

CONCEAL AT ALL COSTS:
LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MENSTRUATION IN JAPAN

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For Sam and Daniel

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ABSTRACT

Although reproductive technologies and the gendered dimensions of medicalization have been thoroughly studied in anthropology, menstruation itself is a neglected topic, especially in urban and post-industrial settings. This research takes as its focus the complex and varied experiences of menstruation for young Japanese women in the Tokyo metropolitan area and examines the Japanese menstrual product industry from an ethnographic and critical feminist perspective. Informed by interdisciplinary studies on embodiment, gender, and reproductive health, I interrogate taken-for-granted notions of “normal” menstrual cycles, menstrual products, and menstrual education by highlighting the diversity of physiological, social, and emotional experiences surrounding menstruation. “Hegemonic menstruality” is what I call the macro, public discourse of menstruation – built up through school lessons and textbooks, commercial menstrual products and their advertisements, and media treatment of women and their bodies. Young women encounter and interact with hegemonic menstruality on a daily basis, and this project details the varied ways in which they embrace, conform, adapt, resist, and/or reject this hegemony. Simply put, hegemonic menstruality refers to the “correct” way to menstruate as a member of society; it is a particular form of menstrual being that, if followed, lends a menstruator more power, or at least less stigma, than if not followed. Due to cultural connections between menstruation, sex, and reproduction, as well as strong expectations of motherhood for women, hegemonic menstruality and hegemonic femininity have quite a few (implicit and explicit) overlaps. Hegemonic menstruality promotes two conflicting components of an ideal woman: 1) she has a “regular” menstrual cycle – perfect reproductive health – and thus is capable of producing children, 2) and simultaneously, she conceals from public perception all

signs of that all-important menstrual cycle. Pain, discomfort, and discursive silence are normalized aspects of menstruation for Japanese women, and failure to conceal menstruation – through sight, smell, sound, and affect – connotes a lack of discipline and femininity which women are expected to maintain. Menstrual product advertisements enforce these expectations of disciplined femininity, and the products themselves are technologies that act as mediators (or barriers) between a woman and her menstrual body. Tokyo as a research site provides the opportunity to study the effect of pronatalist government policies and discourses about fertility, gender roles, and parenthood on embodied experiences of menstruation. In the context of twenty-first century economic precarity, prolonged singlehood, and changing social relations, menstruation – with its discursive connection to motherhood – can have great significance to young Japanese women, who must balance career goals with personal desires and/or social pressures to have a family.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: HEGEMONIC MENSTRUALITY AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MENSTRUATION IN JAPAN

Going Shopping – I head two blocks down the main road leading from Sakuragichō Station, passing a tiny hole-in-the-wall tempura restaurant, a chain burger restaurant, and a *rakugo* theater before arriving at Cheruru Noge Building. Inside is an array of small shops and restaurants, with an escalator leading down to the basement grocery store and 100-yen shop. To the right is the entrance to HAC Drug, a chain drugstore with over one hundred locations in Yokohama and the surrounding area. The air conditioning is a welcome relief from the sticky summer heat, although the canned background music starts to grate on my nerves within a few minutes; *Frozen* is incredibly popular in 2014, but I can only take so many renditions of “Let It Go” before I reach my daily limit. Luckily, I know exactly what I need to get, picking up a small shopping basket and navigating my way through the few dozen labeled aisles. After grabbing some toothpaste, I find the aisle marked 生理用品 (*seiri yōhin*, feminine care products). I scan the aisle, moving past the menstrual napkin section that spans about six feet of the shelving. Finally, nestled between pink boxes of napkins and packages of “sanitary shorts” (special underwear to use during menstruation), I find what I am looking for. While there are about thirty different napkin products on the shelves (which do not even include the scented napkins and panty liners, located in a different section of the store), there are only about six tampon products to choose from, all from one brand. This is hardly surprising, since only a fraction of Japanese women uses tampons, with over ninety percent reportedly using napkins (Sato et al 2006, 28). I select a box of compact tampons and head to the front with my items. The cashier takes the tampons and places them inside a brown paper bag, taping it shut. She then puts the paper bag in a translucent plastic shopping bag along with my toothpaste, and I am then on my way.

Dangerous Jingles – While unpacking my purchase from the paper bag and glancing over the toxic shock syndrome warning document folded inside the tampon box, I absentmindedly hum the jingle from the tampon brand’s new commercial, which had been airing frequently on television lately. Like other Japanese commercials, menstrual product advertisements are often replete with their own catchy jingles, sung by immaculate and smiling young women. Another recent commercial I remember seeing featured pop idol Sashihara Rino singing about a menstrual napkin’s odor absorption powers with a back-up chorus of pink frog puppets. While cute imagery and peppy jingles lend a light, carefree air to the commercials, the National Association of Commercial Broadcasters in Japan does not take the contents of menstrual product advertisements lightly. They have published broadcasting standards that detail several restrictions and guidelines for menstrual product advertisements: ““For feminine care products...sufficient caution should be taken for broadcast time, preceding and subsequent programs, and expressions used in the advertising”” (quoted in Ono 2009, 157). The Japan Hygiene Products Industry Association (JHPIA) also has guidelines for menstrual product advertisements. For them, it is preferred that the product stays in its packaging in the commercial, but if the product is shown, it must only be to provide proper information to viewers about the functions and features of the product. Additionally, songs in menstrual product

commercials should not be so catchy that children, unfamiliar with the nature of the product, copy the song (Ono 2009, 157).

Letting Women “Shine” – In 2013, the same year that Sashihara Rino’s menstrual product commercial first aired, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo announced at the United Nations General Assembly that his administration would pursue development programs and policies that would encourage the “underutilized resource” of Japanese women to “shine” (UN News Centre 2013). The main purpose of this goal, following the theory of “womenomics,” is to strengthen the current national economy by increasing the number of women in the general workforce, as well as in managerial and other company leadership positions. Another goal of Abe’s womenomics policies is to reverse Japan’s declining population and low birthrate; by 2060 the population is predicted to fall from 127 million to 87 million, threatening social security and the future economic well-being of the country. While the government is setting target quotas for female business executives and increasing public daycare facilities, the burden of childrearing still falls on women’s shoulders (Chanlett-Avery and Nelson 2014). Indeed, women who delay marriage and childbirth are often blamed for the declining birthrate and its related economic crisis; they may be referred to as “parasite singles” or “loser dogs” (*make’inu*) in the news and social commentary bestsellers (Yamaguchi 2006). It is increasingly imperative to examine how women navigate the simultaneous government imperatives of economic production and demographic reproduction in Japan.

How are menstrual products, advertisements, and pronatalism in Japan connected? Many influential works in medical anthropology and the anthropology of reproduction have shown how government pronatalist policies impact women’s social identities and life experiences, including their reproductive health and career choices (e.g., Paxson 2004; Krause 2005; Rivkin-Fish 2005). Like many other countries, the Japanese nation-state in the twentieth century constructed its female citizens as the symbolic and biological reproducers of the nation, extolling mothers and criticizing women who chose not to have children (McClintock 1993; Frühstück 2003). Although women have long been active outside the home, childrearing has strongly been considered a woman’s most important role. In fact, Japan is one of the few countries in the world to legally provide menstrual leave for female employees, a practice which began in the mid-twentieth century as a means to protect women’s reproductive health, especially as it concerns pregnancy and childbirth (Dan 1986).¹ Given the connection between menstruation and motherhood in Japanese society, as well as the social and governmental pressure to get married and have children, this project seeks to understand the experience of menstruation for young Japanese women as they prepare for future careers and family life.

With the main exception of Emily Martin (1992), menstruation has surprisingly not played a central role in most medical anthropological studies of women’s lives. This is despite the fact that the near-universal experience of menstruation not only impacts women’s lives on a day-to-day basis, but it also has far-reaching effects on economy, politics, religion, science, and other societal realms. With ethnographic research conducted at Ochanomizu University in Tokyo, Japan, I interrogate the meaning and experience of menstruation for young women, as

¹ With menstrual leave, women can take time off from work during menstruation. Whether this leave is paid or unpaid depends on the employer. Other countries with menstrual leave laws include South Korea, Indonesia, and Taiwan.

well as the role of the menstrual product industry and government institutions in shaping these women's reproductive and career choices. With the Ministry of Education² in charge of sex education (including education about menstruation) and the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare involved in setting industry standards for domestically manufactured menstrual products, the personal experience of menstruation is in reality a political and public one. In addition, the multibillion-dollar menstrual product manufacturing industry, through the development and introduction of new products, connects women's menstrual experiences to global capitalist economies. The menstrual product advertising industry also plays a part by broadcasting messages about proper social and consumer behavior for women. My research takes into account the interactions within and between these individual, political, economic, and social realms; in order to obtain a more complete picture of the experience of menstruation, it is crucial to understand how such interactions influence social notions of menstruation and women's bodies as well as women's own bodily experiences. Moreover, looking at Japanese women's lives through the lens of menstruation reveals new and important insights into fertility management practices, which can be applied to further medical anthropology research on reproduction, particularly in societies that are facing similar population decline issues.

Research Questions, Argument, and Positionality

The main purpose of this project is to describe and analyze the lived experience of menstruation for young women in Tokyo, Japan. Therefore, the primary source of data is these women's own words, expressed in interviews and free-response journal entries. Menstruation is not simply a biological phenomenon experienced in a culture-free vacuum. I argue that sex and health education, menstrual product design and advertising, and discourses on motherhood and women's bodies all influence the embodied experience of menstruation. For this reason, I also collected data through interviews with menstrual product company representatives. Additionally, I conducted textual analyses of menstrual product advertisements, JHPIA documents, and other menstruation-related media.

Research Questions

Reflecting on my three "vignettes" above, we can see these complex relationships at work. From *Going Shopping*, we may ask, how do young Japanese women treat or deal with menstruation in their daily lives? How do they choose what menstrual products to buy and use, and why are napkins used so much more frequently than tampons? Why are menstrual products cordoned off in their own opaque bags after purchase? From *Dangerous Jingles*, questions arise about the significance of both the airtime and the imagery of menstrual product advertisements – what is shown (or not shown) in these ads and what messages about menstruation are being transmitted through them? Who is making these marketing and regulatory decisions about menstrual products? *Letting Women "Shine"* leads us to ask, in a society with rapidly changing demographics that have potentially severe economic consequences, how do young women prepare for and navigate family and career goals? How are their lives shaped by government

² The official title of this ministry is the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (abbreviated as MEXT).

policies and ideologies? How do they embody or resist ideologies of womanhood or motherhood? These inquiries may be condensed into these main research questions:

- How do Japanese university women in Tokyo experience and understand menstruation?
- How are menstrual management practices (e.g., products used and behaviors adopted to deal with menstruation) learned, and how do they affect these women's embodied experiences of menstruation?
- What is the public discourse on menstruation and women's bodies, in what ways does menstrual product advertising contribute to this discourse, and how does it influence these women's experiences with and perceptions of menstruation?

The answers to these questions reveal that media, government, and industry are closely intertwined in the production of discourses on menstruation and women's bodies in Japan. These in turn have the power to directly affect the lived experience of menstruation for young Japanese women.

How to Menstruate Correctly: Hegemonic Menstruality in Japan

“Hegemonic menstruality” is what I call this macro, public discourse of menstruation – built up through school lessons and textbooks, commercial menstrual products and their advertisements, and media treatment of women and their bodies. People encounter and interact with hegemonic menstruality on a daily basis, which takes various forms depending on social, political-economic, and historical contexts as well as individual positionalities such as age/life stage, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, and so on. Simply put, hegemonic menstruality refers to the “correct” way to menstruate as a member of society; it is a particular form of menstrual being that, if followed, lends a menstruator more power, or at least less stigma, than if not followed. I explicitly do not use “menstrual hegemony” to name this discourse; menstruation itself is not hegemonic in most societies (including Japan) – it is the marker of the abject “other” (see Literature Review below).

This project details the varied ways in which young, middle- and upper-middle-class Japanese women attending university in the Tokyo area embrace, conform, adapt, resist, and/or reject this hegemony. One of the main characteristics of hegemonic menstruality for these young women is the concealment of all signs of menstruation. Hegemonic menstruality includes:

- Never openly discussing menstruation, especially in the presence of men
- Having a “normal” monthly menstrual cycle
- Understanding that menstruation's main purpose is to reflect one's reproductive health status
- Understanding that menstruation is both a symbolic and physiological marker of womanhood, and that only cis women menstruate
- Using store-bought disposable menstrual napkins
- Hiding menstrual blood
- Hiding other signs of menstruation including physical sensations such as cramps, bloating, fatigue, acne, headache, etc., and emotional sensations like irritability or anger

Due to cultural connections between menstruation, sex, and reproduction, as well as strong expectations of motherhood for women, hegemonic menstruality and hegemonic femininity have quite a few (implicit and explicit) overlaps. Hegemonic menstruality promotes two conflicting components of an ideal woman: 1) she has a “regular” menstrual cycle – perfect reproductive health – and thus is capable of producing children, 2) and simultaneously, she conceals from public perception all signs of that all-important menstrual cycle. Each chapter of the dissertation will look at the interplay between young women’s lived experiences of menstruation and different components of hegemonic menstruality – although the overarching theme is always “concealment.”

Researcher Positionality

An anthropologist is herself a research tool through which information and experiences are filtered, and so it is important that I be transparent about my positionality and aims in the context of this project. As Madison writes, “Positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects” (2012, 8). I am a white, middle-class American ciswoman, and at the time of my fieldwork I was twenty-six years old and held a Bachelor’s and a Master’s degree in anthropology. Before moving to Tokyo, I had been studying Japanese language and culture for roughly eight years. I consider myself a feminist, both in an academic and theoretical sense and in my personal life. With absolute certainty I can say that holding this stance has led me to conduct this research on menstruation and menstrual products. Practicing critical ethnography, I aim to “use the resources, skills, and privileges available to [me] to make accessible – to penetrate the borders and break through the confines in defense of – the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach” (Madison 2012, 6). While the “subjects” of this work, young Japanese women in Tokyo from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds, are not necessarily marginalized, their “stories” of menstruation are. I want my research to help build and support environments in which open discussion of menstruation is acceptable and commonplace, because I believe that such opportunities have the potential to reduce menstrual stigma, improve gender equity, and positively impact menstruators’ health and wellbeing.

However, I do not claim to know what is the “right” or “best” way for individuals or societies to approach or deal with menstruation, nor do I wish to impose my own views and practices on others. In fact, as introduced above, my main argument in this dissertation is that our experiences and perceptions of menstruation are shaped by personal circumstances, cultural values and practices, political-economic contexts, societal histories, and global exchanges of goods and technologies, among other factors. Just as the young women featured in this work have interacted and continue to interact with a particular form of hegemonic menstruality throughout their lives, I too have grappled with a hegemonic menstruality specific to the context in which I was raised. I include both my own suggestions as well as interviewees’ desires for changes in sex education, menstrual product design and advertising, and views of menstruation in Japan. It is important to recognize, however, that truly effective and appropriate changes (will) come from members of Japanese society, to which I claim no belonging.

Literature Review

Chris Bobel, in the introduction to *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, writes that “menstruation-as-unit-of-analysis serves as a gateway—both conceptually and symbolically—to reveal, unpack, and complicate inequalities across biological, social, cultural, religious, political, and historical dimensions” (2020, 4). This dissertation combines feminist anthropology and medical anthropology with Japanese studies to examine experiences, beliefs, and knowledge surrounding menstruation for young Japanese women in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Informed by studies on embodiment, gender, and reproductive health, I interrogate taken-for-granted notions of “normal” menstrual cycles, menstrual products, and menstrual education by highlighting the diversity of physiological, social, and emotional experiences surrounding menstruation. This research is important because beliefs and practices surrounding menstruation are not just informative about this one – important – aspect of women’s lives; they have an impact across societal institutions, affecting gender relations and even socioeconomic status (Gottlieb 2002). My research makes key contributions to feminist scholarship on gender and the body in the anthropology of Japan, medical anthropology, and sensory anthropology.

Menstruation, a physiological phenomenon experienced by millions of people around the world, can have profound implications for economy, politics, religion, and science, not to mention personal health and hygiene. Ethnographic studies that delve into the subject mainly focus on village communities in Africa and South and Southeast Asia (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Maggi 2001; Gottlieb 2002; Hoskins 2002; Morrow 2002; Pederson 2002), and ones that deal with more urban, industrialized settings often remain limited to the United States (Martin 1992; Vostral 2008; Freidenfelds 2009; Bobel 2010). Japan, a non-Western post-industrial nation with thriving metropolises and its own complex history of gender roles, religion, state-citizen relations, and economic markets, provides an important site for the anthropological study of menstruation. To “situate” menstruation (and the menstrual cycle) in the political-economic context of twenty-first century Japan, I weave together individuals’ lived experiences with theories of medicalization, gender, and embodiment.

Gender and Women in Contemporary Japan

Robert Smith, in his introduction to *The Women of Suye Mura*, writes, “...[Most] of the voluminous anthropological literature on women – and Japan is no exception – deals with their *structural* position vis-à-vis men. It focuses on their access to resources, the degree of their autonomy and power in the domestic and public domains, their participation in the labor market, and so on. We rarely get accounts of how women feel about things – their likes and dislikes or their hopes and fears” (Smith and Wiswell 1982, xi). In the years following this statement, many anthropological projects on Japanese women have helped remedy this lack of personal experiences and desires (e.g., Bernstein 1983; Lebra 1984). Even works that do focus on domestic (Imamura 1987) or political (Pharr 1981) roles or on economic participation (Brinton 1993; Roberts 1994; Ogasawara 1998) lend an ethnographic depth to their topics, bringing light to *lived experiences*. Although government labor statistics, news commentaries, and media such as magazines and television all have their own stories to tell about women’s lives, one must not neglect what women themselves have to say.

The disintegration of the family-corporate system in post-bubble Japan has led to what the media call a “relationless society.” The postwar economic system of breadwinner salarymen supported by homemaker wives is no longer tenable; lifetime regular employment is not guaranteed and the “family wage” is not enough to support the families of those who are lucky enough to have a full-time job. More and more women have entered the workforce since the 1980s; however, women in corporate environments have struggled to secure positions besides clerical work and are severely underrepresented in management positions at all levels of business (Brinton 1993; Ogasawara 1998). Prime Minister Abe’s womenomics policies included setting quotas for corporations to increase the number of women managers and executives (with no punishment incurred for failing to meet these quotas). However, Borovoy (2012) and Yamaguchi (2014) have critiqued the government’s womenomics programs for their superficial approach to gender equality; after all, they argue, the policies are more about improving the economy and stymying the shrinking and aging population than anything else.

Women of any age and young workers in general are often relegated to part-time or temp work, representing the “precariat” of Japanese society (Lukács 2020). Unable to support a family and achieve the ideal dream of owning one’s own home furnished with the latest appliances and other symbols of success, many delay or forgo marriage and live alone (Allison 2015). Allison (2012) argues that although the ideal life of the baby boomer generation is not attainable by today’s generation, it is still upheld as the source of happiness and measure of success. In order to remedy the hopelessness and loneliness rendered by this unreachable goal, the goal itself must change and people must find happiness and relationality outside of the family and the corporation.

Medicalization and Women’s Bodies

In this context of economic precarity, prolonged singlehood, and changing social relations, what does menstruation – with its connection to motherhood – mean to young Japanese women? Shirai writes that the “gendered biopolitics of national population creates complex dilemmas for women and constitutes an important feature of the contemporary Japanese reproductive landscape” (2020, 560). The anthropology of reproduction has revealed cross-cultural trends of the state’s involvement in its citizens’ fertility (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995; Browner and Sargent 2011), whether that means encouraging more childbirth and supporting infertility treatment (e.g., Inhorn 2003; Teman 2010; Wahlberg 2018) or limiting childbirth through the implementation of policies or programs (e.g., Brunson 2016, 2020) and forced sterilization or pregnancy termination (e.g., Greenhalgh 1994). Whether the government is overtly or covertly involved, fertility management is often inherently political (Greenhalgh 1995; Murphy 2012; Rapp 2011). My research considers the social and political-economic implications of government encouragement of (married) women to have more children. In addition to incentivizing (or pressuring) companies to hire and promote more women, another prong of womenomics in Japan is to entice women (in cis/heterosexual married relationships) to have and raise children in the hopes of reversing or at least slowing down the “silver tsunami.” Kano argues that “feminist debates and gender policy in modern Japan have existed in a complex relationship, grounded in and further strengthening the category of ‘all women as potential mothers’” (2016, 5). Indeed, many pro-worker labor laws and practices (include menstruation leave) came about in the first half of the twentieth century in order to protect the reproductive

health of female workers, who were essential as labor for Japan's imperial/wartime industries and as producers of citizens/soldiers. Still today, there exists "an encompassing cultural paradigm of thinking about the pregnant body as 'important,' fragile, and in need of protection" (Ivry 2009, 32).

Even before Japan's nation-building projects of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women's reproductive faculties were the object of intense medicalization, beginning with the medicalization of childbirth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which was even further medicalized and institutionalized into the twentieth century (Shirai 2020). Medicalization, the process in which everyday life experiences are transformed into medical conditions requiring intervention, is a crucial topic of study in medical anthropology. The study of the medicalization of women's bodies, especially in relation to the reproductive lifecycle, is integral to my research. This includes studies of menstruation (discussed in detail below) and menopause (Lock 1993; Martin 1992). Acceptable appearance and function of both internal reproductive parts and external genitalia has also been delineated and enforced by medical institutions (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Karkazis 2008). In particular, fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth have been heavily medicalized and comprise a large part of medical anthropological literature focusing on women (see Inhorn 2006 for a review and critique). Infertility, surrogacy, and assistive reproductive technologies (ARTs) (e.g., Rapp 2011; Inhorn and Birenbaum-Carmeli 2008; Levine 2008) and selective reproductive technologies (Gammeltoft and Wahlberg 2014) are the topic of many studies.

The construction and portrayal of women's bodies has been explored by many researchers in recent literature, especially through the lens of medicalization. Normal aspects of women's lives, such as menstruation and childbirth, are reconfigured to fit medical, masculinist worldviews. Negative terminology used in medical texts to explain the menstrual cycle, such as "degenerate," "discharge," "leak," "decline," and "deteriorate" (Martin 1992, 47), has impacted the way women view their own bodies and menstruation. Women that Martin interviewed "often see menstrual bleeding as 'messy' and the blood itself as 'gross' or disgusting" (1992, 93). Adolescent females interviewed by Stoltzman also reported regarding menstruation as "debilitating, bothersome, and unsanitary" (1986, 113). The inferiority of women's bodies to men's bodies in medical texts and scientific experiments reflects a societal sexual hierarchy that favors men and masculinity over women and femininity (Abadie 2010). Many young Japanese women feel similarly about menstruation and their bodies.

Women's bodies – and menstruation – can also be seen as something that is abject. Julia Kristeva, in her book *Powers of Horror*, describes abjection as "what disturbs identity, system, order...does not respect borders, positions, rules...the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (1982, 4). Kristeva positions menstrual blood into the realm of abjection by relating it to waste and signs of sexual difference, stating, "What goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection" (1982, 108). Menstrual blood is abject waste excreted from the body, which, by passing through one of the body's orifices, defiles and threatens the "body proper." Also a sign of sexual difference, menstrual blood is a sexual bodily fluid that has the power to permeate and transgress the boundaries of the body, and thus poses a threat to the social system and social identity (Kristeva 1982, 71). The polluting aspect of women's menstrual blood, but not men's semen, another sexual bodily fluid, is supported by the construction of sexed bodies and sexual difference, since women and

femininity, one way or another, have been defined and continue to be defined in society in relation to men and masculinity (Butler 1999). Scholars such as Warin (2009) have applied the theory of abjection in analyses of women's bodies in a Euro-American context, and I find it to be applicable in Japan. In the scholarly literature and in my own research, there are signs that menstruation is viewed as a bodily waste and as an indicator sexual difference.

Studying bodies – and menstruation – can also help us challenge the sex/gender binary, which processes of medicalization often reinforce. The sex/gender binary is often presumed to be a “natural” or “scientific” fact; however, the scientific discourse that informs this perspective is itself informed by specific historical and sociocultural contexts (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Haraway 1991; Karkazis 2008). Butler (2007) has critiqued the presumption of the material irreducibility of sex which seems to ground much of feminist discourse. She argues that not only does “matter” inform discourses of sex and sexuality, but sex informs discourses of “matter” as well. The historical contextualization of the concept of matter and materiality reveals sex hierarchies – which feminists inadvertently preserve when they uphold the idea of the material irreducibility of sex and the always otherness of women. Butler also argues that questioning or critiquing the concept of matter – or the concept of “woman” – is not the same as negating or doing away with it; rather, this may actually open up new ways of signification and meaning. Following this, it is productive to use an examination of menstruation to explore and even break down the sex/gender binary which essentializes menstruation as a marker of female reproductive capability and thus “womanhood.” Firstly, not all women menstruate (post-menopausal women, transwomen, women taking menstrual suppression birth control, etc.) and not all who menstruate are women (transmen, non-binary individuals, etc.) (Bobel 2010; Bobel et al 2020; Fahs 2016). Thus, embodied experiences of menstruation can be quite diverse when informed by different gender identities (as well as race, class, etc.) (Frank 2020). Scholars have argued that not only are social meanings and gendered embodied experiences of menstruation not monolithic, but also menstruation itself is “multiple” (Hasson 2016, 976) or “plural” (Rydström 2020, 955).

“Situating” Menstruation: Global Assemblages and Local Biologies

The fact that women's bodies are more intensely medicalized and surveilled than men's bodies is significant. It reflects political and social inequalities between genders – and naturalizes them (Martin 1991). The gender inequities of biopolitics/biopower are further complicated by global, transnational circulations of media, technologies, knowledge, and capital. Lock and Kaufert write that “the majority of women are responding today not simply to ‘tradition’ and local hegemonies, but also to the effects that globally circulating knowledge and practices have on their lives” (1998, 23). Collier writes, “Global assemblages are the actual configurations through which global forms of techno-science, economic rationalism, and other expert systems gain significance” (2006, 400). In other words, global forms of expert knowledge can be decontextualized and recontextualized in various cultural/social situations, and thus global assemblages – “heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated” (Collier and Ong 2005, 12) – are the specific articulation of these global forms in different contexts. Contextualizing health experiences, behaviors, and beliefs by “situating” them in their global assemblages provides a crucial political-economic lens that addresses the misguided assumption that Western biomedical technologies (and knowledges/perspectives), including reproductive technologies, are value- and culture-free and thus can easily be implemented across the globe, in

a one-size-fits-all sort of way (Greenhalgh 1995; Inhorn 2003; Takeshita 2012). The fact of the matter is that this is *not* the case; not only are Western-originated technologies modified or only partially implemented, but they hold different meanings in different societies around the world. In her study of embodied experiences of pregnancy in Japan and Israel, Ivry argues that “different ways of using [medicalizing practices and biomedical technologies] can convey a diversity of meanings, construct different forms of agency, and make possible various systems of relationships, while retaining their medicalizing effect” (Ivry 2009, 17-18). The meanings ascribed to these technologies, in Western and non-Western societies alike, are derived from what Inhorn calls “local moral worlds,” that is, “what is at stake in everyday experience” (2003, 19).

Along with “local moral worlds” and the localization of biomedical practices and technologies, “local biologies” can be another component of global assemblages of health and lived experience. Lock has shown the importance of challenging the assumption that biological phenomena associated with the life cycle are universal across all human groups. She argues that “menopause should not be conceptualized as an invariant biological transformation, and that it is more appropriate to think of biology and culture as being a continuous feedback relationship of ongoing exchange, in which both are subject to variation” (Lock 1998a, 410). Similarly, I posit that one cannot assume that the physical/biological experiences of menstruation are universal, or that cross-cultural differences in women’s reports on these experiences are only due to cultural and social factors that influence women’s interpretations and reporting of experiences in certain ways. My research moves us closer to understanding the “local biologies” of menstruation in Japan.

In understanding the medicalization processes and individuals’ experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood, Santos and Gottschang argue for “situating the birthing choices of pregnant women in the context of larger *reproductive assemblages and hierarchies* involving a variety of actors, including not just women’s families and communities but also national governments, policy-making institutions, international organizations, medical doctors, hospitals, and technology providers” (2020, 554 [emphasis in original]). In order to understand and analyze experiences of menstruation in Japan, we must “situate” knowledge(s) (Haraway 1991) of menstruation in its own global assemblage(s) with its own set of actors. As part of situating and contextualizing knowledge, it is important to investigate who can access and use different forms of medical and scientific knowledge. More and more, social issues are undergoing scientization, meaning that “science” is invoked as a tool to support and legitimize activism and collective social movements. But how science is used for these purposes is impacted by “gender stereotypes, identities, and expectations,” what Kimura calls “gendered scientization” (2019, 345). For instance, many Japanese women involved in citizen radiation measuring organizations after the Fukushima nuclear accident viewed their activities as an extension of their maternal caretaking roles (Kimura 2019, 329).

Additionally, it is my stance that menstrual products should be considered both technologies (Vostral 2008) and mass-produced goods that connect users in a global web of production, marketing, and consumption (Kissling 2006; Shail and Howie 2005). Analysis of the development and use of various menstrual management technologies can contribute to Science and Technology Studies (STS) theories within anthropology. Inhorn discusses the concept of “the local in the global,” writing that the “movement of technologies around the globe is both a

deeply historical and inherently localizing process” (2003, 15). Using this approach, my research can help trace the “localizing process” in Japan of new menstrual management technologies and social and scientific views of menstruation from other parts of the world into the dominant discourse of hegemonic menstruality.

Embodiment, Subjectivity, and the Senses

The individual, and their experiences and knowledges of menstruation and menstrual products, is a key component in “situating” menstruation in Japan. My research, in prioritizing women’s narratives of their subjective experiences, also engages with the concept of embodiment, in which “the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience” (Csordas 1999, 181). Through embodiment, we can study not just individual perceptual experiences, but culture, history, and the self. A paradigm of embodiment shifts the research focus from perceptual categories and classifications to *processes* of perception and objectification, in other words, “how cultural objects (including selves) are constituted or objectified” (Csordas 1990, 40). By acknowledging the body as an agential subject experiencing and acting upon the world, rather than a passive object stamped with cultural and structural representations, we can more easily break down the limiting (and ethno/Eurocentric) Cartesian dualisms of mind/body, nature/culture, and individual/society (Biehl et al 2007; Csordas 1994; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). A feminist approach to the body also helps us explore the complex way in which individuals interact with / react to aspects of the global assemblages and power structures/institutions in which their lives are intertwined – whether it be resistance, compliance, cooptation, ambivalence, or a combination of these (Lock and Kaufert 1998).

Another field linked to theories of embodiment is the anthropology of the senses; I take a multisensory approach to understanding and analyzing experiences of menstruation. The senses, being as culturally informed as other bodily experiences and behaviors, can act as “avenues for the transmission of cultural values” (Classen 1997, 401), and therefore the study of a society’s “sensorium” can reveal important insights about that society’s structures and worldviews (Howes and Classen 2014). Howes argues that “perceptual relations are also social relations, making culture a lived, multisensory experience” (2003, 40). Grounded in lived experience, the senses are part of all aspects of life and are ways not just of sensing but ways of thinking and knowing too.

The role of the sense of smell is especially underrecognized in anthropology, even though smell has been used in many societies to marginalize others along ethnic, socioeconomic, and gendered lines (Classen 1992; Classen et al 1994). In Japan, unlike in North America, the topic of menstrual odor holds a dominant position in advertising discourse. Thus, my project provides new methodological and analytic approaches to understanding menstruation in Japanese women’s lives, with avenues for future cross-cultural research. The significance of smell and other senses for the experiences and meanings of menstruation in other societies should be investigated further.

Critical Menstruation Studies and Menstrual Health

I argue that critical menstruation studies can be used to combine feminist and political-economic approaches to the study of individual lived experiences, the menstruating body, and the global assemblages of which they are a part. However, past studies of menstruation, the

menstrual cycle, and menstruators – while impactful – have not always had such a holistic, critical approach.

In many societies around the world, menstrual blood is seen as one of the most powerful and dangerous body fluids. Numerous scholarly works mention, if not solely focus on, the polluting qualities of menstrual blood, and, by extension, the female body. For example, Dan (1986) and Hardacre (1999) both discuss the ritual pollution of menstrual blood in Japan's traditional indigenous religion, Shinto, and Yoshida (1990) discusses it in the context of Okinawan religious traditions. These researchers, and many others, draw upon the work of Mary Douglas as the foundation for their argument of menstrual blood as polluting. In *Purity and Danger* (1984), Douglas analyzes the classificatory system for edible and non-edible animals in the Old Testament. Categories are most vulnerable at their margins, the boundary between one discrete thing and another. Ambiguous things that do not belong explicitly to one category or another exist at these margins, and their ability to permeate and flow through boundaries poses a danger to the classificatory – and the social – system. Douglas extends her analysis to the body as a bounded system, with the skin and orifices as the boundaries of the system: “We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, feces or tears simply by issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body” (1984, 121). “Marginal stuff” is that which has passed through the boundaries of the body, and this transgression of bodily boundaries by ambiguous substances existing at the margins is an act of defilement and pollution. Through this act of transgression, the “marginal stuff” becomes dirt, “that which upsets or befuddles order” (Grosz 1994, 192). No thing is inherently “dirt” or “dirty;” it is only through its placement and understanding in relation to defined boundaries that it transgresses and categories that reject it that a thing becomes “dirty,” a source of impurity and pollution (Grosz 1994, 192; Warin 2009, 109-110). For Douglas, the marginal body fluids that are the most dangerous and the most defiling are those related to digestion and reproduction – including menstrual blood (1984, 125).

However, although the contributions Douglas brought to the field have been significant and long-lasting, the analytical focus on menstruation through the lens of pollution and impurity has recently been criticized as simplistic and lacking consideration of the agency and subjective experiences of menstruating women themselves (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Gottlieb 2002). Gottlieb argues that the menstruation-as-pollution argument is a “patriarchal ideology” and that “[w]omen’s own views...can offer alternative readings of that ideology, sometimes affording women a form of personal resistance to a degrading cultural script, or allowing them to reinterpret it entirely” (2002, 383-384). More recent work highlights the empowering capabilities of menstruation ignored or missed by previous researchers. Pedersen (2002) and Hoskins (2002) discuss the powers of menstrual blood in women’s performance of magic in Bali and Sumba, Indonesia, respectively; and Morrow (2002) explains the social power grasped by women through menstruation among the Yupik of Alaska. Wardlow (2006, 74-75) describes how Huli women in Papua New Guinea regiment their menstruating bodies to protect their husband’s physical health and social success; however, they can also weaponize their menstrual pollution against unfaithful or unworthy husbands by “inadvertently” breaking menstrual taboos or using their menstrual fluids to influence their men. Many works have also challenged the notion that usage of menstrual huts is a misogynistic and isolating practice (e.g., Maggi 2001). Martin (1992), Freidenfelds (2009), and Stoltzman (1986) are among those researchers who have also

interviewed American women for their individual perspectives on menstruation; these works serve as examples of the need to talk with women themselves about their experiences with and ideas of menstruation in order to better understand its place in their lives and in Japanese society today.

In addition to centering menstruators' voices and their embodied lived experiences, a political-economic approach that takes into consideration global flows of biomedicine, technologies, media, and capital is important for a critical analysis of menstruation. As discussed above, technoscientific medical treatments and biomedical technologies are often localized rather than adopted wholesale, and individuals' access to and ability to choose between various treatments and technologies are often informed or constrained by larger political-economic contexts. Historically, many reproductive health technologies and new pharmaceuticals undergo clinical trials among populations in the global south. Saethre and Stadler (2017) describe how South African women participating in a clinical trial for an HIV-preventing microbicide vaginal gel understood, used, and experienced the effects of the gel in ways unexpected by the foreign scientists leading the experiment. A common experience with using the gel was vaginal discharge, which the latter viewed as an adverse side effect; however, the women saw the discharge as proof of the gel's efficacy. They combined local understandings of bodily processes and practices with this biomedical technology; the gel facilitated the flow of fluids (in this case vaginal discharge) which is integral to maintaining good health by "rid[ding] the body of polluted substances" (Saethre and Stadler 2017, 139).

As another example, international development projects and population control – through birth control technologies – have often gone hand in hand. In the Cold War era, there was great concern over the "population bomb," in which unchecked population growth in developing countries would supposedly lead to political, economic, and humanitarian disaster. The United States' support of population control (limiting births) was part of a military tactic to prevent the spread of communism: "Poverty bred communism, and birth control was the solution" (Murphy 2012, 15). Population control was also integrated into economic development projects for developing countries; development project sponsors believed that developing countries could not achieve the infrastructure and economic success of developed countries if their birth rate was not curbed.

With the example of menstrual extraction and menstrual regulation, we can again clearly see the importance of an intersectional feminist, political-economic approach. Here, the same technoscientific practice has multiple names, meanings, and purposes; these meanings and purposes depend on by whom and to whom the practice is being applied; and the practice is significantly entangled in both US domestic and global politics and history. In the US, proponents of menstrual extraction emphasized that it was *not* an abortion but a technique that empowered women in the face of "the emerging population control industry" (Murphy 2012, 163) (although this "empowerment" ignored local and raced reproductive politics). On the other hand, menstrual regulation was viewed as a commodity that was supplied by USAID or family planning NGOs to developing countries to assist in population control. These women participated in a form of biological citizenship, "responsibilized" to make (the "right") choices about their fertility (Murphy 2012). However, even among populations targeted by development NGOs, the meanings and uses of menstrual regulation can vary. For example, in Matlab, Bangladesh, while the menstrual regulation procedure of uterine vacuum aspiration is used

primarily for terminating pregnancies, women with amenorrhea caused by the injectable contraceptive may switch to the pill, have a D&C, or use traditional healing methods to induce menstruation, because monthly periods are viewed as good for their health, regularly flushing out polluting blood (Johnston 2001). Women in Guinea use plant-based medicines to manage their menstrual cycle (i.e., induce late menstruation) so that they can maintain the good reproductive health needed for future childbearing, and, in some cases, to have an abortion. They may consult hospital doctors and nurses, as well as local healers and herbalists when they have menstrual problems. The ambiguity of menstrual regulation – inducing late menses without knowing or even wanting to know of a pregnancy – allows women to control their fertility in a high-fertility society where abortion is illegal (Levin 2001). Similarly, “In Bamana society [in Mali], where there is a high premium on healthy childbearing, women may attain more psychological security by using some form of menstrual regulation that they believe will guarantee a healthy birth, even if it means a longer birth interval” (Madhavan and Diarra 2001, 178). This particular case of menstrual regulation shows how even a single term can be conceptualized and ascribed different meanings, as well as put into practice (e.g., as a biomedical procedure, traditional method, or a localized hybridization) differently in varying contexts.

Poverty and social class can play a huge role in shaping experiences and understandings of menstruation, whether between individuals in the Global North and Global South or even between individuals in relatively high-income societies. While “population control” has largely been replaced by “human rights” and “gender equity” as the framing for international development projects focused on women’s health, it is still important to critically analyze such perspectives (Brunson and Suh 2020; Brunson 2020). For instance, a major approach for “menstrual hygiene” development projects is providing either commercial (disposable) or reusable menstrual napkins to girls and women in developing countries, so that they can continue to participate in school and social/economic activities. While some projects combine this with economic initiatives (such as helping set up start-ups for community members to produce and sell their own menstrual products), many others do not succeed in addressing related structural issues in culturally appropriate ways (Bobel 2019). Do the menstrual napkin recipients have access to appropriate sanitization or disposal methods and supplies? Are there any components of the project designed to reduce the social stigma of menstruation and other potential contributors to gender inequity in the community? These are some of the reasons why Hennegan et al (2021) have argued for the use of the term “menstrual health” instead of “menstrual hygiene.” Mirroring the WHO definition of health, they define menstrual health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle” (Hennegan et al 2021, 2). Moreover, achieving menstrual health requires “information about the menstrual cycle and self-care; materials, facilities and services to care for the body during menstruation; diagnosis, care, and treatment for menstrual discomforts and disorders; a positive and respectful environment which minimises psychological distress; and freedom to participate in all spheres of life” (Hennegan et al 2021, 3).

Recently, in European and North American countries, as well as New Zealand and Australia, political activism has raised awareness about and even contributed to legislation addressing disparities in menstrual health (Bobel 2010; Bobel et al 2020; Fahs 2016). For instance, many countries (and some states in the United States) have submitted or passed legislation to repeal the “tampon tax,” a moniker given to the tax placed on often already

expensive menstrual products since they were considered “luxury” or non-necessity items. Organizations and social movements are also addressing “period poverty” among students, houseless individuals, and others without the financial or social means to access menstrual products. Researchers, medical providers, and others are also beginning to adopt more inclusive languages and practices as they recognize that not all women menstruate and not everyone who menstruates is a woman. Critical menstruation studies, along with medical and feminist anthropology, thus helps us take a holistic, intersectional, and informed approach in analyzing the global assemblage(s) of menstruation in Japan.

Menstruation Studies in Japan

Douglas’ work on pollution is relevant when discussing the status of menstruation in Japan’s past, as the above-mentioned Dan (1986), Yoshida, (1990), and Hardacre (1999) do, as well as Namihira (1987) who analyzes menstrual pollution and the practice of menstrual hut seclusion. However, academic investigation into the concept of menstruation in modern Japan – that goes beyond the idea of ritual pollution – is virtually nonexistent in English-language literature, and even Japanese-language academic works on the topic are few. Ono Kiyomi (2006) traces the history of Japanese menstrual products and their manufacturers from the mid-twentieth century to the present day, and in an earlier project she surveyed college women about their menstrual experiences, menstrual products, and menstrual product advertising (Ono et al 1983; Ono 1984; Ono 1985). Suzuki’s (2018) monograph on women’s bodily lived experiences dedicates a section to menstruation, including results of annual surveys of college students on euphemisms for menstruation. Like Ono Kiyomi, Tanaka (2013) also provides a detailed history of menstrual products in Japan, as well as an analysis of how the introduction of new products affected women’s lives and weakened views of menstruation as polluting and impure. In a similar vein, Ono Chisako (2009) argues that although the menstruation-as-pollution view declined, since the turn of the twentieth century menstruation has been seen as a bother that hinders everyday life. The medicalization of menstruation also occurred during this time in Japan. State doctors and other officials and intellectuals used articles and advice columns in women’s magazines to spread new hygienic practices meant to generate a strong and healthy population for military and economic activities. Professionals’ responses in advice columns delineated the normal from the abnormal in menstrual health (such as the length and frequency of menstruation) and prescribed proper behavior for protecting one’s health during menstruation (Narita 1995). My project builds off of these Japanese scholars’ arguments and research, tracing the path of the medicalization and commercialization of menstruation and adding data from ethnographic interviews as well as analysis of advertisements.

Methods

Through my research I aim to elucidate the significance of menstruation in young Japanese women’s lives and in Japanese society more broadly. Tracking the trajectory of the construction and transformation of the concept of menstruation and experiences in relation to it entailed the use of multiple methodological approaches, namely ethnographic fieldwork and media textual analyses. I conducted fieldwork in Tokyo over the course of a twelve-month period, from September 2017 to August 2018, collecting information on people’s perceptions and experiences with menstruation through ethnographic interviewing and participant-

observation. I used contacts at several universities, as well as my participant-observation in Ochanomizu University clubs, to recruit interviewees – female university students in the Tokyo area who were at least twenty years old (the legal age of adulthood in Japan). From January to August 2018, I interviewed twenty-three women about their experiences and knowledge of menstruation, using a semi-structured interview method. Four of the interviewees kept a “menstruation journal” for six weeks, in which they recorded details about their menstrual cycle and responded to prompts meant to evoke thoughts, feelings, or experiences relating to menstruation. One of the main goals of this project was to elicit Japanese women’s personal experiences with menstruation, and an open-ended interview and journal format was extremely suitable for this goal since they allowed women to express themselves relatively freely. These formats were also useful in uncovering any cross-cultural differences in menstrual experiences, such as symptoms associated with different parts of the menstrual cycle. Margaret Lock (1993) found in her interviews with middle-aged Japanese women that many of the symptoms of menopause they described were not mentioned by North American women or listed in menopause surveys created in the West. My research has helped determine that this is the case for menstruation in Japan as well. I also conducted interviews or email questionnaires with menstrual product industry personnel. Additionally, I collected and analyzed television and website menstrual product advertisements while I was in Japan.

Research Site & Participant Observation

As the majority of my interviewees were enrolled at Ochanomizu University, it is important to understand the context of this institution. Japan’s first institution of higher education for women, Ochanomizu University was founded in 1875 as Tokyo Women’s Normal School, located in Bunkyo Ward, Tokyo. The national women’s university has “built a distinctive educational system and a productive place of continuous learning that combines liberal arts education, global education and leadership education to enable young women to find their own paths and contribute to the happiness of other people.”³ Its mission is to “support all women, regardless of age or nationality, in protecting their individual dignity and rights, freely developing their unique qualities and capabilities, and pursuing learning so as to satisfy their intellectual appetites.” According to Times Higher Education, Ochadai, as it is colloquially known, ranked 25th out of 273 universities in Japan in 2022.⁴ As of May 2021, the university had roughly two thousand undergraduate students and nearly eight hundred graduate students. About five percent of these are international students, with the majority coming from China. The university has a Faculty of Letters and Education, Faculty of Science, and Faculty of Human Life and Environmental Sciences (formerly the Faculty of Home Economics); it also has master’s and doctoral programs in the Graduate Courses in Humanities and Sciences. Tuition is ¥267,900 per semester⁵, and 12 percent of students receive some form of financial aid or scholarship. Of the 490 undergraduates who completed their studies in 2021, 47 percent entered the general

³ All quotations in this section come from the university website (<http://www.ocha.ac.jp/en/introduction/index.html>, accessed 13 February 2022).

⁴ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/ochanomizu-university>, accessed 6 May 2022.

⁵ About \$2,051, at an exchange rate of ¥1 to \$0.0077.

workforce, 37 percent pursued graduate education, and 7 percent entered government/public service.⁶

As a national university, Ochadai is an elite institution featuring many famous women researchers and educators among its alumni. Only 11 percent of universities in Japan are national ones, with 17 percent of undergraduate students in the country enrolled in them. In 2019, national universities had an overall admission rate of 24 percent.⁷ Many scholars refer to Japan as an “academic credentials society (*gakureki shakai*);” it is common for employers to select graduates based on school reputation more so than skills or experience (Cave 2014, 291). The affiliated primary and secondary schools located on Ochadai’s campus are also particularly prestigious, with Prince Hisahito, second in line to the imperial throne, having attended the elementary and junior high schools. Informally, I was often told by Ochadai faculty and students that the young women attending the school are very “serious (*majime*)” with their studies, especially compared to students at surrounding schools. Many interviewees said they chose to attend Ochadai precisely because of this; they wanted to focus on their education, and they appreciated the peaceful atmosphere of the campus that facilitated their academic endeavors. Nearly all interviewees come from a middle- or upper-middle-class background: about one third are part of single-income households (with the family able to afford for the mother to be a homemaker), and only a handful lived in the student dorms (which are reserved for students who cannot commute and whose families cannot afford an apartment in Tokyo for their daughter).

Through participant observation, I could come as close as possible to young Japanese women’s daily lives and the situations they regularly encounter. As a participant-observer spending time on campus, I gained first-hand observations on college-aged Japanese women’s daily activities; and I was able to easily consume the same media (magazines, television, public advertisements) and commercial goods that my informants, interviewees, and friends do. I was an active participant in two clubs at the university: the karate club and the Transcultural Exchange Association (TEA). I attended regular meetings/practice sessions, field trips, overnight trips, and helped with the annual culture festival (*bunka sai*) with both clubs.

I paid close attention to menstruation-related media I encountered during my time in the country, keeping records of television menstrual product advertisements and in-store displays. I attended two consumer events organized by menstrual product companies: one was “Kumako Fest” held by NaturaMoon at the Tokyo International Forum, and another was “Cloth Napkin Festa” put on by Made in Earth at a studio in Jiyugaoka. I also participated in a cloth napkin-making workshop organized by Made in Earth and Sunny Days; the napkins were to be donated to schoolgirls in Africa. Through these events, I met and later interviewed company reps.

Interviews

2015 Pilot Study

In 2015, as part of my research for my Master’s degree in anthropology, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight young Japanese women (ages twenty-two to thirty-five) living in Honolulu, Hawai‘i, to learn more about Japanese women’s education and experiences with menstruation and menstrual products. Interviews were conducted in Japanese and in English, depending on the participant’s preferences. During the interviews, women were asked

⁶ https://www.ocha.ac.jp/plaza/info/d002664_d/fil/ochadai_gaiyo_2021.pdf, accessed 6 May 2022.

⁷ https://www.janu.jp/eng/national_universities/, accessed 6 May 2022.

about when they first learned about menstruation, what they learned, and who taught them. Most women first learned about menstruation in elementary school during a special sex education class on the topic; this class was described as “very scientific” and biology-oriented. Other women first learned about it through their mothers, and all the women had their mothers talk to them about menstruation at some point in their childhood. Mothers taught their daughters how to use menstrual napkins and often were the ones buying menstrual products for their child. The women interviewed were also asked about the experience of their first menses (menarche), as well as their typical experiences with their menstrual cycle now as an adult. Many women reported having stomachaches and/or backaches during menstruation, but almost all said that their “symptoms” were not as “severe” as other women they knew or whose experiences they had heard of. Nearly all women said that they did not experience any mental or emotional changes around the time of menstruation, only physical symptoms. When asked if menstruation was something they liked or disliked, most women replied that they disliked it, with some saying it was annoying or inconvenient and others saying they hated it. However, even though they disliked menstruating, a few women shared that they viewed menstruation as an important indicator of their overall health, and as “natural” and “necessary” for having children in the future.

I also asked interviewees about their menstrual product preferences, that is, whether they use napkins or tampons. According to academic surveys (e.g., Sato et al 2006), Japanese women predominantly use napkins, with only a fraction relying on tampons as their main product of choice. This trend is evident when comparing the frequency of napkin commercials on television versus tampon commercials, as well as the huge variety of napkins available in stores versus the small selection of tampons. As part of the pilot study, I wanted to find out more about the reasons behind women’s choice of product. Four out of the eight women had experience using tampons, but only two used them regularly and preferred them over napkins. These women first tried them after they moved to the United States, and they usually use them when they have to swim or participate in other physical activities. The two who have tried them but do not use them regularly find them “uncomfortable” or “scary.” The remaining participants who have never used tampons also consider them scary, since it requires inserting something into their body.

These preliminary findings support the trend of Japanese women preferring napkins over tampons, as evidenced by the non-use and dislike of tampons among interviewed women, as well as the fact that the women who do use tampons first started using them after moving to the United States. This could be hinting at cross-cultural variation in the level of comfort women have in touching their genitals or coming into physical contact with their menstrual blood. This could be related to the content of sex education classes in Japan, as well as social and popular media discourses on the topics of sex and women’s sexuality. An additional indication of the importance of sex education classes in women’s understandings of and experiences with menstruation is the fact that nearly all of the women interviewed first learned about menstruation in that first sex education class, and not from their mothers or other people. The marketing and production history of menstrual products, especially napkins and tampons, could also be a significant factor in women’s use of certain menstrual products. In the case of tampons, does low demand lead to fewer advertising spots, or vice versa? In my dissertation research, I therefore continued to address the topic of menstrual education and knowledge, menstrual experiences, and menstrual product preferences.

2018 Interviews

From January to August 2018, I interviewed twenty-three young women about their experiences and knowledge of menstruation, using a semi-structured interview method. Interview topics included: 1) their education – both formal and informal – regarding menstruation; 2) their experience at menarche and their typical experiences during their menstrual cycle; 3) what kinds of menstrual products they use (napkins, tampons, etc.) and why; and 4) their exposure to media (magazines, television, blogs, etc.) and menstrual product advertising.

I also conducted interviews or email questionnaires with menstrual product industry personnel. In total, I received information from two major corporations, one small company, and five reusable cloth napkin companies (see Appendix, Chapter 4, and Chapter 7). The purpose of these interviews was to gain insight into the production process for menstrual products and their advertisements. Discussion with these actors in the commercial realm – who influence women’s lives with their products, advertisements, and policies – provides more perspectives on menstruation in Japanese public discourse.

Text Analysis of Menstrual Product Advertising

Additionally, as part of my MA research in 2015 I analyzed a sample of recent menstrual napkin advertisements found on Japanese menstrual product websites to identify any themes in language and imagery that were regularly used. I found that both linguistic and visual euphemisms were used in these commercials: words and phrases (such as “*ano hi* [that day]”) alluded to menstruation but never mentioned it directly, and blue liquid acted as a visual representation of menstrual blood. Moreover, one major theme I found in these ads that is not present in American menstrual product commercials is an emphasis on menstrual odor. Many commercials touted products with odor elimination capabilities or products with their own fragrances to mask menstrual odor. Despite the prevalence of smell issues in advertisements, none of my pilot study participants mentioned worries over menstrual odor. I made sure to include questions about menstrual odor and other concerns in my 2018 interviews, to determine if menstrual odor is just being exploited as a marketing tactic or if it is something that does concern some young women in Japan.

I also conducted a text analysis of three Japanese cloth napkin company websites in 2017. Since these companies are too small to put out major advertising via television commercials and popular women’s magazines, their websites were used as a stand-in for advertising materials. These companies highlight the superior quality and naturalness of their cotton cloth napkins, compared to “synthetic” disposable napkins. They claim that their products help relieve skin irritation, pain, and odor caused by the use of disposable napkins. They are also much more direct in addressing their audience about menstruation than disposable napkin commercials are. However, while the companies encourage women to embrace menstruation as a natural part of femininity, their messages still contain the imperative to conceal menstruation from others. In my 2018 interviews, I asked the women in my study if they use or are familiar with alternative menstrual products such as cloth napkins, and if users have significantly different experiences and perceptions of menstruation than disposable napkin or tampon users. During my year in

Japan, I continued to collect and analyze menstrual product advertising materials, from television adverts and company websites (of both mainstream and alternative products).

Diary Experiment

Four of the twenty-three interviewees kept a “menstruation journal” for six weeks, in which they recorded details about their menstrual cycle and responded to prompts meant to evoke thoughts, feelings, or experiences relating to menstruation. The number and frequency of additional entries was up to the writer. They started their journals after their first interview with me (with the same questions/topics as all other interviewees), and then they participated in exit interviews after completing the journal exercises.

Data Analysis

My main approach to organizing and understanding my data was interpretive analysis, “the search for meanings and their interconnection in the expression of culture” (Bernard 2011, 415). The “texts” to be interpreted (Bernard 2011, 415; Geertz 1972, 26) included fieldnotes, interview recordings and notes, and menstrual product advertisements and websites. Additionally, while in the field, I used a grounded theory approach, an “innovative and systematic strategy of simultaneous data collection and analysis” (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021, 306), to code these “texts” on a progressive basis so that emerging themes could be explored and discussed in subsequent interviews and participant-observation activities.

I first used line-by-line open coding to identify emergent themes in the notes (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021, 307; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995, 150-151). This included in vivo coding, in which exact words or phrases found in the “texts” were used as the codes (Bernard 2011, 430). For example, the code “*anshin* (peace of mind)” was developed because of interviewees using the term when discussing their menstrual product preferences. I followed this initial coding with developing subcodes through focused coding (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995, 161). For instance, my initial code of “menstrual cycle” was broken down into subcodes such as “experiencing irregular menstrual cycles,” “heavy flow days,” and “using menstrual cycle tracking apps.” Memoing helped to organize codes and subcodes into analytical categories that eventually developed into the topics covered by the chapters in this dissertation (Bernard 2011, 435). Additionally, portions of the interviews were translated into English for use in the form of exemplary quotations and discussion of findings.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 2: History of Menstruation

Combining my ethnographic research with Japanese-language secondary sources, I have traced shifts in views of menstruation throughout Japanese history. Similar to how Frühstück posits that there have been repeated cycles of “liberation” and “repression” of sexual behaviors (2003, 5), I argue that there have been cycles of “openness” and “concealment” of menstruation in Japan. Once considered a mystical phenomenon, menstruation came to be seen as a source of spiritual pollution, surrounded by various taboos. Then, around the turn of the twentieth century, views of menstruation shifted again; ideologies of hygiene that dominated public discourse positioned menstruation as a private issue that should be managed with commercial menstrual products – the beginnings of today’s discourse of hegemonic menstruality. While hypothetically

“free” of connotations of impurity and pollution, women still were not – and are not – free from stigma surrounding menstruation.

