the posts states:

> A group without borders, where we share concerns and knowledge from the deepest part of ourselves. Expanding, empowering and transcending by the hand of the other, we try to weave a network that promotes conscious awakening, in solidarity, in our most genuine essence.

The description of the group sets the tone for a space were open discussions and knowledge sharing can happen. The posts often revealed expressions of gratitude and companionship. For example, in the following quote, note the use of "we" at the end, affirming the sense of belonging to the [online] community.

> I read your life stories and I get excited. I learn from your knowledge and I feel empowered. I see your photos in the comments and I feel connected to this great network of brave and conscious women. Thank you for all the love and warmth, for that creative and healing energy that we release. I love you. (2018)

The post was followed by 55 comments that indicated relatedness with that feeling. For example: "The same happens to me. I always read carefully all possible posts, there is a lot of wisdom here! I visualize many beautiful things for all of us. Thank you!" (2018).

Sharing life experiences related to menstruation, is also something recurring,

> Hello beautiful sisters. I share some photos of the menarche ritual-ceremony I participated. We shared stories, love, flowers and more. I invite you to organize this, it's beautiful. Please see the pictures, but don't share or download (2019). [They were pictures of an altar, presents, flowers and food. People's faces were not seen, only their hands or back silhouettes].

Discussion

Everyday life is politicized in this Facebook closed group in ways that aim to build knowledge and share experiences that counter the lack of information and the inconsistencies around the menstrual cycle from medical and traditional sources. The group breaks the traditional cycle of concealment and shame that has led many women to live everyday lives uninformed about their own bodies. In sharing information and creating a community of care, the active participation of women in this digital space creates a form of body politics that overcomes the norm of concealment around menstruation. The group works as a venue for dialogue,

through which participants can voice previously hidden, intimate experiences and discuss the challenges they face in their daily life. In the group, these once-invisible worries and concerns are shared, read and validated. The posts are a constant exercise of constructing and challenging narratives about menstruation through the recommendations and shared experiences of the participants. They provide a wealth of information (through written posts and images), showing the importance of acknowledging menstrual embodied experiences as key in the process of production and democratization of knowledge about the menstrual body.

Discussions flow because of the active online participation of the women, which in turn also contributes to building a community of mutual support. It creates what Henry Jenkins (2009) described a "participatory culture", where members believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection and gratitude for the support of others. On the other hand, findings of this study reveal that participants of this group are called upon in everyday life to use their personal stories to challenge social norms. They show how everyday activities can help to defy the hegemonic knowledge and practices around menstrual bodies. Claims about homoeopathy and home made remedies fulfill a purpose which goes beyond suggesting a treatment for endometriosis and other gynaecological conditions. These are forms of resistance to the hegemony of medical expertise, to myths and to other well-rooted beliefs about menstruation that reduce it to a biological, negative and painful experience.

Here, we can return to Harcourt's (2009, 13) question: "which bodies are producing knowledge about which other bodies?" Participants who know about their bodies are open to sharing their personal experiences and advice with each other, seeing their discussions as pedagogical, and as a form of engagement with non-hegemonic medical practices and understandings of the health of their menstrual cycle and bodies. These practices are significant—they function as a collective way to reclaim knowledge about their menstrual bodies and as a form of empowerment. It is an embodied knowledge that helps the women make informed decisions and gain control of their menstrual experience as part of their everyday lives. In contrast to the historical perception of menstruation as a pollutant or as a threat to people, food or cattle (Mary Douglas 2003; Jane Usher 2006), menstruation is reconstructed as something beneficial to beauty or health and as something that does not need to be disguised by blue liquid or concealed in silence. The posts indicate a relationship in which it is possible to be in contact with menstrual blood from a perspective that does not see it as dirty or as something to be discarded. Their embodied experiences and knowledge about the functioning of their bodies, on the other hand, is key to making informed decisions about owning and managing their menstrual health.

