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Period warriors on Instagram

POPULAR FEMINISM, DIGITAL ACTIVISM & PERIOD POVERTY

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Abstract

Period poverty is a global issue that impacts women's health, education and dignity. Charity and activist organizations fight period poverty through legislation and by providing free products to women in need. This research focuses specifically on Instagram feminism and how it is influenced by popular feminist sentiments like individualism and consumerism, but also intersectionality. The main research question is: how does popular feminism guide period poverty activism on Instagram in aesthetic and the goals the movement tries to reach? I analyzed the 50 most liked posts tagged with #periodpoverty and a discursive interface analysis of the activist organization PERIODs Instagram. I found that popular feminism and Instagram help reach goals like sharing information and raising awareness but also that it helps an organization like PERIOD with making changes on a governmental level. PERIODs other goal, getting rid of the stigma around periods, is hindered by popular feminism's and social media's media-friendly sentiment which was found in the aesthetic of the posts. The stigma around feminism not being intersectional gets challenged however, by sharing images of women of different ethnicities, body types and sexualities. Nonetheless, I argue that the focus on consumerism and charity work counteract this. It creates a divide between the people buying merchandise and the people receiving donations. It counteracts the notion that period poverty, as a whole, is a global issue.

Introduction

Periods are not a luxury, but this sadly is not the case when menstrual products are highly taxed. This is known as the "tampon tax" (Crawford & Waldman, 2019). In the past two years many countries have lifted the tampon tax, a taxation in the highest scale usually categorized as luxury products, in order to make menstrual products more easily available. Many European countries, India, Australia and Malaysia for example (Rodriquez, 2018) have changed their policy. And in 2019 a bill was passed in Scotland to provide free menstrual products for all girls and women as of January 2020 (Yeginsu, 2020). But the tampon tax is still in effect in the U.S. for example. But there are activist organizations that try and lift these taxes and end period poverty.

Period poverty encompasses the lack of access to sanitary products, menstrual hygiene education and clean spaces to dispose of sanitary products (Sanchez & Rodriquez, 2019). There are three main areas where girls and women are impacted by period poverty, according to the charity organization 'compassion' (Mwinemwesigwa, 2019). Firstly, girls are impacted in their education because girls choose to stay at home when on their period if they cannot afford menstrual products. This can result in lower grades or even having to drop out of school. Secondly, women's health is

impacted when there is no access to clean water or even clean toilets. Lastly, menstruation is a taboo subject in many countries and this affects girls' self-esteem and their sense of dignity.

Activist organizations like PERIOD try and end period poverty. They call themselves the leader in the menstrual movement on their website and their most followed social media platform is Instagram. PERIOD was founded in 2014 by Nadya Okamoto who was 16 at the time (Janfaza, 2019). They started out as a movement that inspired and informed young girls on the topic of period poverty, in the United States primarily. In 2019 Nadya realized that there were changes to be made, because she feared that if PERIOD would disappear everything would go back to what it was. She organized the first national period day on October 19th in 2019 and started a large campaign to get all American states to drop the tampon tax. "Our end goal is making systemic change and changing policy" (Janfaza, 2019).

A newer tactic for feminist activists to try and achieve change is by using social media. This type of activism is an effective way to reach people worldwide and spread the collective identity of "feminist" (Gheyntanchi & Moghadam 2014) as well as spreading information and mobilize protests (Newsom & Lengel, 2012). Social media activism was used in India to protest against the tampon tax by spreading the hashtag #DontTaxMyPeriod (Fadnis, 2017). This is called "hashtag activism" which in academic research is mostly focused on the social media platform Twitter (Boling, 2019; Fadnis, 2017). But hashtags are also a big part of the platform Instagram. It is a newer social media platform and more upcoming in academic research as a research subject.

Using social media for feminist activism is a tactic best suited to the definition of popular feminism by Sarah Banet-Weiser. Popular feminism is a term that suggests that feminism is not a lens to look at popular culture, but that it has become popular culture itself (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017). Social media are similar in that they are a tool to spread popular culture, but the platforms are popular culture by themselves as well. Popular feminism needs digital media affordances for addressing feminist issues (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg, 2020). The feminist issues that get addressed within popular feminism are predominantly regarding the female body, for example the #freethenipple movement (Matich, Ashman & Parsons, 2019). In this movement Instagram was important because women shared topless photographs to feel empowered, but had to deal with removal on Instagram because it wasn't allowed according to their community guidelines (Faust, 2017). Periods are also part of the female body and according to the article by Faust, women also shared images of that on Instagram.

In this research I want discuss popular feminism and how it guides the period poverty movement. I want to see how the goal of changing policy, that PERIOD's Nadya Okamoto mentions, is hindered or helped by popular feminist sentiments. I also want to incorporate Instagram in this and primarily the aesthetic of the period poverty movement that is created on Instagram and how that

relates to popular feminism. I want to know: How does popular feminism guide period poverty activism on Instagram in aesthetic and the goals the movement tries to reach?

I will first expand on the different feminist terms like post-feminism and how this eventually led to the choice to use popular feminism. I will then go into more detail on feminist social media activism and hashtag activism, primarily focusing on the goals of feminist activism that it helps or could help to achieve. The last part of my theoretical framework will explore discursive interface analysis by Mel Stanfill (2017) and how affordances of Instagram are used for feminist activism.

My analysis consists of two parts. Firstly, an analysis of the 50 most liked posts on Instagram that were posted with #periodpoverty. I used the Instagram themes by Cornet et al. (2017) to see which popular feminist sentiments are most prominent in the posts. Additionally, I analyzed the aesthetic of the images and how intersectionality and globality is shown in the popular posts. For the second part of the analysis I used the discursive interface analysis by Mel Stanfill (2017) to analyze PERIOD's Instagram page and analyze the affordances Instagram provides and how the activist movement interacts with that. The Instagram's affordances help with analyzing the obstacles and benefits of using Instagram for feminist activism.

This research adds to the knowledge of period poverty, Instagram activism and also the relation between popular feminism and activism. Feminism is becoming more intersectional, but is still critiqued for its Western-centric view (Gill, 2017). I expected with Instagram being a globally used platform and PERIOD describing themselves as a global movement that the results would reflect different countries and would show that period poverty actually is a global issue. The intersectionality of the period poverty movement is reflected in both the aesthetics as well as the goals of the movement.