Chapter 3: Learning and Talking about Menstruation

Subsumed in a “culture of concealment” (Houppert 1999), public discussion of menstruation is extremely rare. Menstruation is a highly gendered topic of conversation. Girls and women can talk about it with their female friends and relatives, but many find it difficult or inappropriate to discuss periods with or in the presence of men. Because of this, young women with (male) significant others may find themselves in uncomfortable situations if they need to broach the subject of menstruation. Avoidance of talking about menstruation with or around men even extends to doctors (the majority of whom are male in Japan); instead, most of these young women prefer talking to their mothers about issues with menstruation or sometimes turn to the internet for anonymous advice.

Among the interviewees, most first learned about menstruation in school, where they were taught that menstruation is predominantly a sign of womanhood and reproductive capability. Beyond the classroom setting, friends, family members, and media such as comics magazines also played a role in girls’ developing understandings of menstruation and their (soon-to-be) pubescent bodies. These information sources often introduced and/or reinforced the hegemonic menstruality tenet that menstruation should be concealed, as well as various practices to achieve concealment. All interviewees had learned about menstruation before menarche – their first period – but some found that their abstract knowledge of menstruation conflicted sharply with the lived experience of it. Additionally, more and more with each passing year, the internet – including social media and smartphone apps – is becoming an important source of information (whether “true” or “correct” or not), including information about menstruation.

Chapter 4: Menstrual Products

In Japan, menstrual product manufacturing and advertising rakes in millions of dollars each year, and most women have access to a plethora of menstrual products. Women strategically use pads as a “technology of passing” (Vostral 2008) to maintain an idealized feminine aesthetic and affect. The pad also acts as a mediator between a woman and her body; use of the pad limits direct physical contact with menstrual blood and one’s genitals. These reduced sensory relationships produce markedly different menstrual experiences from those who use other menstrual products like tampons or reusable cloth pads. Concealment of menstruation is also promoted through menstrual products’ advertising, emphasizing sensory concealment (sound [including language], sight, smell, and touch). As a border-permeating, uncontrollable fluid, menstrual blood is abject as bodily waste and as a sign of sexual difference (Kristeva 1982). Commercials thus cover up menstrual fluid and even negative affect caused by menstruation, while remaining one of the only public instances in which menstruation is “visible.”

Chapter 5: Dealing with It: Pain and “Failure”

Pain and discomfort are such a normalized part of menstruation for Japanese women that common euphemisms for menstruating are “my stomach hurts” and “I don’t feel well.” Most women I talked to experience menstrual cramps; for some, it is a mild discomfort, but about one

third reported very painful cramps. Many women also modify their routines or use certain menstrual products to minimize leaks and stains, which are called *shippai* (literally translates to “failure”). These “failures” connote a lack of discipline and femininity which women are expected to maintain (Bobel 2019; Miller 2006).

Chapter 6: Irregular Cycles

An irregular cycle can increase the chances of “failures,” catching women off-guard. About one quarter of the women I interviewed have an irregular cycle, but nearly all of them had experienced a time in their lives when their period was irregular and unpredictable. The causes of irregularity vary – from experiencing stress to being underweight – but most women agree that a “normal” menstrual cycle is a sign of good health, while an irregular cycle could be a sign that something is “wrong” and that one might have struggles with fertility in the future. This potential endangerment of fertility can have a profound impact on women’s decisions to treat their irregularity, due to Japan’s emphasis on motherhood as a marker of feminine social “success” (Allison 2012; Allison 2015; Frühstück 2003; Yamaguchi 2006).

Chapter 7: Cloth Napkins

Organic cotton cloth pads are gaining in popularity due to perceived health benefits and eco-friendliness, and even mainstream companies have recently introduced organic/natural cotton disposable pads. However, while the small companies that sell reusable cloth pads do offer an alternative to the disposable pads prescribed by hegemonic menstruality, they also still conform to other aspects of the dominant discourse on menstruation, including an essentialized understanding of femininity that conflates sex and gender, and of course the need to conceal menstrual blood.

CHAPTER 2. FROM SACRED TO SECRET: TRACING CHANGES IN VIEWS OF MENSTRUATION IN JAPAN

Introduction

For many women, everyday adult life is marked by the menstrual cycle – (typically) a monthly pattern of rising and falling hormone levels, ovulation, and the build-up and release of endometrial tissue and blood. Over the course of Japanese history, however, another cycle has emerged: cultural views and treatment of menstruation. Similar to how Frühstück posits that there have been repeated cycles of “liberation” and “repression” of sexual behaviors and discourses on sexuality throughout Japanese history (2003, 5), I argue that there have been cycles of “openness” and “concealment” of menstruation in Japan. Views and experiences of menstruation are quite complex and multifaceted, and they can tell us much about transformations of concepts such as gender and sexuality. This chapter traces changes in views of menstruation in Japan from early historical periods to the modern day. This investigation of historical views of menstruation will help towards a better understanding of the treatment of menstruation in modern-day Japan.

Menstruation in Early Japanese History

In ancient times, menstruation was understood to be connected to nature and to *kami*.⁸ This is evident even in the Japanese word for menstruation – *gekkei* (月経) – which can be glossed as “going around the moon.” Other former terms for menstruation also follow this theme of menstruation being connected to the moon; *getsuji* and *tsuki no mono* (“moon thing”), *gassui* (“moon water”), and *tsuki no sawari* (“moon sickness”) are a few examples. This section outlines the beliefs and social treatment of menstruation from (roughly) the Heian Period (794-1185 CE) through the Edo Period (1600-1868 CE), with an emphasis on the emergence of the belief of menstrual impurity.

Before diving into ideologies and beliefs, I would like to address the practical side of menstrual history – methods of menstrual management during this time period. Well before the advent of commercially-produced menstrual management products, women turned to nature and their surroundings to procure and create tools to handle their menstrual flows. Since women were likely to utilize the most readily available materials at their disposal, what was used depended on the time period and region of the country; thus, many varied methods of menstrual management developed. From the Heian Period on, a class distinction can be seen in the materials used by women to manage their menstrual flow. Women of the nobility would use silk floss as an absorbent material; this was called *hime no mono* (“princess’s thing”) (Ono 2009, 153). Commoner women, on the other hand, would use scrap cloth or old clothing, as well as

⁸ *Kami* can be translated as deity or spirit. There is an innumerable pantheon of *kami* associated with Japan’s indigenous religion, Shinto, which is often described as animistic. Indeed, *kami* can inhabit or be almost any kind of natural object: foxes and snakes, rivers and waterfalls, rocks and mountains, and even thunder and lightning. Things get more complicated when Buddhist beliefs and practices become entwined with Shinto. Buddhism was introduced into Japan by the fifth century CE, and as it spread throughout the country and mixed with Shinto, many *kami* were adopted into the Buddhist system of deities (and vice versa), so that in a lot of cases *kami* or Buddhist deities had multiple roles or identities.

absorbent material made from hemp, flax, kudzu, *washi* (Japanese paper), down from cattail heads, raw cotton, wisteria, or paper mulberry (Ono 2009, 153; Sakai 2014, 68; Tanaka 2013, 3). Like many women around the world, Japanese women would also use their own clothes to absorb menstrual blood. Undergarments consisted of a skirt that wrapped around the hips; during menstruation, the bottom hem of the back of the skirt would be pulled up to the front to fashion a make-shift loincloth that would absorb the blood (Ono 2009, 153; Tanaka 2013, 4). Additionally, the Heian Period medical text, *Ishinpō* (984 CE), mentions a menstrual management item called *kegare no nuno* (月帶), thought to be the predecessor of the menstrual belt (Tanaka 2013, 4) (see the end of this section for more on menstrual belts).

Ono (2009) and Tanaka (2013) discuss two different accounts of menstruation in the *Kojiki*, which purportedly represent not only the views of menstruation held by those in the ancient past about whom the stories are written, but also the views of the stories' writers/compiler.⁹ In the first account in which menstruation is mentioned, in the first half of the second century, the twelfth emperor's son, Yamato Takeru, and his fiancée, Princess Miyazu, composed and exchanged poems in which allusions were made to menstruation. Yamato Takeru's song is on the left, and Princess Miyazu's reply is on the right:

Across the heavenly
Kagu Mountain
Flies like a sharp sickle
The long-necked swan

O high-shining
Sun-Prince,
O my great lord
Ruling in peace!

Your arm slender and delicate
Like the bird's neck –
Although I wish to clasp
It in my embrace;
Although I desire
To sleep with you,

As the years one by one
Pass by,
The moons also one by one
Eclipse.
It is no wonder that
While waiting in vain for you
On the cloak
I am wearing
The moon should rise
(Philippi 1968, 244-245).

The sight of menstrual blood on the hem of Princess Miyazu's clothing inspires Yamato Takeru to sing this song. Here in these poems, we see again a linguistic and symbolic connection between menstruation and the moon: the rising of the moon is a euphemism for the appearance of menstruation. Yamato Takeru had been absent for a lengthy amount of time, and so as Princess Miyazu says, "It is no wonder that...[t]he moon should rise." At this time, menstruation was viewed as something sacred and which had the "mark of the *kami*." Menstruation had a mystical quality to it, since it involved bleeding without dying, which was only a feat the *kami* were capable of, and so this granted menstruation a kind of divinity (Ono 2009, 152) and

⁹ The *Kojiki* was compiled in the early eighth century CE and is the oldest extant chronicle in Japan, a mythico-historical text of sorts that recounts the origins of the *kami* and the islands of Japan, as well as the lives of the early emperors.

“religious consecration” (Philippi 1968, 245). Since the prince did have intercourse with the princess, regardless of her menstrual status, this shows that menstruation was not considered polluting at the time (Tanaka 2013, 68).¹⁰

The other account of menstruation in the *Kojiki*, however, shows a slightly different view. The story goes that the twenty-first emperor (during the fifth century), Emperor Yūryaku, held a banquet. During the banquet, the emperor was served by a maid-in-waiting a wine glass that had a fallen *tsuki* leaf floating in it, which greatly angered him. The servant, facing execution at the emperor’s hands, begged his forgiveness for her offense through the performance of a song which praised the emperor and his palace and reframed the *tsuki* leaf incident as a good omen rather than an offense (Philippi 1968, 362-366). The significance in this story is that the *tsuki* leaf is a symbol for menstruation.¹¹ Therefore, the actual events portrayed in the story can be interpreted as the woman polluting or defiling the ceremonial banquet, but the act of pollution was subsequently absolved by the emperor. Ono argues that this story reflects the views held by Heian nobility that menstruation was polluting (*kegare*) (2009, 152). However, Tanaka points out that interpretations of this story are divided, and that the *tsuki* leaf may not necessarily be a symbol of menstruation after all (Tanaka 2013, 68).

The idea that certain women’s bodily actions (birth, menstruation) were sources of pollution arose among the court society of the Heian period (Faure 2003, 68-71; Tanaka 2013, 61).¹² Birth especially had strong connections to *kami*, spirits, and pollution. At the time, the nobility would call upon female shamans, priests, and mountain ascetics to offer magical prayers to ensure a safe and smooth birth. During parts of pregnancy as well as childbirth, as it was a special, vulnerable time, women were isolated in birth huts in order to keep away evil spirits. This practice is considered to be the beginning of the view of childbirth as polluting, and as an extension, the birth hut as a “polluted space.” Beliefs about pollution, as well as purity and impurity, were also influenced by the religious teachings of esoteric Buddhism (mainly of the Shingon sect), which were promulgated during the Heian Period. These teachings included the practice of “isolating and removing” impurity in order to protect and maintain purity, as well as the concepts of pollution arising from death, birth, and blood (Ono 2009, 152). In Buddhist teachings, women were considered morally inferior to men and incapable of rebirth as a buddha (Faure 2003, 62-23). In his discussion of the view found in Buddhist beliefs and teachings of menstrual blood as polluting, Faure writes, “Menstrual blood is especially impure inasmuch as it bears the mark of exclusively female powers. The biological phenomenon of menstruation led to the view that the female body is essentially porous, and that its ‘outflowing’ is practically beyond control” (2003, 68-69). Pollution and power are often closely tied together, along with taboos or other practices meant to contain such power; something that is polluted (or someone who is

¹⁰ The practices of the Yayoi Period state of Yamatai-koku also display connections between menstruation and the divine. Women were the rulers because they were more closely connected to the divine and could practice shamanism / spirit possession. It was widely believed that menstruation could cause mental/emotional turmoil or abnormalities; this was seen as divine will (*shin’i*) and a marker of those women’s strong connection to the divine (Tanaka 2013, 64).

¹¹ In the past, women secluded themselves during menstruation in a special hut constructed near a *tsuki* (*zelkova* tree), and these huts were thus called *tsukiya* (“*zelkova* tree hut”) (Ono 2009, 152). Therefore, the *tsuki* leaf was closely associated with menstruation.

¹² See Burns (2019, 20-46) for a history of the rise of “pollution ideology” in the Heian capital and its relation to Hanson’s disease sufferers.

polluted) has power in that the pollution can spread to other objects, spaces, or people (Douglas 1984; Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). In the case of medieval Japan, menstrual or birth pollution can interfere with the actions of *kami* as well as humans' relations with *kami*. We can see this with the beliefs about the birth hut; due to its polluting quality, *kami* would not or could not approach it, since they only appear "under conditions of extreme purity, the exact opposite of pollution" (Namihira 1987, S65). Menstrual pollution was equally offensive to Buddhist deities and disruptive to the rites of Buddhist priests; this manifested itself in restrictions on entering temples or other sacred spaces during times of pollution (Faure 2003, 62-63).

Still, the historical origin of the notion of menstrual blood as polluting is difficult to pinpoint, and many researchers have different opinions and theories on the topic. As discussed in Tanaka (2013), Mieda purports that the phenomenon of menstruation, in which women bled profusely but did not die, was difficult to explain logically, so it was considered part of a "mysterious/mystical domain." Since only women experienced birth and menstruation, these also served as clear displays of the difference between the sexes. Men were in awe or afraid of menstruation, and thus they had a special view of it, which then evolved to taboos. Kunugi theorizes that menstruation may have been disliked or feared because it is different from other forms of blood: it is a mix of solids and liquids, and it may be brown or blackish instead of red. It also comes out near the anus, and it may happen suddenly and cannot be controlled. Moreover, it is likely that due to malnutrition and high birth rates (because of high infant mortality and lack of contraceptives), women in the past did not get their period very often, which may have added to women's fear of it.¹³ Another theory is that people learned from experience that contact with sick and dying individuals' blood was dangerous and could lead to their own sickness and death; this then contributed to the idea that menstrual blood could be dangerous and polluting (Tanaka 2013, 58-62).

Regardless of *how* beliefs of pollution and impurity came to be, notions of pollution were in fact codified into law during the Heian Period, with the enactment of the Engi Code in 967. Included in its regulations were specific prohibitions against certain activities for a person who was polluted or in close contact with a polluted person. For example, a person affected by birth pollution could not visit a shrine or temple for seven days. Additionally, a person affected by death pollution could not make such a visitation for thirty days, while someone touched by or closely connected to the former sort of person (i.e., a person affected by death pollution) was prohibited from shrine/temple visitation for twenty days (Ono 2009, 152).

Originally circulated among the nobility of the Heian Period, these notions of pollution spread throughout the populace during the Muromachi Period (1336-1573 CE). At the same time, teaching of the Blood Bowl Sutra, originating from China around the tenth century, also spread throughout the land. Those who committed sins of blood would fall into the Blood Pool Hell after death; however, they could be saved if they read the Blood Bowl Sutra, carried a copy with them, and followed certain rites. While in China, both men and women could potentially suffer the fate of the Blood Pool Hell, in Japan, the emphasis was on women and their polluting blood at birth and during menstruation, which would defile the land and water and offend the gods. There were variations on these teachings throughout the country, including explanations that menstrual blood was a physical manifestation of women's jealousy, lust, or other sins (Tanaka 2013, 70-71).

¹³ This idea that menstruation was scary to women is refuted by Toda (Tanaka 2013, 58-62).

Birth huts, at first used for the purpose of isolating the pollution derived from childbirth and parturition blood, came to be used by menstruating women as well. This is reflected in the various alternative names for these huts that developed, one of which was “moon hut” (*tsuki goya*) (Ono 2009, 152). These would also be called *taya* (“other house”), *hima ya* (“rest house”) (Namihira 1987: S68), *fujō goya* (“filth hut”), or *yogore ya* (“filth house”) (Tanaka 2013, 74). Sometimes, villages or communities would not have constructed seclusion huts¹⁴; however, there were still taboos that women followed to separate themselves from others in their activities. This included preparing their own food using a separate cooking fire and eating separately from their family (Ono 2009, 153; Namihira 1987, S68). Additionally, menstruating women were not supposed to touch the *kamidana* (household altar/shrine) or pass through *torii* gates¹⁵, as these objects were associated with *kami* (Ono 2009, 153). They also should not have approached boats, or fishing or hunting tools, lest their pollution ruin the efforts of the food-gathering tasks associated with those objects (Tanaka 2013, 76).

However, just because such restrictions existed and menstruation was viewed as polluting, this does not mean that menstruation was such a terrible or negative thing in people’s lives. In fact, it is thought that the women who isolated themselves in huts during menstruation did not necessarily see menstruation as a source of impurity, and their sojourn in the huts was potentially an enjoyable and important part of their lives. Since all women of a community would share the same seclusion hut, bonding and sharing of experiences could easily occur. Additionally, women could use their time in the seclusion huts to rest their bodies and minds from the usual daily physical labor and work. This was especially beneficial to the health of women who had recently given birth, it is believed (Tanaka 2013, 77). Moreover, menarche was treated as a celebratory occasion because it represented the transition of a girl into a woman who now had the ability to create new members of the community, vital for the community’s prosperity and survival. People’s participation in celebrations of menarche, as well as their ability to ascertain who in a community was menstruating by observing who was secluding themselves or following menstruation taboos, shows that menstruation was actually an integral aspect of a community’s social life (Ono 2009, 153). Although it was viewed as something polluting, it was still recognized and accepted by people as a part of day-to-day life. Whether life while using seclusion huts and operating under these taboos was pleasant or unpleasant is really up for debate though; experiences vary from region to region, time period to time period, and woman to woman (Tanaka 2013, 77).

During the following Edo Period, these practices and beliefs surrounding menstruation stayed relatively consistent, even as the field of medicine matured, and humoral and naturalistic etiologies began to replace ideas of immorality and bad karma causing maladies. For example, a seventeenth-century physician referred to menstrual blood as “foul blood,” and a late-eighteenth century doctor described it as “polluted and putrefied.” “Bad” or “hot” blood as a humoral disease etiology became widespread by the end of the eighteenth-century. Blood associated with the female body in particular – menstrual blood and lochia – was thus rife with the potential of spreading diseases as “terrible” as *rai* (leprosy) (Burns 2019, 60-62):

¹⁴ In this work, “seclusion hut” is a term I use to encompass all huts used by women to seclude themselves from the rest of the community, for various reasons including childbirth and menstruation.

¹⁵ *Torii* gates are traditional Japanese gates that often are found at the entrances of Shinto shrines. They mark the transition from profane (quotidian) space to sacred (religious) space.

The hot blood “congealed,” “putrefied,” “fermented,” or “stagnated”; it became “dirty,” “poisoned,” or “polluted” ... In a healthy person, *ki*, blood, and blood *ki* were supposed to move spontaneously and unimpeded around the body from one vessel (as the organs were understood) to another. In contrast to this ideal of fluid motion, the hot blood that caused *rai* [and other illnesses] was imagined to be turgid and slow-moving... Blood that was not quickly expelled would stagnate within the woman’s body, where it could turn poisonous and cause the symptoms of *rai* [in her and/or her child]... While no physicians explicitly rejected the idea that transmission could take place from an infected father, they obsessed over the danger posed by the maternal body... (Burns 2019, 62-63).

The etiological theory of “bad blood” and thus the health risks posed by exposure to menstrual or childbirth blood spread from medical circles to the populace, mainly by way of advertisements for new medical treatments and cures (Burns 2019, 69).

Menstrual management tools underwent some slight changes during the Edo Period. The makeshift loincloth construction that utilized women’s undergarments was modified and improved from its Heian Period form. String was attached to the undergarment skirt to make a loincloth-style menstrual belt (*obi*). The absorbent part of this garment was made from old scrap cloth and cotton, as well as grass paper and coarse *washi* (Ono 2009, 153; Sakai 2014, 68). Sometimes called *shita obi* (“loincloth”), the garment was also called *tazuna* (“bridle/reins”) or *oba* (“horse”), due to its appearance (Sakai 2014: 68). Additionally, rudimentary versions of tampons were also in use during the Edo Period. Prostitutes during this time would rip up silk goods into string, wrap them up into a cylinder shape, and use them as an absorptive material. These would be washed and reused as well (Ono 2009, 153). Scrap cloth and other readily available materials would continue to be used throughout the subsequent Meiji Period and up to the early twentieth century. However, as will be shown below, new menstrual management materials emerged during the Meiji Period, and views of menstruation were heavily altered, spurred on by the modernization and Westernization aims of the Meiji government.

Menstruation from the Meiji Period through the Mid-Twentieth Century

In Japan’s past, although menstruation was viewed as having polluting aspects and menstruating women often removed themselves to a separate – physical and/or symbolic – space, it was still integrated into people’s daily lives. However, the Meiji government made explicit steps to erase the notion of menstruation as polluting; at the same time, efforts were also made to make menstruation “invisible” (Ono 2009, 153). This section explores the details of these societal changes during the Meiji Period (1868-1912 CE), the Taishō Period (1912-1926 CE), and up to the early postwar period of the mid-twentieth century.

One of the main driving forces behind the Meiji government’s attempted eradication of “folk” beliefs surrounding menstruation was influence and pressure from Western nations. Taking a stance alongside these “advanced” Westerners, the Meiji government declared that the idea of menstruation and childbirth as polluting and the practices stemming from this idea were “uncivilized” (Tanaka 2013, 73). In 1872, the government issued an edict whose purpose was to completely abolish these “backwards” ideas through the removal of any and all official codes that had once institutionalized the concept of pollution, such as the aforementioned Engi Code

(Ono 2009, 153). In addition, the practice of using seclusion huts for birth or menstruation was banned, and in some cases, these huts were even forcibly dismantled or burned down by government officials (Namihira 1987, S68). However, enforcement of this was uneven, and some areas of the country still used seclusion huts up until the 1960s and had women who practiced other taboos, like eating separately from non-menstruating people, even beyond then (Tanaka 2013, 74-83).

One of the most influential ideas of this time period adopted from the West was the modern concept of “hygiene,” knowledge of which, along with that of modern Western medicine, was spread by the Japanese government for the sake of “enlightening” Japanese doctors, bureaucrats, and even women (Ono 2009, 153). Through public lectures, magazine articles, and school curricula, (mostly male) scientists and instructors “standardized” the experience of menstruation for women. That is, they set forth parameters of what would be considered the medically “normal” age at menarche, length of menstrual cycle and menstrual bleeding, and amount of menstrual discharge. By following the “principles of hygiene” (Nakayama 2017), women and girls purportedly could ensure they would meet the standards of normality, which were required to fulfill their reproductive duty to the nation. As evidenced below, menstruation was reframed as an issue of personal hygiene that should be dealt with using proper products and behavior; and, due to its connection to (reproductive) sex, it should only be discussed when necessary with medical professionals or teachers.

The Ideology of Hygiene and Women’s Bodies

As part of Japan’s nation-state-making processes that took root in the early years of the Meiji Period, concepts of the “national body” of Japan were developed, whereby the goal of the government was to create optimally healthy citizens in order to have the strongest military – and nation – possible. Of this, Frühstück writes, “Calling upon an increasingly complex configuration of bureaucrats, military officials, police, physicians, pedagogues, and other men and women in public office, these concepts [of the ‘national body’] focused on a populace to be regulated, protected, nurtured, and improved in order to establish...a modern ‘health regime’” (2003, 17). The concept of hygiene was part and parcel of these ideologies of imperialist Japan. However, for government officials, doctors, teachers, and others, hygiene soon became something that represented not just the health of the body, but that of the mind as well. Cleanliness and morality became closely linked, and “[p]roper care and maintenance was declared the basis of a ‘moral person’; in fact, the care and maintenance of the whole self was to be recognized as both ‘a virtue and a duty’” (Frühstück 2003, 25).

This concept of hygiene and its accompanying moral prescripts, as well as Japanese imperialist ideology as a whole, had a profound influence on Japanese women’s and girls’ lives as their bodies came under the control of the state. As Japan’s government was striving to build up a national population and a military that was as large and as strong as possible, women were told that the best way for them to serve the state was to be mothers. “Good wife, wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*) was the slogan promulgated by the Ministry of Education (Ono 2009, 153). Women were supposed to serve their husbands and families by taking care of the household. They were also supposed to serve “as educators who instilled proper Japanese values in their children...[placing] themselves in loyal service to the state” (Kondo 1990, 267). “Be fruitful and multiply” (*umeyo fuyaseyo*) was another popular slogan of the Shōwa government (Ochiai 1999,

270), which encouraged large families and early marriages (Fujime 1999, 317). To further promote – or force – a higher birth rate, the Japanese government criminalized abortion in the Meiji-era Penal Code of 1882 (Fujime 1999, 300). In addition to banning abortion, the government later banned all forms of birth control that were meant to limit births; contraception and sterilization procedures were made illegal, and “the act of advocating birth control (limitation) was strictly punished as a crime against the state...” (Fujime 1999, 317).¹⁶ This also meant that, at least for women, any non-reproductive sexual activities were – from the official standpoint of government officials and doctors – frowned upon as pointless and even “abnormal,” as compared to reproductive sex that resulted in childbirth, which was “natural” (Narita 1999, 358).

Although women’s main roles and occupations were supposed to be in the home (and for many upper-class women, this was the case), women workers played a crucial role in the industrialization process of Japan. Between 1894 and 1912, about sixty percent of the nation’s industrial workforce was comprised of women, many of whom worked in the textile industries (Kondo 1990, 269). Working conditions for these young factory women, though, were notoriously bad, with long hours, dangerous machinery, inadequate food, and a lack of sanitary facilities (Kondo 1990, 269-270; Dan 1986, 7-8). This spurred demand for menstruation leave (*seiri kyūka*) from both women and doctors. They argued that menstruation was “a ‘barometer’ for reproductive ability” and so women “ought to take leave to protect their future motherhood” (Dan 1986, 8). The reproductive health of these young women was considered extremely important, and resting from strenuous work was believed to help prevent complications later in life, such as miscarriage and premature labor (Dan 1986, 2). The right to take menstruation leave was enforced after World War II.¹⁷ Here we see acknowledgement and understanding of menstrual health framed around childbirth and motherhood, a strong connection that continues today.

The slogan of “good wife, wise mother” was not only recited at adult Japanese women, but it was also a large part of the rhetoric of government officials and teachers that was aimed at schoolgirls. In 1872, the Meiji government issued an education conscription which required all boys and girls of a certain age to attend school; before this time many girls did not receive any formal education (Kondo 1990, 265). However, for the girls who did now attend school, this standardized education was focused predominantly on home economics and thus the production of a new generation of “good wives, wise mothers.” In terms of sex education, again, stress was put on the importance of becoming a mother, as reflected in this hypothetical sex education lecture a mother would give to her daughter:

You have come so far that you can produce the spring from which a human arises
in your body...You will bleed for two or three days...That will happen once

¹⁶ During the 1920s and 1930s in Japan, however, there were strong birth control (limitation) activist movements, some members of which were also tied to socialist and working-class movements. These activists lectured around the country and operated clinics for consultation on birth control. Magazines and journals also ran articles on birth control and non-reproductive sex, as well as advertisements for contraception. These activist movements and publications, however, were effectively shut down and censored by harsh government regulations put in place in the late 1930s (see Frühstück 2003; Narita 1999; and Fujime 1999).

¹⁷ See Taguchi 2003 for a detailed history of menstruation leave in Japan. While companies do still offer menstruation leave, it varies depending on employment contracts and is often unpaid.

every four weeks and is only proof that you have grown up. However, *it is important that you do not overwork*, and that you wash yourself carefully and take better care of yourself during these days. This is not simply an experience but the preparation for you to become a mother one day. Therefore you must take proper care of yourself. You might worry about when it will happen and it is indeed an important time but please *be pleased with yourself that one day you will be a mother* (quoted in Frühstück 2003, 69 [emphasis added]).

Higher education was considered unnecessary for the girls' future roles as wives and mothers, as well as potentially taxing on their minds and bodies, which were believed to be weaker than men's (this belief is also found among Victorian intellectuals of the same era) (Frühstück 2003, 69). In 1900, the Ministry of Education, following the same vein of thought that led to menstruation leave for workers, called for female students to limit or refrain from active movement during menstruation (Nakayama 2007, 57). Thus, since physical exercise was part of the school regimen, it was necessary for girls to notify their teachers when they were menstruating so they could be excused from such activities. Ono argues that this reflects the idea generated during this time period that menstruation was a personal issue that "should be concealed (*kakusu beki*)" and was "an embarrassing thing that disrupted everyday life" (2009, 154). She sees these practices and ideologies of the state as contributing to the medicalization of women's bodies: "In this way, female bodies in relation to menstruation, pregnancy, and birth came to be controlled by schoolteachers and doctors and became objects that should be [medically] examined and treated. In other words, women's bodily physiological functions relating to reproduction became objects of medicalization" (Ono 2009, 153-154).

"Hygiene" education for women outside of the school system was focused mainly on "family women" – those who were married and had, or were planning to have, children – and took the form of public lectures given by various officials as well as articles and letters in women's magazines that flourished throughout the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. The latter was directed towards the more literate upper classes of society, but public lectures could be attended by anyone and were held throughout the country in various towns and villages. These lectures were often organized by the central or prefectural governments, which would send out lecturers on one-month-long tours of the area. Smaller-scale lectures were organized by women's associations and individual schools. These lectures were the main platform for disseminating information on hygiene to rural populations and were also an integral part of the central government's Rural Improvement Campaign (*chihō kairyō undō*), whose aim was "to reorganize rural society to better serve the cause of Japanese imperialism" (Fujime 1999, 300). In addition to government officials, registered midwives often took the role of public health lecturers, instructing women and other rural village folk on proper hygiene (Ochiai 1999, 273).

Besides attending public lectures given around the country, (literate) women could gain access to discourse about menstruation and menstrual management practices and products through reading – and writing to – women's magazines (*josei zasshi*). Magazine publishing in Japan began in the early years of the Meiji Period, with woodblock prints of translated foreign news. "Modern" weekly magazines began publication during the 1920s, put out by the major national daily newspaper companies at the time. These magazines' advertisements were aimed mainly "at Japan's burgeoning affluent class," and magazine readership until after World War II

“generally remained elitist and intellectual,” due in part to nationwide literacy rates that were not yet very high (Moony 2000, 117-118). Magazines and journals focusing on hygiene and sex abounded during the first few decades of the twentieth century (Frühstück 2003, Narita 1999). Found in popular women’s magazines like *Fujin Kōron (Women’s Public Opinion)* and *Shufu no Tomo (Housewife’s Friend)*, articles and special issues that discussed sex mostly focused on procreative sex, although non-reproductive sex was written about to an extent (Narita 1999, 349 and 357-358). These magazines often ran advice columns written by doctors, as well as advertisements for medicines and other “cures” for infertility, frigidity, and hysteria. About this, Frühstück says, “In these magazines at least, medical doctors were preoccupied with married women’s sexual functioning almost exclusively in the context of ensuring their reproductive capabilities, thus reinforcing earlier claims of the uterus as a vehicle of empire building” (2003, 174).

Indeed, many articles in *Fujin Eisei Zasshi (Women’s Hygiene Magazine)* and the other above-mentioned magazines focused on how to achieve and protect a healthy “mother’s body (*botai*).” During menstruation, one should not ride horses, rickshaws, or bicycles; one should not dance, exercise, stand or walk for long periods of time, carry heavy bags, use sewing machines, or drink alcohol or coffee; one should also avoid mentally taxing activities like reading novels. Failure to follow these proscriptions could lead to reproductive diseases or lifelong ailments, according to many doctors writing in these magazines. Of course, the target audience was upper-class women who actually had a chance at avoiding these actions, unlike working women who could not rest or take time off (Tanaka 2013, 6-8 and 17-19). In addition, the fact that women would write to doctors’ advice columns about their menstrual troubles and other health issues shows again the extent to which menstruation had become something to be concealed. Rather than talking face-to-face with family members or friends about menstruation, women would write to total strangers, thus contributing to the invisibility of menstruation outside the pages of magazines (Ono 2009, 154).

The Introduction of Commercial Menstrual Management Products

Because of the spread of the concept of hygiene, there was a shift in the mode of production of menstrual management products beginning in the Meiji Period. Before this time, women would mainly use certain plant fibers or old cloth to absorb their menstrual blood. Although many women in the early twentieth century continued to make and modify their own menstrual products at home, commercial menstrual products began to be marketed at this time. These products were often considered to be more sterile and hygienic by doctors and writers of women’s magazine articles. Such public backing of commercially produced menstrual products and condemnation of “unhygienic” homemade products marked the beginning of women’s menstruation management being directly tied to the market (Ono 2009, 154). As the twentieth century progressed, commercial menstrual products improved in absorbency, comfort, ease-of-use, and style. Magazines continued to be an important platform for advertising and discussion of these products. What was considered a hygienic practice or product and what was considered unhygienic would continue to pop up as an evaluation tool to judge the quality and acceptability of menstrual management methods and products throughout the twentieth century.

One material that was crucial for these new, hygienic commercial menstrual products was “absorbent cotton (*dasshimen*).” Considered a pharmaceutical product, quality standards for

absorbent cotton were published in the Japanese pharmacopeia and implemented in 1886. Absorbent cotton was thought to be much more hygienic than home-fashioned management that incorporated scrap cloth or paper. Although the latter method continued to be used throughout the Meiji Period (and beyond), it was reported in media such as women's magazines that many women became ill from using old cloth as absorbent material, and so this method was discouraged from a hygienic standpoint (Sakai 2014, 68; Ono 2006, 2).

Absorbent cotton was used in conjunction with menstrual belts, which were improvements on the design of the *oba* from the Edo Period. Although some women still crafted their own menstrual belts themselves, menstrual belts became a commodified item as well during the Meiji Period (Ono 2009, 154). "T-bandage" style menstrual belts made from rubber entered the market during the early twentieth century. A brand called Victoria quickly became popular after a Japanese-made version of their product called "Victoria Menstrual Belt" was introduced in 1913. (The American-made products that preceded it a few years earlier were not as successful.) Victoria truly embraced the commercial aspects of their menstrual products, selling them in small, attractive tin containers. Although the Victoria Menstrual Belt was popular and successful, it was far from perfect; due to its material – rubber – many women complained of leakage of menstrual blood, soreness and inflammation, and "humid dampness (*mure*)" as well. This product did not escape the criticism of doctors either, some of whom viewed the product as unsanitary. As an alternative to the rubber products, the knitted "Matron-Style Menstrual Belt" became a popular item in 1931 (Sakai 2014, 68-69).¹⁸

In 1938, the first commercial tampon in Japan, called Sanpon, was introduced. This product was marketed towards married women only, as evidenced by advertisements' salutations of "*oku sama*" (Mrs./wife)." The reason for this is that at the time, women's chastity was highly valued, and "it was thought that using tampons would tear the hymen and were thus unsuitable for unmarried women" (Ono 2006, 2). However, after the introduction of this commercial brand, just like the prostitutes of the Edo Period, there were many women who used absorbent cotton to fashion their own style of tampons, regardless of marital status. These tampons were yet another menstrual management method that came under fire from social authority figures. Women's magazines such as *Fujin Kōron* published articles discussing the unhygienic nature of these kinds of tampons. Supposedly the idea of tampons as unhygienic has persisted until today even and is a factor in the avoidance of tampon usage by Japanese women (Sakai 2014, 68).

The menstrual management methods used during World War II can be seen as a partial return to pre-Meiji Period practices. This is because the raw material of the ever so important absorbent cotton – raw cotton – had been, up until the war, imported from China. The war obviously interrupted this importation, dwindling supplies of cotton. The Living Necessities Regulations Decree of 1941 reduced the allotment of raw cotton for menstrual management products to zero. Without absorbent cotton, women had to return to paper, grass, tree bark, and other things to be used as absorbent material. However, as a sad, ironic twist, due to extreme stress and malnutrition during the war, many women's menstrual cycles were disrupted, halting menstruation, and so there was not a great need for menstrual products. After the war, the Living Necessities Regulations Decree was repealed in 1951, and absorbent cotton for menstrual products spread once more. Additionally, an improvement on the product called "cut cotton

¹⁸ Tanaka writes that after the Meiji Period, homemade menstrual belts were usually referred to as "T-bandage (*teiji tai* 丁字帯)," while commercially-produced ones were called "menstrual belts (*gekkei tai* 月経帯)" (2013, 4).

(*katto men*)” was introduced and quickly became popular. “Cut cotton,” as the name implies, was absorbent cotton that was, in advance, cut into an appropriate size for use with a menstrual belt and then sold commercially. Another product, named Pink, was introduced by Amethyst Corporation in 1957 and was made from household cotton rather than pharmaceutical absorbent cotton; this was sold wrapped in paper (Ono 2006, 3).

The Anne “Revolution” and Postwar Advertising (Postwar Shōwa Period)

The modern menstrual napkin as it is known today became widespread during the 1960s, due to the manufacturing and marketing success of the Anne Corporation and its “Anne napkin” introduced in 1961. The raw material that commercial menstrual products were made from shifted during this time from cotton to paper: the results of investigations conducted by the Mainichi advertising company showed that in 1962 sixty-seven percent of survey participants used absorbent cotton and twenty-six percent used paper napkins, but by 1969 the users of absorbent cotton had decreased to a mere five percent and paper napkin users skyrocketed up to eighty-nine percent (Sakai 2014, 69).

However, it is important to understand that although paper napkins quickly came to dominate the market for menstrual management products, women did not necessarily switch to the new products. Sakai’s research with women living in Nagasaki Prefecture showed that women born in the 1930s and 1940s were less likely to use paper napkins than women born in the 1950s. It was the young women, reaching menarche around or after the introduction of paper napkins, who predominantly used paper napkins over other menstrual management products.¹⁹ The older women, who had already accumulated many years of menstruation experience before paper napkins came about, most often stayed with the same menstrual management methods with which they had more familiarity and experience. These management methods included using “cut cotton,” gauze, handmade cloth loincloths, absorbent cotton, and tissue/toilet paper.²⁰ Some of the women who did not make the switch to paper napkins explained that they were already satisfied with their current management methods and so did not feel the need to try the new products, while others expressed reluctance and wariness over the products. One interviewed woman, born in 1934, said, “I learned about the sale of the Anne napkin since there was a display at the neighborhood pharmacy, which I saw. I thought about trying it; however, it wasn’t the cotton that I had been using up until then, [but rather] something strange that clung to the skin, so I felt uneasiness and reluctance [to use it]” (Sakai 2014, 71 and 73-74). Indeed, the Anne napkin was a radically different product from its predecessors, so it is no surprise that some women did not trust it. The introduction of the Anne napkin was influential in the history of menstrual products in that it marked “the beginning of the end” of using absorbent cotton and doing menstrual management through personal means at home, and the beginning of mainstream economic and social success for a hygienic “anyone-can-use, uniform management of menstruation” (Ono 2009, 156).

¹⁹ Twenty-two out of the twenty-five interview participants born in the 1950s reported using paper napkins. The total comes to twenty-three out of twenty-five if one lumps in the one respondent who used paper napkins and tampons conjointly (Sakai 2014, 71).

²⁰ Only four out of seventeen interview participants of the older age set (born in the 1930s and 1940s) reported using paper napkins, and these women were among the younger of the age set. However, three additional respondents did report switching to paper napkins in their late teens or early twenties, so it appears that there were a few women who did in fact switch to the new products (Sakai 2014, 71).

The napkin also purportedly provided women more comfort and greater freedom of movement than previous products; this increase in mobility thus led to increased ability or desire to actively participate in the working world (Sakai 2014, 69). Moreover, since many women felt buying menstrual management products to be embarrassing, Anne Corporation, through its advertising, worked to change this way of thinking, for the sake of market expansion and economic success. It is in part to the publicity efforts of the company that menstrual napkins came to be treated like other commercial goods (Ono 2009, 155). However, even though these menstrual products were on display in stores, they were often hidden when being carried out of stores by customers. Even today, it is customary to put such products in opaque, black plastic bags when purchased, rather than the usual thin, translucent shopping bags.

As evidenced by the extensive advertising campaigns undertaken by Anne Corporation, women's magazines were an important media for transmitting information about menstrual management products (Sakai 2014, 69-70). The late 1950s and early 1960s saw a huge proliferation of magazine publications, as Japan began to recover economically from World War II. Magazines targeted at women (*josei*) such as *Shūkan Josei*, *Josei Jishin*, and *Josei-Seven* entered circulation in 1957, 1958, and 1963, respectively (Moony 2000, 118). In addition to editorial content, a large portion of women's magazines consisted of advertisements and editorial tie-ins ("advertorials"), which may have taken up anywhere from one-third to over one-half of a magazine's pages (Skov and Moeran 1995, 60-66). The lack of an environment in which women were socially allowed to talk about menstruation (or felt comfortable talking about menstruation) with close family and friends continued to an extent during this time period, at least for older women, and so frank discussion of menstruation and other things relating to sex often took place mostly on the pages of magazines (Sakai 2014, 75). It was during a boom in television sales during the late 1950s and early 1960s that commercials for menstrual products began to air (Sakai 2014, 70).

How did the Anne napkin and its groundbreaking advertising campaigns impact views of menstruation during the 1960s and onward? Although some scholars have argued that Anne Corporation's advertising played a large role in influencing women and shifting notions of menstruation, Sakai (2014) argues that these assertions are over-generalizing and lacking actual supporting evidence, that is, testimony from women who were the receivers of mass media messages. Through her interviews with women who grew up around the middle of the twentieth century, she found that hardly any of the women said that mass media or advertising had an effect on them (Sakai 2014, 72). In fact, for the older women born in the 1930s and 1940s, the way menstrual management products are discussed so brazenly and openly in advertisements gives them a feeling of discomfort (*iwakan*) (Sakai 2014, 76). While the introduction of television commercials for menstrual products in the late twentieth century is significant in its own right, any changes in views of menstruation during this time may be more easily explained by looking at changes in sex education in school curricula, rather than at the messages of advertisements.

Changes in Sex Education in the Mid- to Late-Twentieth Century

The women of the older generation in Sakai's study, as we saw earlier, were more likely to stick to older methods of menstrual management than use the new paper napkins. They also received little to no education about menstruation, either at home or at school. Sex education in

schools during the 1930s was unstandardized or non-existent in some areas. It was not until after World War II that sex education was systematically put in place in the Japanese school system. The goal of the 1947 “Basic Guidelines for Purity Education (*junketsu kyōiku kihon yōkō*)” was to promote proper “sexual morality (*seidōtoku*),” that is, abstinence until marriage and then reproductive sex. Sex education at this time was also referred to as “menstruation guidance (*gekkei shidō*),” since its teachings focused on menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth, things that only happen to women. However, in the 1949 “Junior High School Health Plan Procedures (*chūgakkō gakkō hoken keikaku jisshi yōryō*),” there was no mention of specific guidance on how to deal with menstrual blood, and so there were many girls who never had a chance to learn how to properly deal with menstrual blood, even though they had “menstruation guidance” class. Compounding the lack of menstrual management education in schools, during the 1940s and into the 1950s, there was a stigma around talking about menstruation among family and friends. Many of the women that Sakai (2014) interviewed who were born in the 1930s and 1940s, and even in 1950, reported that they could not talk to their friends or family about menstruation or sex, as it was “taboo.” This is reflected in statements such as, “When I got my first period, I didn’t tell anyone and dealt with it on my own,” “I never talked to my parent(s)/mother [*oya*] about menstruation,” and “When I got my first period, my mother stealthily taught me how to use cloth for dealing with menstrual blood” (Sakai 2014, 75). These feelings of secrecy, concealment, and taboo stuck with them as they grew older, as evidenced by their shock and unease at how frankly menstruation is talked about in advertising today.

In contrast, the next generation of women born after the early 1950s received better education about menstruation in schools. In 1965, “the Ministry of Education replaced ‘purity education’ with ‘guidance in sexual matters (*sei ni kan suru shidō*)’ or ‘sex education (*seikyōiku*)’...” (Frühstück 2003, 193). Before or around the time of menarche, girls at school were taught about the biological functioning of menstruation as well as methods for dealing with menstrual blood. Paper napkin companies would also give samples of their products to schools, which girls could then take home. This way, they would be prepared for their first menstruation. Overall, these women were able to receive a better education and to talk more freely about menstruation than the preceding generation (Sakai 2014, 76). This difference in education is reflected in the older generation of women’s feelings of discomfort in terms of their own daughters’ school sex education, who would have been in grade school around the 1960s or 1970s. One woman said, “My daughter learned about menstruation at school, so at home we pretty much never talked about it. I’m glad I didn’t have to teach her myself...but when I imagine her talking to her teachers and friends so casually about paper napkins, I get a weird feeling” (Sakai 2014, 74). Menstrual product advertising did not really seem to sway their views of menstruation throughout their lifetimes, and so this advertising cannot necessarily be seen as a cause of changing attitudes towards menstruation, but perhaps should be viewed as a reflection of these shifting values and public treatment of menstruation.

Menstruation and Menstrual Products Today

Themes of embarrassment and concealment continue today, as I found in my recent ethnographic fieldwork. In an interview, I asked Ayaka if she would talk to someone she was dating about her period. She replied, “No, definitely not. [*Why?*] Well, I guess it’s embarrassing, it’s not a nice image – blood coming out, it’s dirty, embarrassing.” In Japan today, menstruation

has a complex and almost contradictory status. While menstrual product advertisements on television and in women's magazines are not uncommon, rarely is menstruation brought up in public discourse outside of these platforms. Even when women do talk about it with friends or female relatives, they use euphemisms like *seiri* (literally “physiology,” commonly meaning “period/menstruation”), *ano hi* (“that day”), and *are* (“that”), rather than *gekkei* (“menstruation”), which is now almost exclusively used in the field of medicine (see Chapter 3 for more euphemisms and discussion of how people talk about menstruation). Much like in the recent past, menstruation is strongly connected to reproduction and sex, and it is a hygiene issue that must be dealt with in private, never to be revealed to unfamiliar others. Menstruation is an often burdensome and unpleasant experience, but one that is necessary for having children, which many of the women I interviewed planned for in their future. Below, I discuss how napkins and tampons have transformed over the past half-century, and how education on and use of menstrual products may be connected to ideologies concerning sex and the female body.

Napkins

In the 1960s, the raw material of menstrual napkins shifted from absorbent cotton to paper, and in the 1970s there was another shift from paper to plastic, in the form of high polymer absorbent material.²¹ Menstrual napkins made through the process of pulverizing pulp into a padding form were introduced in 1973, and this was followed in 1978 by the now-standard high polymer napkins. From this time forward, menstrual napkins have been composed of such high polymer absorbent material, non-woven fabric, and leak protection material. These materials help menstrual napkins to absorb fifty to one hundred times their own weight of menstrual blood and more successfully prevent leakage of absorbed blood than preceding napkin types.

Among these high polymer menstrual napkins, there exists a large number of products with often minute differences in form and purpose. At the time of Ono Kiyomi's research in the mid-1980s on menstrual management products and students at a university in Chiba Prefecture (near Tokyo), there were over sixty varieties of menstrual napkin products, not including generic brands (Ono 1984, 55-56).²² These napkins varied in size/thickness, color, and use of deodorizing sheets. By this point in time, the “usability” (*shiyōsei*) of menstrual napkins had increased significantly (Ono 1985, 37). In other words, the reliability, effectiveness, and ease of use of the napkins surpassed that of its predecessors. However, this does not mean that such products were without their faults. Over seventy percent of respondents complained of leakages, and almost half complained about the menstrual napkin slipping out of place while in use. Others reported that the menstrual napkin was too bulky and uncomfortable. Although some women, just like those in generations before them, would try to fix such issues on their own and personally modify their usage of the product to maximize effectiveness for them, many would

²¹ Japanese scholars such as Ono (2009) use the word *purasuchikku* (plastic) to refer to these modern kinds of menstrual napkins, so that is how I refer to them as well. One could also think of them as “synthetic” napkins, in contrast to the preceding products that were made from paper.

²² Today, there are even more varieties of menstrual napkins available. Unicharm offers 58 menstrual napkin products, 9 tampon products, 10 sanitary shorts products, 20 panty liner products, and 3 body wipe products; Kao has 37 menstrual napkin products, plus 23 panty liner products, 8 sanitary shorts products, body wipes, genital wash, and stain remover; and Daio sells 35 menstrual napkin products. These products mainly vary based on shape, size, absorption level, daytime/nighttime, with or without wings, and scented or unscented.

just resort to trying another one of the many products available for purchase at stores (Ono 1985, 35).

Disposable, high polymer absorbent material menstrual napkins still dominate the menstrual management market today, with stiff competition between manufacturing companies who try to sway consumers with the allure of new “technologies” that promise to eliminate leaks and odor issues. These products, though, are not necessarily environmentally friendly, either in their manufacture (Kissling 2006, 79-81) or in their disposal (Ono 2009, 156). Nor are they always comfortable or safe for women’s bodies (Sato et al 2006; Kissling 2006; Shin 2009; Oleson 1986; Ishii et al 2014). The toxic shock syndrome incident of the late 1970s and early 1980s in the United States, in which several women died after contracting a virulent strain of staphylococcus caused by a certain brand of super-absorbent tampons, brought this issue to the mainstream public spotlight (Oleson 1986, 53-56; Kissling 2006, 77-79). At this time, some American women, fearful of tampons and other commercial menstrual management products that were assumed to be safe up until this incident, looked to other methods of menstrual management, such as using cloth and natural sponges for absorbing menstrual blood (Oleson 1986, 57; Ono 2009, 157). One Japanese woman, Nakano Yōko, upon visiting the United States and learning about these alternative methods, decided to start producing and selling cloth napkins herself in Japan, since only imports from other countries were available at the time. It was in 1999 that the first cloth napkins began to be produced and sold in Japan. Women who have concerns about plastic (high polymer) napkins’ impact on the environment, women who seek alternatives to tampons which they view as potentially unsafe, and women who experience discomfort, pain, or “general malaise” (*futei shūso*) during menstruation are among those who use or try out cloth napkins (Ono 2009, 157-158). (See Chapter 7 for more on cloth napkins in Japan.)

Tampons and Sexuality

While guidance in schools helps better prepare girls for their first period and for using napkins, discussion of tampons is rarely on the agenda.²³ By far the majority of Japanese women use menstrual napkins as their primary menstrual product, while a small number of women use tampons.²⁴ Usually, a mother or a friend will introduce them to the latter product. Only three of the twenty-three women I formally interviewed regularly use tampons, having first tried them out in college. Ayaka said that she started using tampons because she was fed up with feeling uncomfortable and getting stains on her bedding at night; she now uses tampons while she sleeps and during heavy flow days. It is likely easier to judge, visually, when a sanitary napkin is reaching its fluid capacity than when a tampon is, and it is this learning curve, among other reasons, which steers many women away from the product. Several of the women I talked with

²³ The Japanese Pharmaceutical Affairs Law classifies tampons as medical devices (*iryō yōgu*), while menstrual napkins are non-medical devices (Ono 2009, 155). This is probably because tampons are inserted into the body, while napkins, diapers, and other similar products are not.

²⁴ The Japan Hygiene Products Industry Association (JHPA) reports that ninety-four percent of women use disposable napkins, with six percent using tampons (<http://www.jhpia.or.jp/product/napkin/index.html>, accessed 10 April 2017). The low rates of tampon use are partly due to fear of toxic shock syndrome (Ono 2009, 157; Ono 1985, 37); I have heard this as a reason for not using tampons during my interviews and discussions with Japanese women. It is also telling that the famous toxic shock syndrome outbreak in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s is often referred to as the “tampon shock incident (*tanpon shokku jiken*)” in Japan.

were interested in tampons, but they were worried they would not be “good at using them,” potentially resulting in a dreaded “failure” (*shippai*: in this context, menstrual blood leaks/stains).

Reluctance to use tampons is in part due to not wanting to touch one’s genitals or menstrual blood directly. Even women who do use tampons may view this aspect of them quite negatively. Shiori recounted a time when she traveled to New Zealand and discovered that a common type of tampon there had no applicator; she viewed this as “dirty” and refused to use them. Additionally, several women said that inserting tampons seemed scary (*kowai*) and expressed concern that it would hurt, with Nanako saying, “I *definitely* do not want to use them.”

This fear or reluctance to insert something into the vagina may reflect beliefs picked up from sex education classes and societal views on appropriate expressions of female sexuality. The focus of sex education for a long time was on “purity,” abstinence, and repression of “unhealthy” sexual desires; sex was, at least for girls, something to be done after marriage with one’s husband and for the purpose of producing children. Although now methods for preventing transmission of STDs and HIV/AIDS are taught to junior high and high school students, the underlying message is that sex is, first and foremost, for reproduction (Frühstück 2003, 193).²⁵ Sexuality and masturbation are not discussed in a positive light, if they are discussed at all. Education on menstrual products can be potentially lacking as well; if menstrual management methods *are* taught, it is extremely rare for girls to be taught about tampons and how to use them (Ono 1984, 56). This is because educators did not want young girls to use tampons, since their use requires touching the vagina. Such physical familiarity with the vagina could be a gateway to masturbation and reckless and “unhealthy” sexuality. Recall that the first commercial tampons in Japan were marketed toward married women only, in order to protect unmarried women’s hymens and thus their chastity. In fact, the Japan Hygiene Products Industry Association (JHPIA) made it obligatory in 1951 for menstrual product manufacturers to discourage unmarried women from using tampons.²⁶ This continued until 1970, when the JHPIA relented and allowed for tampons to be targeted at unmarried women, with the stipulations that “unmarried women should use [tampons] with extreme caution and should use them according to doctors’ directions” and that “first-time users and uneasy women should consult with a medical specialist before using them” (Ono 2006, 18-19). However, use of tampons does seem to be slowly on the rise over recent years, with even tampon commercials making it to television broadcast. They are more popular among athletes and other women who lead active lifestyles or do sports (Ono 1985, 37; Ono 1984, 55). So although education on tampons may not be present in schools, through word-of-mouth and television commercials, knowledge and use of tampons in Japan is indeed spreading. It is possible that the slow rise in tampon usage reflects changing personal views on sexuality and sexual behavior.

²⁵ Sex education in high schools has also been called “education for the prevention of AIDS (*eizu yobō kyōiku*)” since the late 1980s (Frühstück 2003, 193).

²⁶ The Japan Hygiene Products Industry Association (JHPIA, *Nippon Eisei Zairyō Kōgyō Rengōkai*) was established by the Ministry of Health and Welfare in 1950. It deals with domestic products such as absorbent cotton, gauze, diapers (both baby and adult), and menstrual products (including napkins and tampons) (Ono 2006, 44).