Women found support and contentment upon discovering that they were not on their own. As Judy Wajcman (2000, 460) states, "the Internet can be a site for the creation of new feminist communities, and a new tool for political organizing". The posts expose how positioning personal concerns within a larger context and finding answers and support within a community are very important to the wellbeing of these women. The warmth and affectionate spirit among the members of the group is notable. Posts are written in a way that indicates that because of the dynamics of this group, a community of care is being built where intimate issues can be discussed. Women build links with each other, transcending geographical boundaries and creating an extended knowledge community. The conversations in the group, which arise from sharing personal experiences in their

writing or with photos, touch on deep and private personal themes. When airing these private issues in this digital *public agora*, participants are breaking the structural patterns of keeping their sexuality and menstrual health in silence by creating a community that is nurtured through shared participation and knowledge. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that the mere possibility of being part of this community is a matter of privilege insofar as membership requires having access to the internet as well as time to participate and invest in the discussions. Moreover, finding out about the existence of this group demands the ability to network and function in a high/middle socio-economic class.

Conclusion

Menstruation—rather than being a biological event that demands secrecy and concealment—is about everyday politics, from public figures such as Kaur and Gandhi, to learning platforms on menstrual health, to everyday strategies of resistance, like this Facebook group. Women who participate in the group articulate their individual engagement starting from their own embodied experience and using diverse expressions of the self, in the "hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing" (Donna Haraway 1988, 585). These menstrual politics happening in this online niche are nurtured by "everyday life or micro-politics that shape (their) knowledge and experience of the lived gendered body" (Harcourt 2009, 17). However, the everyday body politics of menstruation is an interdependent process, founded in the active participation, knowledge co-creation and emotional/relational support of the members of the group and facilitated by the affordances of this social media. It is about collectively learning about the body in ways society teaches us not to, departing from questioning our self-assumptions and interrogating structural biases.

My findings reveal that not all actions to change the "menstrual status quo" aim to re-signify the embodied menstrual experience through what Paul Chatterton and Pickerill Jenny (2010) term "the militant activist"—large-scale, public or demand-based initiatives engaging the state (such as #Menstruaccion or #StopTaxingPeriod). The dynamics of this online group help illustrate another form of menstrual politics. Despite not interacting with the formal world of politics, members take actions in their everyday to defy systems of patriarchal oppression. The embeddedness of social media in everyday life allows for the creation of online communities aware of feminist concerns (Clark 2014). Most significantly, body politics can shift in all its "attitudes, beliefs, and values" (Elizabeth Grosz 1994, 17) through everyday activities. These ongoing processes of knowledge co-creation happening among menstruating women in social media contribute to a change in the current menstrual status quo. Everyday life practices around menstruation contain the seeds for transcending the menstrual mandate of shame and for building contextually meaningful forms of relating with our bodies.

Notes

1. Some examples are: "The Body is not an apology": https://www.sonyareneetaylor.com/. "The labia talk: https://labiatalk.com/blog/.
2. The term menstruators is used to indicate that not only women menstruate (Bobel 2010).
3. It is debatable how "*closed*" a Facebook group is when it is composed of more than 25 500 people.
4. Second half of 2016, first half of 2019 and the complete calendar year of 2017 and 2018.

5. This paper is a part of the larger multi-sited qualitative study of an emerging movement of menstrual activism in Argentina conducted between 2015 and 2019.
6. For a more detailed discussion on the nature of consent, privacy expectations and strategies for anonymization of data collected from Facebook, please see: Michael Zimmer (2010).
7. I am aware that omitting the geolocation of participants may lead to missing some important data regarding the area where information on menstrual health is severely lacking or is being produced. I made this decision to guarantee the protection of their privacy.
8. Because of the scope of this research, these issues are beyond the analysis of this article.
9. This study follows Sergio Visacovsky (2012) definition of the Argentinean middle class as a completely heterogeneous category—not only delimited by income, but also by lifestyles, level of education, ways of speaking, the place where one resides, works, goes for recreation and the goods and services desired and acquired.
10. As for infertility and endometriosis, there is a small but growing literature; please see Parveen Parasar, Ozcan Pinar and Kathryn Terry (2017).
11. Nonetheless, accumulating evidence has demonstrated that menstrual blood stands as a viable source of stem cells, for more detailed information please see Maria Rodrigues, Trenton Lippert, Hung Nguyen, Sussannah Kaelber, Paul Sanberg, and Cesar Borlongan (2016).

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