Theoretical framework

Post-feminism & Neoliberalism

Post-feminism was introduced in the 1990's to make sense of the celebration of female empowerment in society, with terms like "Girl Power", even though inequality in society persisted (Gill, 2020). Rosalind Gill argues that the notion of post-feminism needs a reevaluation as the visibility of feminism has grown in recent years (2017, p. 611). This is necessary in her opinion because other feminist scholars say that "post-feminism might be redundant in light of fourth-wave social media-based feminist activism" (2016, p. 613). She proposes post post-feminism (2016), but a more differentiated term, like popular feminism, might be better for this reevaluation.

The biggest difference between post-feminism and later terms like popular feminism is intersectionality. Post-feminism is seen as something for “white, western, middle-class, heterosexual young women” (Gill, 2017, p. 612) and Gill suggests that a more intersectional understanding of feminism is needed (2016). Within popular feminism or “fourth-wave feminism”, perspectives of the “women affected and those who are already challenging gender inequality” are taken into consideration (Matich, Ashman & Parsons, 2019, p. 356). This is a more contemporary view on feminism and adds to the conversation of activism as well.

Aune and Holyoak go as far as to say that post-feminism, as a term, should be uncoupled of feminist activism. Instead of fourth-wave they prefer the term “third-wave feminism” (2018, p. 184). They include the second-wave in their discussion and conclude that defining feminism in waves is difficult because the waves blend into each other and try and achieve similar goals (2018). This makes the use of waves to define the feminism that we see today more difficult than using a differentiated term like popular feminism.

What post-feminism, third- & fourth-wave feminism, and popular feminism have in common is a focus on individualism (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017; Gill, 2017; Aune & Holyoak, 2018) and empowerment (McRobbie, 2008; Matich, Ashman & Parsons, 2019; Gill, 2020; Kanai, 2020). This is partly because all these feminist sensibilities emphasize the influence of the neoliberalist society and its consumer culture (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017).

Neoliberalism is characterized by “individual choice, empowerment, freedom, self-esteem and personal responsibility” (Baer, 2016, p. 20). It seems to suggest that feminism is so second-nature that it is almost redundant. Neoliberalist feminism or corporate feminism promote these terms like empowerment as “the solution to gender injustice” (Gill, 2016, p. 617).

Empowerment or “Girl Power” in particular is not only a solution but also used for commercial purposes (McRobbie, 2008) and according to Banet-Weiser focusses on “consumer power” (2020, p. 9). This consumer culture is seen in the selling of T-shirts (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017; Matich, Ashman & Parsons, 2019) and the use of technology (Kaun & Uldam, 2018). Popular feminism needs a “neoliberal capitalist context” according to Banet-Weiser (2020, p. 12) and social media platforms like Instagram are part of this neoliberal consumer culture (Matich, Ashman & Parsons, 2019).

Popular feminism & Digital Media

Popular feminism is a term that emphasizes feminism not just as a lens to understand popular culture, but feminism as popular culture (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017). This type of feminism is characterized by a recognition of inequality, but not wanting to disrupt the “political

economic conditions that make that inequality profitable” (2017, p. 886). This is in line with the emphasize on individualism and entrepreneurialism in this neoliberal society (Banet-Weiser, 2020). Furthermore, popular feminism focusses on agency and empowerment (Kanai, 2020) and the solution to inequality is proposed to be visibility.

The current belief of (popular) feminists is that they have “digital agency and autonomy through which they can enact vital social change” (Matich, Ashman & Parsons, 2019, p. 345). This is dependent on the belief that visibility is the answer, “as if seeing feminism is the same as changing patriarchal structures” (Banet-Weiser, 2020, p. 9). And this perceived agency is constrained by digital media. The content, and therefor feminist expressions that are visible, are conditioned and the focus of social media platforms on likes and followers also influence the visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2020, p. 12). This results in “bite-sized, often de-contextualized, chunks of information and images” (Matich, Ashman & Parsons, 2019, p. 345). However, these seemingly disconnected messages can become a “networked narrative” (Smith, Krishna & Al-Sinan, 2019, p. 185).

Individualism is important for popular feminism in digital media as well. Kanai says that the practice of self-education on social media is feminist, but this isn’t recognized as such because it is taken for granted by women (2020). After having educated themselves, women need to share the information in order to raise awareness, Kanai calls this platforming (2020, p. 41).

Entrepreneurialism is visible in the merchandise that gets sold, promoting feminism and often raising money for charity (Hemmings, 2018). Digital media help with launching businesses (Banet-Weiser, 2020) and therefor also assist in the selling of t-shirts or books, but this, again, doesn’t protect women (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017).

Empowerment is an important term within feminism overall. When looking at the types of empowerment that are promoted, they mostly regard the female body. Free the nipple (Matich, Ashman & Parsons, 2019), body hair, and also menstruation (Faust, 2017). But where women display their empowerment with topless photos showing of their stretchmarks, sharing pictures with visible menstrual blood is frowned upon. In 2018 influencer Grace Victory posted an image of herself on her bed with period blood on her sheets and underwear. This resulted in a big loss of followers, mostly women, who thought this was inappropriate or disgusting (Harvey-Jenner, 2018). This shows that this type of empowerment of the body might not translate to the period poverty movement.

Popular feminism is mostly “media-friendly” and accessible to a broad public (Banet-Weiser, 2020, p. 9). Polarizing images like Grace Victory’s post don’t suit this media-friendly image. Social media are widely used and available to this broad public, which would make it a useful for feminist activism. Linabary, Corple and Cooky (2019) elaborate on three ways digital media help feminist activism. Firstly, it gives voice to women to share their personal stories. Secondly, social media are multivocal because it is global and the barrier to participate is low, this makes the conversation

include people from all over the world. Lastly it is a way to make a collective visible because the ability to share a tweet and Instagram post. Individualism and visibility are a big part of these three uses of digital media. What is still questioned is the ability to create policy changes (Fadnis, 2017) and if you go by Banet-Weiser's definition of popular feminism this is not the aim. There seems to be a discrepancy between the aim of activism to create change and not wanting to disrupt those socio-economic conditions in favor of popular feminism. Eventually this can have the opposite effect, by not disrupting structures these structures gain strength. By promoting brands, selling merchandise and focusing on the entrepreneurial opportunities of activism, women are strengthening neoliberal capitalism and the consumer culture. This is counterproductive to the actual goal of changing society.