Conclusion

Frühstück theorizes that throughout Japanese history, there have been repeated cycles of “liberation” and “repression” of sexuality by different actors (2003, 5). I argue that, looking at Japanese history, one can find similar cycles regarding menstruation, as well as periods of simultaneous liberation and repression, or rather, openness and concealment. After the powerful mysticism of menstruation in ancient Japan gave way to more negative notions of pollution around the ninth century, women, from a particular religious as well as social standpoint, were seen as sinful, dangerous, and unclean. Powerful yet dangerous, women’s bodies were cast as uncontrollable and a threat to male authority and connection to *kami* and Buddhist deities. Although beliefs of menstrual and birth pollution were present among the populace during the Muromachi and Edo Periods and women practiced various taboos to separate themselves during their time of the month, menstruation was a strong symbol of fertility and vitality of the community. The use of seclusion huts and other practices relating to the polluting qualities of menstruation were then wiped out by the Meiji Period government which deemed them backwards and uncivilized traditions.²⁷

It is here that we start to see the solidification of many aspects of today’s discourse of hegemonic menstruality. While the notion of (spiritual) pollution was forcibly shed from the Meiji Period onward, menstruation as a symbol of fertility and health continued, especially in the context of early twentieth century state ideology that called for Japanese women to “be fruitful and multiply” and help build up the strength of the “national body.” Women and girls encountered these messages through school lessons, public lectures, and magazine articles. It could even be argued that menstruation was perhaps more respected as a phenomenon during this time since it was a necessary function for procreation. Womanhood (and ideal citizen behavior) was achieved through motherhood, made possible by good reproductive health represented by “regular” menstruation:

Menstruation is the foundation of pregnancy...Pregnancy is indispensable for the propagation of the [Japanese] race; if we do not have this, not only could we not propagate the population, we also could not preserve the wealth and power of the nation (*Fujin Eisei Zasshi*, volume 245, 1910, [quoted in Tanaka 2013, 6]).

Following this discourse, menstruation’s sole purpose was reproduction, and reproduction was women’s main purpose: “the uterus [was] a vehicle of empire building” (Frühstück 2003, 174). Moreover, because reproduction was equivalent to sex (as the only socially acceptable sexual activity for women was procreation), menstruation was thus connected to sex since it is integral to reproduction. And despite the importance of reproduction for the nation, sex – and therefore

²⁷ Beliefs about menstrual pollution do still crop up from time to time though. For instance, in 2000, Ōta Fusae became the first female governor in Japan when she was elected as governor of Osaka Prefecture. Each year, one of Japan’s three major sumo tournaments is hosted in Osaka, and traditionally the governor is supposed to present a prize at the tournament. However, the Japan Sumo Association barred Ōta from entering the ring, claiming that a woman entering the ring would pollute it. She remained governor for eight years, but she was never allowed to present the prize in the tournament ring (Hindell 2000). Even in 2018, a referee at a sumo match ordered women to exit the sumo ring, which they had entered in order to provide first aid to a politician who had collapsed (Tarrant 2018).

menstruation – was not an appropriate topic of public conversation for women. Even today, sex education in school continues to frame the menstrual cycle’s sole purpose as making pregnancy possible and to perpetuate the idea that the only (or at least most) acceptable sexual activity for girls/women is procreation. Because of this, many women find it difficult to talk about sex or menstruation, and young women with menstrual problems even avoid going to the OB/GYN due to embarrassment (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 6).

These same public discourses that praised the power of menstruation in strengthening the nation also narrowed what was “normal” for women’s bodies and what was the “right” way to handle menstrual flow. By following the “principles of hygiene” delineated by (mostly male) medical experts in public lectures and magazine articles (Nakayama 2017), women and girls could ensure they would meet the standards of normality, which were required to fulfill their reproductive duty to the nation. These included experiencing menarche at a “normal” age and bleeding a “normal” amount of menstrual fluid for a “normal” number of days every month.

The now-ubiquitous menstrual management method of using store-bought disposable menstrual napkins, a major aspect of today’s hegemonic menstruality, has its roots in the early twentieth century in those same magazines and lessons that “standardized” the physiological characteristics of the menstrual cycle and medicalized any variation from the “norm” as a health problem. First, homemade menstrual products were cast as “unhygienic,” and then, even among the “superior” commercial products, some were derided as unsafe and unsanitary, such as rubber menstrual belts and tampons. The introduction of the Anne napkin in postwar Japan permanently entangled menstrual management in consumerism and the commercial marketplace.

Due to various practices put in place in schools and workplaces, menstruation came to be seen as something that was incompatible with strenuous movement, exercise, and work; disruptive to everyday life; and something to be hidden. Starting in the early twentieth century, female students were expected to refrain from or at least limit active movement during menstruation (Nakayama 2007, 57). Thus, since physical exercise was part of the school regimen, it was necessary for girls to notify their teachers when they were menstruating so they could be excused from such activities. This practice contributed to the transformation of menstruation into a personal issue that “should be concealed (*kakusu beki*)” and was “an embarrassing thing that disrupted everyday life” (Ono 2009, 154). Concealing menstruation is still the main prerogative for many women, who also often complain of menstruation putting limitations on their activities (see Chapter 5). Tracing these origins of hegemonic menstruality can help us better understand the experiences, perspectives, and behaviors of menstruating women today.

CHAPTER 3. LEARNING AND TALKING ABOUT MENSTRUATION

Introduction

[If I could design my own menstrual product ad,] maybe it could be a commercial that would include men and men being ok with periods or something. Because I feel like it's still difficult to say that you're on your period...so maybe in a way some kind of advertising that would make it more familiar to men too...It would be nicer to have a society where it's easier to just say you're on your period, like you don't have to hide it...It's such a natural thing, so I guess in a way I would like society to be more open about it. (Mai)

I asked Manami whether she talks with her friends now about menstruation. She said not really. She then started to wonder out loud about why people in Japan do not discuss menstruation much: "Living in Japan, I've thought about this, if there are boys around, then Japanese people won't directly say that they're on their period. I don't know if it's like that in the US or other foreign countries. I don't think menstruation is an embarrassing thing. Everyone knows about it; men probably know when their mothers and sisters get their period. I've thought quite a bit about why there is such a need to conceal it." She thinks it would be very beneficial if in society there is an environment in which we can talk about menstruation. Perhaps the reason for avoiding talking about it is Japan's "shame culture (*haji no bunka*)," or perhaps it is talk related to the toilet. But why is there shame or embarrassment around menstruation in Japan? While Manami believes it may be related to menstruation's association with other bodily wastes excreted into a toilet (a theory also proposed by some scholars – see Chapter 2), a look at Japanese television programs, preschoolers' bowel movement charts, and turd-shaped phone charms, shows that Japan does not really shy away from shit. So why is menstruation discussed in muted and hushed tones, or not discussed at all? Discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972, 49). However, discourses can also "form the objects of which they" *do not* "speak," in the case of menstruation. As Allison puts it, "...silence is not an absence but rather a part of dialogue" (2011, 2).

The discursive silence in which menstruation lies, in Japan, is just as much an interactive and collective social practice as actual conversation. In fact, learning how to talk – or not talk – about menstruation is often one of the primary ways that young girls are introduced to "acceptable" treatments of and experiences with menstruation. Enveloped in a "culture of concealment" (Houppert 1999), open discussion of menstruation is exceedingly rare. Concealing menstruation in everyday speech is just as much a part of hegemonic menstruality as concealing menstrual blood itself. About silence and power, Sheriff writes,

Unlike the activity of speech, which does not require more than a single actor, silence demands collaboration and the tacit communal understandings that such collaboration presupposes. Although it is contractual in nature, a critical feature of this type of silence is that it is both a consequence and an index of an unequal distribution of power, if not of actual knowledge. Through it, various forms of power may be partly, although often

incompletely, concealed, denied, or naturalized. Although the type of silence I refer to may be a more or less stable and widely shared cultural convention, it is constituted through, and circumscribed by, the political interests of dominant groups. While silence tends to penetrate social boundaries it is not seamless; different groups, whether constituted by class, ethnicity, racialized identities, gender, or language, have markedly divergent interests at stake in the suppression of discourse (2000, 114).

When it comes to gender in Japan, there is definitely “an unequal distribution of power,” which hegemonic menstruality reflects and helps to perpetuate. Menstruation is a highly gendered experience in Japan; talking about menstruation is no different, as periods should not be discussed in the presence of men. This leads to some discomfort and tough decision-making for young women with (male) significant others – if and how to mention their periods. Even doctors (who are predominantly male in Japan) are often avoided. However, this silence can be broken under special circumstances, whether it is commiseration among female friends or corporate advertising of consumer goods (menstrual products). The discursive silence around menstruation helps to make sure that hegemonic menstruality is “concealed, denied, or naturalized” and that gender norms continue to be reproduced.

While women do not often talk about menstruation among themselves, this silence “should not be read as an absence of political consciousness or knowledge” (Sheriff 2000, 127). Menstruation – and femininity – is not the norm, and women may be compelled to hide abject menstruation in order to appease the male gaze and to meet social standards of feminine appearance and demeanor. Additionally, menstruation, due to its strong connection to reproduction, serves as a reminder that women’s “true” calling is motherhood, and thus women may feel the need to conceal menstruation so that they can get ahead in the workplace. In this way, women’s own silence around and concealment of menstruation is an “adaptation” to gendered power imbalances (Sheriff 2000, 127; Gammeltoft 2016, 441), “a culturally learned survival strategy” (McCormack 2017, 66).

McCormack argues that silence is embodied, “a kind of double suppression encompassing not just what is not said but also an attempt to silence the body” (2017, 58). Hegemonic menstruality does not only stifle talk about menstruation, it also silences particular embodied experiences and relationships between a woman and her menstruating body. Menstrual blood should be contained and concealed, and physical and emotional turmoil – from menstrual cramps and PMS – should not be expressed, whether through voiced complaints or facial/bodily appearance. Additionally, typical methods for dealing with menstrual flow, driven by the proscription to conceal it, limit or reduce a woman’s direct interactions with menstruation, which furthers the notion of menstruation as an annoyance or something inherently dirty (see Chapter 4). Moreover, strong resistance or reluctance to talk about menstruation means that some women needlessly suffer in silence with debilitating menstrual cramps or anxieties about irregular cycles and their potential impact on fertility.

What and how girls and young women learn about menstruation perpetuates this gendered secrecy and silence, as well as other aspects of hegemonic menstruality such as the prevailing notion that menstruation is inherently for the purpose of reproduction and that it represents womanhood (and therefore the capacity for motherhood). While the classroom setting is an important site of menstrual education, friends, family members, and even comics played a

role in young women's developing understandings of menstruation and their bodies as they grew up. Menarche – a person's first period – was the ultimate learning experience – “oh, this is what it's really like” – where abstract knowledge of menstruation sometimes conflicted sharply with the lived experience of it. Learning about menstruation did not stop in grade school, however; even today, young women glean new information about their bodies from social media and smartphone apps.

Talking the Talk: Trends in Their Lives Now

Kana told me that she and her university friends do not really talk about menstruation much, “But we have said things to each other like ‘my cramps are so bad,’ or we may ask someone for a napkin if we forgot to bring one. However, I think that O Chadai, because it's a women's university, makes it easy to talk about it. You can just openly ask for a napkin in a classroom. That's pretty nice.” Most women find that only other women are suitable speaking partners when it comes to the topic of menstruation, and some take pains not to be overheard talking about it by men, much less speak to them about it directly. A woman-dominant environment grants women greater freedom of expression about their periods. Mai recounted to me, “There were less guys in my high school. It was like seven-to-three girls-to-guys. I think it was more open and free about it [menstruation], like [fake shouting] ‘I'm on my period!’ kind of thing.” Haruka shared that the atmosphere is much more relaxed (*raku*) now in her women's university setting than it was in middle school, where talking about menstruation was quite a bother (*mendō*) and avoided. Chinatsu lives in a female dormitory, where co-residents openly talk about whether they are on their period or not, if it is heavy or light, if they use napkins or tampons.

When asked if she spoke with friends now about their periods, Miki said they do not talk about it much, but there are occasions when they will help each other out and unite over menstruation. “Actually, just today, I had a friend tell me that her cramps were so bad she couldn't come to class. But I changed it when I told the professor, since he was a man. I told him that she caught a cold [laughing]. Although my friends and I don't talk about menstruation usually, whenever someone is in a tough spot because of their period – like my friend today – I feel like our solidarity gets three times stronger. Like if someone doesn't have a napkin, everyone is like, ‘Oh, here! Here! Here!’ It's a little strange, but I think it's interesting.”

What exactly do young women talk about with each other when it comes to menstruation? Although a female-friendly environment may elicit more conversation on the topic, the conversation is often still quite limited: pain and discomfort are common themes, as well as requests for menstrual products. Hikari says that she and her close friends will ask each other for a spare napkin if necessary; they also talk about menstrual cycle syncing. Many women said that their conversations with friends about menstruation are limited to asking for napkins, or complaining about cramps, heavy flows, and irritableness. However, some young women do not talk with their friends at all about menstruation. Reina never really talked about it much with friends growing up, and even now she rarely if ever discusses it with her friends. As for why, she says,

Since I first got my period, I've thought of it as something that should be concealed so people don't see it. As for why I think this, it could be the effects of education, maybe.

But this feeling is why I don't talk about it with others much. The first time, talking about it with my mother was a little embarrassing, but she was the only one close to me who could help me deal with it...Biologically speaking, I can understand that it's something that always comes every month for women, but blood coming out is unpleasant...

While other women did not specify reasons why they do not talk about menstruation much or ever with their friends, the majority that I interviewed do not make it a topic of conversation very often, even in a women-only environment.

Occasional discussions about menstruation are often among friends, but they happen between mothers and sisters as well, if their relationships are close – both geographically and emotionally. Momoko sometimes talks with her mom about menstruation. For example, every now and then, when she is going home and taking a night bus, she will be on her period. She will complain to / commiserate with her mom about the annoyance/discomfort of that. Additionally, she and her mom and sisters would often go to *onsen* together, but sometimes it is difficult to coordinate a good timing for all four of them. Saki also talks with her mom occasionally about her period; her mom will notice when she is suffering from menstrual pain and make sure she has medicine and can rest. However, this attention is not quite reciprocal: she has never noticed her mom suffering (*kurushindeiru*) or talked to her mom about her mom's period, so she is not sure if her mom also has bad menstrual pain. However, both Natsuki and Hitomi explained that they had shared experiences of severe menstrual pain with their respective sisters, who also suffered from similar experiences.

However, many interviewees do not know if the members of their own family have similar menstrual experiences as them or not, as over half said that they do not currently talk with or have never really talked with their mothers or sisters about their menstrual cycles and menstrual experiences. This is the case for Kana, who said she does not really talk to her sister about menstruation and does not even know if her sister also has bad cramps like she does. Similarly, Rina has occasionally talked with her younger sister about menstruation, but she does not really talk about it with her older sister, so she does not know if her sister also had/has to deal with an irregular cycle like she does. In some cases, it seems that physical proximity/distance is the root cause of the lack of conversation about menstruation. Growing up, Ayaka would talk to her sister and her mom about menstruation, but not so much anymore, mainly because they do not see each other as often. Nanako does not talk to her mom about menstruation at all currently, since she lives away from home. Nor does she talk to her sisters about it – she talks with them on LINE about everyday things (*nichijō*), but menstruation just does not come up. Overall, these women do not talk much about menstruation; when they do, it is often with other women who are physically and or/emotionally close to them, and it is often in a woman-dominant/male-absent environment.

Euphemisms

When women *do* talk about menstruation, *how* do women refer to it? The two words most commonly used to mean “menstruation” in Japanese are *gekkei* (月経) and *seiri* (生理). The former is associated with formal medicine and has its roots in older, out-of-use words to denote menstruation, such as *getsuji*, *tsuki no mono*, and *tsuki no sawari*, which were discussed in Chapter 2. *Seiri*, on the other hand, is merely a euphemism for menstruation; its original, literal

meaning is “physiology.” However, *seiri* is the word predominantly used now, rather than *gekkei*, and this change came about in the early twentieth century during labor movements for menstruation leave. In order to avoid directly mentioning menstruation through the use of *gekkei*, different, more euphemistic phrases were used such as “*seiri teki koshō* (physiological fault)” (Suzuki 2018, 52). Around the 1930s, in articles in labor movement bulletins, phrases with *gekkei* and *seiri* were still used interchangeably, but gradually *seiri* came to replace *gekkei* in these publications. This change was probably driven by “women who had received the Meiji Period concept that menstruation was ‘something that should be concealed’” (Taguchi 2003, 120).

Because of this, we see the use of *seiri* even in legal code, such as the Labor Standards Act of 1947 which made employers offer menstruation leave – *seiri kyūka* – to their female employees. There are other words that incorporate the euphemistic term such as *seiri tsū* (*seiri* pain) and *seiri yōhin* (*seiri* supplies/products) that are commonplace. The use of *seiri* rather than *gekkei* is so ingrained in everyday Japanese discourse, that there are even some people who do not recognize the word *gekkei* or even think that *seiri* is the correct medical term for menstruation (Ono 2009, 150-151). According to the female developmental psychology researcher, Kawase Yoshimi, “Using a substitute/placeholder [word] to conceal menstruation denies [the existence of] women’s healthy physiological special characteristics/traits” (quoted in Ono 2009, 151). However, Suzuki notes that recently, medical terms like *gekkei* and *shokei* (menarche) are making a return in schools and other educational settings (2018, 53).

When menstruation is talked about, other euphemisms besides *seiri* commonly get used, and these euphemistic expressions get even further from the true word. Menstruation may be referred to using demonstrative pronouns such as *are* (“that”) and *kore* (“this”) (Sakai 2014, 69; Suzuki 2018, 59 and 65). The various grammatical forms and vocabulary choices of the Japanese language fall onto a continuum of intimacy and distance. One refers to people with whom one is socially distant (strangers, acquaintances, superiors, etc.) by their last name with an honorific suffix, while one may be permitted to use first names for those with whom one is socially intimate (close friends, family members, etc.); one may also use one of the most intimate forms of address, *anata* (“you,” also may be interpreted as “dear/sweetie” in this case), with one’s spouse. Proper, socially acceptable use of the Japanese language also entails not saying negative things bluntly, but rather saying them indirectly or just relying on non-vocalized implications, such as when expressing dislike or turning down an offer or invitation. Avoidance of using the word “menstruation” and instead using vague, general pronouns like “that” express a wish to distance oneself from a negative thing, that is, menstruation.

Euphemisms, nicknames, and slang relating to menstruation in Japanese are vast and varied. While I did not ask my interviewees about this (a glaring error I have now realized), Suzuki has conducted a survey among female college students about names for menstruation since 2005 (and has included male students in/since 2012) (2018, 58). She organized the results into different themes/categories: menarche (*shokei*), English words (*eizokugo*), abbreviation of a foreign word (*gairaigoryaku*), pronoun/byword (*daimeishi*), woman/women (*onna*), personification (*gijinka*), customer (*kyaku*), moon/month (*tsuki*), red / blood (*aka / chi*), bleeding (*shukketsu*), accompanying symptoms like anemia / menstrual pain (*hinketsu gekkeitsū nado zuihan shōjō*), female appearance/state (*josei no yōsu*), menstrual products (*seiri yōhin*), and other (*sono hoka*) (Suzuki 2018, 59-64). Suzuki posits that the choice of words for menstruation

depends on the situation – for instance, whether one is speaking to a doctor, or talking to close friends or sisters – and that there is a vast array of opinions on when/whether one should use more euphemistic language (2018, 65 and 73).

Women, in their limited conversations about menstruation, may ask for a napkin, or complain about menstrual pain. In fact, expressions of pain have themselves become euphemisms for menstruation, since pain and discomfort are such a normal part of menstruation for Japanese women. These expressions include “my stomach hurts (*onaka ga itai*)” and “I don’t feel well (*taichō ga warui*).” The vast majority of women I talked to experience menstrual cramps; for some, it is a mild discomfort (*iwakan*), but about one-third report very painful (*kitsui*) cramps. As noted above, menstrual pain was part of one of the themes/categories for Suzuki’s survey on words for menstruation. Suzuki found three main things from her survey: that the past notion of “impurity” stemming from menstruation was virtually absent in the vocabulary; that much of the vocabulary centered on menstruation as a special characteristic of women; and that pain and (heavy) bleeding were a big focus (2018, 73). Compared to the past, Japanese women today are beginning to menstruate at a younger age, have fewer breaks from menstruation (due to few or no pregnancies), and experience heavier and longer bleeding and greater pain. These experiences have shifted perceptions of menstruation, with many women viewing it as a bother/annoyance or something that they detest – but due to pain, discomfort, and inconvenience, not due to past notions of impurity (Suzuki 2018). These are the exact findings from my own interviews, which I will discuss in further detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

Learning and Talking about Menstruation in Childhood

The class in school, the manga, the website my mom showed me – those really relieved me, and... although I knew that it [menstruation] was not something special for me, I mean, everybody experiences it, but I kind of thought that, because I didn’t talk with my friends and I couldn’t really share it, I kind of thought that there was something special going on with me. (Mayu)

Most of the women I talked to first learned about menstruation from either their mother or a special session in elementary school just for girls. However, some of the women had an inkling about the existence of menstruation even before formally learning about it, although for some, what they were exposed to early in life about menstruation did not “click” until later on. For instance, Yuka thinks she probably first heard about menstruation by overhearing her mom talking about “*seiri*” and napkins, but not really understanding what it meant. Mai remembers seeing pad commercials when she was a kid, where they had the blue liquid and compared the absorbency of different pads. She says that at the time she did not know what the ads were for. Miki said that she was aware of menstruation before she got her first period because her mom kept napkins next to the toilet paper in the bathroom: “So rather than saying I *learned* about it, I would say I *knew* about it.” Ayaka had a similar experience; although she learned about menstruation formally in elementary school, she had an awareness of its existence (*sonzai kan*) from being around her mother at home, but no concrete knowledge. Rina also reported an awareness of menstruation before formal school education on it; this was because of the small

trash cans and signs in the school bathrooms – signs for throwing away menstrual products in the appropriate receptacle.

It was Mai's mother who, around second grade, first gave her concrete information about menstruation, rather than a school lesson: "She brought me a pad and she told me like so there's this thing called *seiri*, and I guess she explained it at that time. I wasn't really freaked out that time, I think. Before that, I remember going to the bathroom and someone didn't flush the toilet and there was just blood all over it and that really scared me. That time I didn't tell anyone. But then after my mom told me that, oh that was a period. But she just showed me the pad. I think she talked a little bit about tampons, but she said like you're too early for that, so just use napkins."

Elementary School – Sex/Menstruation Education

Around twenty of the women I interviewed first learned about menstruation in elementary school. What was this crucial learning experience like? Most women reporting learning about it in school sometime around fourth through sixth grade, or around nine to eleven years old (in Japan, elementary school has six grades, and middle school and high school have three each). The setting in which they learned about menstruation was often referred to as a "special class," since most of the time girls and boys were separated for the duration of the class; thirteen women reported that only female students were in attendance, while two reported that both male and female students were present for the lesson. Momoko even remembered that the boys got to play basketball in the gym, while the girls had their class on menstruation. The lesson was often a special session of health class or gym class (*hoken tai'iku*); Miki's class was even held in the school nurse's office (*hoken shitsu*). The class on menstruation lasted only one session, although it may have been repeated later on in elementary school or middle school, with age-appropriate details (more advanced, biological details for older students). The lesson was sometimes accompanied by educational videos, and textbooks or pamphlets with diagrams/visualizations.

What was the content of these lessons? Explanations of menstruation were often packaged along with general information about puberty. This instruction focused on "changes in the body," "the development of the body (*karada no hattatsu*)," or "body differences between males and females (*danjo no karada no chigai*)." This information was only "light (*karui*)," i.e., age-appropriate basic information. Instruction on menstruation also focused on the basics, as well as the biological functioning of the female reproductive system. "*Shikumi*," or "structure," was a recurring keyword used to describe the contents of the lessons – what happens during menstruation, how, and why. For example, Yuka recounted what she learned: after ovulation, if there is no sperm to fertilize the egg, then blood comes out from the uterus.

This example highlights two recurring aspects of menstrual education: blood and pregnancy/reproduction. Reina described the basics of menstruation that she learned as "blood comes out (*chi ga deru*)," and Mai said that the video she watched in her class "explained why blood comes out." Momoko was told that menstruation happens once a month, and it is "a time when blood comes out (*chi ga deru kikan*)." Miki's class also covered how menstrual blood flow affected daily/school life: "We were just simply taught, 'It comes once a month, and you must do these kinds of things. We were told things like, 'You can't go in the pool,' and 'Tell the teacher if you get your first period during a field trip.' We were never taught things like how you might

feel bad or get irritable.” Learning how to manage (*shori*) menstrual flow – that is, using menstrual napkins – was a big part of the class for almost half the women as well. Nine women I spoke to said they were shown napkins and taught how to use them in their menstrual education class. Some received free napkins at this time; Momoko and her female classmates even received a set composed of a cute pouch with napkins in it. One notable thing was that Yui did not remember much about her menstrual education, besides being taught how to store and hide menstrual napkins in a bag.

Menstrual education in school is virtually always packaged with an early version of sex education. This, of course, makes sense, because menarche is one of the signs of puberty, and with puberty often comes the physiological capability of reproduction. Menstruation is explained to girls as “a sign from your body that you can have children (*kodomo ga dekiru karada no sain*)” (Reina) (“*koko ni akachan ga dekimasu yo*” [Kana]; “*kodomo ga tsukuru mono ga kuru*” [Rina]), as “something that is necessary for having a baby” (Hitomi), as part of “becoming an adult” (Saki). It is placed as an end result of failure to reproduce: “Once a month, an egg is released from the ovary, and if there is no fertilization then the uterine lining is shed” (Ami). Menstruation is constructed as a universal trait of womanhood, and, by extension, so is reproduction. Menstruation is something that “happens to every girl” (Hitomi), “In order to prepare for making a baby, this kind of thing will happen from now on, so do not worry [when your first period comes]” (Kana), menstruation is “a natural thing (*shizen na koto*)” that occurs in women’s bodies (Manami).

Elementary School – Female Friends

As in their adult life, the women I interviewed did not talk much about menstruation when they were children, with conversations often limited to asking for napkins or commiserating about menstrual cramps. Some women even went to great lengths to hide their periods from school peers. However, swim class in elementary school and middle school would regularly bring menstruation to the forefront of conversation, as getting your period could prevent you from participating and possibly force you to disclose your situation to teachers (and implicitly to the whole class). The topic of first periods was also a special one in women’s early school years.

A friend who had gotten her first period early (or at least before you) was a valuable resource and source of knowledge about the realities of menstruation for several of the women I talked to. Yui was late in getting her first period compared to most of her friends, and so in elementary school, she would ask her friends who had gotten their period already what it was like. When Momoko was in elementary school, she was the second or third tallest girl in class, and so she was worried she would get her period really early. She consulted with a friend who had gotten hers already; the friend told her what it was like and told her about cramps (*itami*). Once more girls in their friend group got their first periods, they would all compare information and experiences with one another. Hitomi, Haruka, and Rina did not really talk about menstruation with their friends in elementary school – except to ask or confirm who had gotten their first period (“*mō hajimatteru?* [Has it already started?]”). Hikari shared a memory she had from childhood: when she was around eleven or twelve years old, her friend got her period for the first time but did not know what it was and thought she was sick or something was wrong, which really surprised Hikari. When Kana was in fourth grade, or around ten years old, she first

learned about menstruation, not from a class or her mother, but from her friend: “She got her period, and so she taught me a little bit about it, like ‘this sort of thing happens’ and ‘you need to do such-and-such.’ Thanks to her I was able to prepare myself mentally.”

In elementary school, Manami never really talked directly or deeply about menstruation with her friends. Everyone’s development was different, so they got their first periods at different times. Conversation – if you could call it that – was mainly limited to asking for napkins. Saki also very infrequently talked with her friends about menstruation in elementary school, with girls occasionally asking for a napkin or pain medicine. Kana was the same, with she and her friends sometimes swapping pain relief methods for cramps. Reina, one of the young women who currently does not talk about and does not like to talk about menstruation much, said that she never had any “deep” conversations about menstruation with her elementary school friends. Chinatsu, Miki, and Kazumi were among others who never, rarely, or only mentioned in passing menstruation in elementary school.

In fact, the compulsion to conceal menstruation from others was present in some of these women at a young age. While Mai would discuss “basic stuff” about menstruation with her elementary school friends – things like “I’m on my period” or “I have cramps” – she and her friends would avoid talking about it in front of boys: “I remember my friend would say like ‘Oh I’m on my period today,’ or like ‘I have cramps.’ But of course, it’s just girls, within the girls we’d just talk slightly about it...If someone didn’t bring their pad, everyone else would just help out and be like oh I have one...we never talked about it in front of guys, we’d just whisper in our ears if someone was there.” But it was not just boys that a young girl may try to hide her period from. When I asked Mayu about a strong memory or experience related to menstruation that she had, she told me a story from when she was in elementary school: “Back when I was in elementary school, when I first got it [my period], when we all went to the bathroom together, and I was the only one having a period that week, I would try not to make a sound to open my napkin. I remember that there was no garbage can in the stall but then outside next to the sink there was this big garbage can and you put it in that, if you’re alone. But then if you’re with your friends you can’t, right? So I would flush it in the toilet, so it would flush away and it would disappear. So you come out from the bathroom with nothing.” Even now, there are sound-masking devices in public restroom stalls, and napkins advertised with crinkle-free wrappers.

Elementary School – Swim Class

As discussed above, among my interviewees, most rarely talked with their peers about menstruation, except occasionally asking for a spare napkin, commiserating about menstrual cramps, or talking about who had or had not gotten their first period. One exception was a situation that often forced girls to acknowledge menstruation to others: swim class. Getting one’s period meant that one could not participate. However, telling the teacher was sometimes a tricky and embarrassing task, especially if it was a male teacher. Parents would write a note for their daughter, or the child would say something vague like “*taichō ga warui*” or “*onaka ga itai*,” to avoid directly admitting their menstrual status. About half of the young women I talked to had memories of their menstrual cycle conflicting with swim class in either elementary or middle school. These memories showcased two recurring themes: bonding with other female students and conflicted feelings over not participating in the class. Ami had a whole strategizing session with her friends about how to tell – but not tell – their male teacher that she had her period and

needed to sit out class: “We talked about whether or not to write down ‘*seiri*’ as the reason for being absent from the swimming lesson.” Another recounted to me how she made friends with another girl who had to skip the lesson; the two bonded over the fact that they both had heavy menstrual flows.

While in the early twentieth century, girls would not participate in physical education classes during their period because physical activity was believed to be bad for their own physical and mental health, girls today often do not participate in swim class because it is believed to be bad possibly for *other* people’s health. There are worries of menstrual fluid contaminating the swimming pool. If it were not for this mistaken notion, then all girls could purportedly participate in school swim lessons. Indeed, some of the women I interviewed were ambivalent or unhappy about having to sit out of swim class; they talked about how they “had to” or were “forced to” sit on the sidelines. On the other hand, there have been reports lately that schools, citing that it is not in fact unsanitary or unsafe, are rejecting menstruation as an excuse to not participate, which has caused problems for girls with menstrual pain or heavy flows (Tamaki 2018). Either way, figuring out what to do during swim class when they have their period seems to be a rite of passage for many girls.

Home/Family – Learning from Mothers and Others

Only six of the women I interviewed first learned about menstruation from a female family member (five mothers, one grandmother), rather than from a class in elementary school. It seems that most mothers expect the main instruction to come from school, and they may follow up with a brief talk around/after the menstrual education class, or often at the time of their daughter’s first period (All of the women I talked to had received information about what to expect for their first period, either from family, friends, or school, by the time of their first period – nobody was caught completely off guard, which is not the case for other girls who may only receive information once they have begun menstruating). Mai’s instruction from her mother was discussed above. Shiori was another interviewee who first learned about menstruation from her mother, who told her that “once I hit puberty, then I would start bleeding, and that that’s something that should occur for women that are healthy at least like once a month. And it usually ends around fifty or something.” Hikari first learned about menstruation at the age of eight from her grandmother, who, one night before bed, told her that menstruation is “women’s bodies preparing to make a baby.” She did not understand much at the time, but when she got her first period, she thought, “Oh, so this is what my grandmother was talking about.” On the other hand, Hikari’s mother never talked about it much with her.

Eleven of the interviewees said that their mother taught them how to use menstrual products (almost exclusively menstrual napkins, not tampons – although Mai’s mother did show her one but told her she was not old enough to use it). This almost always occurred at the time of the daughter’s first period, although occasionally beforehand. For Ayaka, even though she had learned about menstruation in school, she still did not know what to do when she got her first period, so she told her mom, who then got her napkins and taught her how to use them. The ideology of concealment was also perpetuated during this time. Hitomi’s mother explicitly taught her how to change and throw away her used menstrual napkins “so that others can’t see (*mienai yō ni*).” Reina’s mother gave her similar instructions: “She taught me that boys might feel

unpleasantness [*iya*] if they see it [menstruation/pads], so I should make sure they don't see it... 'Please conceal it,' she told me."

Mothers also were often the ones to convey to fathers that their daughter had gotten her first period. For some girls, the first period talk with their mother was also accompanied by some marker of celebration: *sekihan* for dinner or maybe new clothes. And while for most women their mothers were not their primary or first source of information about menstruation, they did still learn things about it from their mothers. Yui learned from her mother how to track her menstrual cycle by circling the days of her period on her calendar. After Hikari stayed home from school because of menstrual cramps, her mother told her that this pain was normal and there was no need to skip school. Chinatsu's mother told her to pay attention to her menstrual flow and watch out for signs of "danger (*abunai*)," like if there was anything that looked like pieces of liver. Reina knew that she could go to her mother with any questions she had; plus, it was her only choice, not having internet at the time.

Media – Manga Magazines

I asked the interviewees about what media they saw as children that had depictions of or information on menstruation. These media depictions in Japan are still few and far between, mostly limited to product advertisements, girls' manga magazines, and Western films. Two women mentioned Western films (one of them being *Carrie!*) as a media depiction of menstruation from their childhood. Five women recalled seeing advertising related to menstrual products – either menstrual napkins or painkillers – as children, on television or in fashion magazines. Seven women recounted reading about menstruation in manga magazines – *Nakayoshi* and *Chao* were two of the magazines mentioned by name. Kana and Ami saw ads for menstrual products in these magazines; Kana remembers seeing a leaflet (*chirashi*) for panty liners (*orimono shīto*) in the magazine. Momoko recalls that these magazines had little sections on sex education (*seikyōiku*) in manga format. Mayu also read these kinds of magazines as a child, around the age of eleven. She described the contents of the manga and informational sections about girls' first period experiences, and stories about menstruating girls dealing with swim class or frustration with friends. These manga magazines served an important role for Nao around the same age as well, who even wrote in to a magazine's advice column, which answered readers' questions and concerns in manga form.

Menarche Experiences

What better way to begin this section with my own menarche experience? I was twelve years old, almost thirteen. I was in seventh grade, and it was the third quarter of the school year, around February. I was a bit late in getting my period among my group of friends, but I had been armed with knowledge from school instruction starting in fourth or fifth grade. I knew what to expect. Or so I thought. One day, after a long bus ride home, I noticed when I went to the bathroom that there was a big brown stain in the middle of my underwear. Confusion and humiliation consumed me. Without any illness or physical sensations to alert me, I had somehow shit myself. It was not in the back of my underwear, but the only thing it resembled was a poop stain. I wrapped the underwear up in toilet paper until it was probably as large as a softball, put it in my bedroom trashcan, and then placed more balled-up toilet paper over it to hide it even more. Everything was fine at school the next day, I took the bus home as usual, but again that afternoon

there was the same stain. I was appalled, frustrated, and angry at myself – get a grip, Maura!, I told myself. Again, a boatload of toilet paper was used to cover up this shame. On the third day, the stain in my underwear was more red than brown, and it finally clicked. I stuck a pad in my underwear, and, feeling like I was wearing a diaper, awkwardly waddled my way to my parents’ room. I told my mom I started my period. She asked if I was ok, if I needed any pads. I said I was all good, and that was that. In total, my first period lasted ten days, with the days around the beginning and end having more of that brown discharge. No one had told me that period blood could be brown.

The estimated ages of menarche reported by interviewees ranged from around nine or ten years old to fifteen years old. The most common reported ages of first menstruation were between ten and twelve years old. This falls around the last year or two of elementary school (fifth and sixth grade) and the beginning of middle school (seventh grade). As discussed above, when someone got their first period or whether someone had gotten their first period already was a topic of conversation among many friend groups in elementary school and middle school. The friend group was perhaps used as a standard to measure oneself against – whether one got their period early, with everyone else, or late. This may explain why some women remarked that they got their first period “early” or “late” when their menarche age is close to average at the population level. For instance, Yuka estimated that she got her first period when she was around eleven years old, in sixth grade; she said that her development/growth (*seichō*) started a bit early. Miki also said that she got her first period “unusually early (*igai to hayakatta*);” she was around the age of ten or eleven. Some women did have slightly later ages of menarche though. Estimating her age of menarche to be fourteen years old, in eighth grade (second year of middle school), Yui said that she got her first period a bit late. Haruka explained that she got her first period late, around thirteen to fourteen years old, because her body was small and late in developing. Shiori got her first period when she was fifteen years old, around tenth grade (first year of high school). She was a runner and very athletic during that time, and she was also quite skinny, she said as an explanation.

The most common emotions experienced by these women at the time of their first period were surprise, worry/unease, and fright. Eight women said they were at least a little if not completely surprised when they started their first period. One day after returning home from school in seventh grade (first year of middle school), Reina got her first period: “I remember that I felt some sort of discomfort (*iwakan*), and when I went to the toilet, I saw blood [on my underwear] and was shocked (*bikkuri shita*). I asked my mom, ‘What do I do (*dō shiyō*)??’” Hitomi also got her period around the same age, which was a bit scary (*kowai*) and surprised her. Thankfully, both Reina and Hitomi were at home when they started their periods, so they were able to seek help from their moms right away. Yui was not so lucky, although she was still moderately prepared. She got her period a bit late – during her second year of middle school at fourteen years old. She recounted, “My first period came right when I was at a *gasshuku* [overnight trip] for my *juku* [cram school]. Since I didn’t know when my period would come, my mom suggested I bring along menstrual products just in case. Then my period came while I was there. I didn’t really have anyone I could go to, and I was so surprised, but I figured out on my own how to use the menstrual products. When I got home, I told my mom how I had gotten my period and how it caught me by surprise.” The experience of getting her period for the first time

was so shocking (*shōgekiteki*) for her, that it became her strongest memory related to menstruation (a question I asked all interviewees).

Mayu also had a detailed, lasting memory of her difficult menarche experience. I asked her to define what menstruation was to her, and she launched into her first menstruation experience. She was in New York, not Japan, and she remembers being frightened. She was at school, and she did not have close friends to talk to about it, although she later told her mom. Later, I asked her to elaborate on this experience, and it turns out she was not very good at English at the time and did not have any Japanese-speaking friends. But she actually talked to her ESL teacher who helped her and would continue to support and help her when she had headaches or cramps. She explained,

I actually noticed it before I went to school, so kind of like in the morning. And then I didn't have time, I rush in the mornings, I didn't have time to talk to my mom. But then there was something going on in my underwear. I think I put it in the laundry hamper and changed into a new pair. And then my mom notices, right? My mom notices after I've gone to school, so my mom's like, "Oh yeah, she got her period, but she didn't tell me." And then I went to school and there's also something going on, right, and although I had [read] the manga [about menstruation], I didn't have anything [napkins] with me, so I put toilet paper and that kind of thing. At recess after lunch, I would always play with friends, but I didn't really feel like it, so I spent like thirty minutes in the bathroom, and I didn't know what to do. My friend was kind of like, "Oh you were sick, are you ok? Do you have to go home?" And I was kind of like, "It's ok," and I just have to make it to the end of the school day. And then I came back, and my mom was waiting for me and asked, "Do you have anything to tell me?" I really remember it – it's been ten years... Yeah, I apologized for not telling her. She was like, "Don't worry, but how did you spend your day at school [without napkins]?"

Upon further reflection, although she was frightened, the information she had acquired beforehand gave her relief – oh this is how it is. Even though the magazine she read (see above section on media) said that it happens to all girls, because she did not know anyone (or could not talk to anyone) who had also gotten their period, she thought there was something special about her. Even though it is not really special, she said.

On the other hand, some women had quite mundane experiences regarding their first periods and had only vague memories of that time in their life, rather than the detailed recollections others had. Moreover, there were some women who were not worried or frightened at all because they felt prepared by the knowledge and education they had received prior to the experience. While Hikari did distinctly remember when she got her first period (a Tuesday evening in the summer when she was ten years old, to be precise), she was not worried about it, because she remembered what her grandmother had told her about menstruation a couple of years before then. Kana got her first period at age twelve, in January during sixth grade; she said she was very well-informed, so she was not really surprised when it happened (*amari odorokimasendeshita*).

While all women had had instruction on menstruation from school, family, or both by the time of their first period, some still felt completely unprepared for the real thing. Ayaka was

thirteen years old (in eighth grade) when she got her first period while at home. It was a bit surprising, but also relieving since she had been waiting for it to happen for a while. However, even though she had learned about menstruation, she still did not know what to do, so she told her mom, who got her napkins and taught her how to use them. Of course, reading or learning about something can be totally different from experiencing it firsthand. And there were a few women, like me, who were not immediately able to recognize what was in their underwear for what it was. Natsuki got her period around age ten (fifth grade), although she said that at first she was not really sure what it was, so she just used a panty liner to stop her underwear from getting stained, and then told her mother about it. Chinatsu's mother also helped her realize that she had gotten her first period. Ami said that when she got her first period at age eleven (fifth grade), it was not very clear whether it was menstrual blood or discharge based on the color, but later on she was more certain. Saki also got her period around age eleven. She was surprised by it because it did not seem to be the way she was taught in school. "I didn't recognize it at first. I was shocked and confused at the stain in my underwear. There wasn't much [blood] and I didn't have any cramps, plus it was sort of brown. And we were taught that blood comes out [during menstruation], so I thought, 'What in the world is this?' It didn't match what was in my head... But my mom recognized the stain when doing laundry, and so she said to me, 'Oh, so you got your period?' That's when I understood what it was."

Besides the ones who were informed by their mothers, all women told their mothers that they had gotten their first period as soon as it happened, or as soon as they could (for cases like Yui). As discussed above, this was sometimes the first moment that mother and daughter discussed menstruation together. This was also when mothers would teach their daughters how to use menstrual napkins. Six women remembered that their family ate *sekihan* for dinner when they had gotten their first period; this was a more common practice in the past but is evidently still around for a few families. A couple of fathers were even informed of their daughter's first period through this meal. In addition to *sekihan*, Momoko's mother bought her and her younger sisters (when they got their first periods) cute underwear to celebrate the occasion.

Teenage Years

Learning – Sex/Menstruation Education

Sex education, including menstrual education, would continue intermittently through middle school and high school, with instruction becoming more in-depth and technical. These sessions also covered sex and pregnancy in more detail.

When I visited the Sunny Days shop in Osaka to interview the owner about her reusable organic cotton cloth napkin company, she invited me to attend a cloth-napkin workshop in Tokyo later that summer that she was organizing with Made in Earth, another cloth napkin company (whose owner I had already acquainted myself with). This was an educational and charity event in which participants, including a couple dozen middle-schoolers, made cloth napkins that would be donated to schoolgirls in Kenya. Participants were split into two groups, with one half beginning work on the cloth napkins and the other half attending a presentation given by the Sunny Days owner; the groups swapped halfway through the event.

This presentation was about the menstrual cycle, and the owner had a slideshow to go along with her talk. The presentation was titled, "To Know Menstruation Is to Know 'Life': The

Story of Menstruation That You Think You Know but Don't.”²⁸ The talk combined simple biological information and illustrations with gendered metaphors and an emphasis on reproduction. For instance, the speaker displayed a basic diagram of the female reproductive system with the uterus, vagina, ovaries, and fallopian tubes labeled. She went on to describe the uterus as a “room for raising/nurturing a baby (*aka-chan o sodateru heya*)” and the endometrium as “the baby's bed (*aka-chan no beddo*)” that is soft and warm and provides nourishment. Since the uterus is the baby's room, menstruation is thus “spring cleaning for the uterus (*shikyū no ō-sōji*).” “For women, preparing the uterus and the body is a truly important job,”²⁹ she said, because women's bodies create new life. When talking about ovulation and fertilization, she showed a slide with an illustration of an anthropomorphized feminine “princess” egg and a masculine “prince” sperm. She told the audience, because fertilization is only possible within six hours of ovulation, “it certainly is a miracle!”³⁰ She ended the presentation with the following sentiment: “When negative feelings about menstruation fade, you will come to value both your body and yourself, [and] the gloomy time [of menstruation] will become a smiling time.”³¹

Since this was an informal menstruation education “lesson” for the event participants, it followed the simplistic style of late elementary school and early middle school menstruation/sex education, covering basic reproductive anatomy of the female body. Like many school lessons on menstruation, the speaker emphasized menstruation's connection to reproduction and fertility, positioning menstruation as crucial preparation for a “baby.” The only portion of the talk that was perhaps a bit different from school lessons was her direct call to think of menstruation more positively (although this was still couched in terms of reproduction – menstruation is a positive, valuable phenomenon because it makes the miracle of conception possible).

Talking

Middle School Friends

Since the age range of menarche spanned both the late years of elementary school and the early years of middle school, the topic of one's first period was still a focal point of conversation about menstruation when these women were in middle school themselves. From sixth year elementary school to first year middle school, Ami and her friends would sometimes talk about menstruation, mostly about who they thought had gotten their first period or not yet: “I remember we talked like, ‘so-and-so has gotten her first period’ and ‘she is quite small so no wonder she hasn't gotten her period yet.’”

Still, beyond discussions of menarche, talk about menstruation was usually rare and fleeting. In middle school, Ayaka and her friends maybe talked about menstruation a few times, not a lot, not “deeply” (*fukaku wa shaberanai*). Just things like, “today I have my period” or “my stomach hurts [because of my period].” Pain emerged as a theme when I was asking about the women's conversations about menstruation during this time of their lives; in addition to Ayaka, five other women said that they did not talk about menstruation often, but when they did, conversation revolved around cramps and stomach pain. For Yui, in middle school, the period

²⁸ “*seiri o shiru koto wa ‘inochi’ o shiru koto: shitteiru yō de shiranai seiri no hanashi*”

²⁹ “*josei ni totte, shikyū ya karada o soroeru koto wa hontō ni taisetsu na shigoto nan desu.*”

³⁰ “*masa ni kiseki nan desu!*”

³¹ “*seiri ni tai suru negatibu na kimochi ga naku naru to, jibun no karada o taisetsu ni omou yō ni naru koto, jibun jishin o taisetsu ni omou koto ni tsunagaru. yūtsu na kikan ga egao no kikan ni kawarimasu.*”

talk with her friends consisted of them complaining about cramps/stomach pain and feeling bad (“*kibun ga ochikonde*”), and how annoying/bad their periods were (“*iya da naa*”).

Overall, besides complaining of pain and discomfort or asking for a spare napkin from a friend, these women really did not talk about menstruation much as preteens or young teens. In our interview, Kazumi asked me if girls in the US talk about it, and I say that at that age it is probably embarrassing so they do not. She replied that it is probably the same case here in Japan; it is embarrassing so they never talk about it. However, a female-dominant or female-only environment was more conducive to openness about menstruation. While most women attended coed middle schools, a number of them attended all-girls high schools, where they reported it was easier to talk about menstruation.

High School Friends

At the outset of this chapter, I discussed how the female college students I interviewed who were attending a women’s university felt much more comfortable talking about menstruation in such an environment. This holds true for earlier in their lives as well – in girls-only high schools. For Haruka, talking about menstruation in her coed middle school was a bother (*mendō*), but in her all-girls high school, it was much more relaxed (*raku*), and girls could talk more openly. Momoko also contrasted her middle school experiences from her high school ones: in middle school, she and her friends did not talk about menstruation much, but in high school, because the class was predominantly girls, they would talk about menstruation frequently – asking for napkins or voicing complaints (“*kyō wa seiri dakara darui wa* [I have my period today so I’m really sluggish/out-of-it]”). When Mai was in high school, there were way fewer boys (about a seven-to-three girl-to-guy ratio, she said), so the girls felt freer and more open to talk about it (fake shouting, “I’m on my period”).

However, for other young women, their (in)frequency of talking about menstruation remained the same from middle school through high school. Kazumi said that she and her friends never talked about menstruation in high school. Growing up, Hitomi never really talked with her friends much about menstruation. When they were young it was pretty much only whether or not they had gotten their first period yet – “*mō hajimatteru?*” And then in high school, it was just “*motteru?* (Do you have [a napkin]?).” Four other women said that their conversations about menstruation in high school were infrequent and mainly limited in scope to requests for products and to complaints about physical discomfort caused by their periods. Common phrases uttered in these conversations included “*taichō ga warui*” / “*guai ga warui*” (“I don’t feel well”) and “*onaka ga itai*” (“my stomach hurts”). Sometimes they would not just complain about pain and discomfort, though; they would also swap advice. Rina said that she and her high school friends would talk with each other about their worries (*nayandeiru koto / fuan*) concerning their periods. Kana and her friends also consulted (*sōdan*) one another about medicine and pain relief methods: “Since the amount of pain varies from person to person, we would ask those around us what we should do. But sometimes, medicine just doesn’t work, so there was nothing we could do about it (*shō ga nai yo ne*).” Period cramps are a fact of life.

Besides cramps, some of these young women’s worries in high school were about irregular menstrual cycles (see Chapter 6 for more experiences of irregularity). Saki said that she and her friends did not talk much about menstruation all the way from elementary school through high school. However, she did know that one of her high school friends was having problems

with her period. Her friend got super skinny and then her period got really short (only lasting two days). While menstruation was not a frequent topic of conversation for Saki, this memory shows that she and her friend shared worries about their menstrual cycles. Shiori also had friends with irregular cycles. She said, “Some girls didn’t have it once a month, some did, and the girls who didn’t have it once a month were like, not freaking out, but just, I think they were used to it, I don’t think they saw the seriousness behind having late periods, so they were just saying, ‘Oh I don’t have periods once a month.’ Like no one really told them to go to the hospital or anything. They just thought it was natural...I heard that delayed periods aren’t healthy for your body because it’s a sign that something’s off. I thought they should go, and I think I told them but none of them really thought of it as a really serious issue.”

Mothers were also confidantes and a source of information about menstrual irregularity in high school. Rina does not talk with her mom about menstruation currently, but when she was experiencing an irregular cycle, she would often talk/consult with (*sōdan*) her mom about that. Nanako never really talked to her older sister about menstruation, but she has talked to her mom about it. In high school, for three months her period did not come, and she consulted with (*sōdan*) her mom about it. When Ami was younger and experiencing irregularity, she did consult her mom about it. However, she did eventually stop talking with her mom about it because, as she said, “I gradually got used to it [the irregularity], so I eventually stopped consulting with my mom about it. Also, when my mom was young, she also had an irregular period a lot, and so she told me not to worry about it that much. Plus, I gradually started to understand the causes of irregularity for me, like if it’s summertime or if I have a lot of stress, so I stopped talking with my mom about it.” It seems that in high school, through conversations with friends and mothers, young women become more aware of the varied experiences of menstruation for the people around them, and they develop a stronger sense of what is considered “normal” in the realm of menstrual cycles.

Girls could also learn about varied menstrual products through conversations with friends. Often, the women I interviewed learned about tampons from friends who used them. This was the case for Saki, who had a friend in their high school swimming club who used them but knew no one else who did (see Chapter 4 for more on tampon experiences and perceptions). Yui also heard about a different menstrual product in high school. A friend told her about a product you can use to “stop” your period so you can go swimming – well, not exactly “stop” she explained, but you insert it and catch (*uketomeru*) the menstrual blood. She did not remember what it was called, and even though her friend used it and she learned about it from them, she never used it. [Seems like she was describing tampons, to me, but when I gave her the name, she did not seem familiar with it – maybe the cup?] However, just as important as who women talk to about menstruation is who they *do not* talk to about it.

Who They Do Not Talk to – Boys and Men

I met Kazumi for our interview in a laidback café near campus. The venue was nearly empty when we arrived, but about halfway through the questions, a young man about her age or so sat down two tables away, and she started whispering her answers after that. She even shushed me after I asked a question with the word “*seiri*” in it. I did check a couple times that it was still ok to have the interview here and/or discuss these questions.

She said as long as she/we can omit the word “*seiri*” it would be ok. Still lots of whispering. Which left me worried about the recording. But here is where the interview guide really helped because we could just talk about “Question 3” rather than “menstrual cups,” for instance.

A male presence reduces a casual conversation to furtive whispers while hunched over a café two-top. We have seen that young women will not necessarily shy away from talking about menstruation with other women, so why is there a moratorium on period talk around men? When talking to the young women about this phenomenon, no one could point to a specific reason why they avoided talking about menstruation in front of or with boys/men and none remembered ever being explicitly taught to hide menstruation from them. And yet most do. When Suzuki (2018, 71) conducted her survey of nicknames and ambiguous pseudonyms for menstruation, she asked female respondents (college students) why they use such terms instead of *seiri* or *gekkei*. They told her that talking about menstruation is taboo and that they did not want boys to know what they were talking about (2018, 71). Among the women I spoke to, there was an implicit awareness of menstruation as a “taboo” topic. I asked Chinatsu what she thought about this, and she replied:

There’s sort of a taboo. It’s not that you can’t talk about it, but there’s a sense that you shouldn’t talk about it in a loud voice. Among girls, I can say stuff like, “I’m on my period today,” but I wouldn’t say that to men. Among girls, it’s not uncomfortable to talk about, but I’m reluctant to talk with men about it. So it’s sort of taboo...It’s not that I want to conceal it, I just don’t want to talk about it. For instance, telling my female coworkers, “I’m taking a break because of my cramps,” a so-called public announcement like that I could easily do, but I have the sense that I couldn’t do that with men. So it’s that kind of taboo, I guess.

For Hikari, she also recognized the social compulsion to keep men and menstruation separate. When I asked her whether men understand menstruation very well, she said in a decisive tone without hesitation, “They definitely don’t understand it. They haven’t experienced it for themselves, and also, in Japan, people hide talk of menstruation from men, so I think there are very few who know about it in detail.” For Natsuki, although she admits no one ever told/instructed her, she felt an implicit understanding that you do not talk about menstruation around boys.

From a young age, many women implicitly learned to hide menstruation from male classmates (and male teachers – see above section on swim class and the discomfort caused by having to reveal one’s menstrual status to a male teacher). Mai and her female friends in elementary school would talk about their periods – basic stuff like “I’m on my period” or “I have cramps.” They would help each other out if someone forgot to bring pads or otherwise needed one. However, they would avoid talking about it in front of boys, or whisper to each other if they needed to talk about it in front of others. Girls who did not hide menstruation well enough from boys could be teased about it. This happened to Reina and some of her friends in grade school:

There are a lot of stories like this, but there are people for whom menstrual cramps hurt super badly – so much that men wouldn't be able to endure it – and so they might say they really want to rest, or they might go to the nurse's office. And boys saw that and would make fun of them, saying things like, "Oh, you're just playing hooky." Seeing that, I gradually perceived menstruation as something embarrassing, something to conceal...I don't want it to be exposed, I don't want to be teased...

From this, she came to the view that men do not understand menstrual pain or what it is like to experience menstruation. Indeed, while boys may have learned a bit of the mechanical basics of menstruation, they often seemed to lack practical knowledge. One of Haruka's strongest memories related to menstruation was when her friend in middle school was explaining to boys why girls sometimes sit out for swimming class. With this memory, we can also see that not *everyone* avoids talking about menstruation with boys and men, but many do avoid it, further compounding boys'/men's lack of understanding.

Male Family Members

While young women may talk to their mothers or other close female family members about menstruation, many do not broach the subject at all with their male family members. Seven women said that they have never talked to their fathers about their periods, and most who have brothers do not talk to them about it either. Manami is one of these women, never having talked to her father or her brother about menstruation. When she got her first period, her mother made *sekihan* for dinner, and she assumes that her mother told her father about their daughter's first period "indirectly (*kansetsuteki ni*).” Hitomi also has not ever talked to her father about menstruation, and she would never talk to her brother about it – it is embarrassing (*hazukashii*). When I asked Miki if she had ever talked to her father about menstruation, she said no, and then she asked incredulously if anybody actually does that –talk to men about menstruation, because “for me, if they're not my doctor, I could never! It's something super private. I would only want to talk to women about it.” When Reina got her period, she told her mom, and her mom taught her how to put on napkins, when to change them, and how to throw them away – especially how to hide it from her brothers. Additionally, she is embarrassed when menstrual product commercials come on while she is watching TV with her brothers. Mayu feels the same way: “Every time I watch those commercials, I feel so...and particularly with my dad or my brother, and we're watching the TV together and then when the commercial comes on, I feel so weird. Like why would this commercial be up on TV? Just keep it in magazines.”