Social media activism

Social media are the most important digital tool for digital activism. Social media have "transformed the organization and communication of protests" (Poell & Van Dijck, 2018, p. 546). Poell and Van Dijck explain this with the term "connective action" with which they mean that large crowds can act together through social media without a prominent leader (2018, p. 547). This makes digital activism a much cheaper and quicker form of protest than for example a protest march. Baer (2016) says however that an interplay of online and offline is crucial for a successful protest. A disadvantage of social media activism is that people might not want to participate outside the online protest, because the online only requires "micro-donations of time and effort" (Poell & Van Dijck, 2018, p. 547).

Smith, Krishna and Al-Sinan use the term "Slacktivism" for this disadvantage. "Slacktivism is a lazy form of activism whereby individuals limit their participation to social media rather than onsite involvement" (2019, p. 182). They critique this term because they think that "social media can empower would-be protesters" (2019, p. 183). They argue that engagement with a protest, both off- and online, is connected to empowerment. The possibility to gain information, share and raise awareness (Fadnis, 2017; Poell & Van Dijck, 2018; Boling, 2019; Clark-Parsons, 2019; Smith, Krishna & Al-Sinan, 2019) and feeling part of a collective (Baer, 2016; Poel & Van Dijck, 2018; Smith, Krishna, Al-Sinan, 2019) result in engagement with activism and feeling empowered.

Social media are used to organize connective action with the aim of creating political and/or social change. Kaun and Uldam point out that "Digital activism is conditioned by political, economic and societal norms" (2018, p. 2101) which influences the types of change that can be made. We established that feminism is also influenced by these societal norms, for example neoliberalism. These norms would then also influence feminist digital activism and the types of causes that get the most attention.

Hashtag feminism changing society

The most popular way to start a protest movement on social media is by using hashtags. The term “hashtag feminism” (Fadnis, 2017; Clark-Parsons, 2019; Matich, Ashman & Parsons, 2019, Banet-Weiser, 2020) has been implemented in the academic debate as the contemporary tactic for feminist activism. Hashtag activism entails: “supporting a cause online by “liking”, tweeting or posting to a social media site using a specific hashtag” (Boling, 2019, p. 3). And social media are, according to Banet-Weiser, the most visible platform for popular feminism (2020) which makes hashtag-use important for feminist activism.

There are a few factors that make hashtags so popular for activism. Clark-Parsons mentions virality and visibility (2019). Earlier I discussed the importance of visibility for popular feminism and this is linked to the virality of a hashtag. Social media platforms support virality (Poell & Van Dijck, 2018), because it results in more attention and use, which means that a protest movement can spread globally and quickly. However, the virality of a hashtag is often short-lived (Clark-Parsons, 2019) and a movement can dismantle as quickly as it has gained attention (Poell & Van Dijck, 2018).

The use of hashtags for activism influences the goals that an activist movement can reach. Clark-Parsons gives two examples of these goals using the example of the ‘me too’ movement. The movement changed perceptions of sexual abuse and raised awareness of the magnitude of the issue (2019). Raising awareness of an issue is mentioned as one of the goals of feminist digital activism (Fadnis, 2017; Clark-Parsons, 2019). Closely linked to that is sharing information (Ahuja, Patel & Suh, 2018; Poell & van Dijck, 2018; Matich, Ashman & Parsons, 2019; Smith, Krishna & Al-Sinan, 2019). Other goals of digital activism can be the breaking of taboos (Fadnis, 2017; Faust, 2017), providing a platform or network to share experiences (Baer, 2016; Ahuja, Patel & Suh, 2018; Boling, 2019) and organizing real-life protests and events (Baer, 2016; Cornet et al., 2017; Poell & van Dijck, 2018; Smith, Krishna & Al-Sinan, 2019). Lastly a goal that is questioned for how achievable it is through social media, policy change. Digital activism often doesn’t result in policy changes immediately (Fadnis, 2017) and to thank policy changes to solely digital activism is a bit precarious.

These goals are led by the type of activism a social media platform allows for, which is dependent on the affordances a platform has. The use of hashtags is an easy way to gain visibility on the platform, which makes it a popular strategy for activism. For this research it is valuable to look at the other affordances Instagram has that influence the goals these feminist activist groups aim for. How these affordances benefit certain goals, making them the forefront of a digital activist movement.

Social media affordances & Discursive Interface Analysis

Social media platforms have many affordances that contribute to digital activism and the previously mentioned goals. What all of these affordances are is confusing because different authors use different terms for similar affordances. Harindranath, Bernroider and Kamel (2015) make a divide between social and content affordances. Social affordances in their context contribute to building a network and content affordances to the goal of information sharing. Khazraee and Novak mention multiple authors with different affordance terms like: visibility, scalability, replicability, editability etc. (2018). These could possibly be placed in the two main categories of social and content affordances. What is missing from all of this are the underlying norms within a platform that shape these affordances. All the things a platform provides its users is not necessarily all going to be used for activism. There are underlying trends and cultural norms that help shape these choices. Mel Stanfill provides a method for analyzing digital media affordances in this context, discursive interface analysis (2017).

This form of analyzation “Interprets websites’ embedded assumptions about their own purpose and appropriate use” (Stanfill, 2017, p. 1062). The aim is to find the embedded norms within an interface or platform by examining “the path of least resistance (p. 1060). She divides the affordances in three categories: functional, cognitive and sensory. Functional affordances provide what you can do with the interface, the affordances make only some use easy and normative and other uses harder. Cognitive affordances are part of meaning making, for example the names of features. These affordances let the user know what they can do with a feature. Lastly, sensory affordances are part of the aesthetics of an interface. How something is designed and what is most visible on the platform has underlying assumptions of who and what it is for. Mel Stanfill applies these terms to websites which is different from Instagram in the number of actors involved. An activist groups website has two actors: the activist group and the users of the website. The social media company is a third actor when we analyze an Instagram activist page. Instagram as a company has norms for their platform as well as the activist group who create their account and the followers of the account. The interplay of these three actors can show the “cultural boundedness of digital activism” (Kaun & Uldam, 2018, p. 2104). In the context of my research this cultural boundedness is popular feminism.

Discursive interface analysis & Instagram activism

Cornet et al. (2017) analyzed Instagram activist imagery and discovered five themes that were commonly used. The first theme is onsite photographs of rallies, marches or other real-life events. Second, infographics that are informative and made by non-governmental organizations. The third

theme is user-created art often to express a personal opinion on the issue. The fourth theme consists of commercial images used for advertisement or businesses showing their support for the issue. Lastly there is repurposed media which consists of all other media originally posted to a different platform. This can be memes, quotes, tweets or full newspaper articles.

Popular feminism and feminist activist goals are visible in these themes. Firstly, the goal of information sharing, through the theme of infographics. Secondly an element of consumer culture is present in the commercial images theme and lastly the interplay between online and offline with a theme dedicated to onsite events. These themes also suit different parts of the interface analysis. Functional affordances are visible in the repurposed media as Instagram allows for sharing from other social media platforms, but this can also show shortcomings of Instagram that other platforms do allow for. Cognitive affordances consist of the Instagram pages being used for activism in the first place and how advertisements and community building are possible. Sensory affordances consist mostly of the user-created art theme because this theme focusses on aesthetic. But aesthetic is all over an Instagram account because the main purpose of the platform is photo sharing.

Methodology

#periodpoverty Instagram post analysis

The first part of my analysis is of 50 Instagram posts that were posted with #periodpoverty. The posts were scraped using the InstaCrawlR tool by Jonas Schröder who is a data-driven marketing researcher at the University of Mannheim. It is an open source tool that can be used in R to scrape Instagram posts with a specific hashtag, without the Instagram API regulations. I managed to scrape 34.000 posts and for the analysis selected the 50 most liked posts out of that list.

I selected the posts based on a hashtag, because they are such a big part of digital activism. Because I want to say how period poverty is addressed on Instagram and not periods in general, I chose #periodpoverty. With the 50 most liked posts I will get an overview of what is popular on Instagram when it comes to period poverty posts. A like is the most used way to show support for a post, partially because it is such a low effort way to participate in digital activism. Popular feminism focusses on being visible to a general audience and a low effort way of participating suits a broader audience.

I focused the analysis on the Instagram image and the description. If suited, I sorted each image in one of the Instagram themes by Cornet et al. (2017). The research by Cornet et al (2017) provides which images suit a different theme and I could, based on the description, also see if the posts suited the popular feminist sentiments and activist goals. For example, if a description had the

word advertisement in it, it suited the commercial image theme and the consumer culture sentiment.

This part of the analysis provides an overview of what is most popular on Instagram regarding period poverty. The top 50 posts were posted between September 2018 and March 2020, with most of them posted in 2020. This suggests that the problem of period poverty has become more well-known this year and gets more (social) media attention. As well as analyzing the activist goals and how they relate to popular feminist sentiment, I analyzed the aesthetic of the movement. One part of that aesthetic is in the art theme of Cornet et al. (2017) and how there are trends in what is depicted in these art images. The other part is intersectionality and the diversity that is visible in the images. As intersectionality is becoming more and more part of feminism, I want to analyze how diverse the most popular posts. This in order to discuss the intersectional progression in popular feminism and how that suits the goal of ending period poverty.

PERIOD movement & Discursive Interface Analysis

In the second part of my analysis I will discuss the non-profit, digital organization PERIOD. According to their Instagram page they are a global and youth-powered organization situated in the U.S. Although their own posts did not make it in the top 50 list, the founder and her organization did appear three times in posts from other accounts. It also appears to be the most well-known organization fighting period poverty as they have 70.000 followers and a verified account. Other activist pages focusing on period poverty do not have as many followers or even a verified account. Examples of other activist groups are: Bloody Good Period, Preventing Period Poverty and the Pad Project.

Being verified is one affordance Instagram has that can help with the goals of a digital activist movement. For this part of the research I want to look into these affordances with the help of Mel Stanfill's discursive interface analysis. Her analysis is based on how the platform makes affordances with a certain purpose and how it suggests a preferred use. I primarily want to analyze how an organization like PERIOD interacts with these affordances and how they create their preferred use in order to reach their activist goals. Mel Stanfill said herself that "how it should be used may not match actual site visitors" (2015, p. 1061). I want to know how the affordances are used in the context of a feminist digital activist movement and how this relates to popular feminism.

Eventually the main concept I want to connect the results of both analyses to is popular feminism. I will connect the sentiments I discussed in the theoretical section on popular feminism to the results. So, consumerism, entrepreneurialism, individuality, empowerment and media-friendliness are all analyzed in how prevalent they are in the aesthetic of the images and how a

movement like PERIOD try to achieve their goals.

Results

Consumer culture & entrepreneurialism

When analyzing the most liked Instagram images I noticed how present consumer culture is. These images fall under the category 'commercial images' by Cornet et al (2017). Using their definition, commercial images are "advertisements and symbols of support by businesses (2017, p. 2477). Nine of the images suited this description with most of them being a partnership with a menstrual product brand or posts by these brands. There are two different ways menstrual product brands are involved in period poverty activism.

The first way brands are involved in period poverty activism is by involving influencers to promote their brand and products. Companies make it part of activism by providing a donation to charity, but make sure that people are still purchasing their products. For example, a menstrual product brand selling sustainable menstrual cups provide one free cup to someone in need for every cup they sell. Popular feminism needs a neoliberal capitalist context (Banet-Weiser, 2020), so raising money for a charity, provided that people buy products from the brand that makes the donation, is not a surprising tactic.

The second way brands are involved is through more traditional feminist activist tactics. By raising awareness of news stories regarding period poverty and by trying to make the topic more visible. This was mostly seen with smaller menstrual product brands. These brands might not have the funds to pay influencers for promotion, or don't want to, but show their support for the cause on their own account. Both these tactics show support for the period poverty movement, but the price of menstrual products is decided by the same companies that make donations. This is the first instance where I saw popular feminism. The first approach focuses on consumerism and doesn't try to change the capitalist context that period poverty happens in. The second approach, although seemingly better, doesn't change anything either within their company other than showing support. The structures that these companies function in are not being challenged when activists or influencers are paid to share that these companies are part of the movement.

This notion that companies don't challenge capitalist structures is one shared by Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer. They state that although inequality is often recognized, the political or economic conditions that result in this inequality are not disrupted (2017, p. 886). The inequality that gets recognized is of women in non-Western countries not being able to afford period products and needing donations. Raising money or providing free products to women who cannot access or afford

it is something good, but it doesn't change policy or societal taboos around menstruation in the countries that need it. The countries that need it are not only the countries that get these donations. The tampon tax doesn't withhold most women in Western countries from accessing it, but it is a structural law that makes it unfairly expensive for all women. Challenging these structural changes does not seem to line up with the companies, because it doesn't help them with selling more products. The consumer culture that popular feminism exists won't go away if the aim is still to sell something before contributing to the movement.