While the above women never talked to their male family members about menstruation, there were still a fair number who did, although it was almost always mentioned indirectly. Like Miki, Mai's mother made *sekihan* for dinner when she got her first period. While they were eating it, her mother asked her father if he knew why they were eating it. He did not know (he only vaguely knew that it was a celebratory dish), and so her mother told him that their daughter got her period. However, Mai was not embarrassed by this; she thought it was funny. Nao's mother was also a messenger to her father about her first period. Her father was abroad on business at the time, but he called her to check up on her, but did not directly mention her period. Only twice in her life has her father mentioned her period, referring to it as her “lady's day.” Chinatsu's family also had *sekihan* to celebrate her first period; this was probably the only way

her dad was “told” about it, although she is not even sure if he recognized it for what it was. Natsuki is relatively open about her period with her younger brother; she appreciates that he is nice(r) to her when she is on her period, since he knows that she suffers from severe menstrual cramps.

Significant Others

The women I interviewed varied in their views on discussing menstruation with a significant other. They also varied in terms of their dating experiences. As mentioned in the introduction, Ochadai women have a reputation for focusing on their studies instead of opposite-sex interactions; plus, there are not opportunities to meet men on campus like there are at coed universities. Seven of the women I interviewed had never dated before, but not all of them felt the same way about talking about menstruation with a hypothetical/future significant other. They ranged from staunch opposition to enthusiasm. Ayaka falls into the former category. She said, “I definitely wouldn’t talk to them about it. It’s not a pretty image – blood is coming out, and it’s dirty. So it’s embarrassing [to talk about].”

Other women explained that they *would* talk to their significant other about their periods, as far as it was necessary or practical. Miki said that although she hasn’t dated before, if she had a significant other, and if they had a deep/serious relationship, she may talk to him about her period, since it relates to pregnancy and birth. Yui felt the same way, saying she would probably talk to her future partner about her period when it is necessary; the menstrual cycle is related to conception / trying for a baby, so it is important to know about it. Yuka had a similar opinion, as did Haruka, who said that if she was dating and living together with someone, she would talk about her period with them.

A couple of the women without dating experience did want to be able to talk to their significant others about their periods. Hikari does not have a boyfriend/partner, but if she did, she could and would talk to him about menstruation. She also does not think it would be a big deal to ask him to buy menstrual products for her. I asked Manami if she had a boyfriend, would she talk to him about menstruation: she “think[s] it would be good to (be able to) talk about menstruation.”

Over ten of the women interviewed had dating experience or had a boyfriend at the time of the interview. Only two of them said that they had not or would not talk to their boyfriend about their periods. Hitomi said that she has never talked about her period with a person she was dating. Kazumi was dating someone at the time of the interview, but she has not and will not talk with him about her period. And she definitely wouldn’t ask him to buy menstrual products for her. She seemed shocked at the notion that someone would or could do that. Reina said, “I’ve never talked about [my period] with him in direct words, but if he asked to go out when I happened to have my period, then I would say something like, ‘Sorry, my stomach sorta hurts, so today’s [not good],’ and he would reply with something like ‘Oh, I see.’” Natsuki also hasn’t really talked about it with the man she is dating, other than just informing him when she is on her period and cannot meet up with him.

For the other women who have or have had boyfriends and talk to them about their periods, they seem to greatly appreciate the ability to be open about how they are feeling, as well as receiving sympathy and understanding from their boyfriends. Shiori had been dating a guy for about a month leading up to our interview, and she will “give him a heads up that I will get really

emotional the next few days” when she is on her period. She says that she could ask him to run to the store and buy her pads if she was in a pinch, and that he tries to be more sensitive and “make sure he won’t say the wrong things” when she is on her period. Nanako said, “When my period is coming, I get irritable, right? I’d like him to be understanding of that, so I let him know ahead of time.” Rina says she apologizes to her boyfriend when she is irritable (“*ira ira gomennasai*”), and Mayu’s boyfriend notices that she is on her period when she gets extra hungry or irritated. When Momoko has bad cramps and cannot go out, she will tell her boyfriend the reason she cannot hang out or go out on a date. Mai said she can talk freely with her boyfriend about her period: “I’ll tell him, ‘I’m on my period. I’m emotionally broke right now, help me’ [laughing]. He’d understand why I’m being so emotional. I speak very freely with him... There was this one time that I was staying with him, and I had these *terrible*, terrible cramps and I just could *not* move, and so I had him buy some pads and medicine, and that was very sweet.”

Who They Do Not Talk to – Doctors

Many of the women I talked to experienced, either currently or at some point in their lives, severe cramps and/or irregular menstrual cycles (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 for more on these experiences). However, almost none of them had ever consulted a doctor about their menstrual difficulties. This hesitance to see a doctor is related to the fact that most gynecologists in Japan are men.³² The association of gynecology with pregnancy and sex also causes some embarrassment that makes these women shy away from making an appointment. When asked what they would do if/when they had these difficulties, eight women said that would consult with (*sōdan*) their mother before doing anything else. They might also ask their sister if they have one, or they might do a search on the internet about their issues. Only after this would they go to a doctor, and only if it was necessary. Even though Reina has a heavy flow and a lot of menstrual pain, she has never gone to the doctor. When asked why, she said, “My mom had the same kind of experiences, so I haven’t consulted with a doctor. Maybe it would be better to go, but this kind of thing, since it’s related to sex, I’d have to go to a gynecologist. People go to the gynecologist when they get pregnant, so although maybe now I feel differently, but because of that, in middle school and high school I would have been too embarrassed to go. I’d worry that I’d be looked at strangely.” Kana also suffers from severe cramps and heavy menstrual flow, but she has not gone to a doctor; she wants to see one for her cramps, but she has not worked up the courage yet.

Learning about Menstruation as an Adult **Internet/Social Media**

The internet is a double-edged sword, especially when it comes to personal health information. On the one hand, there is a plethora of knowledge and information at users’ fingertips – specialized knowledge can become common knowledge. On the other hand, some “knowledge” is just based on anecdotes of unique (non-generalizable) personal experiences, and of course, there is a whole lot of straight-up misinformation out there.

Women can shop online for menstrual products; they can read reviews and blog posts about other women’s experiences with certain products. This is how Natsuki first found out

³² In 2004, two-thirds of gynecologists in Japan were men (Ivry 2009, 27).

about reusable cloth napkins and what got her interested in trying them out (see Chapter 7 for more on cloth napkins and cloth napkin company websites).

Nao was passionate about self-education through the internet and social media. She enjoys reading, and since high school she has done her own research online about things she wants to know more about but that were not covered in school. This is how she found out about conditions like PMDD and PCOS. She said these are things we all should know about, but they are not covered in school sex education or menstrual education. She also learned about the dangers of TSS online; she saw a story on Snapchat recently where a woman had to get an amputation because of TSS, so she does not want to use tampons anymore.

As mentioned above, many women are uncomfortable going to a doctor for problems with their periods or menstrual cycles. Instead, they turn to their mothers, and in some cases the internet. This is what Manami did when her period stopped coming for two or three months while she was studying abroad. After several years of an irregular cycle through high school and university, Nanako also turned to the internet. She searched about what causes your period not to come; she found that often it was because your nutrition is not good or you are too thin. Neither of these was the case for her, but since she did not have any other problems besides a missed period (“*sore igai ni betsu ni fuchō ga aru wake janakatta*”), she was not too worried. Kazumi learned about PMS after doing internet research as to why she gets depressed before her period. She and four other women, none of whom had an irregular cycle, said that if they had troubles (*nayami*) related to their period, they would do internet research about it. This is a gap in research on menstrual education that needs to be addressed in-depth.

Cycle Tracking Apps

Seven of the women interviewed use a smartphone app to track or record their menstrual cycle. The most commonly used app was Luna Luna, followed by Selene. Other apps include Life, Glow, and Karada no Chikara. Selene can provide users their ovulation dates and chances of pregnancy, and users can record their emotional/mental state in addition to their period data. Kazumi uses Luna Luna to record the beginning and the end of her period. She does not use it for anything else, but she showed me that the app can also record your (basal body) temperature, your weight, “events” (like a date or appointment), your “*taichō*” (using a smiley face chart), and your sexual activity. You can even use it to remind yourself to change your contacts, although that has nothing to do with your period, she said. Most of the women who used menstrual cycle tracking apps started using them when they first got a smart phone around the end of high school or beginning of college. They found out about the apps from friends or mobile ads.

I want to highlight one woman’s use of apps for cycle tracking, which helps someone learn about their own bodies and their own menstrual cycles, and for learning information about menstruation in general. Mai uses Karada no Chikara to record her period, as well as amount of blood, blood color, her weight, and her basal body temperature (she actually uses a special digital thermometer that uploads data directly to her app). She tracks her cycle because it is very irregular, coming about every month and a half or even longer. At our interview she showed me her most recently recorded cycles in her app: forty-nine days, forty-nine days, one hundred days, twenty-five days, forty-nine days. While she only intermittently records things like her weight and menstrual blood color, lately she has been diligently recording her basal body temperature. She had learned from a friend that this can help predict one’s menstrual cycle. She had also

visited a gynecologist (one of the only interviewees to do so), who had instructed her to record her waking body temperature for a few months and then come back for a follow-up appointment. Mai also uses Luna Luna. She learns new information from “articles” or information that appear in the app. She learned that “if you don’t have a good cycle, then you might not have babies in the future – that’s a risk.” Also, “Actually in the app it tells you that, well I don’t listen to like everything that they say, but usually it’s the kind of things like during this period you should avoid foods, like too much fat foods...these kinds of articles will tell you that, so I guess I kind of listen to that. They always say like the day after your period is over, and you work out, then you’re more active and it’s easier for you to lose weight. I don’t necessarily listen to them, I’m so lazy...That’s what it usually says, when your period is over, it’s a good time for you to go jogging or something. And then whenever you’re on your period, it tells you, stay steady right now, stay calm, maybe grab a nice hot glass of tea or something.” Again, it is important to consider these sources of information when investigating menstrual education, especially with more and more people having access to the internet and mobile apps.

Conclusion

In order to understand hegemonic menstruality in Japan, one should start by exploring childhood, when notions of concealing menstruation are first introduced, both through what girls learn about menstruation and how they learn to talk (or not talk) about it. When it comes to learning about menstruation, school was the most common first exposure to this phenomenon among interviewees; students (sometimes only the female ones) were taught that menstruation is first and foremost a sign of womanhood and reproductive capability, a major component of hegemonic menstruality. While the classroom setting was an important site of menstrual education, friends, family members, and even comics also played a role in young women’s developing understandings of menstruation and their bodies as they grew up. These sources of knowledge often introduced and/or reinforced the idea that menstruation should be concealed and practices to achieve this. Menarche – a person’s first period – was the ultimate learning experience, where abstract knowledge of menstruation sometimes conflicted sharply with the lived experience of it. Learning about menstruation did not stop in grade school, however; even today, young women glean new information about their bodies from social media and smartphone apps.

Enveloped in a “culture of concealment” (Houppert 1999), open discussion of menstruation is exceedingly rare. Menstruation is a highly gendered experience in Japan, and talking about menstruation is no different. Female friends and close female relatives are appropriate conversation partners, but periods should not be discussed in the presence of men. This leads to some discomfort and tough decision-making for young women with (male) significant others – if and how to mention their periods. Even doctors (who are predominantly male in Japan) are often avoided, with these young women preferring to talk to their mothers about issues with menstruation or turning to the internet for anonymous advice.

The discursive silence around menstruation impacts women’s embodied experiences of it, not just how and when they talk about it (McCormack 2017, 58). In effect, the menstruating body is silenced. Women need to control and conceal menstrual flow; and they also need to cover up physical and emotional signs of menstruation, including menstrual cramps and PMS, making sure not to complain in mixed company or drop the pleasing feminine demeanor

expected of them. This perpetuates circumstances in which some women needlessly suffer in silence with debilitating menstrual cramps or anxieties about irregular cycles and their potential impact on fertility.

CHAPTER 4. THE JAPANESE COMMERCIAL MENSTRUAL PRODUCT INDUSTRY AND THE CONCEALMENT OF MENSTRUATION IN JAPAN

Introduction

In a television commercial, a young woman with immaculately sleek hair lounges on her stomach and is propped up on her elbows, with her hands framing, but not touching, her charming face. She wears a loose white dress with sheer capped sleeves. The hem of the dress, around her knees, is blown by a playful and mysterious breeze that has no effect on her hair. She is cushioned and surrounded by cottony clusters in subtle gradations from light purples to pastel pinks. Directly behind her are three pink frog puppets wearing magenta smocks with white collars, hands clasped together in front. The young woman breaks into song with her amphibian chorus, swinging her bare feet in time with the music:

Wisupā Pyua Hada
Pyu Pyu Pyua Pyua Hada
Nioi no shinpai zero e
Zero zero [frogs singing]
Ano hi no nayami zero e

Whisper Pyua Hada
Pyu Pyu Pyua Pyua Hada
Worry about smell becomes zero
Zero zero
Troubles of “that day” become zero

Image 4.1. *Pyua Hada* Advertisement Featuring Sashihara Rino and Pink Frog Puppets



(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_svcG71IEjs)

What is this strangely cute – and overwhelmingly pink – scene, and what product could it possibly be advertising? For those in the know the brand name Whisper would be a dead giveaway, but the advertised product is made clear in the remaining portion of the fifteen-second commercial when a graphical (and metaphorical) representation of a menstrual napkin sucking up and locking in menstrual blood and odor briefly replaces the fluffy, cheerful image of the young woman and her pink pals. It is a menstrual product advertisement, one that bears common images and tropes of its specific genre as well as Japanese television commercials as a whole (Image 4.1). Japanese commercials often feature popular celebrities as well as rising stars. The young woman in the above commercial is no other than Sashihara Rino, an AKB48 veteran and pop idol, which makes her singing a jingle in such a cute setting quite appropriate. Many Japanese commercials – and nearly all recent menstrual product commercials – feature such catchy song snippets, although menstrual product jingles are not allowed to be *too* catchy. For even though menstrual product advertisements are now a regular part of commercial line-ups, they are carefully constructed to conceal menstruation within them through language and imagery and to promote concealment of menstruation in real life as well. This chapter examines current Japanese menstrual product advertisements and how they perpetuate hegemonic menstruality's proscription of concealing all signs of menstruation. Additionally, I argue that, in order to conceal menstruation, women use menstrual products as “technologies of passing” (Vostral 2008), and in turn, the products impact their embodied experiences of menstruation.

Significance of This Chapter

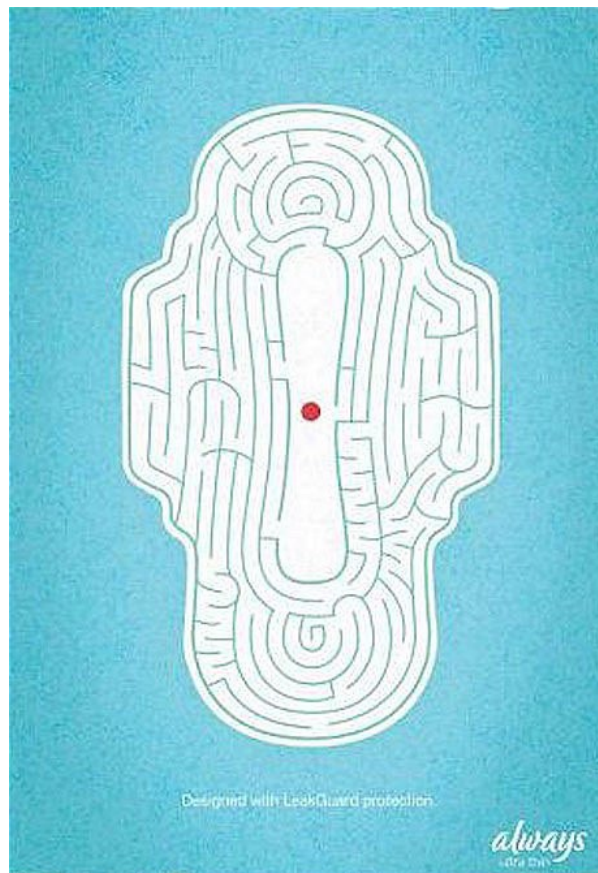
Why should we study menstrual products and their advertisements? First, advertisements shape the society in which they are situated, and they depict an ideal image of society as it could or should exist (Williamson 2010, 11-14). Advertisements show images of the perfect consumer/person – made perfect by the advertised product – and they display them in such a way so as to generate desire in viewers to become like the ideal consumer/person in the image, by buying the product of course. Advertisements are a distorted mirror to society, and the warped reflection tries to influence its own originator, that is, to compel viewers to conform. And in this day and age, it is nearly impossible to escape the ubiquity of advertisements; they are in magazines, in subway stations and train cars, on billboards and buses, on television and the internet, and embedded in smartphone apps. Whether we are conscious of them or not, advertisements are part of our everyday lives, and they are also a running commentary on our lives and ideals.

Second, cultural beliefs surrounding menstruation are a reflection of the broader treatment and construction of women and their roles in society. Views of menstruation may be reflective of structural beliefs and practices in regard to gender complementarity, but they may also be signs and byproducts of, or even justification for, gender inequality in society. For example, in the history of Western biomedicine, female physiology was seen as complementary – and yet inferior – to male physiology. Even as late as the 1980s, American medical textbooks described female biological reproductive activities – especially menstruation and menopause – in negative (and nearly downright derogatory) terms, while approaching male reproductive physiology in a markedly more positive manner (Martin 1992, 45-48). This has lingering consequences for the treatment of women in biomedical care and research. The stigma of

menstruation intruding into public awareness and discourse in the United States is still strong, despite attempts to break down the taboo in recent years.

In fact, objection – and abjection – to the public recognition of menstruation (with little or no innuendo or other such cover-ups) can be seen most clearly when advertisements deviate from their normal euphemistic imagery and vocabulary. There are several instances of this occurring in the United States over the past few years. For example, in 2011, an Always Ultra Thin magazine advertisement caused quite a stir, due to an image that was broadly considered unique and statement-making, but also elicited shock. This advertisement featured an illustration of a maze with no exit in the shape of a winged menstrual napkin with a single dot in the center – a red dot (Image 4.2). The red dot is trapped in a maze with no exit, a symbolization of the sanitary napkin’s “LeakGuard protection.” It was this one tiny red dot that caused an uproar on social media and blog sites of both positive praise and negative revulsion. This advertisement was the first menstrual product advertisement ever to feature “blood” among its images; normally in the US menstrual flow is represented by a translucent blue liquid in print advertisements and television commercials, if it is visually represented at all. For several years, there was not another ad that matched or exceeded this one’s “close” imagery of menstruation.

Image 4.2. The Revolutionary Red Dot from Always



<http://www.adweek.com/adfreak/pad-ad-takes-bold-step-showing-periods-are-actually-red-133239>

More recently, in October 2015, planned advertisements for Thinx menstrual underwear in the New York subway system made headlines on Huffington Post, Slate, and other websites, when it was revealed that the advertising contractors for the subway system had initially rejected the ads for “suggestive” imagery and “inappropriate” language (Image 4.3). The creator of the product argued that the images in the ads were not inappropriate and were in fact a long way from the heavily objectified and sexualized images of women’s bodies that are already plastered throughout the subway. And the inappropriate language? The contractors were referring to the use of the word “period” in the ad. The UK brand Bodyform (known as Libra in Australia), parent company Essity, was the first to release a commercial with blood in it in 2016: it depicted women bleeding from sports injuries. In 2017, the same brand made headlines again for releasing the first commercial with deep red liquid poured on a pad instead of the usual blue, and blood running down a woman’s leg in the shower (as well as a man buying menstrual pads).³³ In 2020, Always went a step further than their 2011 ad by releasing a video advertisement that featured liquid that was a diluted red in color.³⁴ U by Kotex also released a short Instagram ad in early 2020 depicting pads absorbing red liquid.³⁵ These are a few examples of the “breakthroughs” and controversies surrounding menstruation discourse and menstrual product advertisements in (relatively) mainstream media in the West, and I hope they show why an examination of such ads and the images and messages they contain is important.

Image 4.3. “Controversial” Thinx Ads



(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/this-thinx-period-proof-underwear-ad-could-be-deemed-too-inappropriate-for-the-subway_5627cbee4b0bce3470380be)

In addition to examining advertisements, menstrual products themselves should also be investigated for how they reflect hegemonic menstruality discourse and how women’s choices of products impact their embodied experiences of menstruation. On the surface, menstrual products may seem to be innocuous, utilitarian items, but as Vostral argues, “Women’s wants, uses, and

³³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-41666280>, accessed 9 January 2021.

³⁴ I do not have cable, so I am not sure if it ever aired on TV, but I did see these ads on Facebook and Instagram.

³⁵ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/kotex-decides-womens-blood-is-red-not-blue-11579800492>, accessed 9 January 2021.

desires shape the form and delivery of menstrual hygiene technologies, just as the technologies influence women's behavior and therefore societal attitudes about women and being a woman” (2008, 2). Menstrual products are technologies that are neither created nor used in a culture-free vacuum – what is considered to be a menstrual product and how people treat them varies based on societal, temporal, and individual contexts. However, since menstrual products are seldom acknowledged as technologies, in part because technology is often associated with masculinity, failure to contain and conceal menstrual blood is “read as a moral, and not technological, failure” (Vostral 2008, 2). Therefore, women rely on menstrual product technologies to “pass” as “non-bleeders” (Vostral 2008, 14) and “present a controlled, orderly, and contained ‘normal’ female body” (Vostral 2008, 18). By passing as a non-bleeder – successfully being perceived as not menstruating – with the aid of menstrual management technologies, women can avoid the stigma of abject menstruation. Now I turn to the case of Japan, investigating how views of menstruation and menstrual product advertisements, focusing on the necessity of concealing menstruation, both feed into each other and impact women’s lives.

A Glance at the Japanese Menstrual Product Industry

Image 4.4. Early Menstrual Product Advertisement from 1915 in *Fujin Gahō*

此の廣告は依り御注文の方の婦人愛読者なる御旨申すを以て



ピクトリヤ月の帯
の盛んな流行を示しつゝある譯は

一、材料が、パンゲジ、ゴムと稱する特殊の製らざるゴムであります。故に清潔で、自在に伸縮し、却何なる、ハジキや御座にも御目付られ、又は過乾を懼れず御心の快く快してあります。

二、構造巧妙にして、着用中器具分厚く、且方軽やかで、常用にも、御座帯にも好都合、前記に一寸御座りません。

三、使用後のセンチタクは、全部ゴム製なれば、且ザツ水をかきさらばかり、キレイになります。何十回も使ひ直しても等に御座ります。

純長ゴム製 (維客器附)

■月經中の手當は月經帶でなければ、理想的にはまゝいりませぬ
■歐米婦人は誰彼の別なく、進歩せる月經帶を使用してをります
■しかし、數ある月經帶の中には他つて見て知つて不便を感ずる様な品が随分多くあります
■使つて見て、成程、便利で、衛生的で、具合がよいと、感心遊ばすのは「ピクトリヤ」です
■御婦人間に於ける好評と信用とは常に「ピクトリヤ」に集中してをります。

コノ種の衛生は實物二分一にて御座るピクトリヤの構造と使用後の衛生に御座ります

定價七十錢

全國各市
薬店醫藥器械店
にて販賣す。
(東京市内は配達も致しませぬ)
氣味な御座ります。且、販賣店にて御座り
ぬの目印です。「ピクトリヤ」の御座り
を。

發賣元 大和商店
東京市赤坂區櫻馬町一丁目堀端
電話東京一三〇〇(番部)三九二五番



(<http://nunonapu.chu.jp/naplog/>)

The first commercial menstrual products in Japan, which included absorbent cotton and rubber menstrual belts, were introduced to the market in the first few decades of the twentieth century and were advertised in popular women's magazines of the time (Image 4.4). Both menstrual product sales and magazine sales were disrupted during the Pacific War, however, and neither recovered until the early 1950s (Ono 2009, 154). The first commercial menstrual napkins, made of pulped paper and cotton, did not hit the market in Japan until 1961, exactly forty years after Kotex menstrual napkins were introduced in the United States. Anne Napkins (produced by Anne Corporation) were a roaring success, due in large part to their aggressive marketing strategies. On the first day that Anne Napkin sales began, they sold out in stores within a matter of hours. Hanging poster advertisements in subway cars as well as a full-page advertisement in *Asahi Shinbun* – one of Japan's leading national newspapers both then and today – were used to promote the product's release (Sakai 2014, 69-70). Thanks to large-scale advertising and publicity, Anne Corporation saw profits of 100 million yen their first year and upwards of 210 million yen in 1963. Over the span of ten years, the company won magazine advertising awards ten times, showing the power and effectiveness of their publicity. Since menstruation at the time was considered a personal issue that should be hidden and many women felt buying menstrual management products to be embarrassing, Anne Corporation, through its advertising, worked to change the way of thinking regarding menstrual management, for the sake of market expansion and economic success. It is in part to the publicity efforts of Anne Corporation that menstrual napkins came to be treated like other commercial goods, lined up in the shopfronts of drugstores and supermarkets and included as occasional specially featured bargain products (Ono 2009, 155).

However, scholars like Ono (2009, 155) and Sakai (2014, 70) argue that although Anne Napkins were indeed popular, this may have been because of the product's effectiveness and comfort rather than any advertising messages, therefore calling into question the persuasive power of the ads. Although Anne Corporation may have made the visibility – in stores and on television – of *menstrual products* more acceptable in society, it did not necessarily have any impact on the view of *menstruation* as a negative thing that should be concealed. This is also reflected in current-day menstrual product commercials.

Today, the largest providers of menstrual products in Japan are Kao, Unicharm, and Daio, with menstrual product brands Laurier, Sofy, and Elis, respectively. Proctor & Gamble used to have the number-three spot in the country, but they ceased sales of their brand Whisper in Japan in the spring of 2018 (personal communication). There are also several other companies, ranging in size, which provide napkins, panty liners, and other products women use during menstruation. When I asked how Daio imagines the future of Japanese menstrual products, a company representative responded, "The performance of Japanese menstrual products is at an extremely high level, so hereafter, rather than reducing the chances of leaks, we predict that we are shifting into an era in which [consumers] choose based on preference/taste from design and fragrances" (personal communication). This quote encapsulates the state of the market for menstrual products in Japan – the majority of napkins do an acceptable if not exceptional job of absorbing menstrual blood, so brand loyalty must come from "extra" features, like stylish packaging, scenting, celebrity endorsement, and such. Asked the same question, as well as its company mission as a menstrual product provider, the Kao representative responded:

We think that, alongside women’s continued social advancement, life is getting more and more diverse, and menstrual product needs are becoming fragmented. By continuing to propose products that can respond to various women’s feelings that “[I/we] want to live with more peace of mind [*anshin*] and more comfortably [*kaiteki ni*] during menstruation,” Laurier will support women being able to live every day as themselves...[Our mission:] To reduce discomfort [*fukai*] and unease [*fuan*] that accompanies women’s periods, and because [women] wish to live like themselves as usual, we propose products equipped with “absorption you can rely on even during heavy days” and “gentleness on delicate skin” (personal communication).³⁶

Beyond absorption capabilities that provide peace of mind (*anshin*), comfort is the next most common selling point for menstrual pads. Representatives for NaturaMoon, an environmental- and health-conscious menstrual product provider, told me during our interview that about one in five people have allergies or skin sensitivity (“*o-hada ga yowai*”), and that is why they offer pads with a natural cotton surface (the first company in Japan to do so, according to them). Indeed, cotton is making a comeback in Japan (see Chapters 2 and 7), as Kao released panty liners with a “natural (*tennen*)” cotton surface around 2015³⁷ and a deodorizing version in 2020.³⁸ Kobayashi Seiyaku also released their own natural cotton panty liners around 2017³⁹; Unicharm recently introduced an entire product series with organic cotton around 2019⁴⁰; and Daisan also released organic cotton napkins around 2016 and panty liners in 2018.⁴¹

When asked what they see as their menstrual product users’ greatest needs, Kao and Daio both emphasized absorbency and comfort. Daio said that common demands include a product that “does not leak (*morenai*),” and Kao said that “peace of mind (*anshin*)” delivered by a “high-absorption (*takai kyūshūryoku*)” product is one of the greatest needs of their users. On comfort, Daio said that common needs are products that are “not stuffy (*murenai*),” are “not irritating [to the skin] (*kaburenai*),” and provide “skin care (*hada kea*);” they see the appeal of their menstrual products in their quality texture and gentleness on the skin (“*hada zawari ga yoku, hada ni yasashii*”). For Kao, they see users as desiring a product with a “comfortable feeling (*tsuke kokochi no kaitekisei*);” they use the word “comfortable (*kaiteki*)” numerous times in their descriptions of their products in their correspondence with me.

³⁶ Unicharm declined my interview request. I contacted but never heard back from Dai’ichi Eizai and Daisan. I conducted interviews via email with Kao and Daio. These five are all members of the Japan Hygiene Products Industry Association (JHPIA). I also conducted an in-person interview with NaturaMoon, a smaller brand that provides both disposable and reusable cloth organic cotton napkins; the brand is part of a larger eco-goods company.

³⁷ *Kirei Sutairu Tennen Kotton 100%*, which was replaced by *Shiawase Suhada Panty Rainā Tennen Kotton 100%* in October 2020. https://www.kao.com/jp/laurier/lre_kirei_04.html. Accessed 3 January 2021.

³⁸ *Shiawase Suhada Panty Rainā BOTANICAL COTTON 100%*, available in unscented, lavender & chamomile, and lily of the valley & white floral scent. <https://www.kao.com/jp/laurier/index.html>. Accessed 3 January 2021.

³⁹ <https://www.kobayashi.co.jp/brand/sarasaty/lineup/cotton/>. Accessed 3 January 2021.

⁴⁰ <https://www.sofy.jp/ja/products/organic.html>. Accessed 3 January 2021. The napkins, panty liners, and tampons have surfaces made of 100% organic cotton; the sanitary shorts are made of 95% organic cotton.

⁴¹ https://www.cotton-labo.co.jp/product/list/contents_type=32. Accessed 3 January 2021.

What Is a Menstrual Product? – Company Survey

Here I catch myself using “menstrual products” and “napkins/pads”⁴² interchangeably, because in Japan over ninety percent of women exclusively use pads and not tampons. But what kinds of menstrual products are available in Japan anyway? It depends on who you ask! To all of the companies I corresponded with, I asked them, “To you, what is the definition of ‘menstrual product (*seiri yōhin*)’? What kind of things are menstrual products? For example, are things like sanitary shorts and panty liners considered menstrual products?” I was very intrigued by the diversity of responses I received:

Daio: We only recognize “menstrual napkins (*seiri yō napukin*)” as a menstrual product. We don’t deal with menstrual shorts or panty liners.

Kao: Menstrual products (*seiri yōhin*) are a group of products for dealing with women’s periods (*josei no seiri genshō ni taiō suru shōhin gun*). We think that *seiri* shorts and panty liners are also menstrual products.

NaturaMoon: A menstrual product is something that absorbs [menstrual blood] and stops [it from leaking] (*toketomeru mono*). We would consider *seiri* shorts and also etiquette pouches⁴³ to be menstrual products. Whether panty liners are a menstrual product is a bit iffy (*bimyō*).

While Daio obviously had the strictest definition of menstrual product, all had slight variations in what they considered to fall into the category of “menstrual product.” Both Kao and NaturaMoon recognize that women use products that would not be labelled “menstrual product” to handle their periods. The product with the greatest uncertainty of whether or not it is a menstrual product seems to be panty liners. Kao said yes, NaturaMoon said maybe, and Daio said no. Kobayashi Seiyaku, which specializes in panty liners only, responded to my request for an interview about their menstrual products with: “Our company does not produce menstrual products. We only produce panty liners, which are used when [women are] not [on their] period. Therefore, we regretfully cannot fulfill your request.”

This variation in defining or recognizing certain products and not others as menstrual products also has its roots in the law. In Japan, products for sale fall under specifically defined categories and must meet the quality and safety requirements of that category. According to the Pharmaceutical Affairs Law⁴⁴, menstrual napkins are quasi-drugs (*iyaku bugai hin*), tampons are medical equipment (*iryō kiki*), and panty liners and reusable cloth napkins are general merchandise (*zakka*). The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare’s (MHLW) Pharmaceutical Safety and Environmental Health Bureau, in “The Standards for Marketing Approval of Sanitary Napkins [*seiri shori yōhin seizō hanbai shōnin kijun ni tsuite*]” stipulates that a menstrual napkin “shall be white in color (except for the colored area that indicates the area is not the intended

⁴² What Americans typically call pads are called “napkins (*napukin*)” in Japan.

⁴³ These are small bags or pouches in which women carry menstrual products.

⁴⁴ This was revised and renamed in 2014 as the Act on Securing Quality, Efficacy and Safety of Products Including Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices.

surface of use) and shall be almost odorless. It shall not contain any foreign matter.”⁴⁵ The requirement to be white in color prevents reusable cloth napkins from being classified as menstrual products / quasi-drugs. It is also interesting to note that the English translation of this document translates *seiri shori yōhin* as “sanitary napkins,” which it defines as “quasi-drugs designed to absorb and treat menstrual blood.”⁴⁶ Therefore, while women may use panty liners during their periods, only menstrual napkins meet the MHLW definition of *seiri (shori) yōhin*: panty liners – and tampons – may be white and may “absorb and treat menstrual blood” but they are not a quasi-drug.

What Women Want

It is evident that menstrual product companies have a clear idea of what they think their consumers want in a product, so what kind of menstrual product do women actually want? The tables below summarize what products my interviewees’ use and/or prefer. They overwhelmingly prefer napkins with wings rather than without, to protect against slippage and leaks (see Chapter 5 for more on this). They use a variety of absorbency levels, although many like the large overnight pads that provide extra protection during the night, or even on super heavy days. Not many interviewees were aware of scented pads and panty liners, and those that were did not want them. Few women had any kind of experience using tampons, while a majority like to use menstrual shorts, special underwear that helps hide stains and hold the pad in place. Many women regularly used panty liners, although the purpose was mixed – some used them for vaginal discharge, while others used them for light flow days or days when they were expecting their period might come. Many women did not have a brand preference, instead seeking whatever was on sale; the brand preferences that were mentioned seem to reflect the relative size of the company, or at least the size of its product lineup.

Table 4.1. Interviewees’ Menstrual Product Use and Preferences ^a

Use/Preference	Product				
	Napkins	Tampons	Sanitary Shorts	Panty Liners	Other
Use/Prefer	23	6 ^b	17	15 ^c	5 ^d
Don’t Use/Prefer	0	13	3	6	-
No Preference	-	-	-	-	-

^a Not every interviewee mentioned exactly what they use/prefer, so the columns do not add up to twenty-three (the total number of interviewees). This is also why there are no zeros in any cell, except for napkin usage.

^b Three interviewees regularly used tampons at the time of the interview, and three had experience with tampons but had stopped using them.

^c Six interviewees use panty liners during their period or when they are expecting their period. Nine use them for vaginal discharge.

^d These are other products that interviewees thought of as menstrual products / products they use during menstruation: special detergent for getting out menstrual blood stains, pain medicine, hand towel with

⁴⁵ “*honpin (tadashi, koteizai o hogo suru zairyō o nozoku.) wa, hakushoku (tadashi, hishōmen taru koto o shikibetsu saseru tame no hyōshikibubun wa, kono kagiri de nai.) de ari, nioi wa hotondo naku, ibutsu o fukumanai.*”

⁴⁶ “*iyaku bugai hin de atte, keiketsu o kyūshū shori suru koto o mokuteki to suru mono*”

pocket (to discreetly carry a pad to the toilet), cloth liner, and douche. Each one was used/mentioned by a separate individual.

Table 4.2. Interviewees’ Menstrual Napkin Use and Preferences ^a

Use/Preference	Napkin Characteristic									
	Wings	Light Day Absorbency	Regular Day Absorbency	Heavy Day Absorbency	Overnight Absorbency	Thin	Scented	Low Price	Brand	Cute Design
Use/Prefer	16	2	9	5	15	3	-	7	14 ^b	2
Don’t Use/Prefer	2	-	-	-	-	2	9	1	-	-
No Preference	3	-	-	-	-	-	5 ^c	1	8	1

^a Not every interviewee mentioned exactly what they use/prefer, so the columns do not add up to twenty-three (the total number of interviewees). This is also why there are no zeros in any cell.

^b Two preferred Elis, six preferred Laurier, and six preferred Sofy.

^c Two interviewees were not even aware that scented menstrual products exist.

Only four interviewees were completely satisfied with the menstrual products they used and could not think of any way they could be improved. Being effective at preventing leaks – through absorbency and secure placement – was the most important quality sought in a menstrual product. Yuka, Mai, and Yui all wanted a thinner/slimmer pad that still had the same or even better absorbency compared to their current product. Reina, Chinatsu, Hitomi, and Yuka all mentioned that they want a product that does not leak as much (“*morenai*” / “*more nikui*”). Reina, Yuka, Manami, and Ayaka complained about the napkin slipping (“*zureru*” / “*zurechau*”) and thus causing leaks; and Natsuki and Saki wanted improvements to the napkin’s wings, which is also a common site for leaks. Additionally, Hitomi, Mai, and Haruka wanted a napkin that had a better fit and was “easy to move in (*ugoki yasui*).”

After absorbency and fit, comfort was the next most important quality in a menstrual product. Nao and Hitomi both described their go-to menstrual napkins as “comfortable (*kaiteki*).” On the other hand, however, Saki and Miki wished for a pad that was more comfortable – Saki wanted a pad with better “breathability (*tsūkisei*)” due to her sensitive skin and tendency to sweat. Miki also said that she has “sensitive skin (*hifu ga tsuyokunai*)” and therefore prefers napkins that are “easy on the skin (*hada ni yasashii*).” This is also the marketing avenue that companies take for their natural/organic cotton products mentioned previously, a growing trend over the past five years. Even mainstream products emphasize comfort in their advertisements; in fact, *Hada Omoi*, one of Unicharm’s main product lines, has the catchphrase, “*binkan hada ni yasashii* (easy on sensitive skin).”

Absorbency, fit, and comfort are all interconnected: a napkin that absorbs and fits well will be comfortable; an absorbent napkin that does not fit well (or vice versa) may be prone to leaks or pooling and will not be as comfortable. Furthermore, a thin napkin may be more comfortable than a bulky or thick one, but it may provide less assurance (sometimes physical, sometimes psychological) against leaks. However, menstrual product companies recognize these competing demands and continuously come out with thinner and more absorbent napkins.

A few interviewees also mentioned liking or wanting menstrual products with cute packaging or smell reduction capabilities. Mayu was satisfied overall with the quality of the pads she used, but she thought that the exterior design could change to have a variety of colors and thus be cuter, more fun, and less boring. Nanako wanted a napkin that absorbed smell better, and Mayu did as well, although she acknowledged that smell is “a matter of your body,” natural and unavoidable.

Japanese Menstrual Product Advertisements

Television is an important medium for menstrual product advertising today. During the early postwar period, television sets slowly grew in popularity, but their sales were encouraged by television network owners, whose efforts increased the number of television sets nationwide from 900 in 1953 to 16,000 in 1954. Lower prices for television sets in the late 1950s further helped spread television use in Japan. Excitement over Prince Akihito’s wedding in 1959 and broadcasters’ promises of televising the event caused a spike in TV set ownership, with over two million sets sold in less than a year. By the 1964 Olympics, a large majority of Japanese people had access to television, with sixty-five million people in Japan (about eighty-five per cent of the population) estimated to have watched the opening ceremony of the Games (Moony 2000, 79-81). It was during this boom in television sales of the late 1950s that commercials for menstrual products began to air (Sakai 2014, 70).

In a study a few decades ago, Ono et al found that the majority of young women that they surveyed learned about new menstrual products through television advertisements; however, there were mixed reactions to the ads, with 58.7 per cent of the women feeling positively about them and 41.3 per cent feeling negatively about them (1983, 89). Those who favored the ads said that they were educational and informative (65.1 per cent), they created good feelings about menstruation (9.8 per cent), and they put menstrual products on an equal level with other products (10.6 per cent). Most of the women I interviewed in 2018 were neutral on the subject of menstrual product ads, with neither strong positive nor strong negative feelings about them. In fact, many could not remember or could only vaguely recall seeing ads on TV. For example, Ayaka, at the time of our interview, remembered a few ads she had seen recently, but only the fact that she had seen them – she did not really remember the details of the product, the brand name, or other contents of the ad.

Even if they could only recall vague details, there were a few things in menstrual product ads that stayed in interviewees’ memories or caught their attention. The features of the advertised product itself had more impact than the name, as only six interviewees could recall the exact brand or product name of the ad they had seen, while ten interviewees could describe the content of an ad but not the name.⁴⁷ What interviewees recalled the most from menstrual product ads was content related to product absorbency and leak-prevention; this makes sense as this is the most important quality for a menstrual product. Six women described lines, images, or scenes from ads that highlighted this product quality.

Cute and stylish imagery and products were also attention-grabbers for some women. Miki recounted one recent ad she had seen: it featured stylish models, and it actually took her a while to realize she was watching a menstrual product ad. Manami described an ad that displayed

⁴⁷ Sofy and/or *Hada Omoi* were mentioned by four interviewees, and Center-In was mentioned by two interviewees. Both are Unicharm product lines.

menstrual pads with “sparkly (*kira kira*)” wrappers, aimed at high schoolers. Three (Mayu, Shiori, and Rina) of the women I interviewed remembered seeing a commercial for Center-In, with Lola (a popular *tarento*⁴⁸); Shiori really liked the thinness of the pad and the cute packaging, and Mayu even switched to this product line after seeing an ad for it. In addition, Kazumi and Nanako would both want a product with cute packaging.⁴⁹

Those in the 1980s study who disliked the ads said that viewing them was embarrassing (12.9 per cent), especially if there were male relatives or friends around (48.4 per cent). Additionally, they protested on the grounds that it was not good for children to see (12.9 per cent) and that it was unpleasant to view these ads during mealtimes (4.3 per cent) (families often watch(ed) television together during dinner and sometimes breakfast) (Ono et al 1983, 90). The feeling of embarrassment, which is intensified by the presence of male company, has not disappeared in the decades since this study. Momoko said she does not like menstrual product commercials; they are “embarrassing (*hazukashii*),” especially if a male person is watching too. Reina also feels embarrassed if a menstrual napkin commercial comes on while she is watching TV with her brothers. For Mayu, when the ads appear while she is watching TV with her father and/or brother, she feels weird and cannot help but “wonder why these things have to be on TV.” Some interviewees disliked menstrual product ads not out of a sense of embarrassment, but for their unrealistic depictions of women’s dispositions and feelings during menstruation. Shiori recalled seeing ads for overnight pads and expressed disappointment and skepticism about how it showed images of women sleeping and dreaming happily. Nao wishes menstrual product ads were more realistic as well. Hikari talked about how she had heard in America they show women doing sports and being active in menstrual product ads, and she wishes there were more commercials like that in Japan.⁵⁰ She thinks they show the women as too happy, when menstruation can be a painful, difficult, and unhappy experience.

At the time of Ono et al’s study, “In the Kantō region [eastern Japan, including Tokyo], less than ten menstrual product CMs [commercials] are aired in one day, compared to [CMs for] food products such as ramen which are aired about forty times in one day. Although [menstrual products] have become considerably more regularized since the time of the introduction of the off-the-shelf menstrual products in 1961, it is still hard to say that they are treated the same as other products” (1983, 94). Indeed, even though decades have passed since Ono et al’s study, menstrual products and their advertisements are *not* treated the same as other commercial products. Ironically, language and imagery are carefully chosen to conceal menstruation. In Japanese menstrual product ads, there is rarely, if ever, any open or frank expressions about menstruation. The National Association of Commercial Broadcasters in Japan has published broadcasting standards that detail several restrictions and guidelines for menstrual product advertisements: “[T]hings used behind closed doors and things that are not appropriate for household conversation should be treated with caution. For *seiri* products, contraceptive devices, etc., sufficient caution should be taken for broadcast time, preceding and subsequent programs, and expressions used in the advertising” (Ono 2009, 157). The Japan Hygiene Products Industry

⁴⁸ “*Tarento* (talent/personality)” are (usually TV) stars.

⁴⁹ Although, there was one interviewee (Kana) who explicitly did *not* want cute packaging; she would prefer if the packaging was “cool (*kakkoi*),” not “fluffy (*fuwa fuwa*)” or pink like it always is.

⁵⁰ Hikari actually got her wish recently! Sofy released a new line of menstrual products called Sofy SPORTS in 2020, with an ad featuring a woman in workout clothes running. The line includes three pad sizes and sanitary shorts (<https://www.sofy.jp/ja/products/sports.html>, accessed 7 January 2021).

Association (JHPIA) also has guidelines for the treatment of menstrual products in ads. For this association, in commercials it is preferable for the menstrual product to stay in its packaging (box), but if the product must be shown, it must only be to provide proper information to viewers about the functions and features of the product. Additionally, songs in menstrual product commercials (which are often used) should not be so catchy that children, unfamiliar with the nature of the product, copy the song (Ono 2009, 157). The amount of caution that is taken to prevent the wrong people from being exposed to menstrual product ads is a reflection of the need to conceal menstruation – due to its abject power.

Why Conceal – Abjection, Pollution, and Boundaries

Julia Kristeva, in her book *Powers of Horror*, describes abjection as “what disturbs identity, system, order...does not respect borders, positions, rules...the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite (1982, 4). The definition of abjection, just like abjection itself, is “ambiguous,” “a somewhat slippery concept to define...impossible to pin down...” (Warin 2009, 112). Abjection finds its meaning in the dichotomies of subject/object and inside/outside; however, it is irreducible to either of the diametrically opposed categories (Grosz 1994, 192; Warin 2009, 113). About the abject’s relation to the first pair of polarized terms, subject/object, Kristeva writes, “The abject is not an object facing me, which I name or imagine...The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I” (1982, 1). In this way, the abject is separate from and opposed to the subject (“I”), but being opposed to the subject does not make it automatically fall into the opposite category of object. It is not a fixed, solid thing; one cannot firmly grasp or contain it. The abject is fluid, and this characteristic of fluidity helps the abject to avoid identifying with either pole of the inside/outside dichotomy. The abject is “an inescapable boomerang, [a] vortex of summons and repulsion” (Kristeva 1982, 1). It is that which is expelled and cast off, yet at the same time attracts, fascinates, and is desired. The body which expels the abject cannot be fully rid of it, since abjection “hovers at the borders” of the body, neither inside nor outside (Warin 2009, 113). Ambiguous, permeable, fluid, abjection in its three main forms – food and bodily incorporation, waste, and signs of sexual difference – transforms the subject’s body into a site of danger toward social identities and systems.

Kristeva’s analysis of the embodiment of abjection, that is, the phenomenological experiences of the subject and her body and the processes of the construction of the socially proper and clean (or improper and unclean) body at certain places in/on the body, is heavily influenced by the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas (Grosz 1994; Warin 2009), whose interpretations of human societies focus on systems of classification. For example, in *Purity and Danger* (1984), she analyzes the classificatory system for animals laid out in the Old Testament, whereby specific animals are deemed clean and fit for consumption by people while others are considered unclean and unfit for human consumption. Douglas’ explanation for these dietary prohibitions is that only animals who fully fit into certain bounded categories are considered clean, and those animals who contradict or do not neatly fall into existing categories, such as pigs, are a source of danger and pollution and should be avoided (Douglas 1984, 55). Categories are most vulnerable at their margins, the boundary between one discrete thing and another. Things of an ambiguous nature, which do not belong explicitly to one category or another, exist at these margins, and their ability to permeate and flow through boundaries poses a danger to the classificatory – and the social – system. Douglas extends her analysis to the body as a bounded

system, with the skin and orifices as the boundaries of the system: “We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, feces or tears simply by issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body” (1984, 121). “Marginal stuff” is that which has passed through the boundaries of the body, and this transgression of bodily boundaries by ambiguous substances existing at the margins is an act of defilement and pollution. Through this act of transgression, the “marginal stuff” becomes dirt, “that which upsets or befuddles order” (Grosz 1994, 192). No thing is inherently “dirt” or “dirty;” it is only through its placement and understanding in relation to defined boundaries that it transgresses and categories that reject it that a thing becomes “dirty,” a source of impurity and pollution (Grosz 1994, 192; Warin 2009, 109-110). Dirt, existing at the margins of the body and posing a threat to social order, is a form of the abject.

Body fluids pose a great threat to the cleanliness and purity of the body, due to their permeability that exploits the vulnerable boundaries of the body located at its orifices:

Body fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside...to the perilous divisions between the body’s inside and its outside...They attest to a certain irreducible “dirt” or disgust, a horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that permeates, lurks, lingers, and at times leaks out of the body...Body fluids flow, they seep, they infiltrate; their control is a matter of vigilance, never guaranteed (Grosz 1994, 193-194).

For Douglas, the body fluids that are the most dangerous and the most defiling are those related to digestion and reproduction (1984, 125). Menstrual blood is seen as one of the most powerful and dangerous body fluids, and many analytical and ethnographic studies mention or even focus exclusively on the polluting qualities of menstrual blood, and, by extension, the female body. In Japan’s past, menstruation was held to have polluting qualities, and vestiges of these beliefs can still be found in modern society. Kristeva also positions menstrual blood into the realm of abjection by relating it to waste and signs of sexual difference, saying, “What goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection” (1982, 108). Menstrual blood is abject waste excreted from the body, which, by passing through one of the body’s orifices, defiles and threatens the “body proper.” There is a clear connection between menstruation and waste in menstrual product advertisements.

Menstruation is also linked to abjection because it is a sign of sexual difference: “Menstrual blood...stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate, and...the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference” (Kristeva 1982, 71). Menstrual blood, a sexual bodily fluid that has the power to permeate and transgress the boundaries of the body, poses a threat to the social system and social identity. The polluting aspect of women’s menstrual blood, but not men’s semen, another sexual bodily fluid, is supported by the construction of sexed bodies and sexual difference, since women and femininity, one way or another, have been defined and continue to be defined in society in relation to men and masculinity (Butler 1999; Butler 2007). Concealment of menstruation is a must in order to protect others from threatening menstrual blood and to protect oneself from the humiliation of being exposed as a menstruator. Menstrual

product advertisements therefore emphasize the products' absorptivity and other concealing powers, while simultaneously distancing viewers from menstruation linguistically and visually.

What's in a Name? – Concealment through Language

One of the main ways that menstruation is concealed in everyday and public discourse is through language. During the rare times that menstruation is discussed, it is most often done through oblique and vague terminologies. This becomes obvious simply by looking at the two words most commonly used to mean “menstruation” in Japanese: *gekkei* (月経) and *seiri* (生理). The former, whose logographic meaning can be glossed as “going around the moon,” is associated with formal medicine and probably has its roots in older, out-of-use words to denote menstruation. These include *getsuji* and *tsuki no mono* (“moon thing”), *gessui* (“moon water”), and *tsuki no sawari* (“moon sickness”), all of which show a historical connection between the menstrual cycle and the lunar cycle (Ono 2009, 150).⁵¹ *Seiri*, on the other hand, is merely a euphemism for menstruation; its original, literal meaning is “physiology.” However, *seiri* is the word predominantly used now, rather than *gekkei*, and it came about during the Meiji Period due to sentiments involving the concealment of menstruation (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 3). It is even in use in legal code, such as the Labor Standards Act of 1947 which made employers offer menstruation leave – *seiri kyūka* – to their female employees. There are other words that incorporate the euphemistic vocabulary such as *seiri tsū* (*seiri* pain) and *seiri yōhin* (*seiri* supplies/products) that are commonplace. The use of *seiri* rather than *gekkei* is so ingrained in everyday Japanese discourse, that there are even some people who do not recognize the word *gekkei* or even think that *seiri* is the official medical term for menstruation (Ono 2009, 150-151). According to the female developmental psychology researcher, Kawase Yoshimi, “Using a substitute/placeholder [word] to conceal menstruation denies [the existence of] women’s healthy physiological special characteristics/traits” (quoted in Ono 2009, 151).

When menstruation is talked about, sometimes other euphemisms besides *seiri* are used, and these euphemistic expressions get even further from the true word. Menstruation may be referred to using demonstrative pronouns such as *are* (“that”) and *kore* (“this”) (Sakai 2014, 69). The various grammatical forms and vocabulary choices of the Japanese language fall onto a continuum of intimacy and distance. One refers to people with whom one is socially distant (strangers, acquaintances, superiors, etc.) by their last name with an honorific suffix, while one may be permitted to use first names for those with whom one is socially intimate (close friends, family members, etc.); one may also use one of the most intimate forms of address, *anata* (“you,” also may be interpreted as “dear/sweetie” in this case), with one’s spouse. Proper, socially acceptable use of the Japanese language also entails not saying negative things bluntly, but rather saying them indirectly or just relying on non-vocalized implications, such as when expressing dislike or turning down an offer or invitation. Avoidance of using the word “menstruation” and instead using vague, general pronouns like “that” symbolically distances oneself from a negative thing, that is, menstruation.

Menstruation is not just concealed by the language used to talk about it, but also by the sheer infrequency in which it is discussed (see Chapter 3). This is due to girls growing up in an

⁵¹ NaturaMoon references this very thing with their name, which is a neologism of Natural and Moon. Natural refers to both menstruation as a natural phenomenon and their organic cotton products. Moon, a direct reference to *gekkei*, represents menstruation (personal communication).

environment where it was not suitable to talk about menstruation and where their own mothers did not really talk about it. This multi-generational near-silence on the topic extends back to the Meiji Period, when government proscriptions against young girls being too active during menstruation led to these schoolgirls having to inform their teachers of when they were menstruating in order to sit out of gym class. This then led to feelings that menstruation was a nuisance that disrupted everyday life and was something shameful that should be concealed. A lack of proper sex education also contributed to the silence on menstruation, as sex education in schools was unstandardized and sometimes nonexistent until the late 1940s; even then, many sex education classes did not even teach girls how to use menstrual products or deal with menstrual blood. Compounding the lack of menstrual management education in schools, during the 1940s and into the 1950s, there was a stigma around talking about menstruation among family and friends. Many of the women that Sakai (2014) interviewed who were born in the 1930s and 1940s, and even in 1950, reported that they could not talk to their friends or family about menstruation or sex, as it was “taboo.” This is reflected in statements such as, ““When I got my first period, I didn’t tell anyone and dealt with it on my own,”” ““I never talked to my parent(s)/mother [*oya*] about menstruation,”” and ““When I got my first period, my mother stealthily taught me how to use cloth for dealing with menstrual blood”” (Sakai 2014, 75). These feelings of secrecy, concealment, and taboo stuck with them as they grew older, and because of this they were less likely to talk to their own daughters about menstruation, leaving it up to schools which had improved sex education and education about menstrual management by the 1960s and 1970s (Frühstück 2003, 193).

However, despite such improvements, the silence on menstruation has continued. Ono Kiyomi found that only 17.3 per cent of the college-aged women she surveyed talked often with their friends about menstruation, while 82.1 per cent did not really talk about it at all (1985, 33-34). More recently, Ono Chisako organized a casual workshop for women to talk about their experiences with cloth napkins (an alternative to non-reusable, “plastic” menstrual napkins), and participant had this to say: ““Talking about *seiri* and cloth napkins is rather uncommon. But I think it would be nice to talk to friends around [me] little by little and be able to spread [the use of] cloth napkins”” (2009, 160). Both Ono Chisako (2009, 60) and Ono Kiyomi (1985, 35; 1984, 60) agree that there are not many opportunities or welcoming environments for women to talk about menstruation, and that providing better sex education and lifting the linguistic taboo would lead to more positive experiences for women in regard to menstruation and their everyday lives.