Commercial images are not only advertisements by or from companies, individuals also show commercialization through entrepreneurialism. The images that would fall into this category are, mostly of women, who promote their own businesses, published books or charity organization that all have to do with the period poverty movement. Digital media have afforded spaces for popular feminists to launch businesses (Banet-Weiser, 2020). The value of Instagram for entrepreneurialism is reflected by these women having some of the most liked posts.

One of these entrepreneurial women I would like to highlight is Nadya Okamoto. Her personal Instagram account does not appear in the list but she and her activist organization 'PERIOD' are mentioned in three posts. One of them is posted by Janet Mbugua (image 1), who appears four times in the most liked list. The post is a picture of her and Nadya and it highlights how important entrepreneurialism is by mentioning all Nadya's accomplishments: "author, activist, award winner and aspiring politician". It also highlights how remarkably young she is to do all of this "... and she is just 21". Nadya is also mentioned in a post by the Instagram page I Weigh (image 2), founded by actress and activist Jameela Jamil. This post is about the national period day she started and quotes Nadya in mentioning that she started period movement when she was 16 and that she couldn't have come so far without all the "young #periodwarriors". This focus on being young and accomplished is a form of aspirational feminism and sets an example for young girls on Instagram. Alison Hearn (2017) sees the use of social media in this entrepreneurial way as means to speculate on how someone should be and how they should present themselves. Young girls who want to be activists for the period poverty cause are forced to think about their role and identity when comparing themselves to Nadya Okamoto. They will make predictions about their future potential "optimization" (Hearn, 2017, p. 74). Instagram is a platform, mostly, used by young women who are the present and future of a period poverty movement. As much as being inspired by all these accomplished women, and feeling motivated to start a national period day in their own country, they can also feel disheartened by the standard that is set for them.



Image 1: Janet Mbugua & Nadya Okamoto



Image 2: Nadya Okamoto on national period day

What I did see in the entrepreneurial images, that I didn't see in the ones by companies, is this attention to structural changes. We can see this for example in the third post that mentions Nadya Okamoto, mostly her organization. Activist Whitney Bell writes in her description about the national period day organized by PERIOD. She starts her post with: "Periods are hard enough even when you have every privilege". She acknowledges in this post that she has a lot of privilege in how she can handle, and is able to treat, her periods. She recognized that many women don't have this privilege. She doesn't mean women in other countries with this, but women in her own country, the US. She encourages her followers to contact their local politicians in order to get free products in all schools, shelters and prisons. This is a beginning of a structural change in a country that wouldn't receive donations by menstrual product brands because the U.S. is not a developing country.

This section highlighted the importance of consumer culture and entrepreneurialism for popular feminist activism. It also showed that there is a friction between donations to charity in favor of menstrual brands' reputation, and the entrepreneurial women in activist organizations who do want to change the structures that companies rely on.

Changes & Onsite involvement

In this next section I will further discuss what actually needs to be changed and how it is done, according to the most liked posts. A theme that suits this is 'onsite involvement' which display events like rallies or protests (Cornet et al., 2017). There are a few different examples of onsite involvement and they each serve a different purpose in reaching the goals of feminist digital activism.

The first goal I want to discuss is policy change. In their discussion of the #freethenipple movement, Matich, Ashman and Parsons question the structural effects of digital feminist activism (2019). They argue that these macro-level changes are dependent on changing attitudes towards a woman's body. They suggest that in the online space there might not be an audience receptive to a message that goes against their beliefs, making social media not the best way to achieve structural changes. Period poverty, similarly to 'free the nipple', is an issue to do with women's bodies. The goal for feminist digital activism should then be to formulate their message in such a way that they reach a large audience, as well as convince them of the need for policy change.

One example of policy change that got a lot of attention is Scotland passing a bill on February 25th that ensures free menstrual products for all citizens (Yeginsu, 2020). Nine posts appeared in the list that discussed this, most of them in English but also other languages like Italian or French. How the period poverty movement online has contributed to this change cannot be answered with this example, but these posts are getting a lot of engagement on Instagram. This makes not only the issue, but also the solution visible. An example like this might inspire people to advocate for policy changes in their own country. These posts about Scotland only report the news itself, not the process of getting there. A good example of onsite involvement that shows the process of getting there itself is the national period day. It shows how digital activism can go into the offline space by organizing an event and gaining visibility and popularity outside of Instagram as well.

I want to conclude this section with one post by the Guardian's Instagram on online activism and its direct results. In 2017 the #freeperiods movement was set up by Amika George in the U.K. She urged the government to provide free menstrual products in schools so that girls wouldn't have to skip school days when on their period. The post ends with saying that "her hard work paid off" and that in April 2019 the bill was passed to provide free products in all schools in England as of 2020. This is an excellent example of online activism resulting over time in governmental changes. These examples show that policy change can be achieved through digital media, but organizing offline events helps the movement gain even more attention and visibility. There are steps that come before policy change that digital media lend itself perfectly for. These steps are also goals of feminist digital activism that I will discuss in the next section.

Information, Awareness & Taboos

In this section I want to discuss two other goals of digital feminist activism, raising awareness and sharing information. These two goals suit the notion that popular feminism should be visible in order to change society and Fadnis adds to this that digital platforms transformed the way feminist activism makes gender oppression visible (2017, p. 1112).

A surface-level way of becoming visible on Instagram is by using many different hashtags in one post. The posts in the most liked list are not only tagged with #periodpoverty but often times a whole list of hashtags, making them easy to find with a lot of different searches. The virality of hashtags is short-lived (Clark-Parsons, 2019), so these posts need more than that to spread their message and steer away from only being visible. I found that some of these posts didn't rely on the virality of a hashtag but the virality of a news story or personal experience.

The distinction between sharing information and raising awareness can be vague but what I found in the posts is a distinction between factual information and personal stories. The factual information, for example the approximate costs of having your period throughout a lifetime, fall into the category of infographics by Cornet et al. (2017). These are informative posts made by non-governmental organizations and are part of information sharing. The use of personal stories is to express opinions as well as sharing the information. One example that is posted multiple times is about a 14-year-old girl from Kenya. She got her period in school and her teacher shamed her so much for it that she committed suicide later that day. By posting this story, the activists don't just want to share that it happened but raise awareness about the severity of menstruation as a taboo subject. "Period shaming is a thing" begins the post by the account 'feministwarrior_'. As I said, these posts don't rely on the virality of a hashtag but the virality of a news story.