So how do menstrual product advertisements tie in to this notion of linguistic concealment of menstruation? Let us take a look again at the lyrics that Sashihara Rino and her pink frogs sing:

Wisupā Pyua Hada
Pyu Pyu Pyua Pyua Hada
Nioi no shinpai zero e
Zero zero [frogs singing]
Ano hi no nayami zero e

Whisper *Pyua Hada*
 Pyu Pyu Pyua *Pyua Hada*
 Worry about smell becomes zero
 Zero zero
 Troubles of that day become zero

First to note are the brand and product names given in the first two lines of the jingle: Whisper and *Pyua Hada*. Whisper, a menstrual napkin brand owned by Proctor & Gamble, is known by

the moniker Always in the United States – quite a different name! The name Whisper connotes softness, docility, and femininity. It also connotes secrecy; if one talks about menstruation, one must do so in whispers so no one can overhear. *Pyua Hada* means “pure skin;” the name is most likely meant to convey the message that this product works effectively and is comfortable due to its material and absorptive capabilities, the most important selling points of menstrual products. It also implies that the product protects women’s bodies from becoming impure or unclean due to abject menstruation that crosses bodily boundaries. Skin is left unblemished and unbesmirched by polluting, dirty menstrual blood.

Whisper has not been the only brand to invoke this promise of purity and the sense that menstrual blood is something to be protected against. In fact, all four of Laurier’s product lines allude to this, referencing “skin (*hada*),” “guard (*gādo*),” and/or “block (*buokku*)” in their names. *Shiawase Suhada* – “happy bare skin” – “will keep [your skin] smooth and dry” using “block” absorbents.⁵² *Chō Kyūshū Gādo Asa Made Buokku* (“block until morning super absorbing guard”) “consistently/thoroughly [*tettei*] blocks leaks until morning even on heavy nights” (personal communication), and *Surimu Gādo* (“slim guard”) and *Hada Kirei Gādo* (“pretty/clean skin guard”) both guard the skin from menstrual blood through their absorbing capabilities. Sofy also has products called *Hada Omoi* (“skin love/affection”) and *Chō Jukusui Gādo* (“super sound-sleep guard”).

Going back to the *Pyua Hada* jingle, in the third line of the song, “Worry about smell becomes zero,” we see that the product also works to conceal and eliminate menstrual odor. *Shinpai* (worry) is a commonly used word in menstrual product advertisements which tell viewers that all their worries about their menstruation being revealed to others via smell or stain will go away with the use of the product. In the last line of the song there is an allusion to menstruation that may be difficult to catch due to its extremely euphemistic nature. “That day” (*ano hi*) is a reference to menstruation, using vague demonstrative pronouns. The concealment of menstruation implies negativity towards it, and this is furthered by the phrase in the song, “Troubles of that day [menstruation].” I translated the word *nayami* as “troubles,” but it can also have stronger meanings such as “distress,” “sorrows,” “anguish,” and “agony.” This one short song is loaded with cultural messages about menstruation that construct it as troublesome, dirty, and abject – and thus in need of concealment. However, it is not only through language that menstruation is concealed in menstrual product advertisements.

Matter in Its Proper Place, Matter out of Place – Sensory Concealment

There are many ways in which menstrual product advertisements conceal menstruation, most notably through the use of certain visual imagery, which are in a way as euphemistic for the eyes as *seiri* and *are* are for the ears. Additionally, menstrual product advertisements encourage viewers and consumers of their products to conceal menstruation in real life, highlighting how products effectively conceal menstruation from the visual, tactile, and olfactory senses of both menstruating women and those near them. The reason behind this extreme emphasis on concealment relates to views of menstruation in Japanese society, especially the idea that menstruation is abject and thus connected with bodily waste and sexual difference, both of which must be covered up completely or otherwise people will be disgusted.

⁵² <https://www.kao.co.jp/laurier/shiawase/>, accessed 7 January 2021.

Olfactory Concealment

Why do you sell scented menstrual products?

In 2016 we started selling *Surimu Gādo* napkins with white rose fragrance. We propose[d] [this product] in order to [help women] live a little more comfortably during menstruation, by curbing/containing/suppressing [*osae*] the odor [*nioi*] of menstrual blood when changing one's napkin and by relaxing one's mood [*kibun*] with the scent of roses (Kao, personal communication).

There is a very strong focus on the problem (or “problem”) of menstrual odor in Japanese menstrual product advertisements. Odor issues surrounding menstruation directly correlate it with other waste products like garbage, urine, and feces (Ono 2009, 155). Odor must be concealed or masked in order to successfully hide menstruation and the menstruating body from detection by others. Because of this, in Japan there is a bevy of variously scented menstrual products for consumers to choose from in stores. For example, Sofy, a brand of menstrual products owned by the company Unicharm, offers a type of “fashionable” menstrual napkin called Center-In that comes in two “fragrances”: Sweet Floral and Clear Happiness. The product website describes the former as an “elegant and gay floral scent” and the latter as a “refreshed clean-feeling bouquet of scent.”⁵³ By using these products women can have “a brilliant mood, even during menstruation!”. The same brand also has a line of scented panty liners, called Kiyora, with five standard and two “premium” fragrances to choose from, which are described in detail on the product website: Natural Relax, Happy Floral, Sweet, Luxury, Fresh, Elegant Rose, and Orange Flower (Image 4.5).⁵⁴ Not only does Sofy boast about this line's “good taste” in fragrance, it also highlights the purpose of the scents, which is to conceal menstruation. According to the website, the length of time that the scent lasts has been improved by twenty percent compared to previous products; this is due to the technique of permeating the liner all the way through with the fragrance. Because of this, women are protected longer from their menstrual odor being potentially detected by others. Furthermore, it explicitly states that there are “odor masking” ingredients in the liner so that the “worrisome” smell of menstrual blood and vaginal discharge is reduced.

⁵³ “Clear Happiness” has recently been replaced by “White *shabon*” [“soap” → from Portuguese “*sabão*”] (<http://www.unicharm.co.jp/centerin/secret/index.html>, accessed 7 January 2021).

⁵⁴ The current line-up includes: White Floral (premium absorption edition and regular), Floral Relax, Gentle Rose, Ylang-Ylang & Citrus, and Green Fresh. They also have a brand new (unscented) panty liner with deodorizing and antibacterial/antimicrobial silver ion material (<https://www.sofy.jp/ja/products/kiyora.html>, accessed 7 January 2021).

Image 4.5. The “Top Notes,” “Middle Notes,” and “Base Notes” That Comprise the “Sweet” Fragrance for Kiyora Panty Liners



(http://www.sofy.jp/products/kiyora/p_sweet.html)

Laurier (Kao) also has a bevy of scented menstrual products. Their *Surimu Gādo* napkins come in a Sweet Rose scented version, an “elegant rose scent that eases your mood.”⁵⁵ They invite consumers to “find your favorite” among the various scents of their *Kirei Sutairu* (“pretty/clean style”) panty liners: Romantic Rose, Relax Floral, Fresh Floral, and Precious Bouquet – each of these has its own “accent” fragrances as well, such as cherry and geranium for Romantic Rose or bergamot and nerori for Fresh Floral.⁵⁶ Similarly, the *Shiawase Suhada Panti Rainā* BOTANICAL COTTON 100% panty liners come in Lily of the Valley & White Floral and Lavender & Chamomile, each with their own supporting and base note scents. Additionally, the brand has (unscented) deodorizing panty liners (*Kirei Sutairu Chōkyū Ranjeri Rainā*), “for adult women who want to be clean/pretty/pure even in places that no one sees.”⁵⁷ Laurier also has a brand-new product line called Deo+ that includes pads, panty liners, and sanitary shorts. The pads use a newly developed activated charcoal layer, the panty liners use antibacterial/antimicrobial silver ion components, and the sanitary shorts use “deodorant fiber” and “the power of ions” to deodorize menstrual odor. The pad commercial shows a group of young women sitting in a park with cartoonish cat-like noses and a voice asks them (and the viewers), “Aren’t you secretly worried about *that* smell? [*ja, ano nioi hisoka ni ki ni natte nai?*].”⁵⁸ These are just a few examples of how menstrual product companies highlight the “problem” of menstrual odor (and women’s genital odor in general) in their online advertising and descriptions.

⁵⁵ https://www.kao.com/jp/laurier/lre_slim_daytime_rose_00.html, accessed 7 January 2021.

⁵⁶ <https://www.kao.co.jp/laurier/kirei/>, accessed 7 January 2021.

⁵⁷ https://www.kao.co.jp/laurier/kirei_chokyu/, accessed 7 January 2021. These are specifically marketed to older adult women (rather than teens or young adults), which is evidenced in part by being called *lingerie* liners rather than *panty* liners.

⁵⁸ <https://www.kao.co.jp/laurier/deoplus/>, accessed 7 January 2021.

Image 4.6. *Pyua Hada* Ad Showing “Smell”



(<http://www.happywhisper.com/ja-JP/whats-new/whisper-purehada.aspx>)

Smell and a product’s ability to eliminate it are also a common theme in menstrual product television advertisements. However, the odor protection and odor-locking “technologies” offered in menstrual product advertising are strikingly similar to phrases found in trash bag commercials, like “odor shield” and “odor control,” reaffirming and reinforcing menstrual blood’s connection to abject waste, refuse, and excrement. Our *Pyua Hada* commercial is just one example of an ad touting odor control powers. The commercial depicts “smell (*nioi*)” in the shape of green spiky blobs that are reminiscent of cartoon depictions of bacteria and germs. Smell, along with menstrual blood (two separate entities in the image), is absorbed and sucked in by the menstrual napkin and literally locked inside it as two padlocks seal the napkin shut (Image 4.6). Of course, this is all a digital symbolic representation of the product’s capabilities, and not how it really works (but it is the only image of the actual product in the advertisement).

Perhaps, though, in real life the issue of menstrual odor is just as imaginary as the padlock mechanism on the *Pyua Hada* menstrual napkin. Only 13.4 per cent of young women surveyed by Ono used menstrual napkins with deodorizing sheets, and only 17 per cent said that they noticed their own menstrual blood smell (1985, 36). Eighteen of the twenty-three women I interviewed said that they notice a smell during their period at least occasionally or under specific circumstances – such as during/after exercise, when changing their pads, or when their menstrual flow is especially heavy. However, only four of these women were worried or significantly bothered by the smell, and none of them expressed a desire for or reported purposeful use of scented menstrual products. Moreover, five of the twenty-three women stated that they had never smelled menstrual odor from someone else (I did not explicitly ask this question). Of the four women who were worried about menstrual odor, two of them (Momoko and Ami) were chiefly concerned with the possibility that other people would smell it. Mai was also keenly aware of an odor, but when she asked her boyfriend if he could smell it, he said no. While Mayu was concerned about menstrual odor and wished for a napkin with stronger

deodorizing capabilities, at the same time she acknowledged that she had never noticed the smell from others.

While the number of women I interviewed who were concerned about menstrual odor was quite low (about 17 per cent, close to Ono's results in the 1980s), it is important to note that menstrual product companies conduct their own consumer surveys which they use in designing and promoting (new) products. In a 2018 Kao survey of 163 women between the ages of twenty and forty-nine, 88 per cent were worried or slightly worried about "delicate zone" odor⁵⁹; and in a same-year survey of 522 women between the ages of ten and forty-nine, 70 per cent were often worried or sometimes worried about menstrual odor during their period.⁶⁰ In a 2017 Unicharm survey of 4,949 people, 47.1% were troubled by discharge odor⁶¹; and in a 2016 survey of 5,460 women between the ages of 13 and 49, 66.7 per cent were troubled by "delicate zone" odor.⁶² These percentages are significantly higher than what I or Ono found, although our sample sizes were much smaller of course. However, it is a bit suspect that Kao aggregated "[often] worried" and "sometimes/slightly worried;" for all we know, "slightly worried" could comprise 80 per cent of respondents with only 8 per cent being often worried. Additionally, Unicharm's sample size was several times greater than Kao's and produced more moderate results, although the sampling technique for either company was not shared (presumably, though, it was convenience sampling).

All in all, it appears that worry about menstrual odor does exist among women, to varying extents. The question to ask, though, is: is it widespread enough to warrant such a proliferous amount of scented and deodorizing menstrual products? This can be considered another part of the public discourse that constructs menstruation as abject and disgusting. And perhaps it is also a way to sell more products, as this is indeed a for-profit business, selling these necessary goods to women (that is, menstrual products themselves are necessary, whether or not they have scents or deodorizing properties). Taking another look at the Deo+ commercial, the voice asks the young women, "Well, aren't you secretly worried about *that* smell?", implying "you *should* be worried about that smell." The women, who were relaxed and at ease until asked this question, respond by acting embarrassed and concerned and then one of them replies, "that certainly may be true / you certainly may be right / I certainly may be worried about that [*tashika ni sore wa ki ni naru kamo*]." It is as if the voice implants the worry about menstrual odor into their minds when it was not there before.

More studies are needed to explore how women and others perceive menstrual blood odor and why some women do choose to buy scented menstrual products. The importance of smell should not be underestimated, since who and what smells pleasant or unpleasant are culturally specific classifications (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994). The notion of menstrual blood, and by extension women, as foul-smelling can be interpreted as reflecting gendered social hierarchies in Japanese society (and other societies around the world).

⁵⁹ https://www.kao.co.jp/laurier/delicate_care/, accessed 7 January 2021.

⁶⁰ <https://www.kao.co.jp/laurier/deoplus/>, accessed 7 January 2021.

⁶¹ <https://www.sofy.jp/ja/advice/pre-period/02.html>, accessed 7 January 2021.

⁶² <https://www.sofy.jp/ja/products/wet.html>, accessed 7 January 2021.

Visual Concealment

In Advertisements

Menstrual product advertisements also bear imagery similar to advertisements for baby diapers, further instilling the abject notion of menstrual blood as waste akin to excrement. What is ubiquitously poured onto menstrual napkins to prove their absorbency power in advertisements is a translucent light blue liquid, which is also found in diaper commercials. The blue liquid conceals the true color and consistency of menstrual blood, urine, and feces; the “sanitary” liquid neutralizes connotations of these body fluids as disgusting and abject.⁶³ Paper towel advertisements, on the other hand, although they too focus on absorbency as a selling point for their product, are not restricted to blue liquid; many advertisements use yellow or brown liquid that mimics actual food and drink spills. The reality of the purpose of paper towels is not masked like the purpose of menstrual napkins and diapers are. The *Pyua Hada* advertisement is no exception.⁶⁴ Through these advertisements, menstruation is linked to diapers, excrement, and the abject.

Image 4.7. Hada Omoi Ad Showing Blue Liquid in Lieu of Menstrual Blood



(<http://www.sofy.jp/products/hadaomoi/index.html>)

Blue menstrual blood is not the only way that menstruation is concealed visually in menstrual product advertisements. Predictable imagery in ads of this nature also serve to hide

⁶³ However, for Momoko, even the blue liquid was too much for her ultra-clean sensibilities. She told me that she wishes menstrual product commercials would not have a scene with the blue liquid in it at all.

⁶⁴ Indeed, there are *no* exceptions in Japanese menstrual product commercials, but there are a few that have come out in the US, UK, and Australia, as mentioned previously.

menstruation and negative views and experiences in relation to it; ironically, however, concealing menstruation and continuing its discursive silence can lead to more negative experiences for women. Visually, menstrual napkin advertisements are soft and feminine (there are never any men in these ads, although there are men in women's shampoo ads for instance). Women – who are always young women appearing around the age of late teens or early twenties – wear white, cream, or pastel ensembles and are often depicted frolicking on luxuriant green grass in a park or relaxing on a fluffy bed surrounded by downy pillows and clouds. Sashihara Rino's cotton candy-esque pink and purple environment is an excellent example of the imaginary landscape constructed to conceal the “troubles” of menstruation. The women's expressions are cheerful, satisfied, even blissful; occasionally pouting or distressed expressions are quickly erased by the effects of the advertised product. Sashihara, like all menstrual product commercial stars, is effervescent, positive, ecstatic. However, this does not at all match up with women's expressed opinions on menstruation. It is not an enjoyable, joyful, comfortable time; many women experience pain during menstruation and quite a large number would be happier if they did not have a period (Ono, 2009: 149-150; Ono, 1985: 36). See Chapter 5 for details on how the young Japanese women I interviewed cope with painful menstrual cramps and mood-dampening PMS. And yet these negative feelings and attitudes toward menstruation are completely silenced in the only mainstream public images of menstruation. Masking the pain of menstruation with smiling faces is not simply a marketing ploy, but a telling representation of how women should behave – friendly, uncomplaining, and unthreatening. And as long as women appear this way in menstrual product advertisements, the danger of abjection can be covered up or erased just as neatly as women's grievances about menstruation (See Chapter 7 for a discussion of gendered “politics of happiness”).

In Real Life

Menstrual product advertisements also reinforce the need to control menstruation because not only would leaks endanger objects and disgust others, but they would humiliate the woman as well, marking her for her failure to contain menstrual fluid and to keep her body clean and proper (see Chapter 5). Accidents, leaks – seepage of a contaminating substance across bodily boundaries – can be so humiliating that some women remember such events clearly many years after it has occurred. Visual recognition by male peers of abjection and dirtiness through sexual difference, marked by menstrual blood, is a humiliating, degrading experience that must be avoided at all costs. Even just viewing menstrual product advertisements alongside men is embarrassing for women, let alone men seeing actual menstrual blood. Blood stains are the most undeniable and tell-tale sign of menstruation and the abject, and that is why the absorbency effectiveness of menstrual products are one of the most heavily advertised aspects of the products. Menstrual products, according to their advertisements, supposedly protect women from being outed as menstruating and impure, through their superior absorbency and coverage.

The compulsion to conceal menstruation extends even to the menstrual products themselves. (See Chapter 5 for more on product storage and disposal practices, which often strongly emphasize concealment.) For example, when asked about what improvements she would like for the products she uses, Momoko said that she would prefer if the napkin could be more covered/hidden when disposing of it. When she throws it away, she wraps it up in a napkin wrapper, but when she does that, it is still visible from the sides, so she then wraps it in toilet

paper. Instead, she would like it if the wrapper/napkin design were done so that you could simply wrap it up and have it be concealed completely. A few interviewees also mentioned that they are self-conscious about people being able to tell when they are wearing napkins. Yui wanted both more absorbent *and* thinner pads; she feels the shape of the thick pad underneath her pants is visible (“*katachi ga ki ni naru*”). Reina felt the same way – she wanted a pad that was difficult to tell you’re wearing it.

Do you think that online sales of menstrual products will increase?

Online sales have extended over the years, along with women’s social advancement; in particular, working women in their late 20s have high usage [of online shopping]. There are a lot of people who order online because it takes less time and it is not embarrassing [*seiri yōhin o kōn’yū suru koto e no hajirai no nasa*] (Daio, personal communication).

Interviewees’ experiences with and feelings on purchasing menstrual products also reflects the implicit pressure to conceal all signs of menstruation and one’s menstrual status. Both with Kotex in the US and Anne in Japan, customers could discreetly buy menstrual products at the store by asking the drugstore employee for the product – which was wrapped in nondescript packaging – by its brand name. For some, buying menstrual products is still an embarrassing ordeal, especially now that there is no disguising that box in your shopping basket. Only for six of the twenty-three interviews was buying menstrual products, whether with a male or female cashier, not a big deal (Natsuki, Chinatsu, Shiori, Yuka, Momoko, Ayaka). Others avoid the issue entirely either by ordering pads online, like Hikari does, or letting their mother buy the pads, like Mai, Saki, Manami, Miki, and Rina do. Rina told me that she had never bought menstrual products herself. Nao avoids the experience of buying menstrual products by purchasing a year’s supply at a time.

The rest of the interviewees all prefer having a female cashier when purchasing menstrual products at the drugstore, grocery store, convenience store, or campus bookstore. However, as a few of them pointed out, sometimes there is nothing you can do (“*shō ga nai*”) and you just have to accept having a male cashier. Hitomi told me that she prefers female cashiers if they are available, since going to a male one can be embarrassing (*hazukashii*). Also, some male cashiers might just put the napkins in with the rest of the items in the standard translucent plastic bag, and then it would be visible to others as she carries it home. But female cashiers know better, and they will put it in the opaque/black bag first. Like Hitomi, most of the other interviewees try to avoid male cashiers in order to not feel embarrassed themselves, but Nanako said that she is a bit bothered by having a male cashier not so much because she is embarrassed, but rather because she does not want to make the cashier uncomfortable.

Tactile Concealment

The comfort of the product when worn is another highly stressed aspect in menstrual product advertisements, a quality that is touted to stem from the product’s high absorption capabilities (which protect from public outing and shame as a menstruator). As mentioned above during the discussion of the meaning of the name *Pyua Hada*, menstrual products are designed and marketed as something that protects even the menstruating woman from her own menstrual blood. Many products and their ads focus on skin, with numerous ads claiming that their

products are suitable for sensitive skin. One example is an ad for *Hada Omoi*, at the end of which a short jingle is sung, including the lines: “*binkan hada ni yasashii / Hada Omoi* (gentle on sensitive skin / *Hada Omoi* [“skin love/affection”]).” Besides product and brand names, backdrops and sets full of fluffy clouds and pillows further the idea of menstrual products possessing tactile softness and cleanliness. In addition, white feathers or even flower petals are often used both to convey the softness of the menstrual napkin and its absorptive power, as these “sensitive” objects will not stick to a wetted napkin. Therefore, with the use of these menstrual products, one’s skin will be as dry and soft as silky rose petals and completely free of dirty, staining, abject menstrual blood.

Women must be constantly vigilant and aware of their menstrual flow and bodily comportment in order to prevent signs of menstruation being revealed to others. But even in private, dealing with menstrual blood is an undesirable task, and women deliberately choose certain menstrual products to reduce direct interaction with their blood and their bodies. In this way, menstrual products act as literal, material mediators between a woman and her menstrual blood. The use of disposable menstrual napkins leads to limited sensory relationships with menstruation, while use of other products such as tampons or cloth napkins produces markedly different menstrual relationships and experiences.

Why do you think Japanese women prefer napkins over tampons? Or, why do you think the demand for tampons is so low in Japan?

In Japan, because you can simply change napkins without getting your hands dirty, there are many women who perceive them as hygienic [*eiseiteki*]. Also, compared to overseas, there is a strong reluctance [*teikōkan*] to insert tampons inside the body. As context, we think it is differences in menarche education and sex education. In Japan, even in schools the main thing taught is how to use napkins; and comparing Japanese sex education to overseas, there is a lot of abstract content, and there is a strong reluctance to the act of directly inserting a tampon into the body, we think. Also, use of thongs overseas is greater, so we think that demand for tampons is greater there than in Japan (Daio, personal communication).

Along with a sense that inserting tampons into the vagina is “scary [*kowai*]” and “difficult [*taihen*],” the absorption abilities and comfort of the padding of napkins is improving, so it is difficult to feel the merits/advantages of tampons, we think (Kao, personal communication).

Again, the vast majority of women use only napkins, and very few use tampons.⁶⁵ This is in part because using tampons requires direct contact with the genital area and may cause women to touch menstrual blood upon insertion or removal of the tampon. Even women who do use tampons may view this aspect of them quite negatively. One of the tampon users I interviewed, Shiori, recounted a time when she traveled to New Zealand and discovered that a common type of tampon there had no applicator; she viewed this as “dirty” and refused to use them. Daio

⁶⁵ Four out of twenty-three interviewees currently used or had experience using tampons (Nao, Mayu, Natsuki, Ayaka); two more were interested in learning how to use them (Hikari, Reina).

echoed this sentiment, stating that many women view pads as more hygienic (*eiseiteki*) than tampons because users can change out products without getting anything on their hands.

This haptic aversion is also tied to worries over misuse of the product leading to leaks and stains. Miki had never tried tampons, in part because she is worried about accidentally using them “incorrectly,” and Natsuki quickly gave up on trying to use them after several failed attempts when she was eighteen. Reina would actually like to use tampons more, but she claims she is not good (*heta*) at using them, and so relying on them would impact her life too much. Saki sums up this shared sentiment nicely: “Aren’t [napkins] just simple[r]? (*kantan janai desu ka*).” These women were nervous about exposing themselves to the increased potential for their menstrual status being discovered due to user error.

Additionally, several women said that inserting tampons seemed “scary (*kowai*)” and expressed concern that it would hurt, with Nanako saying, “I *definitely* do not want to use them (*sekkyokuteki ni tsukaitakunai*).” “I don’t know why I’ve never used tampons, I guess I feel afraid, since I never stick anything up there,” said Mai. Miki also thought that it would be scary to insert a tampon, and both Kazumi and Nanako thought that it would hurt to put in a tampon. Chinatsu explained her reluctance to use tampons in this way: “I have one friend who uses tampons. She is not a virgin. But I am a virgin, and tampons are scary [*kowai*]. Since I’m a virgin, I’m not experienced with putting something up there, so it’s scary.” Besides general concerns about pain or ineffective use, a couple of interviewees were worried about toxic shock syndrome (TSS). Hikari told me that her mother’s friend was hospitalized once because of TSS, so she has been too scared to try tampons until recently. Although not directly related to TSS, while Shiori does use tampons, she prefers pads because she thinks that “it’s healthier to let the blood out instead of keeping it inside.”

This fear or reluctance to insert something into the vagina may reflect beliefs picked up from sex education classes and societal views on appropriate expressions of female sexuality. That is, girls should not explore their bodies sexually, and ideally (although of course not in practice) vaginal penetration should only occur under marital procreative circumstances (Frühstück 2003, 193; Ono 2006, 18-19). Avoidance of tampons may thus be an embodied response to these ideas. Indeed, interviewees rarely learned about tampons in menstrual/sex ed class. Not only has Momoko never used tampons – she has “never even seen the real thing (*mita koto mo nai desu*).” Instead, they often learned about the existence of alternative menstrual products and how to use them from friends/peers. And when they (or their friends) do decide to use tampons, it is often because that is the most effective choice for preventing leaks in a particular situation. For example, Hitomi’s only exposure to tampons was when she went to an *onsen* with a friend who used one there. Shiori, Saki, and Haruka all learned about tampons from friends during gym class or swimming practice in high school.

Menstrual product companies’ takes on the napkins vs. tampons debate seems to reflect these ideas as well. As seen above, Kao posited that women considered “inserting tampons into the vagina [to be] ‘scary (*kowai*)’ and ‘difficult (*taihen*).” And Daio believes that “there is a strong reluctance [*teikōkan*] to insert tampons inside the body” due to “differences in menarche education and sex education.” NaturaMoon, a smaller menstrual product company that sells both disposable and reusable organic cotton pads, agreed that one of the main reasons why tampon use is so low in Japan is because of how sex education in the country is influenced by a strong hesitance [*teikōkan*] to discuss sex in general. They believe this will only get more prominent as

the number of “monster parents” (akin to “helicopter parents”) increases. Additionally, they think that tampons’ classification as a “medical device (*iryō kiki*)” further hinders its adoption by women and increases anxiety about trying them.

Use of products such as cloth napkins may result in markedly different views of the body and menstruation. As a response to environmental concerns as well as personal health issues believed to be caused by disposable products, reusable cloth pads are on the rise in Japan (Ono 2009, 158; see also Chapter 7). However, while most of the women I interviewed were aware of this alternative product, most were averse to the idea of using them, because washing out the menstrual blood by hand would be a hassle (*mendōkusai*). For instance, Ami told me, “I’ve heard of them [cloth napkins and menstrual cups], but I wouldn’t use either of them. The napkins seem like they would be a pain to use (*mendōkusai*), and I don’t really have a reason to switch from my current napkins, I don’t have any skin trouble with them. For the cup, inserting something inside is a bit off-putting. Plus, I don’t know anyone who uses it; maybe if I could hear more about what it’s like, then maybe I’d try it.”

Meanwhile, proponents of cloth napkins argue that direct contact with one’s menstrual blood may shift one’s view of menstruation in a more positive direction. One study with first-time cloth napkin users showed that after six months, participants were less likely to think of menstruation as “bothersome (*yakkai / mendō*)” and more likely to view it as “natural (*shizen*)” and feminine (Kaimura and Kusaga 2008, 149-151). Again, while no one I interviewed was using cloth napkins at the time, one young woman told me that she had recently been making deliberate efforts to “think more positively [of her period] (*pojitibu ni toraeru*)” and was excited to buy her first cloth napkins at an upcoming event.

Menstrual Products as Technologies of Passing

I consider the use of disposable menstrual pads to be a part of hegemonic menstruality in Japan not only because the vast majority (over ninety per cent) of women exclusively use them, but for two additional reasons. First, these products are designed to maximally conceal menstruation and prevent it from leaking into public perception, and women choose to use them because of this. Second, use of these products perpetuates the idea of menstruation as an abject fluid that should be concealed. This extends to the self, not just others. Vostral argues that women use menstrual products as “technologies of passing,” a way to represent themselves to others as belonging to a more appealing and acceptable identity (a non-menstruant). However:

...the representation is both outward and inward. The act of technological passing presents an altered external identity, but also requires the technological user to agree to a sort of temporary amnesia...Menstrual hygiene technologies allow for a temporary passage, to “forget ‘time of the month’” as one ad claimed, and get on with life as if menstruation were not occurring (Vostral 2008, 10-11).

Disposable menstrual pads allow users to “forget” their “true” identity as a menstruant, at least temporarily. Vostral asks, “What problems lurk beneath artifacts seamlessly integrated into personal identities of passing? What dangers are overlooked when a technology becomes ubiquitous and naturalized?” (2008, 18) These products shape embodied experiences of menstruation, and therefore perception/reception of menstruation as well. The pads reduce the

need to touch or feel menstrual blood: they wick away fluid and are ultra-thin so that one may not even have the sensation of wearing a pad. They make it so that interacting with menstrual blood is not the norm and therefore is a negative experience if it does happen. Because they are disposable, they contribute to perceptions of menstruation as waste and as something dirty. As long as disposable pads are the dominant menstrual management technology, then the imperative to conceal menstruation will continue to pressure women and shape both their behavior for others and their perception of their own menstrual bodies.

Conclusion

Menstrual product advertisements are part of a discursive silence on menstruation in Japanese society, one that (re)produces feelings of negativity, abjection, troublesomeness, and, above all, a need to conceal menstruation. In a market that is flooded with a variety of menstrual products, many of which have miniscule differences, competition is extremely fierce and calls for what is considered the best advertising strategies. This of course involves pleasing the viewer and potential customer. Thus, companies create pleasant yet misleading images in association with menstruation – like smiling faces, pastel color schemes, fluffy clouds, and singing frogs – in an effort to cover up menstrual abjection from people viewing the product advertisements. About these advertising strategies, Erchull comments, “Given that the women, as they are often depicted in the media [of menstrual product advertisements], are far removed from the realities of actual women with stray hairs and messy body fluids, this objectification may provide the needed distance, offering marketers the opportunity to present menstrual cycle products to consumers without eliciting a disgust reaction.” (2013, 33). This treatment, this “sanitization” of menstruation, shows that menstruation is considered abject and thus must be concealed. Through cheerful models, blue liquid, and euphemistic language, the power of abject menstruation is neutralized and made safe for viewing.

There is a double layer of concealment within menstrual product advertising: the ads themselves conceal menstruation through visual and linguistic tactics, and the products they advertise are designed to maximize users’ success at concealing menstrual fluid and odor in day-to-day life. Because “themes of secrecy and shame are common in these advertisements and...menstruation is frequently portrayed as a hygienic crisis that needs to be carefully managed through the use of the products being advertised” (Erchull 2013, 34), the ads impart upon women the hygienic and social necessity to contain and conceal menstruation. This kind of messaging is especially significant given that menstrual product advertisements are one of the only public platforms for discussion of menstruation.

Every year in Japan, around seven billion menstrual napkins are produced and consumed (Ono 2009, 156; Sakai 2014, 68), worth ¥62.2 billion (\$622 million) in 2018.⁶⁶ In the early 2000s, three companies in Japan’s domestic menstrual product market held 86 per cent of the market shares: Unicharm (Sofy brand), Kao (Laurier brand), and Proctor & Gamble (Whisper brand) (Ono 2009, 157). Today, Unicharm offers 58 menstrual napkin products, 9 tampon products, 10 sanitary shorts products, 20 panty liner products, and 3 body wipe products⁶⁷; Kao has 37 menstrual napkin products, plus 23 panty liner products, 8 sanitary shorts products, body

⁶⁶ http://www.jhpia.or.jp/site_en/statistics/data2.html, accessed 3 January 2021.

⁶⁷ <https://www.sofy.jp/ja/products.html>, accessed 3 January 2021.

wipes, genital wash, and stain remover⁶⁸; and Daio sells 35 menstrual napkin products⁶⁹; this totals to 206 different menstrual products, not including smaller brands. Menstrual products are tools and technologies equipped by women to conform to hegemonic menstruality, and the products that women choose to use out of this vast selection can have a direct impact on their embodied experiences of menstruation. Erchull writes that “if a woman does not appear to be menstruating, we do not need to think about the fact that women do menstruate” (2013, 37). However, with the “right” menstrual products, menstruating women themselves “do not need to think about the fact that [they themselves] menstruate.” Women use menstrual product technologies to “pass” as non-menstruators in public (Vostral 2008), but when they do so, they may also “pass” as non-bleeding to themselves. In fact, many women choose menstrual products that will help them not only conceal menstruation from others but also help them distance *themselves* from menstruation. This is part of the reason why disposable menstrual napkins are the product of choice; they are effective at absorbing menstrual blood and are also designed so that women do not need to touch menstrual blood or the vaginal opening. The pad is thus a mediator – or even barrier – between a woman and her menstruating body. In sum, menstrual product advertisements, the products themselves, and how and why women choose to use them all reflect the societal imperative to conceal menstruation.

⁶⁸ <https://www.kao.com/jp/laurier/index.html>, accessed 3 January 2021.

⁶⁹ <https://www.elleair.jp/product/list/menstrual>, accessed 3 January 2021. After Proctor & Gamble left the market, Daio became the next largest menstrual product provider.

CHAPTER 5. DEALING WITH STAINS AND PAINS: THE EMBODIMENT OF HEGEMONIC MENSTRUALITY

Introduction

Would you talk to someone you were dating about your period?

“No, definitely not. [*Why?*] It’s not a pretty image – blood is coming out, and it’s dirty. So it’s embarrassing [to talk about].” (Ayaka)

My fieldwork brings to the forefront the importance of commercial menstrual products in shaping experiences and views of menstruation. While access to commercial menstrual products for economically disadvantaged girls and women has been acknowledged as a liberating experience and an important step toward global gender equity, the role of menstrual products in the lives of economically secure women is missing in the scholarly conversation. In Japan, menstrual product manufacturing and advertising is a multi-billion-dollar industry, and most women have access to dozens of varieties of menstrual products. What effects do menstrual product choices have on women’s experiences and understandings of menstruation? Commercial menstrual products in Japan are designed, marketed, and used by consumers in a way that produces and enforces the need to conceal signs of menstruation – whether they are visual, olfactory, haptic, or affective. In other words, menstrual products and their ads emphasize the main characteristic of hegemonic menstruality – concealment of signs of menstruation.

Absorbing or otherwise containing menstrual blood is the main purpose of menstrual products. They are an important technology that women operate in order to keep menstruation out of the public eye (Vostral 2008). Within hegemonic menstruality, store-bought disposable menstrual napkins are the product du jour, while others such as tampons, cups, or reusable cloth napkins are seen as outside the norm in most circumstances. Even when equipped with the appropriate technology, however, containing menstrual blood is not always a simple task. What does it mean to “fail” at menstrual management, and how do women choose and use a variety of products – and often a combination of them – to conceal from the public their menstrual status? Pads, menstrual shorts, tampons, and panty liners all have their own advantages and disadvantages which women strategically manipulate to prevent leaks and stains, referred to as “failures.”

Menstrual blood is not the only thing that needs to be hidden in order to successfully conceal one’s menstrual status. The products needed to contain menstrual blood are themselves a sign of menstruation, and some women go to great lengths to hide them, whether fresh or used. Moreover, managing menstruation goes beyond dealing with menstrual blood flow; women must also contend with cramps, bloating, fatigue, acne, and headaches, as well as fluctuations in emotions such as irritability, anger, and sadness. These too should be kept away from public detection. Through pain relief methods and perseverance (*gaman*), young women try to maintain an ideal feminine appearance and affect – a pretty countenance and a pleasing demeanor.

The embodied experience of menstruation is affected by all of these practices of concealment. Different menstrual products require different techniques for effective usage and concealment. Additionally, the products act as mediators between a woman and her menstrual blood (see Chapter 4). Moreover, women adopt specific habits of bodily comportment to further

increase their chances of success in avoiding “failures” of blood leaks and stains. The need to hide discomfort, pain, and negative emotions also impacts embodied experiences during menstruation.

The Ideal Feminine Image and the Menstrual Product Industry

In Tokyo today, as in many urban centers around the world, it is nearly impossible to escape the ubiquity of advertisements; they are in magazines, in subway stations and train cars, on billboards and buses, on television and the internet, and embedded in smartphone apps. Whether we are conscious of them or not, advertisements are part of our everyday environments, and they are also a running commentary on our lives and ideals, including gendered ideals of appearance and behavior. In *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics* (2006), Laura Miller examines the multibillion-dollar beauty industry in Japan and how it both affects and is affected by cultural values of beauty and personhood. She describes how “beauty work” – the efforts to make one’s body more beautiful and thus socially acceptable – has become more intensive and intricate recently, where everything from heel texture to nipple color may be scrutinized and “corrected.” She writes, “The self-management and discipline required to achieve an appropriate body indicate good character and self-control. Sculpted bodies symbolize perseverance or determination, while an untamed body means that the person lacks control, is slovenly, weak, and inadequate. (Miller 2006, 11-12). “[S]elf-management and discipline” are indeed what menstruating women must perform, and the proper and effective use of commercial menstrual products may be considered yet another form of “beauty work.”

As described in Chapter 4, menstrual napkin advertisements are soft and feminine, with not a drop of blood in sight. The advert models’ expressions are cheerful, satisfied, even blissful. Young women in these advertisements “are plucked and waxed, and their images are then airbrushed and contoured so that they represent the current female ideal...[and] are far removed from the realities of actual women with stray hairs and messy body fluids...” (Erchull 2013, 33). However, this does not at all match up with women’s expressed opinions on menstruation. It is not an enjoyable, joyful, comfortable time; many women experience pain during menstruation and quite a large number would be happier if they did not have a period (Ono 2009, 149-150; Ono 1985, 36). And yet these negative feelings and attitudes toward menstruation are completely silenced in the only mainstream public images of menstruation. Masking the pain of menstruation with smiling faces is not simply a marketing ploy, but a telling representation of how women should behave – friendly, uncomplaining, and unthreatening.

And women *do* pay attention to menstrual product advertising. In a study a few decades ago, Ono (1983) found that the majority of young university women that she surveyed learned about new menstrual products through television advertisements, with many finding the ads pleasing and informative. While word-of-mouth and social media are also sources of information on competing menstrual products, my interviewees in 2018 often recalled television ads they had seen recently, describing the peaceful, contented faces of sleeping models or the stylish packaging of new products. Even if the brand name did not stick, the face of Lola, a popular talent and model in Japan, did for at least three women. The cute prints (*kawaii gara*) and seasonal designs are a draw for these and other women. While some women liked the cute and feminine aesthetic of menstrual product commercials, others were critical of what they viewed as

“false advertising.” The models’ happy faces seemed too good to be true, based on their own experiences of pain and discomfort during menstruation.

Regardless of their approval of advertising imagery or their feelings on menstruation, the women I talked to go to great lengths to conceal any sign of their menstrual status from others. However, there are times that such signs “leak” through and reveal a woman lacking in “self-management and discipline.” Pain management – taking pills and pursuing other pain relief measures – is also a big component of menstrual management and part of maintaining the smiling, pleasant feminine ideal image.

Avoiding Failure by Using Menstrual Products

If “successful” management of menstruation leads to the preservation of an ideal feminine aesthetic, then “failing” to contain signs of menstruation means failing to be properly feminine. The most obvious sign of menstruation is a bloody stain on clothing, bedding, or furniture. The women I spoke to referred to these stains or leaks, literally, as “failures” – *shippai*. When I asked interviewees if they had strong or lasting memories related to menstruation, several recounted embarrassing stories of public failures. Chinatsu’s most prominent memory related to her period was when her napkin leaked while she was out at a café; because of the risk of failure during her period, she gets worried when she has to sit in chairs or on the train for a long time, and she thinks about her menstrual flow constantly. Rina dealt with an irregular menstrual cycle before taking the birth control pill in university, and it was the constant failures that drove her to seek a solution for her unpredictable periods. A strong memory related to her period that she shared was a time when she had a “failure”: “When I was a junior in high school, I was at a restaurant when my period started. After getting up to leave, I saw that the chair was stained. I really remember feeling so bad since it was a restaurant chair. I apologized to the staff, and they put me at ease and told me it was ok, but I still felt so bad about it.” Mai, however, did not tell anyone when she bled through her napkin and pants onto a new chair she was sitting on in the school library; she just put away the chair and does not want to think about what has happened to it now. This kind of leakage does not happen to her very often, she says.

Whether frequent or rare, leaks and stains are a bitter reality of menstruation. Saki has slight leaks often, like around the wings of the napkin. And there are times where it has come close to leaking, but she was able to remedy it in time. While Shiori’s period is relatively regular, there is a two-to-three-day window before and after the expected start date when it may start without her noticing, which may lead to leaks and stains on her jeans/clothes. While this has happened occasionally, (probably since she does not bleed heavily) she has not had any embarrassing incidents related to it – yet. For Hitomi, sometimes there are leaks/failures, but it seems like something that just happens – it is annoying but not a big deal and not unexpected.

However, while still perhaps not entirely unexpected, failures/leaks *are* a big deal for some women. While most of the women I spoke with experienced menstrual cramps of varying intensity, almost half of them said that leaks were one of the worst, if not *the* worst, aspect of their period. For Reina, menstrual pain and napkin leaks were tied as the worst part of menstruation, and she carefully monitors her body’s positioning to minimize leaks, even if it makes her more uncomfortable. Chinatsu and Rina, whose failure stories were recounted above, also found leaks and the stress of risk of leaks as the most troublesome aspect of their periods. Yui worries and feels *fuan* (unease) a lot during her period, due to the risk of failures. When I

asked her about the most difficult aspect of her period, she said, “I experience leaks and stains quite a bit. Because I have those sorts of experiences, I really don’t like my period. Around the second day, my bleeding is kind of heavy, so the napkin is at its limit when I change it. I get really stressed and worried when I want to go to the bathroom but can’t.”

Women must be aware constantly of their flow in order to avoid failures. Mayu told me, “The worst thing about my period is having to be conscious of it all the time. I worry about being able to change my napkin in time. Will I be too late, or will I make it? You have to think about it constantly. It disrupts your normal routine.” This creates a lot of worry (*shinpai*) and unease (*fuan*) for women, who make frequent bathroom trips, avoid sitting for long stretches of time, and abstain from exercise and sports during their periods, all in order to reduce their chance of failures. And, of course, these women make strategic use of various menstrual products to prevent leaks. The main ways that leaks happen are that the menstrual product is not absorbent enough or it slips out of place, and so women make strategic choices with menstrual products to ensure, and ideally maximize, absorbency and non-slippage.

Preventing Failures: Absorbency

Sufficient absorbency (*kyūshūryoku*) is arguably the most important quality for a menstrual product to possess, according to my interviewees, who repeatedly mentioned it when describing their preferred products. Things like price, brand, and packaging design meant nothing if the napkin was not reliably absorbent. If the possibility of leaking causes stress and worry, then an absorbent napkin or tampon provides peace of mind – *anshin* – to users. The notion of *anshin* was brought up often by the women I talked with when we were discussing the merits of different menstrual products; most women were satisfied with the absorbency of their napkins, although a few saw room for improvement. Hitomi’s ideal product, for instance, “definitely wouldn’t leak. And even when you’re sleeping, you can sleep with peace of mind (*anshin*). I worry (*fuan*) about that myself.” Yui also looks to her products for peace of mind, imagining an ideal commercial with the message that “there are times when you worry, but it will be alright.”

Napkins: Overnight and Heavy Flow Styles/Sizes

Women like Hitomi who do not have enough peace of mind from their regular napkins will take extra precautions and use heavy flow or overnight pads even when it is not strictly necessary. These large napkins provide extra protection and thus peace of mind, especially during times when women may not be free to change their napkins for a while. “They are bulky, but they help me not worry as much,” Nao told me. Miki said that she uses extra-large overnight pads that are almost akin to diapers; there are not many in a pack and they are expensive, but they provide much more leak-protection. Mai sometimes seeks out higher quality napkins that are thin yet super absorbent, instead of the brand her mother buys for the household: “When I have the thicker ones, it just seems bulky under there, so like when I cross my legs, I can feel it’s there. When they’re the thinner ones, it’s just nicer I think, you can’t feel it. Somehow I feel like the thick ones overflow kind of, it’s weird, like there’s a pool [of blood] (laughing), there’s a big pool even though it’s thick and should absorb a lot, there’s still a pool sitting above the pad, but then with the thin ones, it just feels clean and dry.”

Panty Liners

Panty liners do not have very widespread use among the women I interviewed, and those who did use them had different purposes for doing so – to collect excess discharge on non-period days or to serve as a small pad for the light flows at the beginning and/or end of their period. Several also wore them “just in case” around the time they expected their period to come. This helps prevent stains to favorite underwear or unexpected leaks through clothing.

Tampons

Tampons are another source of absorbent protection, although very few women in Japan use them (over ninety percent exclusively use napkins). Only three of the twenty-three women I formally interviewed regularly use tampons, having first tried them out in college. Ayaka said that she started using tampons because she was fed up with feeling uncomfortable and getting stains on her bedding at night; she now uses tampons while she sleeps and during heavy flow days. Mayu uses them when she is out and about, like going to class, and knows that she will be active and/or unable to use the restroom for long stretches of time. As an added layer of protection, these women (Mayu and Ayaka), while using tampons, *also* wear pads, just in case. It is likely easier to judge (visually) when a napkin is reaching its fluid capacity than when a tampon is, and it is this learning curve, among other reasons, which steers many women away from the product. Several of the women I talked with were interested in tampons, but they were worried they would “not [be] good at using them” (Reina), potentially resulting in a dreaded “failure.” As Saki said to me, “Aren’t napkins simple?”

Preventing Failures: Non-Slippage

While having riskier timing and being more difficult to use, tampons are far less likely to slip out of place, which is another major concern of many pad users. One feature a menstrual napkin may have to prevent slippage is “wings (*hane*)”; winged pads have extra adhesive material near the center of the pad that folds over and sticks to the exterior of the crotch area of one’s undergarments, thus holding the pad in place more securely. Wingless pads may bunch up in the center, exposing the undergarments and outer clothes to menstrual blood. All but one of my interviewees preferred winged pads; in fact, besides being reliably absorbent, having wings was the most desired quality of a menstrual napkin. Mai said she really needs the ones with wings, otherwise the pad just goes everywhere in her underwear. Nanako shared that without wings, it is more likely for her underwear to “get dirty (*yogorechatte*).” However, even with wings, pads are not guaranteed to stay in place. In each interview, I asked what qualities of their menstrual products they were satisfied with and which needed improvement. Many complaints involved the pad slipping (*zureru*) out of place, the pad having a bad fit, and the pad leaking around the wings.

Menstrual Shorts

If the standard adhesive of pads and the additional stickiness of wings are not always enough, then how are women supposed to prevent failures and maintain a spotless feminine appearance? The answer is “sanitary shorts” or “menstrual shorts,” otherwise known as *seiri yō shōtsu*, a special type of underwear that is sold alongside napkins in drugstores and supermarkets. Many styles have black fabric, and they are made of nylon or other synthetic

materials. There are also several design variations, such as high-waisted shapes and double-lined crotches. Some even have one or two built-in pockets for carrying extra menstrual napkins; this was an important feature mentioned by several women, since carrying one's bag to the toilets at school may be too conspicuous.

Reflecting a trend in the general population (Ono et al 1983, 93; Sato et al 2006, 28), the majority of women I talked with use menstrual shorts⁷⁰, and some were downright shocked to learn that they are not available in the US: “What do you do at night?” (Miki), “Do you just put the napkin in your regular underwear? Doesn't it slip?” (Yuka), “But you need them to use winged napkins” (Shiori), I was told. Many women said that sanitary shorts, because of the shape and fabric material, fit well with napkins (or fit better than regular underwear) and prevent them from becoming unstuck or otherwise moving out of place. “They prevent the napkin from slipping, like when you're walking around” (Miki). The smooth (*sara sara*), stretchy, tight fabric also keeps the napkin snug against the body, further preventing slippage; and, as an added bonus, it helps keep the shape of the pad from showing through one's clothes, which several women were insecure about.

Furthermore, if the seemingly inevitable leak or slippage occurs, the sanitary shorts provide an extra layer of protection. The crotch area, if not the whole panty, is made with waterproof fabric (*bōsui shīto*), or at least fabric that is “difficult to leak through (*more nikui kiji*),” so even if blood leaks onto the sanitary shorts the outer clothes are still protected. Several women also said that it is “easy to get stains out of them (*ochi yasui*).” Reina likes that they are black, to hide stains. Nanako said that “it's alright if menstrual shorts get dirty/stained (*yogorete mo ii*),” and Hitomi even wears them like others wear panty liners – a couple of days before her period is due, just in case it starts early. This unique product thus serves as a preventative measure against “failures” and keeps women looking nice and free of any signs of menstruation.

Hiding the Evidence: Storage and Disposal Practices

Not only do women do their best to prevent menstrual blood from leaking into public view, but they also adopt behaviors to conceal the fact that they are using menstrual products. So, “successful” use of menstrual products includes not only hiding menstrual blood but also hiding the products themselves. Recall Mayu's story from Chapter 3: in elementary school, she used the toilets with her friends. She was on her period, and she tried not to make any sounds when opening the wrapper of her napkin. And there were no trashcans in the stalls, only one by the entrance. She did not want to carry out the used napkin where others would see, so instead she flushed it. Even now, there are sound-masking devices in public restroom stalls, and napkins advertised with crinkle-free wrappers.

As mentioned above, some styles of menstrual shorts have built-in pockets for holding extra napkins. This is especially helpful for school-age girls, since there is only one reason to bring your backpack to the toilets. Four interviewees mentioned these pockets as a positive feature of menstrual shorts, with Miki adding that having the pocket gave her peace of mind (*anshin*), especially if she forgot to pack extra napkins in her bag. Mai also had a special handkerchief (“towel”) that also had a built-in pocket for inconspicuously carrying a napkin to

⁷⁰ Eighteen of the twenty-three interviewees explicitly mentioned using menstrual shorts.

the toilets at school.⁷¹ Menstrual shorts also have double-lined crotches to hide the wings of menstrual products; the wings are tucked in between two layers of fabric so you cannot see them from the outside.

Product Storage

I asked interviewees where they store their unused menstrual products; the most common answer was in the toilet area.⁷² In Mai's and Miki's family homes, they keep the napkins on a shelf above the toilet. Yuka and Momoko keep them in a decorative box in the toilet area. In addition to storing them in the toilet area, both Shiori and Miki keep some in their bedrooms as well. In Rina's family home, the napkins are kept in a small cabinet in the toilet area. Some are put in a small basket in the toilet area which the women take from when they need a napkin. When that gets empty, it is refilled with the napkins in the cabinet. Kazumi keeps napkins inside a closet in her apartment. In Nanako's family home, they take great pains to conceal the products, even while they are just being stored. They keep the napkins inside the toilet area on a shelf, in an opaque bag ("*naka mienai*"). Ayaka said that because she lives alone in an apartment, she keeps her products on a shelf in the toilet area and does not try to hide them.

There was not much mention of product storage outside the home. Miki and Saki keep some napkins in their lockers on campus; Saki said that when her period starts, it starts very suddenly/quickly, so she needs to have these supplies on hand. Only three women mentioned keeping menstrual products on their person / in their purse/bag. (Perhaps this is a taken-for-granted behavior and thus was not brought up much by interviewees, or maybe I could have worded my questions better when asking about where they keep their menstrual products.)

Product Disposal

While some women do hide their *unused* products, it is much more common (and arguably more important for these women) to successfully conceal *used* menstrual products. At least ten women have a trashcan or bag in the toilet area in which to dispose of their used menstrual products. (Mai's family has a small Hello Kitty trashcan for the job!) A few others have a trashcan in the *senmenjo*, rather than in the toilet area, that they use for disposal. Ayaka only has one trashcan in her living space, so her used products will go in there along with all other trash.

At Mayu's family home in Chiba, they do not have a trashcan in the toilet area. She and her mom would instead carry used products to the kitchen trash to throw out. When she first started her period, occasionally she would forget to throw the napkin out and leave it in the toilet area by accident, to be discovered by her father. Even with a trashcan in the toilet area, women will try to make sure that others do not see their used menstrual products. When emptying her toilet trashcan at the end of her period, Chinatsu will move the contents to an opaque black bag

⁷¹ It is common practice in Japan to use a personal handkerchief/towel to dry off one's hands after washing them in the bathroom.

⁷² In the US, we use the term "bathroom" to describe the room in our home that contains a toilet, sink, and shower/bathtub (or a room with just a toilet and sink). In Japanese homes, the toilet and shower/tub are (almost) always in separate rooms. There may be a sink built into the top of the toilet tank, or the sink may be located in an area separate from both the toilet and shower/tub – the *senmenjo* ("washroom" – like a sink/vanity area usually right outside the bathing area). So here, to minimize confusion, I use "toilet area" to describe the room that the actual object is located in, and "toilet" for the object itself.

and then put this bag into the main trash bag. Kitchen/general trash bags in Japan are usually very translucent; and instead of outdoor trash bins or dumpsters, trash bags in cities are put in wire cages or covered with mesh nets (to protect against crows and other pests) before being picked up by trash collectors. So, trash is rather publicly visible. Putting the used menstrual products in a black bag and then putting that bag into the big trash bag prevents neighbors and trash collectors from seeing the contents. Similarly, Manami, Kazumi, and Nanako throw their used napkins away in paper bags or black plastic bags, and then put those bags into the general household garbage bag. Sometimes these are even small, single-use bags, like what you would find in some public women's restrooms here in the US.

A lot of my interview with Momoko revolved around cleanliness and concealment of menstruation. When asked about what improvements she would like for the products she uses, she said, "After you use napkins, you roll them up in the wrapper, right? But when you roll it up, you can still see the pad from the side, right? I really hate that, so I double-wrap it in toilet paper. But that takes a lot of time, so I wish the wrapper was bigger so that when you roll the napkin up in it, you can't see the napkin from any angle." Apparently, her youngest sister is careless when it comes to throwing away her used napkins (or at least it is not up to Momoko's standards of concealment), and so she has had to talk to the sister about that.

Careful Choices: The Habitus of Menstrual Life

Csordas has called the body "the existential grounds of culture" (1990, 5). The body is not a passive object that culture acts upon, but an agentive subject that acts upon and interacts with the world. The body is not static or singular; it has a history and is in constant flux. Farquahar and Lock (2007) also propose a dynamic body, or rather, *bodies*. The plurality of bodies is an important argument; it helps to avoid reifying and objectifying bodies – *the* body – and to avoid universalizing or generalizing bodies' capabilities, experiences, and meanings. Habitus, how we use our bodies to live in and interact with the world, is socially and collectively learned. It arises in its own historical and political-economic contexts, although it is often naturalized and taken for granted (Bourdieu 1992; Mauss 2006).

Containing and concealing menstrual blood does not stop at the strategic use and disposal of menstrual products. Pads, while increasingly technologically advanced, are not infallible tools, and so young women often adopt ways of moving and acting in the world that reduce the chances of "failures" or otherwise contaminating others' lives with menstrual fluid. The embodiment of hegemonic menstruality is evident in interviewees' actions regarding physical exercise, commuting, work, and other tasks and activities. Csordas (1990) proposes a focus on embodiment as a methodological paradigm for understanding and analyzing "lived experience." How the self and other cultural objects come to be conceptualized – the process of constituting, as Merleau-Ponty (2007) would put it as well – is an important topic of study. It is through embodied experience that people create and use knowledge, that they experience and understand themselves (their selves), society, and the world. Therefore, the body and the self/subjectivity are closely connected, if not one and the same. Kleinman and Fitz-Henry (2007) make the argument that the subjective is always social and the social is always subjective. By this they mean that subjectivity is not static, but is influenced by various continuous political, economic, and historical processes. The world we live in impacts our experiences and sense of self, and conversely, our subjectivity influences how we see the world. Therefore, various social contexts

imply different modes of subjectivity and experience. Subjectivity and society shape one another. Hegemonic menstruality is not a set of a priori rules nor are experiences of menstruation biologically determined. Social and individual perceptions and experiences of menstruation are continuously (re)created and (re)negotiated, with macro-level discourses interweaving with everyday embodiment.