This particular story raises another issue that is part of period poverty and doesn't have to do with the costs of menstrual products. The dignity of girls and women is affected by menstruation being a taboo subject (Mwinemwesigwa, 2019). The goal of making menstrual products more available in countries and lifting the tampon tax has been discussed extensively up until now but breaking the stigma around periods is something that appears in the most liked posts as well. The sign behind Nadya Okamoto on the national period day (image 2) says it all: "end period poverty & period stigma". The tactics for trying to break a stigma are different from wanting governmental change. One tactic is raising awareness of the consequences the stigma has, like the story of the Kenyan girl. One post that shared a video of an Indian activist, Parineeti Chopra, says that awareness is the first step towards destigmatization.

Another way that can help break a stigma is through illustrations and photography art of menstrual products and blood (image 3 & 4). These images seem to try and destigmatize menstrual products as something dirty to something beautiful by replacing blood with glitter. It is difficult to say if this actually destigmatizes periods. What I mostly see looking at these art images is a conscience decision to make these images media friendly. As I discussed previously, a good tactic for digital feminist activism would be to reach a large audience. One way to do this is by staying within a media-friendly environment and steer away from controversy.



Image 3: post by artist @avvocathy



Image 4: post by @freeda

In contrast, other Instagram creators post more explicit images. Rupri Kaur posts images of her blood-stained underwear (Faust, 2017) as well as the influencer Grace Victory. These women deal with removal of their images and comments from people who don't think it is appropriate to post. When images are constantly removed, the issue these women try to address gets less visibility. How empowered they might feel when posting, the removal by Instagram or bad response from their audience takes that empowerment away. Visibility is such a big factor for popular feminism and keeping your images media friendly helps with that. Compromises need to be made to achieve visibility, in this case maybe the feeling of empowerment over your body when on your period.

The most liked art images are part of a process of finding a middle ground between media-friendly imagery that is appealing to a large audience and breaking a stigma around periods and period products. I will discuss this more in the second half the analysis in the section on sensory affordances. My conclusion for this part of the analysis is that however admirable menstrual brands or period art seem in the most liked list, they still operate within the consumerist and media friendly structures of popular feminism. However, the entrepreneurial images as well as the images showing onsite involvement and policy change do show that Instagram can be used to express the need for

structural changes. In the second part of the analysis I will discuss how the organization PERIOD uses Instagram to achieve this.

PERIOD's goals

In this part of the analysis I will discuss the Instagram account of the activist organization PERIOD. The Instagram description (bio) of PERIOD says that they are fighting to end period poverty and period stigma, these are their main goals. After that, they mention how they want to achieve that through service, education and advocacy. On their website they explain what they mean with these three 'pillars' as they call them. Service means providing menstrual products to people in need in the U.S. With education they have two programs: learning people who are interested how to get involved as a period activist and which facts they should know. The other program is a tutorial on sustainability and menstruation. Lastly for advocacy they aim to achieve systematic change through policy and legislation, the tampon tax is addressed to governments in order to change them.

There are some interesting observations to make when focusing on popular feminism within these pillars. The pillar of service is quite straightforward so there is not much more to say than that it is an easy way to contribute to the movement and create a community. The education pillar is interesting as it seems to focus on individuality mostly. They aim to educate individual people to make more sustainable choices and to have the facts ready to participate in the activist movement. Individuality is one of the main characteristics of popular feminism, so it is not surprising that the organization tries to tackle education on an individual level, or micro-level, first. The goal of advocacy on the other hand does focus on macro-level changes on policy level. Having it as one of the three pillars shows how important it is to end period poverty. It at least shows how important PERIOD thinks it is, regardless of how much they are able to achieve on this governmental level.

For this part of the analysis I am going to discuss the different affordances of Instagram using the discursive interface analysis by Mel Stanfill. I want to discuss how these affordances are used to achieve the goals PERIOD has and how their tactics suit popular feminism or not.

Functional affordances: visibility & individuality

PERIOD's Instagram account @periodmovement is a verified account. To verify means confirming the authenticity of someone or something (Hearn, 2017). The function ensures users that this is the official account of the non-profit organization and a bonus affordance is that the account will get recommended more often and show up in searches more. This affordance is functional for activist groups as it makes their account more visible on the platform. The value of being verified lies mostly in its exclusivity. "Don't ask for it, we will give it to you when we decide you deserve it" (Hearn, 2017,

p. 68). So being verified is a confirmation that your account is authentic, and simultaneously a way for tech companies to regulate their platform. They can make visible what they feel fits the norms of Instagram. Visibility guides users on the platform by focusing on likes and followers (Banet-Weiser, 2020). PERIOD has 70.000 followers, but not nearly as many likes. Otherwise their own posts would have appeared a lot in the first part of the analysis.

Likes and comments are a way to see the engagement with a post and more generally with the organization's goals. According to Smith, Krishna and Al-Sinan, both empowerment and participation are connected to engagement with digital activism (2019). Participation is seen in the sharing of information and connecting and organizing events. This is very prevalent on the Instagram page of PERIOD. They share pictures of events organized by themselves or others to support the movement and most of the other posts are infographics with information on the developments of the period movement. Empowerment is achieved through creating a collective and by having people distribute the information given. But creating a collective seems to conflict with the popular feminist notion of individuality.

I haven't discussed individualism in the first half of the analysis, but it does play a role in entrepreneurialism. The images that displayed some form of entrepreneurialism were all individuals. Even though a movement is about displaying yourself as a group, these examples showed all these individual women trying to contribute to this larger issue. Nadya Okamoto is an example of such an individual, but she does try to create a movement through social media. In the most liked images, I could see that Instagram focuses on the individual, as these individuals get more likes than activist groups. PERIOD tries to create a collective in a space where they have to try and bring all these individual people from across the world together.

Creating a collective is difficult to achieve on Instagram and what shows this is the gap between the amount of followers PERIOD has and the number of likes and comments. PERIOD has 70.000 followers but only get an average of one to two thousand likes on their posts and around 10 comments. Here the concept of slacktivism pops up as commenting is more effort than liking or just following an Instagram account. Likes are important for visibility, but comments give the opportunity for followers to engage, not only with the post, but also with each other. For PERIOD it is a chance to engage with their followers in order to create a collective, distribute information and create this feeling of empowerment (Smith, Krishna and Al-Sinan, 2019).

PERIOD does seem to have found a function on Instagram that does help with engagement and creating a collective. There is also the possibility of posting Stories on your Instagram account. These are videos, pictures, polls etc. that are available to watch for 24 hours. PERIOD uses this affordance to share posts by their followers and other activist pages. They also do livestreams where followers can ask questions and they use Instagram Stories to link to petitions that people can sign.

Comments might seem as the obvious place to engage with followers, but it seems that PERIOD overcomes the struggle of people not commenting by utilizing the Stories for engagement. This way the period movement is not only visible but it engages followers by sharing their posts and talking through livestreams.

Cognitive affordances: Consumer culture & Societal change

Cognitive affordances are closely tied to the social act of meaning-making because they help with processing information (Stanfill, 2015, p. 1063). The way information is processed on an Instagram account depends on which information is most prominent, but also the names of certain features as they help a user to know what they can find there. One of the clearest examples of such a cognitive affordance are 'highlights'. These are located at the top of the account and are collections of Stories that normally are only available for 24 hours, but can be saved as highlights and categorized in themes. The PERIOD highlights show the followers that two things are most important for participating in the period movement: consumerism and politics.

One of the highlights is called 'sponsors' and here we see the importance of consumer culture in collected Instagram Stories. Buying merchandise like t-shirts, canvas bags and jewelry to donate to charity and support the movement. Something critiqued by Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer for not protecting women (2017). Most of the sponsors are menstrual product brands, with a large presence of menstrual cups which are a sustainable alternative to tampons and pads. It is expected that these companies would contribute to a movement around periods but other companies also show their good will, like Uber and Airbnb, by sponsoring events for PERIOD. Buying something for yourself, similarly to liking an Instagram post, could be seen as a form of slacktivism. The popular feminist consumer culture is apparent within the period movement, which isn't necessarily a bad thing as money and menstrual products are still donated for a good cause. But as I discussed in the first half of the analysis, this can lead to othering the problem of period poverty. It divides the people who buy the t-shirt from the people who receive free tampons. But this doesn't seem like something PERIOD wants to do as their main goals are taking down the tampon tax and period stigma, issues that involve all women. This is where the goal of politics comes into play.

One major way of engaging people with politics is through petitions. Signing a petition can be as low effort as liking an Instagram post or buying a T-Shirt. It is a traditional way of activism but made easier through the globality of social media. One petition can reach thousands in a short amount of time and can be used for advocacy, instead of supporting charities which is covered by selling merchandise. PERIOD's political actions focus on North America which highlights that period

poverty is an issue everywhere in the world, not just the poorer countries where most of the donations go to. This overlaps with the discussion of intersectionality and popular feminism.

There has been a change in the notion of who feminism is for. Where it initially seemed to only apply to white, middle-class women, it now has become intersectional (Gill, 2017). Matich, Ashman and Parsons summarize it as an “international feminist solidarity” (2019, p. 356) where activists do not solely focus on the women who are already challenging gender inequality, but all women who could be affected by it. This international solidarity is definitely present within the period movement, but there is still a divide. The divide between women combatting period poverty through legislation and women who cannot do that and need donations. There are examples of women from non-Western countries combatting period poverty, for example women in India who protested against the tampon tax (Fadnis, 2017). To make the period movement truly global, changes in legislation should be combatted everywhere. Charities providing free products definitely help women but it doesn’t solve the actual issue of period poverty. PERIOD probably contributes to this divide unintentionally but they state in their Instagram bio that they are a global organization, so they should strive for the same measures on a global scale.

Sensory affordances: media-friendly way of breaking taboos

Sensory affordances are the affordances that have to do with the aesthetic of a platform. I already established a trend of art posts that make periods and menstrual products media-friendly. The period movement account also posts artwork with this media-friendly appearance. And they avoid images that can be perceived as more shocking like the beforementioned blood-stained underwear. The art posts by PERIOD are accompanied by inspiring quotes. One that is used a lot on the account is “Not all women menstruate, and not all people who menstruate are women” which is an example of intersectionality becoming more and more part of popular feminist activism. The artwork that show women’s bodies are drawn with stretch marks and curves (image 5) and there is also some attention to drawing women of different ethnicities. A statement is made through showing this diversity, maybe more so than changing the perception of menstruation in society.



Image 5: artwork by @eugeniedbart

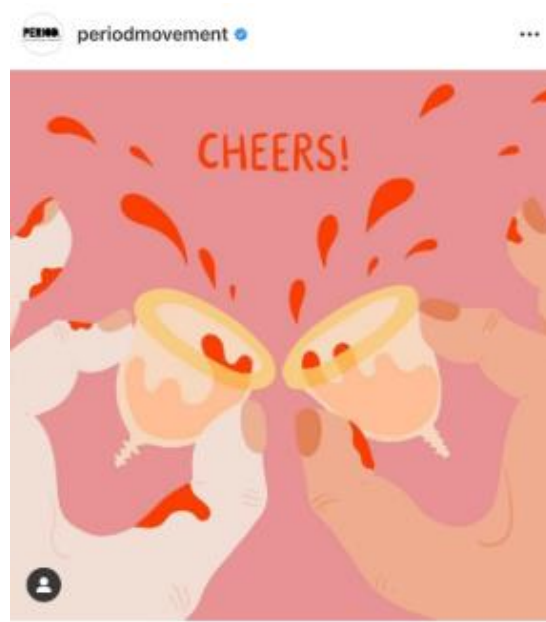


Image 6: artwork by @andreaforqacs

Breaking taboos is however one of the two main goals of PERIOD and many other period poverty activist movements. Even though quotes are used to explain that menstruation isn't just for women, the aesthetic of the Instagram account feels like it is targeting the traditional woman. The use of pink and all the art displaying female bodies, nail polished hands and lace underwear. Diversity is on the movements mind as I discussed, but they still use a more traditional form of femininity in their aesthetic. This suits popular feminism as it doesn't disrupt the existing image of the woman in addressing an issue regarding women. It could possibly ostracize people from joining the movement because they don't align with this imagery. Matich, Ashman and Parsons explain this as a macro-level issue where the way people think isn't challenged because perception of the movement doesn't align with intend (2019). For PERIOD this is the goal of a global movement but taking a risk by choosing a specific aesthetic for it. This way the movement might circulate within a specific group of people who already agree with the movement and are perceptive to this aesthetic.

The aesthetic is also part of advertising. Images 7 and 8 are paid advertisements for menstrual product brand Always. It seems that these advertisers want to fit in with the art on Instagram that is already made and pay art influencers to promote their brand. Using the perceptiveness of the audience to this popular feminist aesthetic to promote their brand as part of the period poverty movement. Even in art displaying diversity and activism, the consumer culture finds a way to get a piece of the pie.