“I just live as usual (*itsumo dōri seikatsu shiteimasu*),” Ami said when I asked her if she refrains from any activities during her period. This was not a typical response among my interviewees. Most of the women I spoke to modified at least some part of their daily lives during their periods, including avoiding certain actions, behaviors, or objects. Some of these avoidances are because of fear of failures (leaks) and some are because of an inability to perform the task/activity due to menstrual pain/cramps. Clothing choice and bathing practices are impacted by the need to contain and conceal menstrual blood. Exercise routines, and even just general movement or bodily comportment, are also affected by the fear of failures, as well as by menstrual cramps. School and work attendance can also be impinged by menstrual pain for some women.

Clothing

White, beige, blush, and other light colors are staples of many Japanese women’s wardrobes. But white is completely off-limits for some during that time of the month. Kazumi said that there is not anything in particular that she avoids during her period, except for wearing white clothes. Natsuki also avoids white, instead opting for dark, black, or red clothing, which would more easily hide a stain if a failure occurred in public. Miki experiences irregular periods, and when her period does not come, she stresses out and worries about her clothing choices. She is even hesitant to wear white right after her period ends, in case it is just a fake-out. Nanako avoids wearing new or nice underwear during her period, in case of stains. Besides color, the fit of clothing is also important. Yuka does not like to wear loose or thin clothing during her period, and Yui does not like to wear skirts during her period since she is more worried about “failures” when wearing them.

Bathing

Bathing practices are one aspect of the daily routine that is most likely to change. Typically, Japanese people bathe in the evening, by washing themselves with a showerhead (or bucket and tap) and then soaking in the tub (*ofuro*). By washing themselves before entering the *ofuro*, they can reuse the bathwater for the whole family (these practices are the same at *onsen*). Not everyone soaks in the *ofuro* daily though; busy people may only have time for a shower, single people may not want to fill the *ofuro* for the use of only one person, and some people just prefer not to. With tampon use being rare, and with the heavy flows that some women experience, sharing bathwater during one’s period is often avoided.

About half of the women I interviewed suspended or otherwise modified their use of the *ofuro* during their periods. Two women never use the *ofuro* anyway, so their bathing habits do not change. Hitomi’s mother told her she should not go in the *ofuro* during her period, so she follows that suggestion. Chinatsu and Yui also do not take baths during their periods, opting for just showers. Momoko lives by herself so she will still go in the *ofuro* if she wants to, but when she is at her family home, she will only take a shower. Some of the young women I talked to

craft a compromise: they will still enter the family *ofuro*, but they will take their turn last and drain the tub once they are done. This is the case for Natsuki, Reina, Saki, and Nanako. Kazumi said that she might go in the *ofuro*, but she would not have a long soak like usual. Similarly, Ami still uses the family *ofuro* but tries to make sure her blood does not get in the bath, and Miki will only shower on her heavy flow days and then use the *ofuro* on lighter days. Seven women still use the *ofuro* as usual during their periods, although a few of them made the distinction that they would not visit *onsen* or pools when on their periods.

Exercise

Many female university students participate in school sports clubs or otherwise do some occasional exercise. Again, with limited use of tampons (which, in Japan, are often associated with exercise, sports, and movement), exercise is a risky activity if one is trying to avoid “failures” or leaks. It can also be difficult to do while suffering from painful menstrual cramps (more discussion on cramps below). Hikari, Mayu, and Rina all said that they refrain from heavy exercise (*hageshii undō*) during their periods. Reina also says she avoids intense exercise so her napkin will be less likely to slip out of place, and Momoko does the same. During her period, Yui does not exercise as much and avoids riding her bike if she can help it. While both Momoko and Rina said that they avoid heavy exercise, they still participate in karate club practice during their periods, although they may skip practice if their menstrual flow is particularly heavy.

Like Momoko and Rina, there were a few other women I talked to who still exercise as usual, although they experience increased discomfort and worry while exercising. Hitomi plays badminton, and she changes into a fresh napkin right before practice to help reduce the chance of leaking. She also tires a bit more easily during practice when she is on her period, but she still participates. For Yuka, she still exercises during her period, but she often experiences a sudden gush or heavier flow when she does, which is nerve-racking for her. Mai sometimes still attends dance practice during her period, but “it gets extra soaky down there because of all the sweat and things,” which is very uncomfortable for her. Saki ran long-distance in high school, but the exertion combined with her heavy periods sometimes caused her to become dizzy or otherwise unable to participate fully in sports. Like I mentioned previously, Rina said she may skip karate practice if her period is really bad, but she tries hard not to. Both now, for karate, and in high school when she practiced badminton, it can be “tough to exercise (*undō ga kitsui*)” and “difficult to move (*ugoki zurai*)” during her period. But instead of resting, she “take[s] medicine and push[es] through it (*gaman*) to practice as usual.”

Some women, on the other hand, find exercise helpful for dealing with their periods, or at least find that it does not add to their discomfort or stress. While Reina does avoid heavy exercise, she finds that light exercise, such as going for a walk, helps her period end sooner. Shiori works out regularly (two or three times a week), regardless of her period, and she finds that working out helps alleviate her menstrual cramps. Mai does not typically exercise when she is on her period, mainly because of the bad cramps, but before her period (and before she knows her period is coming), she often exercises. She will get bloated, feel fat, and then go jogging or do some other exercise. Only later will she realize that she is bloated because of her period coming.

Sitting, Sleeping, and Moving Around

When stricken with painful menstrual cramps (although calling menstrual cramps painful is a bit redundant...), the last thing people feel like doing is moving around. When Ayaka is on her period, she will try not to overdo it by going out; she much prefers trying to relax at home. She will also “try not to let [her] stomach get cold (*onaka o hiyasanaï yō ni*).” I ask her what she does to prevent this; she says she will wear certain clothes to keep that area of her body warm. She also likes to stay under the covers of her futon and read, and that helps keep her warm and lets her rest if she has cramps. Reina has severe menstrual pain and does not want to / cannot move her body during the worst of it. Manami feels *darui* and *omoi*; she gets sleepy and all she wants to do is sleep and not move. Chinatsu feels really uncomfortable (*iwakan*) when her menstrual flow is heavy, and she “[does] not want to move (*ugokitakunai*).” While Yui does not enjoy her period, the reason why she does not move around much, she does find it nice to relax and rest at home occasionally.

Just with exercise, certain simple bodily positions or movements can increase the risk of “failures.” Even sitting for stretches of time becomes a risk. Because of her heavy flow, Reina tries to stand on the train rather than sit, even though she does not like standing – this is to help prevent leaking after sitting for a long time and then moving. Chinatsu also gets worried when she is sitting in the train or on chairs for a long time. Sitting in one position/spot for a long time (more than an hour) is something that Shiori avoids, both due to the risk of leaks and because if she keeps still too long, she is more aware of her period pain. Sleeping in certain positions can become a risk too. When Hitomi is on her period, she tries to sleep on her back, facing up since the napkin is bigger and thicker in the back. Other than that, she just “live[s] [her] life as usual (*kawarazu ni seikatsu shiteru*).” Hitomi’s concern over leaks while sleeping or moving are evident in her imagining of the perfect menstrual product: one that “does not leak (*more nikui*),” provides “peace of mind (*anshin*)” even while sleeping, and makes it “easy to move (*ugoki yasui*)” when wearing it.

School and Work

While many women and girls experience painful cramps, and some worry about leaks with heavy menstrual flows, it seems that the bar is high for missing school or work because of one’s period. Twelve of my interviewees said they have never missed school or work because of their periods. While Momoko deals with an irregular cycle and occasionally severe cramps, she will just take some pain medication for the cramps instead of missing school or work. In addition to taking medicine, she will try to concentrate on an activity that will take her mind off of the pain and distract her from it. Hikari says she does not really need to stay home from school or work because her cramps are not bad; but she has covered shifts for coworkers who had to stay home. Similarly, while Nanako has never missed school or work because of her period, she does know classmates who have done so.

Reina has never missed school or work because of her period, but she does try to schedule her work around her period though. Nao also tries to avoid working while on her period, especially the first two days, during which her flow is heaviest. She has not missed university classes because of her period, but she did use her period as an excuse to skip school in high school. Natsuki is the same: she has stayed home from school because of her period, but only in high school, not university. She remembers teachers in high school getting mad at her for

sleeping, even though she tried her best to stay awake. Mai has stayed home from school and work during her period when the cramps and flow are really severe, and Kana has skipped work once and skipped school two or three times because of her period.

Dealing with Pains: Management of Menstrual Cramps

Pain and discomfort are such a normal part of menstruation for Japanese women that common euphemisms for menstruating are “my stomach hurts (*onaka ga itai*)” and “I don’t feel well (*taichō ga warui*).” The vast majority of women I talked to experience menstrual cramps; for some, it is a mild discomfort (*iwakan*), but about one-third report very painful (*kitsui*) cramps. About half of the women who experience cramps take over-the-counter pain medication like Eve or Bufferin. Some use stomach wraps or heating pads and lay in bed. Other women just “persevere (*gaman suru*)” or try to sleep it off. “*Shō ga nai yo ne*,” Kana said to me – there really is not anything you can do about it. Hikari recalled a childhood memory of how menstrual pain was normalized for her. When she was young, her grandmother taught her about menstruation – that you would bleed once a month. Her grandmother had not mentioned the pain, though. She told me:

My first period, I didn’t have any cramps, but I did with my second period. I didn’t know about menstrual cramps. I remember staying home from school and going to the doctor. I got medicine and they told me it was a regular stomachache. Later at home, my mom asked me why I was going to the bathroom so much. I told her I had my period. She said, “Ah, well, your stomach hurting because of your period is completely normal. It’s no big deal and there’s no need to miss school.” She was angry! I remember her being upset at me!

Momoko also told me a childhood story about menstrual cramps. In middle school, she had a “work experience” event where she helped out at a grocery store for the day. She had severe cramps and did not have any pain medicine with her. As she told me the story, she imitated herself doubled over in pain, hobbling around to put out produce. She said to me, “Every month, I’m resentful of men, because I have severe cramps. Men don’t really have to deal with that kind of pain, do they? They don’t have an annoying thing to put up with every month.”

Experiences with Menstrual Cramps

The pain felt due to menstrual cramps varies widely from person to person, but almost all menstruators have some experience with them. There are a few exceptions though. Nanako said she “almost never” has menstrual cramps, and Yui does not really get them either. Chinatsu and Miki do not get cramps either. These were the only women out of the twenty-three I interviewed who did not have at least some level of discomfort or pain from menstrual cramps. Some women only gradually started to experience cramps as they got older. Rina did not regularly get cramps until she was in university. Kazumi has had slight menstrual cramps since high school. When Shiori was in high school, her period came only every three months, and she did not have much if any pain. She began taking a “hormone pill” to “correct” her menstrual cycle, and when she stopped taking the pill after two years, she started having menstrual pain every month. However,

the pain is rather mild; rather than calling it painful, she described it as “something feels wrong or feels different, and then I know that my period’s coming.”

Like Shiori, several women reported only mild cramps. Hitomi told me that she cannot say she has no cramps, but they are very mild. It is more of a sensation of discomfort than pain; she described this sensation as a “heavy stomach (*onaka ga omoi*).” Yuka said she has menstrual pain, but it is “light (*karui*),” lasting from about the day before through the first day of her period. Haruka gets mild cramps on the first and second day of her period. The second day is also the worst for Ami, but she said it is not that bad compared to others. I asked her why she thinks this, and she explained, “It’s not that I don’t have any menstrual pain, but it’s sort of just a discomfort. It’s not like it hurts so bad I can’t move or I feel listless and can’t do anything.” She theorized that perhaps her uterine lining was thinner than others’, and so she had a lighter flow and less painful cramps. Five other women reported moderate or “regular (*futsū*)” cramps. However, even if the pain is described as mild or moderate, it can still be difficult to deal with. For example, Manami said that the worst aspect of her period is “the pain (*itami*).”

Eight women reported severe menstrual pain, often described as “*kitsui*” (ex: Hikari) or “*omoi*” (ex: Momoko). Kana’s relationship with menstruation and how she discussed it was almost completely situated as a story of pain – suffering through cramps and searching for effective pain relief came up over and over again throughout the interview. She told me,

I started getting period cramps in middle school. I still get them now, and actually they’ve steadily been getting worse lately. In middle school, I got cramps about two days before my period came, but they were just a little uncomfortable. In high school, I started getting cramps one day before my period came, and around then they started to get quite painful. Now the cramps come on the first day of my period, and they are incredibly painful. So recently I’ve started taking pain medicine. I didn’t use to need medicine – in high school the pain was still tolerable. But now when my period comes and the cramps start, I take medicine – it can’t be helped.

Kana’s cramps are by far the most difficult aspect of her menstrual experiences. When asked about a lasting memory related to her period, she recalled a time in high school when she and other classmates were assigned with cleaning the classroom. Her cramps were really bad, and her classmates let her sit down while the rest of them cleaned. At the end of our interview, she asked me if I knew any causes or solutions for cramps getting worse or being severe like hers. I emphasized that I am not a doctor, but I know anecdotally (including my own experience) that the birth control pill can help make cramps and flow lighter. She said she probably will go to a doctor just in case there is anything they can do to help. Up until now, she would just think, “Nothing can be done,” but the pain has gotten to the point where she would be willing to try anything.

Mai’s menstrual cycle is very irregular. She says her period comes about every month and a half, or sometimes she will go three months without having one. Whenever it has been a long time like that, her period is really “terrible” – painful cramps, heavy flow, etc. Her cramps are severe and last the first four days of her period; they are definitely the worst part of her period. Because of her severe cramps, she does not typically exercise during her period, and she sometimes stays home from school or work. Saki’s cycle is regular, but she has always had a

heavy flow and severe cramps, especially during the first two days of her period. She would often go to the nurse's office in middle school and high school to get medicine for the pain. Her mood (*kibun*) suffers during menstruation, at least partly due to physical pain and discomfort (*fukaikan*). She says that "stopping the pain is essential."

Reina said that men/boys do not understand menstrual pain. She and other girls experienced bullying/teasing (*karakai*) from boys in grade school, and so to her, menstruation became "something embarrassing, something to conceal...I don't want it to be exposed, I don't want to be teased." Yuka mentioned how she has never experienced any sexual harassment (*seku hara*) due to her period. I asked what this would be – it entails being made fun of or mocked for being on your period or experiencing period pain, or just generally having the fact that you are on your period brought to attention in a negative/non-supportive way. Like if someone sees you carrying your pouch/purse (for carrying menstrual products) to the bathroom, they may point that out. Or calling you weak for having / complaining about menstrual pain.

Pain Management Methods

Methods for dealing with menstrual pain vary, but the most common approach is to take pain medication. In Japan, there are over-the-counter pain medication brands that are marketed as medication for menstrual cramps, or at least that is one of their intended uses. One of these is called Eve, which two of the women I interviewed referred to by name. Bufferin is also a commonly used pain medication, both for general aches and pains and for menstrual cramps. In total, eleven of the twenty-three women I interviewed said they take pain medication for their menstrual cramps, some of the time if not all of the time. However, two of these women had mothers with backgrounds in nursing who actually discouraged their use of pain medication. Kana's mother has told her it would be better not to take medicine, because your body gets used to pain medicine eventually and then it is no longer effective. When Momoko got her first period in sixth grade, it lasted for one week, during which her stomach hurt the entire time. But her mom did not let her take any medicine for it, since her mom believed she would become dependent on pain medicine if she used it from the very start. However, in middle school, when she was on her period and had exams, her mom let her take pain medicine so she could concentrate better and not be distracted by the pain. Now she takes Bufferin for the pain whenever she wants, although her mother still encourages her to use other pain relief methods.

Some women do use pain relief methods besides or in addition to taking pain medication. One uncommon method is the birth control pill; it is known to lighten flows and cramp severity for some women, and this is why Natsuki sought out the pill in high school. For Shiori, she finds pain relief in exercise; this method is not possible for some women who have trouble exercising or even moving around because of the severe pain. One of the most common alternative or supplemental pain relief methods is the use of heat (e.g., dressing warm, using a hot compress, drinking warm liquids).

Some women have no choice but to simply wait out the pain, because over-the-counter pain medication is not effective enough. Like I mentioned previously, for Manami, the cramps are the worst part of her period. She does not take medication for it or use *hara maki* (warming stomach band); she will just try to sleep through the worst of it if it hurts a lot. Mayu tried some pain medication (Luna brand) in middle school, but it did not work at all, so now she just waits it out without any medication. Kana, Momoko, and Rina all do take pain medication, but it is not

enough for their cramps. Kana will lay in bed and try to distract herself since she cannot even sleep through it like Manami tries to do. Momoko will also try to concentrate on an activity that will take her mind off of the pain and distract her from it. Rina said that she just takes her medication and tries to persevere (*gaman suru*) through the pain.

Warmth and Hieshō

It was early November, and winter weather was slowly creeping toward Tokyo. One Thursday evening at karate practice, Kudō-*kantoku* (coach) was talking about getting chilled (*hieru*), which she had mentioned a few times before. According to her, women are very susceptible to getting chilled and should try to prevent it. At the time, I did not really understand the concept; sure, it sucks to be cold, but why does it matter so much more for women? All I knew was that it is connected to blood flow and menstruation – Glenda Roberts refers to it as “culturally meaningful chills” (1994, 44)⁷³, and some of the cloth napkin websites I researched also mention it in relation to their products (disposable napkins chill the body – cloth napkins warm it). I really got to know chill that winter though. The gym that we practiced in had no A/C or heat; and while I got rubber *tabi* to protect my feet from the wooden gymnasium floor, sometimes my hands got so cold that they ached fiercely and I had trouble forming fists.

About a month later, I was at a dinner party near Sugamo at the home of my friends, a married couple named Nina and Takashi. We briefly got on the topic of *hie*, and I asked them to explain why it is often said women are prone to chilling. Nina and other women at the party agreed that this was a common saying, but they were not sure if many women actually experience it. They batted around ideas as to why women might be more prone, including poorer blood circulation, less muscle mass, and lower metabolisms. It can cause illness or make menstruation worse. Nina, who is American, also said it was not limited to Japan or Asia, and that her mom often spoke of it too.⁷⁴

My first karate *gasshuku* (training retreat) was at a quaint inn (*yado*) in Shizuoka, nestled partway up a small mountain with a view of the ocean. Winter temperatures still clung on in early March, although we had exercise during the day and space heaters at night to fend off the cold. The threat of *hie* kept rearing its head on the two-night trip. After each practice session, we would hit the *ofuro* to quickly wash off sweat and relax our muscles (these bath trips would only be about five to ten minutes). Before bed, we had a chance for extended time in the bath so we could wash our hair. We dried off, got dressed, and slid on our slippers to return to our room for the night. However, Ishikawa-coach saw us and chided us for not putting on socks after getting out of the bath – “Don’t get chilled!” On the last day of the retreat it was sunny and moderately warm, so after going to the *ofuro* after the second morning practice session, I only had on leggings and a t-shirt as we headed down to lunch. However, my roommates told me I needed to

⁷³ “Taniguchi san later came to tell me that she had overheard the whole thing and to reassure me of her support. She said if anyone was *kakko warui* it was the *shisutaa* herself, who was wearing a red plaid blanket over her hips to keep warm during her period. I, too, had seen the irony in this, but hesitated to point it out to the *shisutaa*. Perhaps warding off culturally meaningful chills, such as those which come with menstruation, is acceptable, whereas insisting on wearing a sweater just because of a brief blast of cold air is not” (Roberts 1994, 44).

⁷⁴ Freidenfelds writes that, in the United States, “advice literature continued to recommend avoiding cold water and chilling during menstruation into the late 1960s” (2009, 89). This was “because the [menstrual] flow might be checked, causing internal ‘disorder’ and inflammation, and because women were more susceptible during menstruation to catching colds that could lead to long-term health problems” (Freidenfelds 2009, 78-79).

put on a sweater, because after you take a bath, you can get chilled easily, even if it is warm. And Sunday afternoon, while I was resting during practice, Kudō-*kantoku* saw me grab my *tabi* to put them back on, which she encouraged, remarking that it would be good so as not to get chilled while I rested on the floor.

Hieshō is nearly synonymous with women's health problems when you look at media (books, online articles, TV programs) related to health and wellness. And *hieshō* is not simply being cold – getting chilled can lead to poor blood circulation, aches and pains, poor digestion or appetite, lethargy, and so on. It is connected to the “hot and cold theory” of Chinese medicine, in which homeostasis contributes to or is a sign of good health while imbalance can lead to or be a sign of poor health. Both external factors/objects (foods, drinks, weather, etc.) and internal ones (e.g., organs) have their own set of intrinsic properties, including “hot/warm” (associated with yang) and “cold/cool” (associated with yin). While “cold” things are not inherently bad, an imbalance of either hot or cold causes health problems. Women are more associated with yin, which itself is associated with darkness, cold, inertia, and blood (Keyhanian 2021). Many women try to avoid getting chilled, especially during their periods; it can worsen their cramps. On the other hand, keeping warm can help relieve menstrual pain. Only five of the women I interviewed said they do not experience *hieshō*, while the rest either said they experience it or otherwise take steps to keep warm and avoiding getting chilled during their periods. Yuka's experiences with *hieshō* include getting stomachaches, colds, and suffering from cold extremities (fingers and toes). Yui's *hieshō* is also felt most strongly in her toes, and Haruka focuses on warming her hands and feet to combat her *hieshō*. The winter season makes *hieshō* symptoms more acute for Momoko and Shiori; Miki deals with it year-round (“*zutto hieshō*”). For Ami, mornings when she is on her period are more difficult; she feels like her whole body is colder than (“*hada zamui*”).

As mentioned above in the section on pain relief methods, using heat or otherwise keeping warm is a commonly used method to combat both *hieshō* and menstrual cramps, which may be worsened by *hieshō*. Hikari, Natsuki, and Mai all use a heating pad, or *kairo* – pocket heater / hand warmer (often single-use). Mai uses this product even during the hot summer months since her cramps are so bad. Yuka, Rina, and Ayaka will wear a stomach band (*hara maki*) to warm their bodies and reduce cramps; the *hara maki* is like a stretchy sweater tube that you wear over your stomach/torso. It can also take the form of very high-waisted underwear; Momoko uses high-waisted menstrual shorts to keep extra warm during her period, and Rina sometimes wears thermal high-waisted underwear as well. Mai will wear wool pants during the wintertime to help reduce cramps and stay warm, Yui also wears extra warm clothes during the winter, and Yuka tries to wear lower body garments and other clothes that are not too thin. Ami and Ayaka also use *futon* or *mōfu* (blanket) to keep warm at home; Ayaka likes to stay under the covers of her *futon* and read, which helps keep her warm and lets her rest/relax if she has cramps.

What you put *in* your body can be just as important as what you put *on* your body. Natsuki, Yuka, Yui, Haruka, and Momoko all avoid drinking cold beverages during their periods, instead opting for warm drinks and food. Mai does not drink coffee during her period: “I heard caffeine isn't good for your period, and it could possibly hurt you? I think it was on Luna Luna or something; it has articles on it about your period. So I quit drinking coffee...I'll warm up some water or some milk instead of the coffee, just to warm myself up.” Warm beverages (except for coffee apparently) are helpful because they “keep [your] stomach from getting cold

(*onaka o hiyasanai yō ni*).” Taking baths is another good way to keep the body warm. As discussed earlier, bathing choices can be tricky during your period, but some still use the *ofuro* in order to avoid getting chilled. Rina normally takes showers whether she is on her period or not, but in winter or on cold days she will opt for a bath. Shiori’s mother told her it is best to keep her body warm during her period, so she will use the *ofuro*, although she will go in last when she is at home.

PMS as Local Biology

Today, premenstrual syndrome (PMS) is a well-known phenomenon; however, it is a relatively recent one, arising in the mid-twentieth century. In fact, a connection between emotions and the menstrual cycle, regardless of a formal label, has not always been recognized either. In the West, this first began in the nineteenth century, when physicians attributed women’s “emotional instability” to the menstrual cycle’s perceived effects on the nervous system. Later in the twentieth century, the theory of the nervous system under siege shifted to out-of-control hormones (Freidenfelds 2009, 113-114). Robert Frank, a doctor, proposed the term “premenstrual tension” in 1931, and physician Katharina Dalton is credited with coining the term “premenstrual syndrome,” or PMS, in 1953. However, the concept did not gain much traction among the general populace in the United States until the 1980s. Freidenfelds gives three reasons for PMS catching on as phenomenon during this time. First, the concept received considerable media attention during two murder trials in Britain in which the female criminals received lighter sentences due to suffering from PMS when killing their victims. Second, it became a popular piece of “supporting evidence” against second-wave feminism and women’s attempts to gain more positions of power in the workplace (Freidenfelds 2009, 111).

The third reason that PMS started to catch on in the 1980s was because of improvements in the comfort of menstrual management products (napkins and tampons), as well as pain medication for cramps. Once “the physical discomfort that they assumed caused bad moods during menstruation had largely been eliminated,” women “were ready to be convinced that periodic irritability and depression should be seen as a part of the menstrual cycle that needed to be brought under control, and they read with interest the abundant popular literature about premenstrual syndrome” (Freidenfelds 2009, 113-114). There are some benefits to the medicalization of experiences labelled as PMS: “...psychological and physical states that many women experience as extremely distressing or painful can be alleviated, a problem that had no name or known cause can be named and grasped, and some of the blaming of women for their premenstrual condition by both doctors and family members can be stopped” (Martin 1992, 114-115). This “naming” can be quite powerful; having a name for these experiences legitimizes women’s suffering in the eyes of medicine and society and opens up avenues to alleviation of this suffering that may not be available without medicalization.

However, the transformation of emotional changes and physical sensations associated with the menstrual cycle into a medical problem can be twisted and wielded against women, rather than empowering them. As Freidenfelds argues, it can be “turned into a way to insist that women manage their moods better” (2009, 117). It can be used to argue that women are not suited for leadership or even for the workforce in general (Martin 1992, 121; Freidenfelds 2009, 111). The medicalization of women’s emotions, especially anger, obfuscates gender inequality in patriarchal capitalist societies. Freidenfelds points out that the “symptoms” of PMS that “most

[need] to be managed” are “psychological symptoms such as depression and irritability...that most [disrupt] women’s productive and reproductive efficiency” (2009, 114). Martin similarly found, when interviewing women, that the “overriding theme in the changes women articulate is a loss of ability to carry on activities involving mental or physical discipline” (1992, 121). In other words, anger, irritability, and depression can be written off as a hormonal imbalance, rather than acknowledged as a sign of structural violence from a system that demands capitalist productivity and Foucauldian self-discipline. If a woman is angry, distressed, or annoyed, the burden of responsibility lies on her, not on society, to change: “Her own anger, however substantial the basis for it, must not be allowed to make life hard on those around her” (Martin 1992, 130).

What is PMS in the Context of Japan?

While PMS may have its origins as a medical term in the West, it still influences lived experiences of the menstrual cycle in Japan. However, it is important to keep in mind that there may be significant differences and understandings of and embodied experiences of PMS across different societies. As Lock and Kaufert argue, “...the majority of women are responding today not simply to ‘tradition’ and local hegemonies, but also to the effects that globally circulating knowledge and practices have on their lives” (1998, 23). Global forms of expert knowledge, as “global assemblages,” can be de- and re-contextualized in various contexts (Collier 2006). Through the concept of “local biologies,” Lock (1993) has argued against the assumption that biological phenomena associated with the life cycle are universal across all human groups. Niewöhner and Lock further assert that

...the embodied experience of physical sensations, including those of well-being, health, and illness, is in part informed by the material body, itself contingent on evolutionary, environmental, social and individual variables. Embodiment is further constituted by the manner in which self and others represent the body, drawing on local categories of knowledge and experience. If embodiment is to be made social, then history, politics, language, and local knowledge, including scientific knowledge to the extent that it is available, must inevitably be implicated. In practice this means that knowledge about human biology is informed by the social, and the material in turn informs the social. The primary site where this engagement takes place is the subjectively experienced socialised body. Hence, the body cannot be assumed to be universal in kind, layered over by sociocultural flotsam. The material and the social are both contingent (2018, 684).

They argue for the importance of “situating biologies,” that is, examining the processes in which local biologies are constituted and understood in globally connected societies (Niewöhner and Lock 2018, 688). The particular phenomena associated with PMS must be situated within the context of Japan, where feminine rage is similarly included under the umbrella of the “problem” of PMS but physical pain and discomfort are less often included.

Around four interviewees (Reina, Hitomi, Yui, Kana, and Nanako) were unfamiliar with the name “PMS” or “*gekkei mae shōkōgun*.” Hitomi was one of these women; when I described symptoms of PMS like cramps and irritableness, she says she does not experience any of that. Yui had not heard of PMS or *gekkei mae shōkōgun* either. I explained what it is

(mental/emotional and physical changes before / at the beginning of your period). She asked if it was an illness (*byōki*); I said that despite the name, many women experience it but live life normally, although there are some with severe symptoms who go to the doctor. During this discussion of PMS symptoms, I mention tiredness/fatigue, and she brings up that she does get tired before/at the beginning of her period (“*nemuku naru*”). Nanako said that she can get irritated easily (“*ira ira shiyasui*”) about two to three days before her period starts, but she was not familiar with PMS. Kana gets anxious and “feel[s] low/depressed (*kibun ga ochikomu*)” a few days before her period starts, but she has not heard of PMS. So, while knowledge or awareness of PMS as a phenomenon associated with mental, emotional, and physical changes around the beginning of the period is not present for some women, this does not preclude them from experiences typically associated with PMS.

PMS is “a collection of symptoms that includes getting irritated before your period (Ayaka).” PMS is “different for everyone” but it involves mood swings and cramps, in addition to other symptoms (Nao). Yuka did not seem to recognize PMS by name but did when I explained a bit more and talked about mood changes (e.g., *ira ira*). She does not experience mood/emotion changes, but she considers her menstrual pain and tiredness to fall under the PMS umbrella. Momoko has heard of PMS, but she does not have it. According to her, “there are women who get irritable and emotional because of female hormones during their period.” Haruka has heard of PMS, but she does not really know any specifics of what it is like. She has just read about how “women suffer [from it] (*josei ga kurushindeiru*).” Shiori is familiar with the term PMS and says she experiences it a lot: “It really makes me very emotional. Like I can go from happy to sad or angry like really quick. And even like the smallest things can really piss me off.” Kazumi found out about PMS on the internet after doing some research as to why she gets depressed before her period. To her, PMS involves symptoms that have to do with your mood and “feeling depressed (*ochikomu*).” This is why she believes that she has experiences of PMS. Natsuki described PMS as “changes in your mood such as extreme mood swings, getting irritated, and becoming aggressive, that happens about a week before your period.” Personally, she does not experience much in the way of PMS nowadays, but in high school, “I would get listless and hate doing anything. I wasn’t aware of my own behavior but hearing from those around me afterwards, I would be irritable and tiny things would bother me.” Mayu said, “I kind of define that [PMS] as when you get irritated or you get so nervous, *so* nervous, like compared to ordinary life. I kind of think I do, yes, get frustrated... There’s nothing going on, but then you get frustrated, or you feel so irritated and then you feel so nervous, or something frustrates you really bad about your boyfriend... I also get a headache and stomachache, I feel like hell.” While a few women included things like fatigue and cramps in their list of possible PMS symptoms or experiences, most of the interviewees, whether or not they evaluated their own experiences as PMS, focused on the connection between PMS and emotionality – more extreme or intense emotions, more irritability, more sadness.

Irritation and “Feeling Low”

What do young Japanese women experience during and around their periods, besides bleeding and cramps? Fatigue, soreness of the breasts and/or pelvis, and increased appetite were mentioned by a few interviewees. Ayaka said that she “[does] not really get irritated (*ira ira amari nai*)” and besides “getting tired more easily (*tsukare yasui*),” she does not experience any

other physical or emotional changes around her period. Mayu said she gets extra hungry during her period, and Haruka also said that her appetite (*shokuyoku*) changes during her period. For Miki, the most difficult aspect of her period is getting irritable and the fact that she cannot stop eating.

Mood swings or changes in mood, including increased irritability and sadness, were described by many of the young women I talked to. These can be challenging to deal with; Nao said that the worst part about her period is the changes in her mood, and Shiori said that the worst part of her period is the “ups and downs” of her emotions, especially since they affect the people around her. Miki describes her changes in mood as “large (*ōkii*).” Mai said that her emotions are “very severe. I’m happy at one moment, and then I’m super sad at the other moment. My emotions are maybe like five times the regular. Yesterday was my worst day I guess, like every three minutes I was like about to cry for no reason. That kind of happens. Well especially because I’m job hunting right now. Stress and periods don’t go good together. Usually I don’t get *that* stressed, but I guess I still do have some extremes.” Saki said that during her period, she “feel[s] uncomfortable (*fukaikan aru*),” her hormone balance changes, and her mood (*kibun*) goes down.

These women who experience mood changes during their periods feel emotions more intensely, switch from one emotion to another more quickly, and are more likely to feel irritated or sad/depressed. Eight of my interviewees said that they get more irritated, angry, or annoyed while on their periods. I do wonder if the lower threshold for irritability is something that they recognize themselves or something that is pointed out to them by others. Either way, these women do seem actively conscious of their emotions and how they (may) affect the people around them. Nao tries not to show her anger or mood swings. Mayu recounted a time when she told her boyfriend that she was on her period, and he responded “Oh, so that’s why you’re so irritated!”

Ochikomu was a word I heard many times during my interviews – to feel down, to feel sad, to be depressed, to be in low spirits. Nine interviewees said they get sad, depressed, low, or down during their periods. Reina said she gets *utsu* (depression, low spirits), and she gets in a funk where she “[doesn’t] want to do anything” and feels like she has “the May blues (*gogatsu byō*).”⁷⁵ Manami said that, emotionally, she often feels “negative and dark (*kuraku naru*)” and “easily depressed/sad (*ochikomi yasui*).” Ami said she “[feels] a little down (*utsu ppoku*)” during her period, and Kazumi said she gets “gloomy/depressed (*yūutsu kibun*)” about three days prior to her period starting. Rina said she does not get depressed (“*ochikomu janai kedo*”) but she’s not as energetic/spirited (“*genki*”) as she usually is. Emotionally/mentally, during her period, Yui feels “*fura fura* (unsteady, dizzy, wandering, aimlessly, without knowing what one is doing),” and about a week before her period she may “feel down (*ochikomu*).” A few days before her period, Kana feels low/depressed (“*kibun ga ochikomu*”), and she feels “*tenshon* (anxiety, emotional tension).”

⁷⁵ The May blues is blues experienced by college freshmen or workplace recruits shortly after beginning school or work (the schoolyear begins in the spring, and this is also when new graduates / work recruits often begin their jobs).

Conclusion

The imperative to conceal menstruation leads to particular embodied experiences of menstruation. In order to conform with hegemonic menstruality, women must properly carry out “self-management and discipline” (Miller 2006, 11). As Jackson and Falmagne write, being “a woman in a patriarchal society requires that one embody societal messages of femininity, dissociating from one’s own physical desires in order to conform to hegemonic constructions of feminine beauty, appearance and behavior” (2013, 382). Hegemonic femininity and hegemonic menstruality pressure women into performing a “range of self-monitoring and body-management tasks” (Hasson 2016, 964) that require vigilance and often self-sacrifice – for instance, standing instead of sitting during a train commute to reduce the chance of blood pooling that could lead to leaks, which are “a highly visible, stigmatizing mark, symbolically representing a lapse in ‘proper’ feminine behavior” (Jackson and Falmagne 2013, 390). Bobel argues that:

...the high premium placed on clean and contained bodies actually sets forth a mandate for a particular set of embodied expectations, a coded quest for respectability via the body that passes as non-menstrual, and thus, disciplined. To put it bluntly, in the world of MHM [menstrual hygiene management], dignity depends on discipline...Until MHM chooses to reframe, its efforts are held hostage by the dominant cultural narrative of gendered body negativity and market-based solutions that privilege consumption over social change (2019, 32).

While Bobel is mainly discussing NGOs’ efforts to promote gender equity and women’s health through supplying menstrual products and providing menstruation education to communities in “developing” countries, her assertions hold true for Japan as well. Under hegemonic menstruality, menstruation is a hygiene problem that should be addressed via “market-based solutions.” And yet, not delivering on the expectation to present “clean and contained bodies” “can be read as a moral, and not technological, failure” (wherein menstrual products are considered technologies) (Vostral 2008, 2). When a non-menstrual body is the only socially acceptable body, then “gendered body negativity” is perpetuated; women’s bodies are naturally inferior and stigmatizing, requiring technological and commercial interventions to “discipline” it.

These technologies also have a direct effect on how women live their menstrual lives. While many menstrual products today are very effective at absorbing and/or containing menstrual blood, women often must still adapt to the shortcomings of menstrual product technologies. For instance, since most women do not choose to use tampons, they must refrain from swimming and public bathing during menstruation. Additionally, they may wear spandex undergarments or loose-fitting outerwear to hide the outline of menstrual napkins, as well as dark-colored clothing to hide potential leaks. They develop specific habits to obtain, use, and dispose of their menstrual products that boost their efforts to conceal all signs of menstruation. Women have limited outlets to express pain, discomfort, and distress, since they are expected to put on a brave face and “persevere (*gaman*),” as well as maintain a polite and pleasing demeanor to others despite the heightened emotional sensitivity and turmoil that some experience. Under the weight of “grinning-and-bearing-it,” it is logical that women may develop resentment toward menstruation and their own bodies.

CHAPTER 6. WHEN IT DOESN'T COME: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF MENSTRUAL IRREGULARITY⁷⁶

Introduction

From 2010 to 2017, my period would start exactly every four weeks on the Tuesday evening after completing that month's pack of hormonal birth control pills. I would often preemptively take ibuprofen before going to bed on those Tuesday nights, in case cramps threatened to strike midsleep. Even before starting the pill at the age of nineteen, my cycle was very regular. In the days before there was "an app for everything" – including menstrual cycle and fertility tracking – I would mark the days I bled on my wall calendar: my period came every twenty-eight plus or minus about three days. My cycle's regularity meant that I could prepare. I could prepare for the monthly migraine, the hot anger at everything and everyone, the acne, the "Again?" my mother would always say as I applied stain remover to my pajamas and my sheets.

This chapter starts as a story of me and my body, me and my blood. In September 2017, I had set out to find stories of other bodies, other blood – in Tokyo, among the all-female students of Ochanomizu University. At that time, I found it ironic that I was going to talk to Japanese women about their experiences with menstruation when that was something I no longer experienced. Four months earlier, in May 2017, I had gotten the hormonal birth control implant, and my period had all but disappeared. My predictable companion of thirteen years was no longer with me. I would like to say it was nice not to worry about buying and storing pads, about having painkillers on hand to alleviate cramps and headaches, about preventing leaking blood and leaking smells. While these things were no longer a concern for me, I still worried – I worried about if and when my period would come. Suspended in a never-ending state of uncertainty, I became hyper-aware of the sensations of my body, alert to any potential sign – a hint of a migraine aura, a twinge deep inside my abdomen, anything. However, during my twelve-month stay in Tokyo, I learned that although I rarely bled anymore, I did still share experiences of menstruation with the young university women. For irregularity is not so uncommon and not so abnormal, and it is not only when you are bleeding that you deal with your menstrual cycle. This chapter's focus is when the state of normalcy is irregularity and when unpredictability is expected. How do women deal with their irregular periods? How do they deal with the expectation to flawlessly conceal their menstrual status when they may be taken by surprise by their very own bodies?

Public awareness of menstrual disorders – such as dysmenorrhea and amenorrhea – has been improving in recent times due to greater media attention and increased medical research. In Japan, a country grappling with the socioeconomic impacts of low birthrates and a shrinking and aging population, media and scientific discourse focus on the effect of these disorders on fertility. In fact, in both scientific and classroom settings, menstruation is linked strongly to fertility, and fertility and motherhood are traditional markers of feminine success. So what does it mean when menstruation does not follow the pattern taught to young girls in school? Many of

⁷⁶ In this dissertation, there are multiple kinds of "irregular" menstrual cycles: predictable pattern but non-monthly (long cycles and/or repeating patterns of amenorrhea); non-predictable and non-monthly (including long stretches of amenorrhea); seasonal irregularity (more of an annual pattern if any); and extremely heavy flows or severe cramps (not necessarily accompanied by an "irregular" cycle).

the women I interviewed agree that a “normal” menstrual cycle following a regular pattern is a sign of good reproductive and general health. On the other hand, an irregular menstrual cycle could be a sign that something is “wrong” and that one might have struggles with fertility in the future. However, exploring women’s own experiences with heavy menstrual flows and irregular menstrual cycles shows that these experiences are actually quite common, calling into question the idea of a “normal” period. Women’s responses to irregular cycles and painful cramps – their level of concern and the type of treatment they seek (if any) – are extremely varied. These women thus provide alternative answers to what it means to be “healthy” and what it means to be a “woman.”

“Hegemonic menstruality” – the macro, public discourse of menstruation that proscribes the “correct” way to menstruate as a member of society – assumes that a “normal” menstrual cycle occurs every month, that menstruation’s main purpose is enabling fertility, and that all signs of menstruation should be concealed. Irregular cycles flout hegemonic menstruality in multiple ways, causing anxiety for those who experience them. Their unpredictable nature makes women more vulnerable to failures (*shippai*) – leaks of unexpected menstrual blood – making it more difficult to conceal menstruation successfully. They may also be a sign of reproductive failure; with a pervasive public discourse on the social and economic woes of a country with an aging and shrinking population and a strong social prerogative for (married) women to bear children, the potentially negative implications of an irregular menstrual cycle can weigh heavily on women who experience them. As Spielvogel argues, in Japan, “For young women, a healthy body is defined as a fertile body” (2003, 197). However, at the same time, many women accept and adapt to their irregular menstrual experiences without seeking to conform to hegemonic menstruality.

Interviewees Views on Menstrual Cycles and Health

Whether they had experience with irregular menstrual cycles or not, many women viewed regular menstruation as important to their general health. Hikari’s grandmother taught her that menstruation was “your body preparing to make a baby,” and told her its purpose was both to have children and so that one’s body is healthy. She views menstruation as a good thing – a “detox” for her body. When asked whether she likes or dislikes her period, Ami said that she does not hate it, but she does not like it a lot either. Lately, she has been thinking of it as “a barometer for my body that can reveal the condition of my health...I’ve been thinking of it as a positive recently. When my period doesn’t come, that lets me see that I’ve been dealing with too much stress or I’m pushing myself too hard at work...it lets me objectively infer my health condition, and it’s the easiest way to know whether or not I’m pregnant.” Kazumi and Haruka expressed similar ideas: Kazumi said that getting her period helps her know that she is healthy or at the very least it helps her judge the health (*taichō*) of her body; Haruka said getting her period helps her “understand [her] body’s condition (*karada no jōtai ga wakaru*).” Nao, Reina, and Manami all said that menstruation is a sign of a healthy or properly functioning body. This peace of mind – this guarantee of health (and non-pregnancy for these university students) – helps alleviate some of the negative opinions and experiences of menstruation (discussed in Chapter 5).

Throughout my interview with Shiori, she strongly associated a regular menstrual cycle (once a month) with a healthy body and an irregular cycle as a sign of being unhealthy. This

viewpoint began from childhood when she learned about menstruation from her mother. Her mother told her that during puberty she will start to bleed once a month, that this is something that “should occur for women who are healthy,” and that it ends at around fifty years of age. Later on, from school and from health-related television shows, she learned that anorexia and stress can affect the menstrual cycle and make it irregular. So when asked if her period is a good thing or a bad thing, she said, “I think it is good in the sense that I do have it regularly because some people don’t, whether it’s like anorexia or stress or whatever. So I would take it as a good thing that my menstruation cycle is healthy.” In high school, she and her friends would talk about their periods occasionally, especially those who had an irregular cycle (not coming once a month). She commented on these conversations, “I heard that delayed periods aren’t healthy for your body because it’s a sign that something’s off. I thought they should go [to the doctor], and I think I told them but none of them really thought of it as a really serious issue.” Shiori repeatedly connected a monthly cycle with good health and a non-monthly cycle with poor health. She expressed surprise and concern (and a bit of judgement?) over friends who experienced irregular cycles without seeming to care about it. However, irregularity can cause much concern and worry for those who experience it, and some do indeed make efforts to “correct” their menstrual cycles.

Early Experiences

About one quarter of the women I interviewed currently had an irregular menstrual cycle, but nearly all of them had experienced a time in their lives when their period was irregular and unpredictable. Quite a few had these experiences early on in their menstrual lives – in middle school or high school. It is common for menstrual cycles to be irregular for the first year or so after menarche. This was certainly the case for Haruka, Reina, and Natsuki; Natsuki had another long bout of irregularity (specifically amenorrhea) in high school. Rina dealt with irregular periods all throughout middle school and high school, and her period is only regular now because she takes the birth control pill. Irregularity had a lasting impact on Miki’s middle school experiences: I asked her about a strong memory she had relating to her period, and she said that in middle school there was a friend who had had her period for two weeks, and she felt like she had someone to talk to, like she was not alone in having issues with her period. Young women (or adolescent girls) often commiserated with friends about their period-related suffering, and, when faced with worry or uncertainty regarding menstruation, they would turn to the internet or perhaps their mothers (see Chapter 3). This is what Nanako did in high school when her period did not come for three months. A change from normal – as determined by a menstruator’s personal experiences – can be a sign that something is wrong. But putting your finger on what precisely is wrong can be very difficult.

Women’s Explanatory Models of Irregularity

Nanako recounted how in high school she did not get her period for three months, and her period continued to be very irregular up until her second year of university. She did internet research on possible causes of amenorrhea and found that “it could be because of nutrition deficiency or being too thin, or something like that. But I wasn’t too thin, so I thought it must be something else...I wasn’t in a bad condition besides that, so I thought that it’s probably ok...I

still wonder what could have caused it.” She certainly was not the only one to have no clue why their period was irregular.

A few other interviewees said that their menstrual irregularity was indeed due to dieting or being too thin. Natsuki told me that the first year after she got her first period, her cycle length and days of bleeding were irregular. While it eventually evened out, in high school she went through about one and a half to two years where she did not have a period at all, because she was really thin. Saki had a friend in high school who became super skinny and her period became really short (only two days of bleeding). Shiori got her first period relatively late, around her first year of high school (tenth grade) when she was fifteen years old, and her period came only about every three months that first year. She says that at the time she was a runner and very athletic, as well as quite skinny, and this is why her period was irregular. After high school, she put on a bit more weight, and she attributes her period becoming more regular to this.

According to interviewees’ direct experiences, the most common cause of irregularity was stress, and in fact several women’s times of irregularity coincided with big life changes or other events, like starting university or studying for entrance exams. For example, when Hikari first started university, her period became irregular due to stress, coming every other month instead of every month. She went to the university clinic, and she was told she should wait a little longer and see if it goes back to normal, and it eventually did. In all, it was irregular for only about six months. When Manami was studying abroad, she experienced amenorrhea for about two to three months. She was quite worried about this, although she did not go to a medical facility like Hikari did. Instead, she did some research on the internet, and then she ended up calling her mom. Her mom said that it was probably due to stress. Indeed, she did eventually get her period again and was very relieved.

But even less extreme circumstances or times of stress can bring on bouts of irregularity. Haruka, Ami, and Yui all had regular cycles at the time of their interviews, but all three also had experiences of irregular menstruation associated with stress. Haruka said that during periods of stress, her period would become irregular (or “unstable [*fuantei*]”) and would not come for two months. Yui’s cycle is fairly regular, on average about twenty-nine days long, but her cycle can change due to stress. Ami said that about half the time her period is irregular and the other half it is regular. She finds it to be irregular more often in the summer, and when she is very stressed it can become irregular. One interviewee, Momoko, talked about the reciprocal relationship between stress and her period. Her cycle is rather long to begin with, about forty days, and sometimes stress makes it late or otherwise irregular. The lateness and irregularity in turn causes her stress – she says that she “get[s] quite worried.” It gives her concern about her health in general and she also gets worried that she may be pregnant.

Worry and Inconvenience: Living with Irregularity

While the risk of pregnancy can be a major worry, irregularity can also lead to more minor worries and inconveniences. Many of the women who had irregular cycles complained that the unpredictability made it difficult for them to make and keep plans for the future, such as beach or hot springs trips, or even just going out with friends for the day. In fact, when interviewees were asked what the most difficult thing about their period was, after painful cramps (see Chapter 5), an unexpected period ruining their plans was the next most mentioned complaint. Your period can really strike at the most inopportune time. Momoko told me about

something that happened to her earlier that summer: “Last month I had my civil service exam. After I got to the test site, I went to the bathroom, and I saw that my period had come. My cycle is usually forty days, but it came rather early, around thirty days instead. So, I hadn’t brought any napkins with me. I used tissues and toilet paper as a stop-gap, and that’s all I had from morning until the evening. During the exam, I covered my pants and the chair with my hoodie just in case too. I felt so uneasy, and I couldn’t concentrate.” As discussed in Chapter 5 visibly leaking menstrual blood is called *shippai*, failure, a failure to be properly feminine, which women must guard against. But irregular cycles make this even harder to do.

Ruining Plans and Pants

Irregularity contributed to women’s mixed feelings about their periods. When asked if her period was good or bad or if she liked or disliked it, Haruka said she could not say she likes it, but she also does not really think it is bad. It was sometimes nice to skip gym class in middle school, and in general it helps her understand her body’s condition. The most difficult thing to deal with is planning and going on trips because of her irregular cycle. Ami has similarly complicated feelings about her period. The worst part of her period is its irregularity – it makes going to the *onsen* or pool, or other activities, difficult; sometimes she thinks it is ending but then it does not. However, she knows that she is still healthy regardless of the irregularity (“*fujun demo genki*”).

Nanako’s feelings on her period are more straightforward. When I asked whether she liked or disliked her period, before I could even complete my question, she quickly replied:

I don’t like it! (laughing) Are there actually people who do like it? No way. If it was possible, I wouldn’t want it to come. Even with a napkin, sometimes my underwear gets stained, and changing out napkins is annoying. I’m a person who’s easily annoyed, so I hate it...During my period, I can’t go to the *onsen* or the pool, or the ocean, because I would contaminate it. Not being able to go sucks. Also, when it was irregular, not knowing when it would come sucked. Plus, whenever it came when I thought it wouldn’t and so I wasn’t using a napkin, I’d be like, “Oh no!” and my pants would get stained...As for any good points, well it’s not a “good point” per se, but it is necessary for having children. But in terms of the actual phenomenon of menstruation, there’s nothing good about it.

Reina also struggles with making and keeping plans since her period could come unexpectedly, which makes it difficult to go out or do certain activities. Kazumi does not like her period either; it makes it hard to plan and keep plans for trips. She remembers a time she took a trip to the ocean with friends, but she ended up not being able to go swimming because she got her period.⁷⁷ Instead she went on a cycling sightseeing tour.

Hitomi’s dislike for her period is also directly related to its irregularity. She has a distinct memory from when she was a young teen, when her period started unexpectedly during the night: “My futon got super stained. That was the first time I experienced a bad leak, and I was super shocked. I told my mom, even though I didn’t want to tell her, and apologized. I still remember that shock, it really sucked.” Because of her irregular cycle, she is often caught off

⁷⁷ Very few women in Japan use tampons, so swimming while on your period is often out of the question.

guard by her period starting, resulting in leaks/stains, which she really hates. Haruka and Nanako, in addition to complaints about unexpected periods getting in the way of plans and fun activities, attributed negative feelings about their periods to instances of their underwear getting stained when they were caught unprepared. Rina even stated that the worst aspect of her period for her was when it would come unexpectedly and her clothes, futon, and the like would get blood on them, which happened quite a bit.

Worry and Stress

Stress is acknowledged as a cause of menstrual irregularity, and there is often a reciprocal relationship between irregularity and stress – times of stress may bring on irregularity, and a missed period (or the uncertainty of when exactly the period will come) can in turn cause stress. In regard to the latter part of this reciprocal relationship, Manami talked about how it troubles her when her period is occasionally irregular (“*shūki no midare*”), while on the other hand, getting her period regularly every month gives her peace of mind (*anshin*) and lets her know that her body is healthy and functioning correctly. Miki gets stressed over when exactly her period will come, and she worries about her clothing choices (i.e., she is hesitant to wear white). Mai also finds her irregularity difficult to deal with since it is hard to know when to expect it. Overall, dealing with an irregular cycle can be annoying and even very stressful, especially if there are larger health implications.

Fear of the Unknown – Is Motherhood at Stake?

Interviewees perceive a monthly menstrual cycle as a sign of good health and a non-monthly cycle as a sign of the opposite. This (potentially) poor health is not just one’s health in general, but specifically reproductive capacity or fertility. In a society that highly values motherhood and routinely places childcare in the hands of women only, infertility can be construed as a sign of failure – failing to be a woman / to be feminine. In sex education, menstruation is essentialized into a process that allows a woman to conceive – the main purpose of menstruation is to facilitate reproduction. Because of this, irregular cycles can cause concern for future family planning. Conversely, they can also cause stress over potential accidental pregnancies.

Menstruation’s Purpose: Reproduction

I always asked interviewees how they would explain menstruation to a girl who had not learned about it yet. They would explain things in the same way that they were taught when they were children. For instance, Yui’s explanation was: “it’s something that will happen around the end of elementary school or the beginning of middle school. I would explain the *shikumi* [how it works/the mechanics of it]. It’s something necessary for women to have children after getting married.” At least six other women I interviewed described menstruation as “necessary” (*hitsuyō*) for having children (Hikari, Mayu, Hitomi, Shiori, Rina, Nanako). Because it is necessary for having children, this prevented some women from hating or strongly resenting their period. Shiori, Rina, and Nanako all disliked their period, and the only thing that they could think of that was close to a “good” aspect of their period was that it is necessary to have children.

This idea – that menstruation is necessary or allows one to have children – was imparted in the women’s sex education growing up. Hikari’s grandmother told her that the purpose of

menstruation is so you can have children. If she had to explain menstruation to a young girl, Nao would reiterate what she was told: “You bleed once a month because your body is preparing to have a baby.” Mayu was told that menstruation “is your body making a home for a baby.” Natsuki described it as such: “First there’s ovulation. The egg comes through the fallopian tube. After ovulation, because the egg might get fertilized, [your body] builds up something like a bed to welcome a baby. In the case of the egg not getting fertilized, that bed, the uterine lining, separates [from the body] and comes out like a gloppy liquid.” Although lacking visual metaphors, many other women described how they were taught or how they would teach menstruation:

- “Menstruation is a sign that you can have children” (Reina).
- “Menstruation is when you become able to have children” (Chinatsu).
- “Menstruation is so you can have babies” (Kana).
- “The teacher said, ‘something for making children will come’” (Rina).
- “Your body can now make a baby” (Ami).
- “Because of menstruation, you can give birth” (Nanako).

Worries about Fertility

So if menstruation is necessary for having children, and women are expected to become mothers and have children, what happens if a woman does not get her period or otherwise has an irregular menstrual cycle? Nanako said that if she ever had problems with her period again, like an irregular cycle, she would probably go to the doctor: “I think if I don’t go, that would be bad. I’ve seen stuff on the news about infertility, which is scary. So, if my period got irregular again, I think I definitely should see a doctor.” When talking about good and bad aspects of her period, Yui at first laughed at the idea of a good point (*ii ten*) regarding her period. However, she did then say, “I’ve heard that some people don’t get their period. So, if I get married and have children, I would feel gratitude (*arigatasa*). But right now, I don’t feel that way.”

Here I would like to introduce two women with severe experiences of menstrual irregularity, with a focus on their worries about fertility. Later I will discuss how they approached solutions to their irregularity, with concerns about future fertility impacting such attempts at “correcting” or treating the irregularity. Mai understands that “if you don’t have a good cycle, you might not have babies in the future – that’s a risk.” This she learned from her cycle-tracking app Luna Luna, although both she and her mother were concerned about her irregular cycles and their impact on her future fertility well before she started using the app. She has sought advice from her nurse aunt and from doctors, and she has a history of multiple temporary uses of the birth control pill to treat her irregular cycles. But the side effects of the pill – and both her and her mother’s worries that the very thing treating her irregular cycles may itself negatively impact her future fertility – has made “correcting” her period rather difficult.

During her interview, Miki told me about her journey with menstrual irregularity, which began for her in middle school:

Around elementary school, around the time I first got my period, it was normal. Then when I went into fifth or sixth grade, it suddenly got heavier, the flow began to get really heavy – so much so that a pad would barely last an hour. I don’t know why, but around the second year of middle school, my period suddenly stopped coming. At first my

mother and I thought it was fine, after all, it's common for menstrual cycles to be all over the place during puberty. So I just let it be. Even though it never came I didn't do anything, for more than half a year, for whatever reason, it didn't come. Then after that, something happened – my hair started to fall out, not so much that others would notice but more than usual. Maybe this had to do with my period not coming. I went to a nearby gynecologist, and I was prescribed the birth control pill, but it made me feel really bad...After that, I tried going to a different gynecologist. That gynecologist, even though she was a female doctor, how she responded to my problems wasn't very good – I was prescribed the pill again, so it felt like her response was just “why don't you just try the pill.” For three or four months, I tried to put up with that sort of unpleasant doctor, but my mother couldn't put up with it, so we turned to *kanpō* [traditional Chinese medicine]. I got a consultation at the *kanpō* shop and received various things, and my problems started to improve a little bit. It's not that my period would come once a month again immediately after I started taking *kanpō*, there were still times it didn't come, but I could see the exit. Now, I go to an acupuncturist. *Kanpō* isn't very tasty, you know.

Because of these experiences, she believes it will be difficult for her to have children. She had said this a couple times throughout the interview, and so I asked her if she had been told this by a doctor. She said at the time in middle school when she saw a doctor, that no, the doctor had not talked about pregnancy. But she had done her own research on the internet, and it seems like it would be difficult.

Pregnancy (Scares)

While the main focus of this chapter is on experiences of menstrual irregularity, here I want to touch on the experiences and thoughts of these young women, regardless of irregularity experiences, on menstruation as an indicator of (non-)pregnancy and a tool for avoiding or achieving pregnancy.

Absence of menstruation, especially for people with an identifiable pattern to their menstrual cycle, is widely regarded as a sign of possible pregnancy. I have already mentioned Momoko and how her irregular cycle causes her stress, both because it can mess with her day-to-day activities and plans and because it carries the possibility of pregnancy when her period does not show. Similarly, when I asked Ami about an impactful memory relating to her period, she recounted to me a time she thought she might have been pregnant because her period did not come when she expected it to:

One time, I thought I could be pregnant, and after my period came, I thought, ‘Wow, my period is really important after all.’ Even though I have an irregular cycle, I don't have much menstrual pain and don't really suffer from my period, so even though my period is irregular, I thought I was healthy and thought little of it. But then at that time, my irregular cycles became a pretty big problem after all...I'm still a little like this now, but at that time I still thought of myself as a child and not an adult. However, menstruating means that I have a body that can bear children, that I can become a parent, that this could happen to my body without me even being aware. I became self-aware through this experience, and it left a lasting impression on me.

For Ami, she tries to see her period as a beneficial tool for assessing her overall health and whether or not she is pregnant. Mayu also sees her period – or lack thereof – as a potentially easy way to know whether she is pregnant.

Not only can people surmise their pregnancy status from the absence or presence of their period, but they can also use their menstrual cycle to their advantage, whether their aim is to avoid pregnancy or to get pregnant. Mayu uses an app called Selene to track her period; it also gives you your ovulation date and chances of pregnancy during certain windows of time. While not all the women I interviewed tracked their menstrual or ovulation cycles, and many did not feel the need to since they were not currently sexually active, several of them pictured themselves tracking their menstrual cycles in the future to increase their chances of conception. (This was also one of the few reasons for talking about menstruation with men that interviewees described – see Chapter 3.) For instance, Yui had not dated before, but if she had a partner, she would probably talk to them about her period as far as it is necessary. That is, the menstrual cycle is related to conception / trying for a baby, so it is important to know about it. Miki also believed that in the future, if she had a partner/lover/etc., and if they had a deep/serious relationship, she may talk to him about her period, since it relates to pregnancy and birth. With these ideas and practices of using the menstrual cycle to increase chances of pregnancy with a long-term partner, the conceptual and cultural connection of menstruation to heterosexual reproduction is readily apparent.

Correcting Irregularity?

While irregularity is often inconvenient and even quite worrisome, few of the women I spoke to ever consulted a doctor about their irregular menstrual cycle. Some, like Chinatsu, would search for answers on the internet, and others would talk to their mother about it. This is what Shiori did when she was experiencing irregularity in her teenage years. After doing so, she became less worried about it, since her mom had similar experiences, and she just got used to the irregularity. Going back to Chinatsu, although she was curious about the cause of her irregularity, she was never too worried or alarmed. She does not have any problems besides an occasional late or missed period, and over the years she has just gotten used to it, so it is just matter-of-fact (*atarimae*) now. As Ami put it, “My period is irregular but I’m healthy (*fujun demo jibun ga genki*).” Women choose to treat menstrual irregularity or otherwise control their menstrual flow and cycle in varied ways (if they choose to address it at all), including seeking assistance from medical experts, taking the birth control pill, consuming certain foods, or using over-the-counter products.

Going to the Doctor and Taking the Birth Control Pill

Using the pill – whether for contraception or for regulating menstrual cycles is relatively uncommon in Japan. While the contraceptive pill was not legalized until 1999, abortion has been legal since 1948. Plastic IUDs were not approved by the Ministry of Health and Welfare until 1974, and copper ones were not approved until 1999. These conservative policies have hindered pharmaceutical companies from applying for approval of other contraceptives such as injections and implants. Japan’s conservative contraception policies came about because for ten years after abortion was legalized interest groups could not agree how to promote birth control or were opposed to promoting it. Additionally, when the pill appeared in the 1970s, it was during a time

when drug-related scandals were prominent, worry over the declining birth rate was growing, and abortion was already legal (unlike in many other places where the pill was introduced) (Norgren 2001, 6). Plus, as Kano writes, “The argument against legalizing the pill had come from politically influential medical groups that saw the pill as undermining the (lucrative) abortion business, but opposition had also been voiced by feminist groups that saw the hormonal intervention in women’s bodies as unnatural” (2016, 93).

However, there were a few interviewees with experience taking the pill for regulating menstruation. Remember that not all periods that could be labelled as irregular have to do with cycle length; they can be indicated by excessive pain and bleeding too. In her third (senior) year of high school, Natsuki had really painful periods, which she attributed to stress caused by entrance exam prep. She was in a lot of pain, and she had heard that the pill could help relieve her pain. Her pharmacist aunt was able to assuage her (and her mother’s) worries about side effects, and so she decided to take the pill. It made her period lighter and the pain better. She does not take it anymore though. As for why she stopped taking it, she said, “After my entrance exams were over, I stopped taking it. While it would have been fine to continue, the pill isn’t that cheap, and I thought I’d try out quitting the pill when I came to university. In the end, because my stress is a lot lighter and I don’t have horrible cramps anymore, I’ve completely stopped taking it.” Natsuki said that not many people know that the pill can help with painful periods:

I think that people usually think of the pill only as a contraceptive. I did some research myself, so I knew that it could be used to help with menstrual cramps, but the image of the pill as a contraceptive is really strong. Even if they know it’s effective for menstrual cramps, some people are a bit afraid – there’s an image that, ‘Isn’t it a little scary that you can just take medicine and stop something that occurs in your body?’ Also, there are more than a few people who associate the pill with sex, thinking that someone who takes the pill wants to do that kind of thing. And so, there might be a lot of people who are hesitant to use the pill, in case people around them hold that kind of opinion.

Recently, her fifteen-year-old sister also started having painful periods, so she has talked with her sister about her own experiences with that. She has also recommended the pill to a friend who is suffering from severe cramps and stress while job-hunting.

While Rina’s menstrual cycle was rather irregular growing up, it is now very regular because she takes the pill. Because of this, it comes on the same day every month. It lasts about six days, with the second and third days being the heaviest, accompanied by cramps. She has been taking the pill for about a year, at the time I interviewed her. She said, “I went to the doctor for a consultation and then decided to take the pill. I’m taking it to stabilize (*antei saseru*) [my menstrual cycle]. I’m not experiencing any side effects in particular, and my period now comes regularly and punctually, so I feel good about taking it.”

I got a bit of medical history from Mai concerning birth control pills and her irregular cycle:

Sometimes [my cycle is] like every one-and-a-half months. The longest would be like every three months. And after three months it’s terrible, there’s a lot of blood everywhere. There were times that I took the birth control pill so it steadied the cycle.

The very first time I took the birth control pill was in my first year of college. That wasn't for my cycles, but I had very bad acne, I still do, but to control that. My aunt on my father's side is a nurse and she always said the birth control pill is really good for clearing your skin...But my mom still had stigma about the birth control pill, like being dangerous, like you don't know what it's going to be like, like it might affect you in the future in a bad way, and it might affect your health in a way. She had that kind of stigma, so it took a really long time until we could really act on getting the birth control pill for my skin. Maybe for about two years [we couldn't decide if I should take the pill]...It didn't really help with my acne, so I quit [taking the pill] for a while. [Later,] because of my menstrual cycles, I went to the gynecologist, so they also recommended the birth control pill, so I took it for a little while, but then I went to Indonesia, so I quit. Because you have to go every few months to buy it. And also because I was going to be in Indonesia, having fun, I'd probably forget to take it too, so I decided not to take it [while I was there], but while I was in Indonesia, maybe because I didn't have any stress, it [my period] was very nice and steady, so I didn't have to take the pill. So after I came back it started to get bad again, so I'm thinking about taking it [the birth control pill] again right now...[The gynecologist I saw recently] recommended that I not just check my cycle but look at my temperature, so I bought a nice thermometer just for women to see their temperature...so I've been doing that for three months now so I have to go soon again...so they said that my cycle, your cycle doesn't have to be every month, it varies with people so even if you have a month and a half each time then that's still ok, as long as your temperature is rising and lowering at a steady period...I'm kind of worried about my cycle, I don't know if it's ok...

Mai first wanted to take the pill to improve her acne in high school after her aunt recommended it. However, her mother was quite hesitant to let her take the pill because of worries about side effects. Eventually her mother relented, and Mai got a prescription from a dermatologist. It did not help clear up her skin though, so she quit taking the pill after a few months. Then about two years later, she visited a gynecologist because she was concerned about and suffering due to her irregular menstrual cycle. She once more received a prescription for the pill but again quit after a few months, this time because she was going to be studying abroad in Indonesia. Fortunately, her cycle was quite regular while she was abroad, even without the pill, which she attributed to low stress. She recently visited a gynecologist again for her cycles, who suggested a slightly different approach to her issues, telling her that she may just have longer-than-average cycles. She had been tracking her basal body temperature to see if there is a pattern to her cycles and had plans to follow up with the doctor.

I spoke earlier about Miki's struggles with menstrual irregularity and her strong concerns about its impact on or its implications for her future fertility. In middle school, she experienced extremely heavy bleeding and then over a year of amenorrhea. Her mother took her to a gynecologist – at this time she was around thirteen or fourteen years old. The doctor prescribed her birth control pills to regulate her cycle. However, she was gaining a lot of weight during this time (weighed over forty kilos), it was difficult to take the pills every single day at the exact same time, and they (in addition to the weight) were making her feel bad. She *gaman*'d for about six months, and then neither she nor her mother could *gaman* any longer. Then they tried *kanpō*

(traditional Chinese medicine). It took a while, the medicine was unappetizing, and the whole ordeal was stressful, but eventually her cycle became more regular (about once a month) although there are still some times when it does not come. She still regularly goes to acupuncture appointments as part of her *kanpō* treatment.

Other Methods of Controlling Menstrual Cycles and Menstrual Flows

Some of the women I interviewed used (or had heard about) various techniques or activities to manipulate their menstrual cycles – delaying the onset of menstruation, bringing on menstruation, or advancing the end of menstrual bleeding. Not all of these women currently had irregular cycles when using these techniques. Several women had heard of friends or classmates using tampons so they could continue swimming competitively during their periods, and some of these classmates would even use “the pill” to delay their period around important sports events (Mayu, Yui, Haruka). Knowledge about this “pill” was often vague – “it’s something girls take to temporarily control their period, but I’m not sure what it is exactly” (Mayu); “it’s a product you can use to ‘stop’ your period so you can go swimming” (Yui). So while some women will try to delay their period, Mai actually tries to bring on her period, every now and then: “I drink soy milk. Soy milk I think helps to get my period started, like when I don’t have it for a really long time. When I feel that my period isn’t coming at all, I start drinking soy milk. And that sometimes actually works, I don’t know, it might be my imagination. One time when for three months my period didn’t come, and I was like maybe soy milk will work. I started drinking it. It came the next day, so...”

Some try to manipulate their periods in other ways; rather than trying to influence when their period will start, they try to affect when their period will end. Reina told me that exercising and going for walks would help her period end sooner. Momoko’s period lasts about five days, but she said she can make it shorter by a day or two by using a store-bought douche (called “*bide*” in Japanese) – she showed me the product on her phone. She first saw this product in a store around the winter of her second year of university, and although she only used it occasionally at first, she has been using it every time since April 2018. She said, “It gets the dirt (*yogore*) out... Each time I get my period, I use it once or twice. It makes me feel refreshed and clean, and it shortens my period, so it saves me a lot of trouble.” When I asked her if she had any other memorable experiences related to her period, she said at Christmas (a romantic holiday in Japan), she was supposed to go out with her boyfriend. However, “It was iffy timing with my period. I was worried whether it would end before our date or not. But I really wanted to go on our date, so I did my best to make my period end early using the douche.”

When Irregularity Is Normal

From high school up until her second year of university, Nanako’s period was pretty irregular (*futeiki*). However, she never went to the doctor, since she was pretty used to her period not coming sometimes, so it was not a big deal (*atarimae*). She searched on the internet about what causes your period not to come; she found that often it is “because your nutrition isn’t good or you’re too thin.” Neither of these was the case for her, but since she did not have any other problems besides a late or absent period, she was not too worried. If she did have problems related to her period, she would probably go to the doctor. She keeps seeing in the news reports about infertility, so she would want to make sure it was not something serious like that.

However, to her, an irregular cycle is not a “problem,” or at least not enough of a problem to see a doctor about it.

Manami reached out to her mother when she experienced irregular menstruation while studying abroad. Occasionally her cycle is irregular (“*shūki no midare*”) which troubles her a bit. If she was *really* troubled about her period, she would probably consult with her mom first and then *maybe* see a doctor. When Ami was younger and experiencing menstrual irregularity, she also consulted her mom about it. However, she did eventually stop talking to her mom about it for two reasons: her mom experienced the same things herself and told her not to worry about it, and she also just got used to the irregularity, so it was not as big of a deal. Like most of the young women I interviewed who had menstrual irregularity experience, she has never been to the doctor for her irregular periods or any other problems related to her periods. However, she has been thinking about going. I asked her why she has not gone yet. She said, “It would be a bother to go. Also, it’s a little embarrassing to go to the gynecologist. It would be difficult to go – I’ve never been before, and I feel uneasy going by myself, so I still haven’t gone.”

Discussion and Conclusion: What is “Natural”? What is “Normal”?

Hegemonic menstruality promotes two conflicting components of an ideal woman: 1) she has a “regular” menstrual cycle – perfect reproductive health – and thus is capable of producing children, 2) and simultaneously, she conceals from others’ perception all signs of her menstrual cycle. Irregular cycles do not conform to hegemonic menstruality in multiple ways, causing concern and worry for those who experience them. They are considered by many to be a possible sign of poor reproductive health, which can have a negative stigma in Japan where there is a near-constant stream of discourse on the perilously declining birthrate and a strong social prerogative for (married) women to bear children. As Kano argues, “The basis of social policy in modern Japan is the assumption that all women are potential wives and mothers...Almost everything else derives from this assumption” (2016, 8). Thus, the cultural connection between menstruation, fertility/reproduction, and womanhood/femininity not only impacts women’s perceptions of and experiences with their menstrual cycles, but it also drives public discourse on women’s health and bodies, as well as government and corporate policies concerning childcare and gender equality. The women with irregular cycles who I interviewed are acutely aware of such discourses and policies, leaving some quite worried about their futures, such as Miki who felt doomed to struggle with fertility due to her long history of menstrual irregularity.

In addition to acting as an indicator of potentially poor reproductive health, irregular cycles make it more difficult to conceal menstruation, a defining point of hegemonic menstruality. The unexpected arrival of one’s period can leave one vulnerable to “failures” (*shippai*), such as when Momoko started her period during her civil service examination and had to wrap her sweater around her waist. Moreover, many of the women who had irregular cycles complained that the unpredictability made it difficult for them to make and keep plans, such as beach or hot springs trips, or even just going out with friends for the day. When interviewees were asked what the most difficult aspect of their period was, after painful cramps, an unexpected period ruining their plans was the next most mentioned complaint. In fact, several of the interviewees with irregular cycles who sought treatment for them did so in order to control when they would bleed.

While interviewees recounted various home remedies (e.g., using a “*bide*,” drinking soy milk) for controlling the timing of menstrual bleeding, the most common treatment was the low-dosage hormonal birth control pill, which was used by four women (two in the past and two at the time of their interview). If concealing menstruation is so important and bleeding so onerous, then why do so few Japanese women use the low-dosage pill to regulate their cycles and even fewer use menstrual suppressing birth control such as IUDs? For the former, while the low-dosage pill can help prevent women’s menstrual status from being revealed accidentally via unexpected bleeding, there are pervasive concerns about the medication’s impact on fertility (Coleman 1983, 90-91). These concerns about “the pill’s side effects are the result of the barrage of negative attention the pill has received from health professionals and the media over the course of several decades” (Norgren 2001, 127). So for some women, the trade-off of being protected from failures (*shippai*) but potentially having their future fertility damaged is not worth it.

As for using medical interventions that would eliminate menstrual bleeding, despite the overall negative views of menstruation and its annoyances and associated worries, many women told me that menstruation is good for your body and health. Hikari described it as a “detox for my body,” and Ami said her period was like “a barometer for my body...I can objectively surmise my health from it.” Regular menses allows women to check in with their bodies and assess their overall and reproductive health. This is similar to Brazilian women’s contradictory perspectives of menstruation, where menstrual suppressing medication use is widespread: the menstrual cycle brings taxing and unwanted emotional and physical changes via premenstrual tension (PMT, primarily known as premenstrual syndrome [PMS] elsewhere), but regular bleeding is cleansing and relieving (Sanabria 2016, 55). As one of Sanabria’s interviewees puts it: ““This blood has to come out, when it is trapped, you swell and *passa mal* (become giddy). I didn’t like to suppress my menstruation, I think menstruation is the health of women, even if it is dirty and an *incomodo*, even when it depletes you, that blood has to come out”” (2016, 90).

However, while there may be similar views on regular menstrual bleeding among the Japanese women I talked to and the Brazilian women that Sanabria interviewed, what is considered “natural” about the menstrual cycle and about medical interventions differs. In her discussion of debates surrounding abortion and contraception in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries in Japan, Kano argues:

What is taken to be natural...is always inevitably selective...And this selection always has a gendered dimension. In the Japanese case, the discourse of nature is set against scientific and technological control of reproduction, but it can also be set against women’s control of their own bodies...While there is a specifically feminist aspect to the insistence on nature—that is, on resisting the exploitation, medicalization, and technologization of the woman’s body—there is also a clear danger of diminishing female agency (2016, 95-96).

In Brazil, the predominant medical discourse is that monthly menstrual cycles are not only incompatible with the demands of modern life but also unnatural: in the past, women experienced menarche at a later age, had more pregnancies, and breastfed longer; and therefore, they had far fewer menstrual cycles than women today. Many doctors in the country take the

stance that such frequent hormonal fluctuations can be deleterious to women's health and can cause conditions such as fibroids and even cancer. Most of the women who use menstrual-suppressing hormonal contraceptives (extended-regime birth control pills or IUDs) do so in order to reign in "a body gone astray and out of one's control" (Sanabria 2016, 81) due to hormonal changes during the menstrual cycle. Thus, monthly menstruation is "denaturalize[d] and pathologize[d]" (Sanabria 2016, 73), and medico-technological intervention is used, ironically, to return the female body to what is considered to be its natural state.

In Japan, though, it is the opposite: hormonal contraceptives have been viewed as unnatural and deleterious to (reproductive) health (Norgren 2001, 126-127). Lock reports that it is a "widely shared belief...that intrusive technologies are unnatural, contrary to Japanese custom, and dangerous to both individuals and society" (Lock 1998b, 227). And while many women in Brazil use hormonal contraceptives for their "off-label" effects (e.g., suppressing menstruation, treating PMT symptoms) rather than for fertility control, in Japan "the pill" is mainly known as a contraceptive, not as a medication for dysmenorrhea, acne, etc. Thus, even if Japanese women wanted to reduce or eliminate their menstrual bleeding, they may not be aware that there is medication for such a purpose.

Just like what is "natural" can be up for debate, what is "normal" when it comes to menstruation can be flexible as well. Despite the cultural emphasis placed on motherhood and political/media discourses on the declining birthrate, many women accept and adapt to their irregular menstrual experiences without seeking to conform to hegemonic menstruality, that is, without trying to obtain/maintain a monthly menstrual cycle. For these women, irregularity *is* "normal." However, while they may successfully adjust to their unpredictable cycles, they may still feel like something is wrong with them. Building upon the work of Grosz (1994), Gunson argues that "the social significance of menstruation in defining what it is to be a woman can lead to an overwhelming sense of 'alienness' when there is an involuntary absence of menstruation" (2016, 316). How would these women feel – how would any and all menstruators feel – if scientific and social conceptualizations of menstruation were decoupled from reproduction and fertility?

Hasson asserts, "Overall, feminist scholars have paid more attention to the cultural meanings and norms that govern menstruation than to what menstruation *is* or how it is *defined*. In doing so, what counts as menstruation is taken for granted, and the complex choreography that can alternately shift or stabilize definitions of menstruation is overlooked" (2016, 959). Reproduction, made possible by menstruation, is taken for granted as a quintessential function of the female body, and monthly hormonal cycles paired with buildup and shedding of the endometrium is presumed to be the norm, with any deviations considered a medical problem. However, there is "scientific evidence that [menstruation] serves a multitude of purposes" beyond enabling reproduction, although it is not well-known by laypeople due to a dearth of education on the subject (Gunson 2016, 316). Stubbs (2008) proposes that the menstrual cycle be considered a "vital sign" for one's holistic health, a sentiment that is echoed by several of my interviewees. In the end, it is important to keep in mind that menstruation "does exist as a biological fact for many women, a fact that is also always mediated dependent on what form menstruation takes, how regular, how painful, how messy, how heavy and how women interpret all of those aspects in relation to their own contexts" (Gunson 2016, 315). For many of my

interviewees, irregularity is just an expected aspect of their menstrual experiences, that they have to deal with – but maybe just not every month.

CHAPTER 7. ALTERNATIVE MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS AND ALTERNATIVE VIEWS OF MENSTRUATION: CLOTH NAPKIN COMPANIES IN JAPAN

Vignette: Made in Earth Cloth Napkin Festa

It was a sunny and warm Saturday morning in June, as I walked down a street in Jiyugaoka lined with posh shops, including one that had designer clothes for pet dogs. I got to the event location, called Casa Tana. It was a small place, but clean and spacious. The venue was one big room, with the half closest to the entrance lined with product booths, and the far half cleared with yoga mats on the floor. Along the wall by the entrance was a table with a small wooden old-fashioned ginning machine, which people could try out with tufts of cotton. The room had lots of large floor-to-ceiling windows and had a covered piano in the corner behind a projector screen hanging from the ceiling. The white-painted window frames combined with the pale-colored wood flooring lent a very light, airy, and new atmosphere to the setting. There were cotton plant decorations and signs for Made in Earth (MIE) up around the room.

The first event of the day was a yoga class, which cost 2000 yen to participate and lasted an hour. There were about fifteen or sixteen participants, all women, most of whom were in their 20s or 30s, and a few were older in their 40s. It was themed as “menstrual blood control (*gekkei chi kontorōru*)” yoga, so the moves and positions focused on the pelvis. However, the instructor never talked directly about menstrual blood control at all. She did talk a lot about how to sit “properly” and how to position and open up the pelvis, with the context implying that this would somehow play a role in controlling one’s menstrual flow.⁷⁸

The area where we did yoga transformed into a presentation set-up, with rows of chairs facing the back wall of the room where the projector screen hung. Here would be the “stage” for a series of “talk sessions” that took up the rest of the festa schedule. Throughout the sessions, festa attendees would take turns participating in a beginners’ cloth napkin-making workshop on the far end of the room, by the entrance. The first talk session of the day was with Maeda Keiko (the MIE brand manager) and Tagawa Tomiko (founder of a company called Earth Garden). Maeda looked to be in her late 40s or early 50s, with straight black hair past her shoulders and a beige cap on the whole day. Tagawa looked to be in her mid-40s and wore overalls. These two led most of the talk sessions throughout the day. The audience gained a handful more members, as festa participants who had not opted in to the yoga session arrived.

In this first session, Tagawa acted as an MC or interviewer, giving Maeda prompts or questions as she presented on MIE, its history, and its products. Tagawa started by asking the audience who uses cloth napkins, and about half raised their hand in response. She then began a discussion of delicate zone care with Maeda, “delicate zone (*derikāto zōn*)” being a common euphemism for the external vaginal area. They lamented that current practices and trends in

⁷⁸ Menstrual blood control, as it is called in Japan, is the practice of using internal muscles and bodily positioning (posture, position of hips and legs, etc.) to either hold or release menstrual blood from the body on command. It is not commonly practiced or even commonly known; however, it occasionally comes up in discussions on blogs, in books, or at events in connection with cloth napkins and/or homeopathic vaginal/reproductive health treatments (e.g., yoni eggs, vaginal steaming). Misago Chizuru, author of the book, *Mukashi no jōsei wa dekiteita* [*Women of the Past Could Do It*] (2004), argues that, as the title claims, Japanese women of yore frequently practiced menstrual blood control techniques.

delicate zone care are negatively impacting women's health, often without their awareness. Panties that you can buy prioritize cuteness rather than good/healthy material; they are made with polyester and rayon, rather than cotton. Panty material is important because there is a short distance between the uterus and the vaginal opening, so what is present at the vaginal opening can affect the uterus. Both of the women prefer Japanese toilets (it is good *kin tore* – muscle training), but that is becoming rarer (*fushigi*), and muscles needed for it are not being used anymore.

After this discussion of delicate zone care and the perils of “modern” products like Western toilets and poly-blend underwear, the topic shifted to MIE products. The company's cloth napkins are handmade individually in a domestic factory, rather than mass-produced (often internationally) in an automated process like disposable napkins. The factory that produces MIE's products is run by an elderly couple – the hanging projector screen displayed photographs of the couple at work: the man cutting stacks of cloth and the woman sewing the napkins. Working in the factory is their *ikigai*, their purpose in life. MIE produces several thousand napkins a year. It gets its organic cotton from India, Turkey, Africa, and New Mexico. The slideshow cycled through photographs of cotton fields in New Mexico, the harvesting and combine machine, the ginning machines, and other parts of the harvesting and processing of the cotton.

The next main talk session of the day was a roundtable with six women, including Maeda and Tagawa, talking about their experiences with cloth napkins. This time, Maeda acted as the main MC or moderator, with Tagawa as both a participant and secondary moderator. Most of the session revolved around how the participants found out about cloth napkins, how their experiences with cloth napkins have been, and what changes they have noticed in their health, body, and life in general since beginning their cloth napkin journey. Half of the participants explicitly expressed that they were originally drawn to cloth napkins since they were already interested in other organic/health goods. All of the women described improvements in their general health and/or their menstrual experiences after regularly using cloth napkins. Three women said using cloth napkins helped relieve irritation (*kabure*) and trouble with sensitive skin. One woman said that before using cloth napkins, her period would often take several days to trail off, whereas now it promptly ends after five days. Another told the audience that cloth napkins helped alleviate her menstrual symptoms, including cramps and severe PMS. Cloth napkins also helped her, along with two other speakers, combat *hieshō*.

One participant in particular had an interesting take on cloth napkins and her experiences with them so far. Murakama was a model and pageant contestant, which was clear from her appearance: totally decked out in a full face of makeup, a frilly expensive-looking dress, and preposterously high heels. She was a self-described cloth napkin beginner (*shoshinsha*), having used them for only three months. She said that she likes healthy things, such as vegetables and organic goods, so she wanted to try out organic cloth napkins. She also suffers from what she called “uterine troubles (*shikyū toraburu*).” Because of this, even though she was excited to try them out, she could not use the cloth napkins she purchased right away; she ended up having to wait until her one-month-overdue period began. She said it was the first time she had ever been happy to start her period. Murakama has been extremely pleased with cloth napkins so far; there is no smell with them like with disposable napkins, and they are also very warm, which helps with her *hieshō*. With cloth napkins, she pays more attention to her body in general, and she

benefits from this in a multitude of ways. By taking care of her body, and especially her “delicate zone,” her face color and complexion have improved.

Introduction

Menstrual product manufacturing is a multibillion-dollar industry in Japan, with hundreds of millions of disposable napkins – the most widely-used menstrual product – sold each year. However, recently, some women have been turning to alternative, reusable menstrual products – especially cloth napkins – for environmental and health reasons. Cloth napkin companies are small in size, and their products lack a widespread presence in traditional brick-and-mortar stores like pharmacies and supermarkets. Instead, most advertising and sales of cloth napkins take place on companies’ websites and online stores. This chapter explores how these alternative menstrual products and menstruation are presented and constructed by Japanese cloth napkin companies, through a combination of qualitative content analysis of company websites, consumer event participant-observation as described above, and interviews/questionnaires with company representatives.

Even though investigating views and understandings of menstruation can tell us much about women’s positions in society (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988), modern studies of menstruation in postindustrial societies such as Japan are surprisingly lacking in anthropology. Moreover, in Japan menstruation is strongly tied to reproduction and motherhood. As the Japanese government attempts to reverse the nation’s trend of a declining birthrate and population, women are encouraged – or pressured – to get married and have children. And while the birthrate and mothers are frequently discussed in popular media, menstruation itself is rarely mentioned in public discourse, reflecting a culture of silence and concealment around menstruation (Ono 2009; Sakai 2014).

With this in mind, the few venues in which menstruation *is* talked about – especially advertising for menstrual products – become extremely important. Chapter 4 examined how hegemonic menstruality is (re)produced in television advertising and on company websites for disposable menstrual napkins. Ads for disposable napkins use linguistic euphemisms (e.g., *ano hi* [that day]) and symbolic imagery (e.g., blue liquid) to avoid direct representation of menstruation, and the products themselves – through absorbency and odor-control capabilities – aim to conceal menstruation from others. The ultra-absorbent, thin, and disposable nature of these products even serves to conceal menstruation from users themselves; they rarely have to touch or smell their own blood, or even feel that they are wearing a pad (at least according to advertising claims).

Cloth napkin companies directly challenge major aspects of the discourse of hegemonic menstruality by positioning their products as superior – healthier, safer, more natural – alternative to disposable napkins and by encouraging women to embrace menstruation as a natural, positive experience. Three interrelating themes arise from my data: naturalness, health and safety, and responsibility of care. However, drawing on theories of the politics of happiness (Ahmed 2010), care work (Carney 2013), and abjection (Kristeva 1982), I argue that these companies still reinforce hegemonic menstruality’s pressure to conceal menstruation from others and attempt to discipline women’s bodies and behavior through essentializing femininity.

Critique of Disposable Napkins

Disposable napkin production is a multi-million-dollar industry in Japan, with over 7 billion napkins produced annually (Sakai 2014, 68).⁷⁹ By far the majority of Japanese women use disposable napkins as their primary menstrual product, while a small number of women use tampons.⁸⁰ Despite their prevalence, disposable napkins have been the target of criticism – in Japan as well as other parts of the world – due to environmental, safety, and comfort issues. I provide this information not to demonize the disposable napkin industry, but to highlight potential reasons for women to try cloth napkins and other alternative menstrual products.

From an ecological standpoint, disposable napkins are highly unsustainable. They are single-use, individually wrapped products, which generates many tons of trash on an annual basis (Ono 2009, 156). Moreover, the production of disposable napkins requires large industrial equipment, use of which creates great quantities of liquid waste and greenhouse gas emissions (Kissling 2006, 81). Disposable napkins are also reliant on oil for their manufacture, a non-renewable resource.⁸¹ Around thirty to forty percent of the components of the adhesive used in menstrual napkin manufacturing (used to assemble different parts of the napkin), as well as the adhesive used to adhere the napkin to users' undergarments, are made from petroleum products (Ono 2009, 155).

Critics also point out potential health issues surrounding disposable napkins, especially the risk of exposure to dioxins. Dioxins are a class of chemicals that are bio-accumulative and are known human carcinogens; some studies point to dioxins as a potential cause of endometriosis (Ishii et al 2014, 357; Shin et al 2009, 853-854). They are not purposefully manufactured but are generated as a byproduct of processes involving chlorine or the combustion of organic materials; these include the pulping and bleaching processes in disposable napkin and tampon manufacturing (Kissling 2006, 79-81). In Japan, wood pulp undergoes elemental chlorine bleaching to create the absorbent core of menstrual napkins and to give the material a white sterile appearance; this fulfills the guidelines for quasi-drugs set out in Japan's Pharmaceutical Affairs Law (Ishii et al 2014, 360). Although there are only trace amounts of dioxins detected in menstrual products and the health effects of dioxin exposure are still largely unknown, this chemical still plays a large role in anti-commercial menstrual product discourse (Kissling 2006, 79-81).

Even though the majority of Japanese women use disposable napkins, this does not mean that they are satisfied with or enjoy using these products. Sato et al (2006), noting a surprising

⁷⁹ The Japan Hygiene Products Industry Association (JHPIA) reports that 7.54 billion napkins were produced in 2015 (the most recent year with available statistics) (http://www.jhpia.or.jp/site_en/statistics/data2.html, accessed 10 April 2017).

⁸⁰ JHPIA reports that 94% of women use disposable napkins, with 6% using tampons (<http://www.jhpia.or.jp/product/napkin/index.html>, accessed 10 April 2017). The low rates of tampon use are partly due to fear of toxic shock syndrome (Ono 2009, 157; Ono 1985, 37); I have heard this as a reason for not using tampons during my interviews and discussions with Japanese women. It is also telling that the toxic shock syndrome outbreak/incident in the United States in the late 1970s / early 1980s is often referred to as the "tampon shock incident" (*tanpon shokku jiken*, タンボンショック事件) in Japan.

⁸¹ The 1973 oil shock, caused by Saudi Arabia's oil embargo on Japan, the United States, and other countries, caused a shortage of petroleum. Therefore, during the oil shock, not only was there a shortage of gasoline and fuel, but there was also a shortage of menstrual products. The reliance of mainstream commercial menstrual napkins on nonrenewable oil resources has not yet changed to this day (Ono 2009, 154-156).

lack of research on the subject, conducted a study to test the comfort levels of disposable napkin users. They had a group of women sit and walk around while wearing disposable napkins, recording the temperature and humidity of the area surrounding the napkin. They supplemented the data from this experiment with a survey of 186 graduate and undergraduate students from the Tokyo area. Sato et al (2006) found that over sixty percent of the women they surveyed complained of *mure* (stuffy and humid dampness) either all the time or much of the time during menstruation. In addition, about forty-five percent of the women suffered from itchiness (*kayumi*) and about twenty-two percent from chafing or soreness (*sure*) during menstruation (Sato et al 2006, 28). The experiment found that disposable napkins inhibit air circulation and thus lead to high humidity around the genitals and increased feelings of *mure*; in comparison to baby and adult diapers, the humidity for those wearing disposable napkins is much higher. Based on these findings, Sato et al call for more research to be done on the comfort of menstrual napkins, since very little has been done compared to that on diapers (2006, 31-32). Menstrual napkins are a product that most women use and will use for decades of their lives, so it is unsurprising that some users end up searching for alternatives to uncomfortable disposable napkins that are more environmentally friendly, safer, and more comfortable.

Cloth Napkins in Japan

After the toxic shock incidents of the late 1970s and early 1980s in the United States, in which several women died after contracting infections thought to have been brought on by using tampons with super-absorbent rayon material, some women sought out alternative menstrual products that they believed to be more “natural” and thus safer. These products, among them cloth napkins, were deemed favorable by women in the concurrent environmentalist movement as well; they used them to reduce waste and lower their impact on the environment. Cloth napkins imported from the United States and Australia were also available in Japan, although it was not until 1999 that they were produced domestically (Ono 2009, 157). Nakano Yōko, founder of an ecological goods company named Artemis⁸², started developing her own design of cloth napkins after learning about them while accompanying her husband on a business trip to the United States. Having used cloth diapers while raising her children, she quickly took to the idea of using cloth napkins. However, she found that the imported napkins in Japan were not the right size for petite Japanese women, and thus resolved to make ones more suitable for the Japanese frame. She and her staff, through trial and error, tested out the ideal shape and thickness, eventually introducing their product, “*tsuki no yasashisa* (the moon’s gentleness),” in COOYON [クーヨン], a monthly magazine published by Crayon House⁸³ (“Nai nara tsukurō!” 2010).

⁸² Nakano named the store after the Greek goddess Artemis. She writes that she chose the name because Artemis is a fertility goddess, for both crops and women: “Using this image of Artemis, I put into [the shop] my desire for women to have healthy, rich lives in body and soul (そのアルテミスイメージして女性の心とからだを健やかに豊かに、生きてほしいという気持ちを込めたんです)” (“Nai nara tsukurou!” 2010). Artemis closed its doors, so to speak, in 2016 when Nakano shifted her focus to providing food-centered consumer education/literacy workshops (<https://elaboo.org/>, accessed 5 December 2021).

⁸³ Crayon House is a Japanese organic goods company founded in 1979 and aimed at mothers and children. Its products include toys and picture books, organic cosmetics and clothes, and organic food. The company has published several childrearing and health books, in addition to its monthly magazine (<http://www.crayonhouse.co.jp/shop/c/c>, accessed 8 May 2017).

Today, there are a number of cloth napkin producers and retailers in Japan which range in size, but almost all are small-scale ventures, especially in comparison to the major disposable napkin corporations. Environment-focused magazines, blogs, and word-of-mouth (*kuchi komi*), rather than television commercials or mainstream women's magazines, are the main modes of spreading information and garnering more customers. According to Ono Chisako, many women who are interested in cloth napkins are attracted to them because they produce much less waste than disposable napkins (2009, 158). Since these women are most likely already interested in or participating in environmental lifestyle activities, it makes sense that cloth napkin companies would advertise in environmental publications. Cloth napkin companies also have a strong online presence, facilitating the spread of word-of-mouth networks centered around their products. Additionally, most cloth napkin companies only sell their goods in online stores, although some do have their products available in brick-and-mortar stores (usually specialty shops with health foods and fair-trade goods). Legally, in Japan's Pharmaceutical Affairs Law, cloth napkins are not recognized as menstruation treatment supplies (*gekkei shochi yōhin*) like disposable napkins and tampons, due to their raw material (cloth). Instead, they are classified as sundries or general/miscellaneous goods (*zakka*); this limits their availability in major supermarkets and drugstores (Ono 2009, 158).

Besides environmental reasons, women try out cloth napkins as a means to resolve health issues that they believe are caused or exacerbated by disposable napkins. These include *kabure* (skin irritation like rashes and itchiness) and *mure*, as well as general malaise (*futei shūso*). Although few scientific studies on the health benefits and effects of using cloth napkins have been conducted, scholars such as Ono believe that by using cloth napkins, physical pain and discomfort can be reduced, and thus more positive feelings towards menstruation can develop (2009, 160-161). Kaimura and Kusaga (2008) conducted a study involving 32 female university students who had never used cloth napkins before, in which participants were asked to try out cloth napkins for six months. They conducted surveys with participants every two months and interviewed them at the end of the experiment. Because of the greater comfort of cloth napkins and because using them required observation of and interaction with menstrual blood (when changing and washing the cloth napkins), the women in the study came to see menstruation as "natural" rather than "bothersome" and reported an overall positive shift in their views and experiences of menstruation (Kaimura and Kusaga 2008, 149-151). Ono makes a similar argument, asserting that through the labor of washing used cloth napkins, "the negative feelings of menstruation being a nuisance and something one would rather not have fades away" (2009, 160-161). It is this perceived power of cloth napkins – to liberate women from negative feelings (both physical and emotional/mental) and bring about acceptance of menstruation as a natural and positive experience – that is promulgated by its proponents. Japanese cloth napkin company websites are steeped in this message of naturalness and positivity, with implications for conceptions of women's bodies and proper behavior.

Methods

In the following sections, I analyze the contents of three popular cloth napkin company websites: Organic Cotton Mütter, LOHAS Kōbō, and Jewlinge.⁸⁴ I chose these three companies

⁸⁴ Here, I define a cloth napkin company as a company that produces and/or sells cloth napkins. These companies are not necessarily solely focused on cloth napkins but may also sell other related goods such as soaps and clothing.

by determining the biggest sellers of cloth napkins on Rakuten, one of Japan’s major e-commerce websites, in March 2017. I did this by searching for 布ナプキン (*nuno napukin*, cloth napkin) and sorting the resulting 11,236 products (including out-of-stock products) by number of reviews. Sorting by product rating⁸⁵ would seem ideal for judging what the most well-liked items are, but sorting the products this way led to skewed results that favored products with a high average rating but only one or two reviews over products with a medium-to-high average rating and hundreds of reviews. I looked at the top ten products with the most reviews and tallied the total number of reviews for each company that had a product included in this sample (see Table 7.1 and Table 7.2). Of the five companies on this list, I chose the top three, which all had significantly more reviews (at least four times as many) than the bottom two.⁸⁶ For my analysis, I looked at the companies’ home pages, “about” pages, and any other webpage containing information about their cloth napkins. Many cloth napkin companies, including LOHAS Kōbō and Jewlinge, have a “What are cloth napkins?” page or some similar content, as well as a company mission statement and/or slogan. I examined these pages for recurring keywords and themes relating to cloth napkins and their users. This data is supplemented by personal observations from cloth napkin company consumer events and by coded responses to interviews or questionnaires conducted with cloth napkin company representatives (see Table 7.4). Three interconnected themes – nature, health and safety, and responsibility of care – emerged from these data.

Table 7.1. Top Five Cloth Napkin Companies Based on Total Number of Reviews of Top Ten Products

Company	Number of Reviews (Number of Products in Top Ten)	
	2017	2021
Organic Cotton Mütter	12,280 (2)	12,663 (2)
LOHAS Kōbō	12,077 (3)	12,584 (3)
Jewlinge	11,713 (3)	10,168 (2)
Sunny Days	2,532 (1)	2,618 (1)
Baby Hearts	2,447 (1)	5,166 (2)

⁸⁵ Each review is accompanied by a rating from zero to five stars.

⁸⁶ 2021 data does not significantly change these results. The same five companies are represented in the top ten list of products (see Table 7.1 and Table 7.3), and Organic Cotton Mütter, LOHAS Kōbō, and Jewlinge still come out as first, second, and third, respectively, based on total number of reviews of products in the top-ten sample. These three companies also continue to have significantly more reviews than the next two, with Baby Hearts (fourth place) having roughly half as many as Jewlinge (third place).

Table 7.2. Top Ten Cloth Napkin Products on Rakuten by Number of Reviews (2017 data)

Name of Product	Company	Number of Reviews
布ナプキン おりもの 軽い日 ライナー (厚さ：普通)	Organic Cotton Mütter	10,499
布ナプキンセット【Let's トライアル布ナプキン セット】洗剤付き	Jewlinge	7,896
布ナプキン【一体型 M サイズ】昼用・普通の日 ～多い日用	LOHAS Kōbō	6,319
布ナプキン おりものライナー	LOHAS Kōbō	3,943
布ナプキン ワンコイン お試し 軽い日用 布おりものシート	Sunny Days	2,532
お試し 布ナプキン ライナー 防水 オーガニック コットン	Baby Hearts	2,447
布製パンティライナー2枚セット【柄はスタッフ のおまかせ】	Jewlinge	1,955
布ナプキン 生理のときに使える用【ワンコイン 3枚セット】	Jewlinge	1,862
布ナプキン とってもお得な福袋 おりものライナー	LOHAS Kōbō	1,815
布ナプキンお試し2枚セット 織物・軽い日用 ミニホルダー	Organic Cotton Mütter	1,781

Table 7.3. Top Ten Cloth Napkin Products on Rakuten by Number of Reviews (2021 data [10,548 hits from 布ナプキン])

Name of Product	Company	Number of Reviews
布ナプキン おりもの 軽い日 ライナー (厚さ:普通) オーガニック 生理用品 オーガニックコットン布ナプキン Cloth napkin organic cotton liner 布ナプ 布 ナプキン	Organic Cotton Mütter	10,859
布ナプキン お試し 一体型 [初回購入者限定価格] 日本製 多い日昼用 24.5cm 透湿防水布 生理用ナプキン 選べる 3柄 コットン 綿 無漂白ネル 生理用 生理用品 肌にやさしい 失禁 サニタリーパッド 替えパッド フェムテック JEWLINGE ジュランジェ	Jewlinge	8,062
布ナプキン 一体型 M サイズ 昼用・普通の日～多い日用 布ナプ合計 2,000 円 (税込) 以上でメール便送料無料 ルランルラン 布ナプ 生理用品 妊活 冷えとり お試しに すいせん バラ ローズ はりねずみ 動物 彩の国優良ブランド品	LOHAS Kōbō	6,567
楽天スーパーセール 11%OFF 布ナプキン おりもの ライナー おりものシート 布ナプ合計 2,000 円 (税込) 以上でメール便送料無料 おりもの用 一体型 ルランルラン 布ライナー パンティーライナー 生理用品 お試し 布ナプ 季節柄 ローズ ミュゲ すずらん 彩の国優良ブランド品	LOHAS Kōbō	4,027
新柄追加) 布ナプキン ライナー 防水 お試し オーガニックコットン 3 枚以上でメール便無料 day-s,Dstandard,usually,flat beginner おりもの 軽失禁 尿モレ 失禁 尿漏れ 温活 国産 子宮 綿 透湿 防災グッズ フェムテック かゆみ PMS 日本製 ベイビーハーツ	Baby Hearts	2,719
ワンコインお試し布ナプキン◆布ライナー軽い日・おりもの用[お一人様 1 回限り 4 枚まで]軽失禁 尿漏れパッド サニーデイズ	Sunny Days	2,618
【新柄追加】布ナプキン 防水 お試し 3 枚セット オーガニックコットン メール便無料 3S 一体型 おりもの 軽失禁 月経 透湿防水布 コットン 綿 生理用品 尿漏れ 尿もれ 失禁 人気 妊活 温活 国産 sou0 recommend beginner PMS 日本製 ベイビーハーツ	Baby Hearts	2,447
布ナプキン セット 生理用ナプキン [お試し 一体型 3 枚セット 洗剤 50g 付 メール便送料無料 日本製] 多い日昼用 24.5cm 透湿防水布 無漂白コットンネル 綿 100% 生理用品 失禁 尿漏れ 敏感肌 失禁 産後 悪露 サニタリーパッド 替えパッド フェムテック	Jewlinge	2,106
布ナプキン おりもの セット とってもお得な福袋 ライナー おりものシート 5 枚セット 日本製 布ナプ合計 2,000 円 (税込) 以上でメール便送料無料 ルランルラン パンティーライナー おりもの用ライナー 一体型 布ナプ ルランルラン 彩の国優良ブランド品	LOHAS Kōbō	1,990
布ナプキン お試し 2 枚セット おりもの 軽い日用 ミニホルダー オーガニック 尿漏れ 失禁 生理用品 日本製 オーガニックコットン布ナプキン ライナー Cloth napkin organic liner 布ナプ 布 ナプキン	Organic Cotton Mütter	1,804

Table 7.4. All Types of Data Collected from Cloth Napkin Companies

Name	Location	Important Dates	Associated Companies/ Brands	Type of Data			
				Website Analysis	In-Person Interview	Email Questionnaire	Consumer Event Participant-Observation
Chi no shio		1975: company founded 2007: started cloth napkin sales				x	
Jewlinge	Sendai			x			
kucca	Tokyo	2009: company founded			x		
LOHAS Kōbō	Saitama	1979: company founded 2008: started cloth napkin sales	Lelan Lelan (their brand)	x	x		
Made in Earth	Tokyo	1995: company founded 1999: started cloth napkin sales			x		x
NaturaMoon ^a	Tokyo	2010: company founded 2017: started cloth napkin sales	Green Packs (parent company)		x		x
Organic Cotton Mütter		1998: company founded		x			
Sunny Days	Osaka						x
tipua	Osaka	2004: started cloth napkin sales 2010: opened showroom/workshop	Artemis		x		

^a This company sells both disposable and cloth napkins.

The Three Companies

Organic Cotton Mütter, like its name implies, is an organic cotton goods store that started business in 1998. Although they do not deal exclusively with cloth napkins and cloth napkin accessories like the other two stores, their cloth napkins are a top-selling item, as indicated by the fact that cloth napkins are listed first on the homepage's sidebar menu. They manufacture their own organic cotton products in a small factory in Chiba Prefecture, boasting that they produce the highest number of organic cotton goods in the country. They use only fair-trade raw cotton in their production and are certified by an NPO called NOC (*nihon ōganikku kotton ryūtsū kikō*). Their slogan is “Delivering ‘good feeling’ to everyone (*minna ni ‘kimochi ii’ o o-todoke suru*).”

LOHAS Kōbō is an environmental goods stores that specializes in cloth napkins, as well as clothing, baby goods, green cleaning supplies, and essential oils. LOHAS stands for the English phrase Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability, which, according to the company means “being concerned about the global environment and carrying on a healthy and sustainable lifestyle.” The shop manager became involved in environmental lifestyle activities after reading *Silent Spring* as a student; she is currently a trained cupping treatment specialist. The company stocks a variety of cloth napkins from different makers, which are all made from organic cotton and are bleach- and brightening agent-free. Their slogan is “Being kind to women is being kind to the earth (*josei ni yasashii wa chikyū ni yasashii*).”

Jewlinge is a cloth napkin specialty store that takes pride in their handmade, domestically produced cloth napkins. The company developed its own napkin design and uses unbleached, organic cotton from Tanzania and flannel from Indonesia. They also boast of their all-female staff, headed by a shop manager who was motivated to wear and make cloth napkins as a way to try to alleviate her menstrual pain. The staff designs the different prints available on a seasonal basis, and they use natural dyes to color their napkins. In addition to their online store, they sell products in brick-and-mortar store in Sendai. Their slogan is “Cute and comfortable (*kawaiku, kokochi yoku*).”

“Naturalness”

Organic Cotton

In the cloth napkin business, the more natural the better, and nothing is more natural than organic cotton. Virtually all cloth napkin retailers only stock napkins made from organic cotton; and much like the décor at the Made in Earth event described above, webpages are often adorned with images of cotton tufts and photographs from harvest locations. Made in Earth, NaturaMoon, and tipua source their organic cotton from the United States; Jewlinge procures its cotton from Tanzania; and Organic Cotton Mütter purchases 100% fair trade cotton from farmers in developing countries. The latter company also stresses that its cotton is certified by NOC, which they claim has the strictest organic cotton product certification standards in the country. Organic Cotton Mütter and LOHAS Kōbō provide near-identical definitions of organic cotton (*ōganikku kotton* or *yūki saibai men*): raw cotton that has been cultivated without agrochemicals or chemical fertilizers on land that has not been treated with any agrochemicals for at least three years. The cotton used by these companies is also free of chemical treatments, such as bleaching, softening, and brightening; this is to protect the skin from irritation and potential allergies, especially for consumers with sensitive skin. LOHAS Kōbō mentions that bleaching processes often use chlorine and may produce dioxins, which, as discussed above, are believed to be

dangerous and cause health issues. The shop manager added in our interview that their products' manufacturing process emphasizes the "goodness of nature (*shizen no yosa*)" and "just improves on nature," rather than transforming something natural into something unnatural via bleaching and brightening.

These standards for the organic cotton raw material produce a napkin of superior, natural quality. Organic Cotton Mütter calls organic cotton "a pure, natural, raw material" and says that its napkins have the "outstanding comfort and texture of pure organic cotton." LOHAS Kōbō asks, "As something that touches the skin, isn't 'cloth' the raw material that makes one feel the most natural and most comfortable good-feeling sensations?" and invites its customers to "please enjoy the natural texture that is fluffy and soft." Jewlinge offers a similar sentiment: "Soft and fluffy with gentle absorbing power, [unbleached organic cotton] is an excellent feature." Implicit in these exaltations of soft, pure cotton is a contrast between "natural" cloth napkins and "unnatural" disposable napkins, which are made from synthetic fibers and petroleum-based materials. In our interview, NaturaMoon stated that their mission is "to deliver 'natural and happiness' to women (*josei ni natural and happiness o o-todoke suru*)." These companies tout that "natural" products and happiness go hand in hand. Conversely, the "unnaturalness" of disposable napkins has negative health implications for women who use them (described below).

"Natural" Accessories and Features

The theme of naturalness on cloth napkin company websites does not end at organic cotton but extends to cloth napkin accessories and more minor features of the product. LOHAS Kōbō offers "green" detergent, soaps, and other cleaning supplies to help customers clean their cloth napkins, clothing, and homes. They also recommend using the natural powers of sunlight not only to dry the napkins after washing, but to sterilize and disinfect them too. Additionally, LOHAS Kōbō recommends using essential oils when washing cloth napkins; essential oil is lauded as a three-in-one tool that sterilizes, deodorizes, and exudes pleasant fragrances. Tea tree and eucalyptus have especially refreshing aromas, and tea tree and peppermint also provide a sense of cleanliness (*seiketsukan*). Of course, LOHAS Kōbō offers for sale the essential oils that they describe and recommend for customers to use.

Jewlinge emphasizes the natural qualities of the prints and dyes of their cloth napkins. Staff design and select the prints, changing them out three times a year to match the seasons (spring, summer, and autumn and winter together). Jewlinge also devotes an entire webpage to discussing their "natural dye[s]" (spelled in katakana: ナチュラル・ダイ). They use rose for a light pink color, strawberry for dark pink, and logwood for black dye. The natural color (*tennenshoku*) produced by the dyes does not fade or discolor – unless it is exposed to hot water during washing. To counteract this, Jewlinge explains, they add chemical dyes that help preserve the color. They emphasize, however, that these chemicals are safe enough to be used in baby clothes, and so the napkins are still gentle enough for sensitive skin. Although the dyes are evidently not chemical-free, the company still refers to them as "natural dyes" because they are plant-based. Jewlinge also draws on color psychology in discussing their dyes, calling pink a "rejuvenation color" that stimulates the secretion of female hormones. These hormones are a "serum" (*biyōeki*) that produces beautiful skin. Jewlinge implies that by having pink cloth in contact with one's skin (i.e., wearing a pink cloth napkin), power and beauty are given to the body. By focusing on the "natural" qualities of cloth napkins on their websites, these companies

paint their products as environmentally-conscious, superior alternatives to “unnatural” disposable napkins.