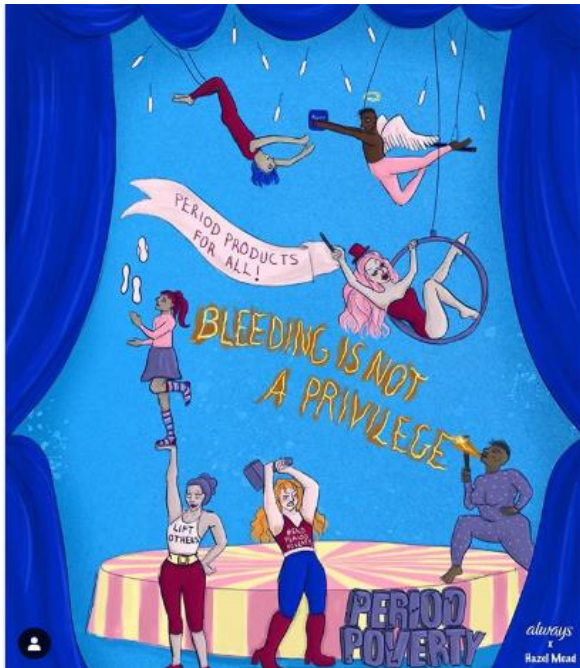


Image 7: post by @hazel.mead



Image 8: post by @colormecourtney

Conclusion & Discussion

With this research I wanted to answer the question: how does popular feminism guide period poverty activism on Instagram in aesthetic and the goals the movement tries to reach? The analysis consists of two different methods. I first performed an analysis of the 50 most liked posts on Instagram that were tagged with #periodpoverty. With this analysis I could see what feminist activist goals and what aesthetic is the most popular regarding period poverty on Instagram. The second analysis was a discursive interface analysis of the Instagram account by activist organization PERIOD. With this analysis I could zoom in on the feminist activist goals of one particular organization and how social media is utilized to reach those goals.

Popular feminist sentiments were present in both analysis with consumerism and entrepreneurialism being the main focus. Both commercial companies and activist groups promote the act of buying to support charity. This mostly entails buying a t-shirt or menstrual product and the charity donating money or products in return to women in need. This helps women but it doesn't contribute to the goals of a movement like PERIOD who advocate for removal of the tampon tax and breaking the stigma around periods. Entrepreneurialism is, in contrast to consumerism, more suited to the goals of PERIOD. People can feel inspired by all the women starting businesses and charity organizations and want to become involved in activism themselves. PERIOD actively contributes to

this by organizing a training program for people who want to learn about the movement and how they can contribute. The focus moves away from charity work to activism and fighting for changes in legislation.

Individualism and visibility are two popular feminist sentiments involved with the way the Instagram platform is used for activism. Social media is inherently individual and revolves around visibility. The individualism of Instagram can be an obstacle when trying to build a community on the platform. PERIOD spreads petitions and provide training programs that focus on individuals getting involved in a movement. The Instagram followers can also watch livestreams individually, but still feel a sense of community by seeing everyone respond and interact. This way PERIOD avoids individualism becoming an obstacle. Visibility is achieved through hashtags, being verified or going viral. A way to get more visibility on Instagram is by not only using viral hashtags, but also posting viral news stories. An example I gave in the first part of the analysis is of a Kenyan girl who committed suicide after her teacher shamed her for being on her period. This story was used to raise awareness of one aspect of period poverty, menstruation being a taboo subject.

The goal to break the stigma around periods is linked to the two remaining popular feminist sentiments, empowerment and media friendliness. These two sentiments are linked because the way some women feel empowered by sharing images of their period doesn't suit the media friendly image of popular feminism and Instagram. It impacts the visibility of a movement because these women have to deal with removal of their photos. Period poverty activists have to find a middle ground between the goal of breaking a stigma and the media friendly space they have to be posted in. The aesthetic of the period poverty posts seems to focus on making menstrual products pretty instead of dirty, by replacing blood with red glitter for example. The posts more so show how intersectional the movement itself, and period poverty as an issue, is. Within popular feminism there is the stigma of the white Western woman being the face of feminism. But like Rosalind Gill suggests, intersectionality is becoming part of popular feminism (2016). The period poverty movement doesn't seem to break the stigma around period poverty as much as it breaks the stigma around feminism itself. Instagram as a company can remove what they deem inappropriate without having to give much explanation or take responsibility. This obstacle is something a feminist activist movement can't overcome when using the platform. The goal of changing legislation to remove the tampon tax is much more achievable through a social media platform and this is reflected in the amount of attention it gets on the PERIOD Instagram account. However, intersectionality can benefit the period poverty movement in becoming more global. Part of the intersectionality should be to remove the divide I previously mentioned between people giving to charity and people receiving from charities. Including people from all different ethnicities in campaigns and events can inspire people from

countries other than the US to take action. But this should be actively encouraged and supported by organizations like PERIOD.

With this research I contributed to the knowledge of period poverty and Instagram activism. The results showed the importance of popular feminist sentiments in how Instagram activism is shaped and sometimes obstructed. Where individuality and entrepreneurialism are used to strengthen the movement, the aesthetics and focus on consumerism limits it. The removal of images is something that activists have to deal with because they use the platform Instagram. It can give them a lot of visibility, making it important to use, so they have to moderate their content to fit the media friendly image of Instagram. Giving commercial companies and consumer culture so much attention is a choice an organization like PERIOD makes. They might use it to pay for their events but it takes visibility away from the two goals they strive for. This friction between consumer culture and social media activism is something to explore more in future research.

I am limited in the generalizations I can make about the entire movement as I focused my attention on one organization mostly. I also used an English hashtag for the first part of my analysis, therefore probably excluding initiatives in countries that don't use English as their main language. As more countries follow the example of Scotland and start providing free menstrual products, period poverty activism as a research subject will become more important. Researching the developments in different countries and the activist organizations who strive for these developments will contribute to getting a global view of period poverty activism. A last recommendation for future research I would like to make is the importance of intersectionality for feminist digital activism in creating a global movement.

Popular feminism now includes intersectionality but the examples of consumerism focused charity work counteract this. It creates a divide between the people buying the products and the women receiving the donations, but period poverty is a global issue. Activist organizations shouldn't focus their visibility online on promoting commercial charity work by companies, but use their platform to educate, inspire and support women from all over the world to fight for social change.

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