Health and Safety

Production and Safety

In addition to highlighting the “naturalness” of their products, all three cloth napkin company websites emphasize the high quality of the raw materials and production processes that lead to safe and superior cloth napkins. As noted above, these companies use unbleached organic cotton that is completely (or nearly completely, in the case of Jewlinge’s natural dyes) free of chemicals. This is a choice that not only creates a product that is soft and comfortable but safe too. The companies that make their own cloth napkins – Jewlinge and Organic Cotton Mütter – take pride in this fact and share details of the production process on their websites. Jewlinge states that their napkins are made in western Japan, an area famous for its spinning industry, by skilled workers: “[We] put our heart into hand-making each one!” They repeatedly invoke the notion of *anshin*, peace of mind or safety, when discussing their products. For instance, because their cloth napkins are domestically produced, customers can be at ease; and because the napkins are comprised of multiple layers of flannel, users can have peace of mind and not worry about leaks. Additionally, the snap fastener used to hold the cloth napkin in place in users’ undergarments is made of plastic, giving peace of mind to users who have sensitivity to metals or cold materials. The fasteners have also cleared strict removing-and-installing tests over ten thousand times, thus assuring that the napkin will stay in place and not accidentally shift positions or fall into the toilet. Lastly, Jewlinge reassures users that the black knobby bits on the surface of new napkins are not a sign of dirt or contamination, but of unbleached cloth: the bits are merely remnants of raw cotton leaves and stalks that will come off naturally after washing and are not harmful to the body.

Organic Cotton Mütter describes in extraordinary detail the procedures used to manufacture their cloth napkins and other organic cotton goods. In their factory, they make organic cotton products in a separate part of the building than where regular items are made, and they use sewing machines that are exclusively for organic cotton products; this is to ensure the safety and comfort of consumers by preventing cross-contamination with other fibers that may have been chemically treated. They claim that “a company which has this kind of production system is extremely rare (*mezurashii*) in this country” and that their “production equipment dedicated to organic cotton products is of the highest caliber in the country.” Since their organic cotton is not chemically treated, it is not as strong as other types of cloth and therefore requires expert manipulation to create a high-quality product. For this, they employ specialty staff who have over ten years’ worth of sewing and manufacturing experience. As an additional precautionary measure, Organic Cotton Mütter vacuum seals its organic cotton products when packaging them for delivery in order to prevent chemicals such as exhaust fumes from adhering to them during shipping. Of this practice, they note, “Our company may be the only one in the world to vacuum-pack organic cotton products.” Organic Cotton Mütter proclaims that their products are not only suitable for but highly favored by consumers with sensitive skin, especially those with chemical-hypersensitivity, atopic dermatitis, and dry skin. They even attest that they are recognized by a chemical-hypersensitivity hospital for their product quality; in essence, their products “bring peace of mind and safety to people.”

Health Benefits

Connected directly to cloth napkin companies' emphasis on the quality and safety of their raw materials and production process are assertions about health benefits from cloth napkin usage. Just as we saw with the invocation of cloth napkins as “natural,” here again disposable napkins are positioned as the foil to superior cloth napkins. LOHAS Kōbō and Jewlinge are especially vocal in their indictment of disposable napkins and the chemicals they contain; the LOHAS Kōbō manager even repeatedly referred to disposable napkins as “chemical” napkins in our interview, in direct contrast to “natural” cloth napkins. According to these companies, disposable napkins' chemicals cause the problem of menstrual odor by reacting with the components of menstrual blood. The high polymer absorbent material in disposable napkins traps in moisture, including menstrual blood and sweat. Bacteria can propagate in this moist, damp environment and create odors. Cloth napkins, on the other hand, have good breathability (*tsūkisei*) due to their material and can let moisture evaporate to an extent, thus reducing stuffiness and subsequent odors. Additionally, Jewlinge makes the claim that many women silently suffer from skin irritation when using disposable napkins, pointing out that delicate zone anti-itch medication sales reach one billion yen annually. Since stuffiness can lead to skin irritation – that is, rashes and itchiness – these ailments are also reduced with the use of cloth napkins.

Murakama, the pageant contestant in the Made in Earth festa roundtable, commented on the improvement of smell issues, and several other panelists also claimed that skin troubles lessened with using cloth napkins. The owner of tipua, when asked in our interview about the appeal of cloth napkins over disposable napkins, said that the two products are “just totally different (*mattaku chigau mono*)” and nearly incomparable. She added that one of the main plusses of cloth napkins is that they are “gentle on the skin (*hada ni yasashii*).” Being gentle on the skin and being comfortable (*kaiteki, kokochi yoi*, etc.) are oft-repeated descriptors of cloth napkins by many companies.

How do you imagine the future of Japanese menstrual products?

“Comfort during use” being the biggest reason, [cloth napkins] became a topic [of conversation] among women who suffer from chilling and skin irritation during menstruation... Hereafter, while we think that cloth napkins won't replace disposable napkins... we think that regular users, who have perceived the “comfort” that cloth holds, will definitely continue to use cloth napkins... “Skin irritation” during menstruation is a very painful problem for women, so we predict that even disposable napkins will definitely start to focus on being gentle on the skin as one important way of appealing to customers (Chi no shio, email questionnaire response).

Touched on by Chi no shio above, one other highly emphasized quality of cloth napkins is their warmth, versus chilly disposable napkins. LOHAS Kōbō calls chilling (*hie*) “a powerful enemy for women.” When looking at media (books, online articles, TV programs) related to health and wellness, *hieshō* (sensitivity to cold) is nearly synonymous with women's health problems. And it's not simply being cold – getting chilled can lead to poor blood circulation, aches and pains, poor digestion or appetite, lethargy, and so on. Many women try to avoid

getting chilled, especially during their periods; it can worsen their cramps. On the other hand, keeping warm can help relieve menstrual pain (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of interviewees' pain relief methods, including different methods for keeping warm or reducing chilling). Therefore, cloth napkin companies take the issue of *hieshō* very seriously.

Both the Made in Earth cloth napkin festa and NaturaMoon's consumer event, Kumako⁸⁷ Fest, featured doctors specializing in women's health and *hieshō*. At NaturaMoon's event, Dr. Ishihara Niina gave a talk entitled "*taion o agereba kirei ni nareru* (you can become pretty by raising your body temperature)," based on her new book, *josei no kirei wa sanjuppun de tsukureru* (women can become pretty in thirty minutes)." Drawing on *kanpō*, her main focus was on the causes, effects, and remedies and preventative measures for *hieshō*. She emphasized that chilling is a major problem for women, who are more susceptible to it than men since they have lower muscle mass. When you are chilled, your organs stop working well, you may get diarrhea or constipation, or you may have trouble sleeping as well. Chilling makes it hard to lose weight, even if you reduce your food intake; it can also make it easier to fall into a depression. *Hie* is even connected to cancer, since cancer cells can develop in a low-temperature, low-oxygen environment.

According to Dr. Ishihara, one of the reasons more women suffer from chilling nowadays is that "chilling/cooling" vegetables and foods are now available all year round, thanks to modern technology. She warned that ironically, you can get chilled the most in the summer, since you are in an air-conditioned environment and consume lots of cold drinks. Even just drinking a lot of water can cause chilling and thus be bad for your health. You need to sweat out the water inside you first before replenishing it; otherwise, it just accumulates inside you and chills your body. Of course, working up a sweat is hard to do with an office job, another modern trend with unchecked consequences for women's health.

The best ways to prevent or combat *hie* include eating "warming" foods (ginger, dairy, black tea, fruits, garlic, onion, etc.) and taking baths. Dr. Ishihara lamented the now-widespread practice of only taking showers and encouraged the audience to go in the *ofuro* (bath) for at least a few minutes or perhaps even just soak their feet in the *ofuro* while washing their hair. Other ways of warming the body include sleeping with a *haramaki* (warming pad you wrap around your stomach) and exercising. Working up a light sweat through thirty minutes of daily exercise helps to combat *hie* and improve one's mood and overall health which can be brought down by *hie*.

Much like the *haramaki*, cloth napkins can be considered a "garment" of sorts to increase body temperature; NaturaMoon, LOHAS Kōbō, Made in Earth, and Chi no shio all describe their cloth napkins as "warm" (*atatakai*) or warming. Disposable napkins, however, can have the opposite effect, with all of the symptoms of *hie*. Jewlinge notes that the high absorbency polymer which makes disposable napkins thin and super absorbent is similar to the components of cooling gel sheets used for the treatment of fevers. One statement embedded in a passage explaining the chilling effects of these materials exclaims: "Using disposable napkins is the same as sticking a gel sheet to your delicate area's skin!" Therefore, using disposable napkins "causes chilling of the body, back pain, and feeling bad (*fuchō ni naru*)." These websites position chilling – and thus disposable napkins which cause chilling – as the root cause of women's suffering during

⁸⁷ Kumako is the name of NaturaMoon's mascot, a cute bear with a head shape reminiscent of a tuft of cotton (*kuma* means bear and *ko* is a common suffix in feminine names).

menstruation. Cloth napkins, on the other hand, are made of cotton rather than polymer. This material, according to LOHAS Kōbō, “warms instead of chills, and so it improves blood circulation and lessens menstrual pain.”

Indeed, although these companies offer a disclaimer that cloth napkin users have varied experiences with the products, informational passages on their websites are peppered with “happy voices,” or consumer testimonials, describing the various maladies that cloth napkins relieved. For example: “Switching to cloth napkins liberated me from my troubles of irritation, sluggishness, and depression and...the discomfort of rashes, itchiness, and odor;” “After using cloth napkins my menstrual pain that I suffered from went away;” “My menstrual pain and back pain have lightened.” At the NaturaMoon consumer event, there was a raffle, and winners were invited to take the mic for a moment to make a comment or give thanks. One winner shared that she suffered from PMDD (“which is like PMS but more severe,” she explained) but using NaturaMoon’s products has helped her immensely. The Made in Earth cloth napkin festa roundtable was a chorus of positive testimonials, with all panelists attributing improvements – *kabure* relief, shortened periods, lighter cramps – to their use of cloth napkins. In our one-on-one interview, Maeda commented that lately more and more girls and young women are suffering from “female troubles (*josei no toraburu*)” involving the uterus and/or ovaries, such as severe menstrual cramps and infertility issues. She sees cloth napkins as a potential solution to these troubles, since they are good for people with “delicate” bodies and people who have “problems, troubles, [and/or] discomfort (*nayami, toraburu, iwakan*).” By choosing cloth napkins, women choose a product that they believe is safe, natural, and thus good for their bodies.

Responsibility of Care

Taking Care of One’s Body

The last major theme of these cloth napkin companies I call “responsibility of care,” wherein cloth napkin users are implicitly called upon to care for (take care of) and care about various things. Primarily, users should take care of their bodies. As discussed above, cloth napkin companies emphasize the safety and high quality of the raw materials and manufacturing processes involved in making their products. “Natural” cloth napkins made from non-chemically treated organic cotton helps to relieve discomfort, irritation, and chills caused by “unnatural” disposable napkins made from high polymer absorbent material. LOHAS Kōbō refers to this improvement in comfort and health as the “body liberated from unnaturalness.” For them, taking care of one’s body by using cloth napkins is common sense that arises naturally: “Delicate days call for natural raw material that is gentle on delicate areas – thinking this, you gradually come to think of choosing cloth napkins.” Jewlinge admits that the transition to cloth napkins can be difficult for some women as they figure out the proper timing for changing napkins, but they emphasize that using cloth napkins is an “opportunity to sympathize with your body.” They also claim that using pink-colored napkins from their natural dye collection of goods will improve women’s complexions by stimulating the production of female hormones. By using cloth napkins, women can take care of their bodies – inside and out.

At the charity cloth napkin-making workshop, the Sunny Days rep ended a presentation on the menstrual cycle for middle-schoolers with the following sentiment: “When negative feelings about menstruation fade, you will value both your body and yourself, and the gloomy time [of menstruation] will become a smiling time.” This reflects a message common among

cloth napkin companies: women should also care for – that is, be fond of – menstruation itself. More than disposable napkins, use of cloth napkins requires that women be more intimate with their bodies during menstruation. They need to pay attention to their menstrual flow to determine when to change their napkins and thus prevent leaks and stains. And although they can put their used napkins in a washing machine, they need to “pre-wash” or soak the napkins by hand first, most likely touching their menstrual blood in the process. This is quite different from the case of disposable napkins, where women can quickly wrap and discard the used product. Chi no shio’s rep conveyed that “cloth napkins are good because by seeing one’s own menstrual blood one can accept ‘*seiri*’ affirmatively, and one can become aware of changes in one’s own physical condition/health.” LOHAS Kōbō claims that since disposable napkins are treated as trash, by extension, menstrual blood comes to be thought of as garbage or something dirty. However, by paying more attention to one’s body and menstruation, including looking at and touching one’s menstrual blood while using cloth napkins, this feeling of dirtiness fades away.⁸⁸ Ono (2009, 155-156) expresses a very similar sentiment; and this idea is also reflected in the results of Kaimura and Kusaga’s (2008) research, in which young women who switched to cloth napkins for six months began to see menstruation as “natural” rather than dirty and bothersome. Cloth napkins are a gateway to positive thinking about one’s period.

Eco & Eco

According to these companies, women should choose cloth napkins over disposable napkins not only because they are more comfortable and healthier for their bodies, but also because they are better for the environment – and customers’ wallets. This combination of favorable traits in one product is referred to as “eco and eco” – short for ecology and economy – in Japanese media. LOHAS Kōbō and Organic Cotton Mütter highlight that using untreated organic cotton is not just good for users’ bodies, but for the environment as well. For one, production of cloth napkins does not involve the use of non-renewable resources (petroleum products) unlike disposable napkins. Additionally, there are no chemical pesticides involved in organic cotton production, and since the cotton is unbleached, there is no runoff of liquid waste created by elemental chlorine bleaching or other processes that are used in disposable napkin manufacturing.

Also, as LOHAS Kōbō points out, users can shrink their environmental footprint by reusing cloth napkins rather than generating lots of trash with disposable napkins. The leaders of the charity cloth-napkin-making workshop organized by Made in Earth and Sunny Days not only pointed out that choosing cloth napkins helps reduce the “trash mountain (*gomi yama*)” and waste incineration pollution generated by disposable napkins, but they also explicitly connected cloth napkin usage with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The Chi no shio representative shared that many customers preferred (their) cloth napkins because they do not produce waste like disposable napkins do, and NaturaMoon similarly claimed that consumers are drawn to their eco-friendly cloth napkins and other products. In our interview, the owner and founder of kucca

⁸⁸ In our interview, Maeda, the Made in Earth rep, made extremely similar comments, saying that “menstrual blood is a part of oneself, but it is treated like trash. Really though, it is a super important thing.” She later added that “while disposable napkins are easy since you don’t have to wash them, cloth napkins...are natural, and they are also easy in their own way once you get accustomed to using and washing them. The feeling of ‘I hate when my period comes’ then goes away.”

said that she uses eco-friendly packaging for consumer orders to help even further reduce the environmental impact of her cloth napkin products.

Both LOHAS Kōbō and Organic Cotton Mütter describe their products as economical as well; after the initial investment of a set of napkins, customers do not need to purchase more for many years, as opposed to monthly purchases for disposable products. The owner of tipua as well as the Made in Earth / Sunny Days charity workshop also emphasized the long-lasting quality of cloth napkins as a major advantage over disposable napkins. By presenting cloth napkins as environmentally friendly and economical, cloth napkin companies construct their product as the responsible alternative to disposable napkins.

Discretion

Lastly, cloth napkin users should take care to be discreet about their menstruation. LOHAS Kōbō repeatedly describes how customers can be discreet about using cloth napkins, from purchasing them to washing and drying them. They have an entire webpage devoted to explaining how their delivery packaging does not reveal the contents of the box, with accompanying photographic examples. There are multiple layers to this concealment: cloth napkins are put in a paper bag and then placed in the package with other goods, the company packages orders themselves so that delivery service personnel are unaware of the contents of orders, and the label on the package reads “miscellaneous/general goods” or “daily necessities.” When washing used cloth napkins, LOHAS Kōbō recommends soaking them in an opaque container with a lid so that the contents are not visible, as well as using essential oils to eliminate any odors while the napkins are soaking and drying. Moreover, while the company also recommends drying napkins in direct sunlight, they suggest hanging them up inside other clothing or even drying them in a private room so that family and neighbors will not see them. At the Made in Earth cloth napkin festa, when going over the company’s product line, Tagawa described one of the plusses of the “three-fold” style of napkin being that the napkin looks just like a handkerchief when hung up to dry, rather than what it really is.⁸⁹

Jewlinge offers a line of cloth napkins colored with natural dyes, including logwood which gives the fabric a black color. They say that this napkin is “a popular product that is gorgeous and conceals the color of menstrual blood.” The concealment of menstrual blood is not just for users’ own sense of cleanliness, but also for preventing others from seeing conspicuous stains while one changes clothes in a public place like a gym or *onsen*. Ironically, however, because the color of menstrual blood is concealed, users must be extra thorough when washing black napkins to make sure they have cleaned it completely. While one could argue that these products and advice are driven by consumer desires for discretion, cloth napkin companies are still supporting the notion that women can and should be proactive – responsible – in concealing their use of cloth napkins.

Discussion

In the United States, alternative menstrual products are often associated with environmentalist networks, and the same may be said of Japan. Advertising for these products is remarkably similar in these countries as well. To start, because of the smaller size and budget of

⁸⁹ The “three-fold” style of napkin is a rectangular or square piece of fabric that one folds in thirds to create a napkin shape. One can refold the napkin mid-use to get a “fresh” absorbent surface before changing napkins completely.

the companies compared to disposable napkin corporations, advertising mainly occurs in environmental magazines and company websites, rather than mainstream women's magazines or television. Companies in Japan and the United States both emphasize similar aspects when promoting their products, including "the natural, healthful qualities of the product and practical reasons for using them" (Kissling 2006, 97). They highlight the use of organic cotton, critique disposable napkins for being unsafe and uncomfortable, extoll the economic sensibility of their products, and accept menstruation as a natural and positive life experience. Cloth napkin companies also do not explicitly compete with one another, but instead focus their criticism of competing products on disposable napkins and tampons (Kissling 2006, 97-99).

Despite their disdain for disposable napkins, cloth napkin companies do share a similar trait with their rivals: they both attempt to sell happiness alongside their products. Disposable napkin commercials feature young women frolicking on luxuriant green grass in a park or relaxing on a fluffy bed surrounded by downy pillows and clouds. The women's expressions are cheerful, satisfied, even blissful; there is not a dull or dreary face in sight. LOHAS Kōbō emphasizes the happiness that fun, cute, and comfortable cloth napkins can bring to users. Jewlinge even proclaims a company motto of happiness-making: "We want to turn women's blue days into happy [ones] (*josei no burū dē o HAPPY ni shitai*)."

They also insist that their pink-dyed napkins will "relieve the melancholy of 'blue days.'" For disposable napkin companies, *menstruation* causes unhappiness, while for cloth napkin companies, *disposable napkins* cause unhappiness. For both, unhappiness is resolved through the use of particular products. In other words, happiness is achieved through consumption.

But what does it mean to be happy during your period? Many women experience pain, discomfort, and inconveniences during menstruation and quite a large number report that they would be happier if they did not have a period at all (Ono 2009, 149-150; Ono 1985, 36). And yet menstrual product advertising emphasizes happiness. This is not simply a marketing ploy – to make people desire the product – but a part of hegemonic menstruality that emphasizes concealment of *all* signs of menstruation, including discomfort and negative moods. In other words, the advertising is a message for how women should behave, that is, to act happy even when they are not. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed explains the politics of happiness and how happiness is used to enforce social norms: "Happiness describes not only what we *are* inclined toward (to achieve happiness is to acquire our form or potential) but also what we *should* be inclined toward (as a principle that guides moral decisions about how to live well)" (2010, 199). There are socially appropriate pathways to happiness, or "happiness objects" that one should aspire to obtain. Ahmed also discusses the "affective geography" of happiness, in which happiness is centralized while unhappiness is pushed to the margins. This results in "certain bodies [being] pushed to the margins, in order that the unhappiness that is assumed to reside within these bodies does not threaten the happiness..." (2010, 97-98). In mainstream media discourse – including disposable napkin advertising – menstruation is labeled as a cause of unhappiness. Women's sexuality scholar Breanne Fahs notes that such negative "media implies that menstruation makes women 'unclean,' and the medicalization of menstruation has resulted in women seeing their menstrual cycles as inconvenient, unnecessary, something to medicate away, and, in the worst cases, something that causes mental illness" (2016, 25). Menstruation is assumed to be a negative experience and thus a source of unhappiness; this stigma of unhappiness further marginalizes menstruation and menstruators in society.

Cloth napkin companies can be seen as trying to reclaim menstruation from these margins and transform it into a positive, happy experience – a laudable endeavor. However, this ignores the gendered, performative pressure of happiness and limits the range of affective interactions women have with their periods. It is important to understand that happiness is a political act that can be used to reinforce social norms, not just about *what* should make people happy but about *who* should be happy. Ahmed argues that women are often bound in circumstances of “conditional happiness,” in which the happiness of others is dependent on their happiness. Therefore, they have a responsibility – a duty – to be happy for that other person (Ahmed 2010, 91). In other words, women may force themselves to be happy, or at least to appear happy, for the sake of appeasing others and conforming to societal expectations. Cloth napkin companies’ encouragement of women to be happy about menstruation because it is a natural, positive part of being a woman implies that those who refuse to or cannot be happy are failing to be properly feminine. Indeed, Kaimura and Kusaga express this sentiment when discussing their hopes for widespread adoption of cloth napkins. To them, the use of disposable napkins leads women to view menstruation as unclean waste and thus “reject femininity,” while using cloth napkins will help women “regain femininity” (2008, 151). However, although it may seem counterintuitive, affirming unhappiness can be a powerful and positive act. Ahmed writes that “suffering is a receptivity that can heighten the capacity to act” (2010, 210). Not only does embracing unhappiness free oneself from the pressure to perform false happiness, but it opens up avenues for solidarity and political action. Fahs notes that many women bond over sharing details of premenstrual symptoms (2016, 27). My point here is that women have varied experiences and perceptions of menstruation. It is just as problematic to insist that women *should* be happy about menstruation as it is to claim that women *cannot* be happy about menstruation.

Relating to the responsibility of happiness is the responsibility of care. As discussed above, cloth napkin companies encourage women to care for their bodies and care about the environment. Carney defines care as “the multifaceted labor that produces the daily living conditions that make basic human health and well-being possible” (2013, 68). Care is a highly gendered form of labor that many women perform unpaid and unacknowledged, and which is strongly connected to family and motherhood. While this is not the case in all societies, in Japan menstruation is intrinsically linked to reproduction; reproduction, in turn, has powerful implications for the future of the country. The declining birthrate and aging population of Japan have left it in a precarious state, economically and socially. To counteract this pressing issue, the Japanese government has taken various measures to encourage (married) women to have (more) children. This is a continuation of a long history of government involvement in the reproductive lives of its citizens. Like many other countries, the Japanese nation-state in the twentieth century constructed its female citizens as the symbolic and biological reproducers of the nation, extolling mothers and criticizing women who chose not to have children (McClintock 1993; Frühstück 2003). Although women have long been active outside the home, childrearing is still often considered a woman’s most important role. In fact, Japan is one of the few countries in the world to legally provide menstrual leave for female employees, a practice which began in the mid-twentieth century as a means to protect women’s health, especially as it concerned pregnancy

and childbirth (Dan 1986).⁹⁰ In this light, women choosing cloth napkins because they are more natural, safer, and healthier for their bodies can be viewed as protecting their menstrual health and potential for motherhood. The connection between menstruation and motherhood is further enforced by the fact that Jewlinge, LOHAS Kōbō, and Organic Cotton Mütter all sell baby clothes alongside cloth napkins, as well as by the very name of Organic Cotton Mütter.

Lastly, I would like to highlight a glaring contradiction in the way that these cloth napkin companies conceptualize menstruation. That is, menstruation is simultaneously depicted as something natural that women should enjoy and as something that should be diligently concealed. The message that comes across, then, is that women should embrace menstruation on a personal level but hide it on a public level. Even though these companies consistently position cloth napkins as the antithesis to disposable napkins, which they claim cause all kinds of ailments including a negative perception of menstruation, they are actually embracing the very same perception they are trying to refute. In this way, cloth napkin and disposable napkin advertising have an additional commonality (besides selling happiness) – stressing the need to conceal menstruation from others. Although they do not outright call for this concealment, by leaving unquestioned practices of concealment – such as hiding cloth napkins from sight and using deodorizing fragrances to prevent olfactory detection – they effectively normalize such behaviors.

The importance of concealing menstruation can be traced to the concept of abjection. Julia Kristeva, in her book *Powers of Horror*, describes abjection as “what disturbs identity, system, order...does not respect borders, positions, rules...the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (1982: 4). Kristeva positions menstrual blood into the realm of abjection by relating it to waste and signs of sexual difference, stating, “What goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection” (1982, 108). Menstrual blood is abject waste excreted from the body, which, by passing through one of the body’s orifices, defiles and threatens the “body proper.” Also a sign of sexual difference, menstrual blood is a sexual bodily fluid that has the power to permeate and transgress the boundaries of the body, and thus poses a threat to the social system and social identity (Kristeva 1982, 71). In this way, women are responsible for concealing signs of menstruation, whether that is menstrual odor, leaks and bloodstains, a grumpy mood, or simply a cloth napkin hanging on the clothesline.

Conclusion

In her book *Seizing the Means of Reproduction*, Michelle Murphy (2012) explores the history and politics of reproductive technologies of the women’s health movement in the 1970s and 1980s in the United States, including pap smears, vaginal self-exams, and menstrual extraction and menstrual regulation devices. Of her choice to focus on these technologies rather than high-tech ones that are usually invoked by the term “technoscience,” she writes, “...the less glamorous and simpler technologies examined in this book have vitally touched a vastly greater number of people and have provided crucial sites for the emergence of neoliberal governmentalities, for the industrialization of medicine, and for the entanglement of sexed and

⁹⁰ With menstrual leave, women can take time off from work during menstruation. Whether this leave is paid or unpaid depends on the employer. Other countries with menstrual leave laws include South Korea, Indonesia, and Taiwan.

raced living-being with capitalism” (Murphy 2012, 3). I would argue that the same is true for menstrual napkins and that there is theoretical value in positioning them as a form of technoscience. Commercial napkins – whether disposable or cloth – are used by millions of women in Japan and around the world. The menstrual product industry was largely unregulated in the United States until the deadly toxic shock syndrome outbreak, and even now the FDA relies on product testing that corporations conduct for themselves (Kissling 2006). In Japan, the industry regulations are stipulated by the Japan Hygiene Products Industry Association, which is made up of corporations that produce cotton swabs, first aid bandages, diapers, face masks, and menstrual products (Ono 2006). In this way, the government has a relatively hands-off approach to the industry, leaving consumers to make informed, responsible decisions about their purchases. As I discussed earlier, menstrual products were commercialized and industrialized early in the twentieth century, and a whole slew of industrial products have developed alongside them, including: oral pain relievers, heating pads, herbal teas, special menstrual undergarments, douches, “feminine” cleansing wipes, and hormonal contraceptives used to regulate or eliminate menstruation.

As for the entanglements with capitalism, buying cloth napkins instead of disposable ones is still a form of participation in capitalist systems, and even making one’s own napkins – whether for an unwillingness or inability to purchase them – is still informed by these systems. Indeed, while Japanese cloth napkin companies may demonize disposable napkins as unhealthy and oppressive to women, the very same product could be liberating and healthful for women in other parts of the world, who may be confined to the home instead of going to school or work because of a lack of access to effective menstrual care. In this sense, it is important to study the “topographies” (Murphy 2012) of menstrual products; women have differential access to menstrual products and understandings and experiences of menstruation along lines of class, race, age, etc. How menstruation is conceptualized has an impact on how women are viewed and treated in a society (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988), and so studying menstrual products and menstruation can help elucidate women’s positions and roles.

CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION

Toward a More Public Menstruation? Seiri-chan Makes Her Big Screen Debut!

Image 8.1. Poster for Seiri-chan Film



(<https://seirichan.official-movie.com>)

“I’ve arrived!” exclaims Seiri-chan impishly. A human-sized pink heart with dollish eyes and a mouth reminiscent of candy lips, she is an anthropomorphized menstrual period dreamed up by manga author Koyama Ken. The slice-of-life style escapades of Seiri-chan began online in 2017; in 2019, the comic had gained over twenty million page views, had won the Tezuka Osamu Cultural Prize for best short work, and had been adapted into a live-action film.⁹¹ The film website describes Seiri-chan in this way:

Delivering a “seiri punch” to annoying guys, firing out violent language at times and wise sayings at other times, it’s the strongest, adorably ugly Seiri-chan. Having no regard for whether you’re at work or on a date, always coming when it’d be better if she didn’t, Seiri-chan.

⁹¹ The comics are available to read for free at: <https://omocoro.jp/matome/113450/>, accessed 18 March 2022.

When Seiri-chan comes, you get sluggish and irritated, and you suffer from cramps. There's not a single good thing about her. If only men could experience [menstruation] just once.

But during troublesome and difficult times, Seiri-chan notices and is always by your side, giving you a little bit of courage.⁹²

During the same year, in addition to its big screen adaptation, Seiri-chan found itself as a marketing tool for corporate “empowerment” of women. In November 2019, the Umeda branch of the department store Daimaru in Osaka opened a new section for women that is focused on sex and menstruation. The new area is meant to “snuggle up to women’s rhythms,” which were determined by the department store’s collaborator Luna Luna, a menstrual cycle tracking app: “blue time (during menstruation), sparkling time (after menstruation), wavering time (unstable time), and gloomy time (before menstruation).” The shops in the new area sell menstrual products (including period underwear and menstrual cups), underwear, sex toys, cosmetics, bedding, supplements, and herbal teas. Riding the “FemTech boom,” the Umeda branch manager reported that the purpose of the new area is “to become a solution for women’s delicate problems.” To celebrate the opening of the new department, there was a Seiri-chan pop-up shop with copies of the manga, character goods, and an autograph event with Koyama.⁹³ Additionally, the same store had been experimenting with “period badges” – employees could wear an additional badge underneath their nameplate with an image of Seiri-chan on it to signify that they were menstruating. While the “period badge” was meant for employees to have the option to signal to one another when they were on their period and would like support, when the idea was announced it received some backlash as there were concerns about employees having to reveal their menstrual status to customers in the process of communicating with coworkers. Therefore, the experimental badges were abandoned, with the company promising to devise a new system that would work without alerting customers about staff members’ menstrual status.⁹⁴

Although poor planning led to the downfall of this novel experiment at creating a more open environment around menstruation, could it be a sign of similar things to come? Perhaps. Just this month (March 2022), FamilyMart – a major convenience store chain in Japan – announced the experimental implementation of a “crowd-shelf” exclusively for menstrual products, at their Tokyo Kasei University location. In the store’s bathroom, customers can take menstrual products or leave some for others to use. After three months, the company will evaluate the experiment to find the best way to spread and continue its implementation. FamilyMart is also offering two percent off all menstrual products at all its stores, starting on International Women’s Day (March 8) through the end of May.⁹⁵ Similarly, the online pharmacy and medical consultation company Nekuino recently partnered with Nankai Electric Railway and Senboku Rapid Railway in Osaka to provide free menstrual napkins in train station bathrooms. Using Nekuino’s app Smaluna⁹⁶, one can scan a QR code on the specially designed menstrual

⁹² <https://seirichan.official-movie.com/introduction/>, accessed 18 March 2022.

⁹³ <https://www.wwdjapan.com/articles/981032>, accessed 18 March 2022.

⁹⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50597405>, <https://www.wwdjapan.com/articles/985814>, accessed 18 March 2022.

⁹⁵ <https://www.wwdjapan.com/articles/1334595>, accessed 18 March 2022.

⁹⁶ This app specializes in medical consultations and prescription delivery related to menstruation and contraception (including, low-dose birth control pills and the morning-after pill). <https://smaluna.com/>, accessed 18 March 2022.

napkin dispenser to receive a napkin.⁹⁷ These kinds of initiatives are inspired by growing discussions of period poverty and the economic burden placed on women to acquire menstrual products.

Contributions and Significance of This Research

My research engages with the complex and varied experiences of menstruation for young Japanese women and examines the Japanese menstrual product industry from an ethnographic and critical feminist perspective. As a research site, Tokyo, Japan, provides the opportunity to study the effect of pronatalist government policies and discourses about fertility, gender roles, and parenthood on embodied experiences of menstruation. In the context of twenty-first century economic precarity, prolonged singlehood, and changing social relations, menstruation – with its discursive connection to motherhood – can have great significance to young Japanese women. The female university students who I interviewed must balance career goals with personal desires and/or social pressures to have a family, and their experiences with (ir)regular menstrual cycles impact their ideas of and decisions for their futures.

Informed by scholarship in critical menstruation studies, medical anthropology, and feminist anthropology, this research examines what it means to have a “normal” menstrual cycle, and how menstrual products and menstrual education impact the diversity of experiences surrounding menstruation, whether they are physiological, social, or emotional. Understanding and acknowledging menstrual experiences can provide important insights into many social structures and societal institutions. Media, government, and industry are institutions that are closely intertwined in the production of discourses on menstruation and women’s bodies, which can directly affect the lived experiences of menstruation.

The main concept elucidated in this research is “hegemonic menstruality.” This construct is formed from a combination of public discourses and institutions – medicine, (sex) education, advertising, news, and more. The “correct” way to menstruate must include having a “regular” menstrual cycle and thus excellent reproductive health, which should be put to use by becoming a mother (after marriage). It also must include flawless concealment of any and all signs of menstruation, from menstrual fluid and menstrual napkins to pain from cramps and irritability from hormones. It is hegemonic menstruality’s intersections and interactions with young women’s daily lives and notions of self that is of most interest here. How do young women understand and/or respond to the tenets of hegemonic menstruality, and how does it impact their lived experiences of menstruation?

The purpose of menstruation, as taught in schools and by female family members, is to make pregnancy possible. As children, young women learned that starting menstruation means that they can now “make a baby,” and menstrual blood is “the baby’s bed” that the body gets rid of when fertilization does not occur. Menstruation is a symbol of womanhood and thus motherhood as well, or at least the potential for it. In the past, menarche was celebrated as girls transitioned to womanhood and could contribute to the continuance of the community through reproduction. Menarche is still occasionally celebrated today, with *sekihan* or encouraging words from mothers. While women in Japan today are having fewer children and starting families later in life (if at all), motherhood is still a socially expected role for women and an important marker of femininity. Therefore, even when young women dread the arrival of their period and suffer

⁹⁷ <https://www.wwdjapan.com/articles/1316380>, accessed 18 March 2022.

through cramps, bloating, and other discomforts, they find a silver lining in the fact that a “regular” – monthly – menstrual cycle helps ensure they can fulfill the role of mother if and when desired. On the other hand, while experienced at some point in the lives of most interviewees for one reason or another, an irregular cycle can cause stress and worry about future fertility.

While there have been cycles of “openness” and “concealment” of menstruation in Japan’s history, the predominant treatment of menstruation today undoubtedly errs on the side of concealment. Hegemonic menstruality’s mandate to conceal menstruation colors young women’s embodied experiences of their menstrual cycles in many ways, from the words they use to talk about menstruation to the period products they buy. The embodiment of hegemonic menstruality materializes in the habitus of young women’s menstrual management practices. During menstruation, women avoid certain activities like exercise or swimming, and they comport their bodies in such ways as to reduce the chances of menstrual blood leakages. A leak is a “failure” – a failure to conceal menstruation properly, which is equivalent to a failure to be feminine. It is read as a sign of a lack in self-discipline and regard for others. Not only should feminine aesthetics be maintained, but feminine affect should as well; women should be uncomplaining, pleasant, and smiling, even when suffering from menstrual cramps, bloating, headaches, or emotional distress. Only in the privacy and safety of women-only conversations can complaints and commiserations be aired.

In menstrual product advertising – one of the rare public venues for discussion of menstruation – hegemonic menstruality is further represented and reinforced. In ads, euphemisms are employed in place of straight talk about menstruation, menstrual blood is replaced by a sanitized blue liquid, and airbrushed smiling faces of models cover up menstrual discomfort and suffering. Marketing emphasizes the liquid- and smell-absorbing qualities of the menstrual products, to help provide peace of mind and protect consumers from the shame of “failures” to conceal abject menstruation. Women in turn carefully select various menstrual products – mainly napkins and “sanitary shorts” – to maintain an idealized feminine aesthetic and affect, in other words to “pass” as non-menstrual (Vostral 2008). Not only do young women strategically use menstrual products to conceal menstruation from others, but the products they use can also contribute to embodied experiences that conceal menstruation from themselves. Menstrual napkins can be considered as a mediator between a woman and her menstrual blood. Use of disposable napkins, rather than tampons for example, leads to fewer moments of direct physical contact with menstrual blood and one’s body (especially the genital area). Using tampons or reusable menstrual products like cloth napkins makes touching menstrual blood a necessity, leading to different experiences and understandings of menstruation and one’s body. As organic cotton menstrual products – including reusable cloth napkins – continue to rise in popularity, we may see greater shifts in conceptions of menstruation.

Further Avenues of Study: Fashion, FemTech, and Fertility

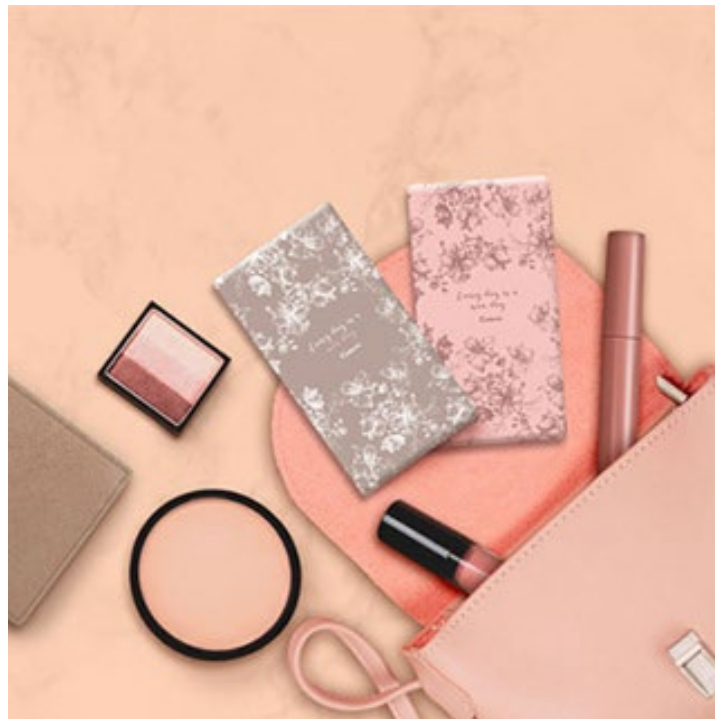
While my research contributes greatly to illuminating lived experiences of menstruation for young women in Japan, there are still many lacunae to be filled. This research is limited in scope – I interviewed only young adult women attending university in the Tokyo area. Inclusion of other ages and regions would continue to add to understandings of hegemonic menstruality and lived experiences of menstruation. Additionally, this research only includes ciswomen; the

study of queer and trans experiences of menstruation is an important growing field in critical menstruation studies and feminist studies.

Looking forward, I see three major (at times overlapping) areas ripe for further study of menstruation in Japan: the intersection of commercial menstrual products and the fashion industry; FemTech, social media, and big data; and medical advancements in treatments for menstrual disorders and infertility.

It is safe to say that absorption and comfort improvements for menstrual napkins have reached a level of diminishing returns. Therefore, to stand out from competitors, menstrual product companies are pursuing differentiation through aesthetics, include cute and/or “fashionable (*oshare*)” prints on napkin wrappers and products imbued with perfume-like scents. Yet it remains to be seen whether the “accessorization” of menstrual products actually improves users’ moods or their experiences and perceptions of menstruation. Can they make menstruation something to look forward to, or at least dread a little bit less? Do they give more of a reason for girls and women to talk about their periods – showing off and comparing pads like they would a new bag or fresh coat of nail polish? Or do they just further obfuscate the difficult realities of menstruation, like the cotton candy clouds and pink puppet frogs of *Pyua Hada* do? They do seem to disguise menstrual products: Center-In’s website says of its product, “it’s so cute it blends in with other accessories, and it doesn’t look like a menstrual product so it’s easy to carry around!”⁹⁸

Image 8.2. Advertisement for Center-In Menstrual Napkins



(<https://www.sofy.jp/ja/products/center-in.html?show=4>)

⁹⁸ <https://www.sofy.jp/ja/products/center-in.html?show=4>, accessed 18 March 2022.

More and more, social media is an integral part of people's lives. With FemTech, even women's health is digitized. Questions of privacy and big data thus arise when it comes to menstrual cycle tracking apps and platforms like Instagram. At the same time, however, it is important to investigate the positive potential of connectivity, empowerment, education, and even political action that social media and digital technology can provide its users.

As Japan continues down the path of "shrinking and aging (*shōshi kōrei ka*)" in terms of its population, interest in fertility treatments may also continue. Infertility and the country's birthrate are ever-present topics in the media, which impacts understandings of and experiences with menstruation. While irregular menstrual cycles emerged as an important topic in this research, experiences with specific menstrual disorders such as endometriosis require further study. How, when, and why do people seek out medical treatment for painful and/or life-disrupting menstrual experiences? How do medical systems and discourses on health and gender impact these decisions for people in Japan?

Conclusion

There is little scholarly literature on the experiences of menstruation for women in industrialized societies like Japan; much anthropological work has focused on village communities in Africa and South and Southeast Asia, and Japanese studies on the topic favor survey results and lack ethnographic data on modern women's experiences. My research will help fill in this gap and provide a foundation for cross-cultural research among other industrialized, urban societies. Moreover, my research will contribute to theories of embodiment and medicalization of women's life experiences. My emphasis on a sensory approach that takes into account not just the visual and the haptic but also the olfactory and auditory aspects of menstrual experiences will provide a more complete understanding of the subject and serve as a methodological example for other sensory research.

Although the middle of the twentieth century and beyond saw increased mass media discourses relating to menstruation, in the form of menstrual product advertisements, concealment of menstruation still occurs on a day-to-day basis. While women do not view it as something that is polluting, some do regard it as "troublesome," "annoying," or "dirty" and express a desire to hide it (e.g., Ono 1985, 36). Cashiers still provide opaque shopping bags to put menstrual products in for customers, advertisements continue to use linguistic and visual euphemisms in their messages (Ono 2009, 157), and informal education on menstruation focuses on how to conceal signs of menstruation. Beliefs about menstrual pollution do still crop up from time to time though. For instance, in 2000, Ōta Fusae became the first female governor in Japan when she was elected as governor of Osaka Prefecture. Each year, one of Japan's three major *sumo* tournaments is hosted in Osaka, and traditionally the governor is supposed to present a prize at the tournament. However, the Japan Sumo Association barred Ōta from entering the ring, claiming that a woman entering the ring would pollute it. She remained governor for eight years, but she was never allowed to present the prize in the tournament ring (Hindell 2000). Even in 2018, a referee at a *sumo* match ordered women to exit the sumo ring, which they had entered in order to provide first aid to a politician who had collapsed (Tarrant 2018).

I will conclude here with a brief look ahead at some of the potential practical applications of this research. One of the most important things to take away from this investigation into the treatment of menstruation in Japan is that specific views of menstruation reflect general views of

women in society. These beliefs often have negative connotations and put women in an inferior position to men. Views of women's bodies are extremely important to understand; as long as women are continuously essentialized into reproductive beings, then discriminatory practices, such as the recent scandal of Tokyo Medical University rigging exams against female applicants, may continue to happen (Tanaka 2019). Moving forward, it is important to consider how the climate surrounding discourses on menstruation and menstrual products can improve. If negative views of menstruation reflect negative views of women, then perhaps positive thoughts and experiences in relation to menstruation could lead to more positive treatment and positioning of women (and vice versa). As discussed previously, the content of sex education classes can have an impact on views of menstruation and sexuality, as well as what kinds of menstrual products girls choose to use. Changes in sex education curricula that include information about tampons and healthy discussion of female sexuality beyond marital procreative activities have the potential to improve young women's self-image and experiences with menstruation. Lastly, creating more mainstream public formats (beyond menstrual product advertising) that allow women to express their own personal menstruation experiences – both good and bad – is another avenue for developing more positive and complex views of menstruation in Japanese society as a whole. Fahs (2016) has shown that while menstruation may be relatively absent from or even negatively viewed in public discourse, women can form relationships of solidarity through discussing their menstrual experiences. The history of menstruation in Japan is one of religion and politics, foreign conceptions and domestic adaptations, and innovations and traditions. Will the future of menstruation be one in which women no longer need to conceal it at all costs?

APPENDIX. INTERVIEW GUIDES

Interview Guide for Female University Students (Japanese)

A. 個人的な歴史

1. 出身はどこですか。
2. 何年生ですか。専攻は何ですか。
3. なぜこの大学に入ることを決めましたか。
4. 何歳ですか。
5. 仕事、アルバイトなどしていますか、あるいは、していましたか。
6. ご兄弟姉妹はいますか。
7. ご両親はどんな仕事をしていますか。
8. 将来の目指している仕事はありますか。
9. 将来、結婚したいですか。家族が欲しいですか。
10. 趣味はありますか。どんな趣味ですか。
11. 国内・国際政治に興味がありますか。

B. 生理について習ったこと

1. 自分の言葉で生理を説明・定義してください。
子供の頃、どうやって初めて生理について習いましたか。そのとき何を教えられましたか。そのとき、どのように言われましたか。
2. 学校で／先生から生理について何を教えられましたか。
3. お母さん・ご兄弟姉妹・ご家族から生理について何を教えられましたか。
4. 子供の時に友達と生理について話しましたか。
5. 子供の時に本や雑誌で生理について読んだことがありますか。
6. 子供のときにテレビ番組や映画で生理について聞いた・見たことがありますか。
7. もし、まだ経験したことがない女の子に生理を説明するとしたら、どのように説明しますか。
8. 月経前症候群 (PMS) 聞いたことありますか。月経前不快気分障害・月経前不
きげん 性障害 (PMDD) は？ 子宮内^{しきゅうないまく}膜症 (endometriosis) は？ 多^た囊^う胞^{ほう}性^{せい}卵^{らん}巣^{そう} 症候群
(polycystic-ovary syndrome, PCOS)

C. 生理について個人的な経験

1. 初潮（初めての生理）はいつでしたか。どんな経験でしたか。
2. あなたにとって生理はどのような経験ですか。普段、あなたは生理のときにどのように感じる人が多いですか。自分の月経周期を詳細に説明してください。
3. 全体的に生理のことはいいことだと思いますか。いやなことだと思いますか。好きですか。好きじゃないですか。なぜですか。
4. あなたの生理に関する経験の中で、一番大変・楽しくない・嫌なことは何ですか。一番楽しい・好ましいことは何ですか。
5. あなたの生理に関する経験の中で、印象された経験・思い出を詳細に説明してください。
6. 今、お母さん・ご家族と生理について話しますか。友達と？他の人？
7. 彼氏・パートナーいますか。いたことがありますか。付き合ったことがありますか。もし、いたら、生理について話しますか。話したことがありますか。もし、生理用品を買って頼みますか・買わせますか。
8. 生理の問題・悩みがあったら、お医者さんに行ったことがありますか。
9. 生理のときに、お風呂に入りますか。
10. 生理のときに、神社・お寺に行きますか・行ったことがありますか。
11. 生理のときに、学校・アルバイトをサボったことがありますか。
12. 生理のときに、なるべくしないようにすることがありますか。言い換えれば、遠慮する・控える・避けることがありますか。逆は？（生理はないとあまりしないけど、生理のときにすること）

D. 生理用品

1. どのような生理用品をよく使いますか。なぜですか。
2. タンポンを使ったことがありますか。なぜですか。
3. 月経カップを聞いたことがありますか。使ったことがありますか。
4. 布ナプキン聞いたことがありますか。使ったことがありますか。
5. パンティーライナーを使いますか。使ったことがありますか。
6. 生理ショーツ使いますか。使ったことがありますか。

7. フェミニンウォッシュなどのフェミニンゾーンケア用品を使いますか。使ったことがありますか。
8. 生理の時に、何かにおいが気になりますか。(自分のにおいか他人のにおいか)
9. 生理痛・頭痛^ずのために薬を飲みますか。どの薬ですか。
10. どこで生理用品を買いますか。
11. 何歳から自分で生理用品を買いはじめましたか。
12. レジ係は男性か女性かどちらの方が好みますか。若いかわくないか？
13. 毎月、生理用品をいくつ使いますか。毎日、いくつ使いますか。
14. 羽つきか羽なしかどちらの方が好みますか。香料か無香料かどちらの方がいいですか。
15. (自分が使う)生理用品について、何か変更したい・改善したいことがありますか。

E. メディア

1. (どのような)雑誌を読みますか。
2. (どのような)テレビを見ますか。
3. (どのような)ブログ・ウェブサイトを読みますか。YouTubeなどで動画を見ますか。
4. (どのような)生理用品の広告に目が留まりますか。
5. 生理用品の広告に気をつけますか。どのように新しい用品について身につけますか。どのように新しい用品を使ってみることを決めますか。
6. 自分の生理用品広告を作ったら、どのような広告を作りますか。

Interview Guide for Female University Students (English)

A. Personal history

1. Where is your hometown?
2. What year are you? What is your major?
3. Why did you choose to attend this university?
4. How old are you?
5. Do you work or have a part-time job? Have you in the past?
6. Do you have any siblings?
7. What kind of work do your parents do?
8. Do you have a dream job/career?
9. In the future, do you want to get married? Do you want a family?

10. Do you have any hobbies? What kind?
11. Are you interested/involved in domestic and/or international politics?

B. What you learned about menstruation

1. Can you please define/describe menstruation, as you understand it?
2. As a child, how did you first learn about menstruation? At that time, what were you taught and how were you told?
3. Did you learn anything about menstruation at school or from a teacher?
4. Did you learn anything about menstruation from your mother, sibling(s), or other family members?
5. When you were a child, did you and your friends ever talk about menstruation together?
6. When you were a child, did you ever read about menstruation in books or magazines?
7. When you were a child, did you ever see/hear something about menstruation in TV shows or movies?
8. If you had to explain menstruation to a girl who hasn't experienced it yet, how would you explain it?
9. Have you heard of PMS? PMDD? Endometriosis? PCOS?

C. Your personal experiences with menstruation

1. When did you get your first period? What kind of experience was it?
2. What kind of experience is menstruation for you? What kind of things do you typically feel during menstruation? Walk me through your typical menstrual cycle from beginning to end.
3. As a whole, do you think menstruation – for you personally – is a good thing or a bad thing? Do you like or dislike it? Why?
4. What is the most difficult/unenjoyable thing about your period? What is the most enjoyable part?
5. Can you share a memorable experience related to your period, or someone else's?
6. Now, do you ever talk with your mother, family members, or friends about menstruation?
7. Do you have a boyfriend or partner? Have you in the past? Have you dated someone before? If so, do you talk with them about menstruation, or have you in the past? Would you ever ask them to buy menstrual products for you?
8. Have you ever gone to the doctor for issues relating to menstruation?
9. Do you take a bath during your period?
10. Do you visit shrines/temples during your period, or have you in the past?
11. Have you ever skipped school or work during your period?
12. During your period, are there things you avoid doing (that you would normally do)? Conversely, are there things you do during your period that you don't normally do?

D. Menstrual products

1. What kind of menstrual products do you usually use? Why?
2. Have you ever used tampons? Why?
3. Have you heard of or use(d) a menstrual cup?
4. Have you heard of or use(d) cloth napkins?
5. Do you use or have you used panty liners?

6. Do you use or have you used menstrual shorts?
7. Do you use or have you used delicate/feminine zone care products like feminine wash or wipes?
8. Do you notice any particular smell during your period? Or when you're around others who are menstruating?
9. Do you take medicine for menstrual pain or headaches (caused by menstruation/PMS)? What kind?
10. Where do you buy menstrual products?
11. From what age did you start buying menstrual products yourself?
12. When you buy menstrual products, do you prefer a male or female cashier? Young or old? No preference?
13. Every month / menstrual cycle, how much/many menstrual products do you use? How many do you use in a day?
14. (If you use napkins) Do you prefer wings or no wings? Scented or unscented?
15. Is there something about (the) menstrual products (you use) that you would like to change/improve?

E. Media

1. Do you read magazines? What kind?
2. Do you watch TV? What kind of programs?
3. Do you read blogs or websites, or watch videos (like on YouTube)? What kind?
4. Do any menstrual product advertisements you've seen recently (or in your life) stand out to you? What do you remember about them? What do you like/dislike about them?
5. Do you pay attention to menstrual product ads? How do you find out about or decide to try new products?
6. If you could design your own menstrual product advertisement, what would it be like?

Interview Guide for Menstrual Product Companies (Japanese)

貴社につきまして:

1. 貴社は何年に創業されましたか。
2. 貴社の従業員を何人採用されますか。その従業員の年齢と性別の比率は何ですか。
3. 生理用品に関する従業員を何人採用されますか。その従業員の年齢と性別の比率は何ですか。
4. 財務報告書を発行されますか。
5. 生理用品に関する広告費、生産費、研究開発費などは如何程ですか。
6. 貴社の売上高・純利益・経費の中で生理用品に関する売上高・純利益・経費の比率は何ですか。

7. 貴社は日本衛生材料工業連合会の会員ですか。それなら、何年に会員になりましたか。どのように会員になりましたか。会員としてどのような責任・規制がありますか。どのような活動に協力されますか。

8. 生理用品メーカーとしての使命は何ですか。

9. 貴社の生理用品のブランドの名前はどのような意味がありますか。各用品の名前はどのような意味がありますか。

10. 貴社によると、「生理用品」の定義は何ですか。どのようなものが生理用品として認められていますか。例えば、生理用ショーツ（サニタリーショーツ）やパンティライナー（おりものシート）のようなものは「生理用品」ですか。

11. 貴社の将来・未来はどのように想像されますか。

12. 日本における生理用品の将来・未来はどのように想像されますか。

13. ホームページ以外、（貴社も含めて）日本の生理用品メーカーにつきましての英語に発行された資料・情報はほとんど存在しません。アメリカ・欧米に貴社、あるいは日本の生理用品につきましてのお伝えになりたいメッセージはありますか。

販売と製造につきまして:

1. 貴社は何年に生理用品の販売・製造が始まりましたか。

2. 販売・製造される生理用品の種類はいくつですか。現在製造・販売される生理用品は何年に発売されましたか。もう販売・製造されない生理用品の名前と販売・製造期間は何ですか。

3. 毎年、生理用品をいくつ製造されますか。

4. 毎年、生理用品をいくつ販売されますか。

5. 国内で貴社の生理用品をどの店で販売されますか。

6. 国内の工場はいくつありますか。どちらですか。各工場はどちらの生理用品を生産されますか。各工場は生理用品をいくつ生産されますか。

7. 貴社の生理用品はどのように製造されますか。どちらから素材を取得されますか。生理用品を漂白されますか。それなら、なぜですか。

8. 海外で貴社の生理用品を販売・製造されますか。どの国で販売・製造されますか。毎年、いくつ販売・製造されますか。

9. 生理用品のオンライン販売が増加していくと思いにありますか。

開発とデザインにつきまして:

1. どのように新しい生理用品を開発・設計されますか。時間・費用は如何程かかりますか。
2. 貴社の生理用品のサイズ（長さ・広さ・厚さ）と吸収できる量はどのように決定されますか。
3. どのように生理用品の香料を設計されますか。なぜ香料付けた用品を発売されますか。香料付けた用品はいつから販売されますか。
4. 貴社の生理用品のパッケージはどのように設計されますか。

消費者との関係につきまして:

1. お客様からのご意見などどのようにお受けになりますか。消費者とどのように対応されますか。
2. お客様の代表的なご意見・コメントは何ですか。
3. 貴社の生理用品に対して、お客様が重視される要求は何ですか。
4. 貴社の生理用品の消費者の対象年齢は何歳ですか。
5. （他社の用品に比較すれば、）貴社の生理用品のアピールは何ですか。
6. どのようにお客様を増加させるようにされますか。
7. なぜ日本の女性がタンポンよりナプキンが好むとお思いになりますか。／なぜ日本においてタンポンの需要が低いとお思いになりますか。

広告につきまして:

1. どのように広告を設計されますか。社外の広告会社を利用されますか。それなら、どちらの会社ですか。
2. どのテレビ局、どの雑誌で広告を掲載されますか。広告としてほかの媒体を利用されますか。
3. どのようにホームページを設計・整備されますか。

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