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Communicating knowledge and embodied experiences of personal menstrual cup use through YouTube

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite being a normal part of life for many, menstruation is often stigmatized resulting in reduced knowledge of reusable products such as menstrual cups. YouTube videos can raise awareness of menstrual cups and challenge stigma, but little is known about the content creators or what content is communicated in the videos. **Aim:** Firstly, to examine vlogger characteristics and the content of videos sharing personal experiences of cup use. Secondly, to evaluate the potential of these videos as a way of communicating about menstrual health. **Methods:** A content analysis of the 100 most popular menstrual cup videos on YouTube followed by a qualitative thematic analysis of 50 videos containing personal experiences. **Results:** The content of the videos was captured in four themes: embodied knowledge; technology enabled intimacies; persuasive narratives and a collective sense of community. **Discussion**: Vloggers communicated knowledge and embodied experiences of personal cup use. This represents a step towards destigmatizing menstruation and menstruants' bodies, but issues around the complexities of vloggers' motivations and the situatedness of vloggers remain. **Conclusions:** Given the paucity of information on menstruation and reusable menstrual products, YouTube videos provide a potentially valuable resource for health communication and education especially for younger menstruants.

KEYWORDS

Communication, credibility, menstrual cup, menstruation, personal experiences, stigma, YouTube

BIOGRAPHIES

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Introduction

YouTube is an important platform for promoting health education and improving health literacy (Huh et al,, 2014). It creates a space for people to engage in discussions around potentially stigmatizing conditions or issues, discuss and explore alternative options and viewpoints (Liu et al., 2013). The video format facilitates high personal information disclosure (Bruce, 1996) allowing people to 'show' and 'document' their personal experiences (Mazanderani et al., 2013; McNeill & Sillence, 2018). YouTubers or vloggers often use their own life experience as a starting point for their conversations online. This activity generates new forms of intimacy made possible by the distance of the internet (Andreassen, Rikke, Petersen, Harrison & Raun, 2017).

In recent years, YouTube has been studied in relation to a number of women's health issues including intrauterine devices (IUDs), vaginismus, birth stories (Nguyen & Allen, 2018; Kaya et al., 2019; Ajayi et al., 2021) and menstruation (Andreasen, 2020). Initially concerned with the quality of the content on YouTube (Camm et al., 2013; Singh et al., 2012), researchers have also started to examine the level of social support provided in videos (Frohlich & Zmyslinski-Seelig, 2012; Naslund et al., 2014) and the vlogger's motivations for creating and sharing content (Huh et al., 2014; Wotanis & McMillan, 2014).

Huh et al. (2014) noted that in addition to journaling and self-reflection, altruism was an important driver for vloggers making their videos. Vloggers wanting to help other people, in a similar situation to themselves, may offer social support to their viewers. This includes informational (e.g., strategies and advice) and emotional support (e.g., sending thoughts and prayers) (Cohen et al., 2000). Online social support is particularly important in health contexts that are potentially stigmatized in which access to other sources of information or emotional support may be more restricted. A number of studies have examined the role of YouTube in relation to stigmatised health issues including mental health (e.g., Kang et al., 2017; Naslund et al., 2016; Devendorf et al., 2020) but also in relation to menstruation. A study looking at Danish teenagers vlogging about menstruation suggests the platform is a potentially positive space for new ways of seeing, presenting and talking about menstruation. Indeed Andreasen (2020) found that teenage YouTube vloggers were able to play with concepts of 'disgust' in their videos and subvert the more traditional narratives around happiness, cleanliness and control associated with menstruation.

An important feature of discussions around menstruation centres on menstrual products but videos containing vloggers' own experiences of using menstrual products bring into focus the tension between the authenticity of the individual experience and the potential issues around financial or other 'investment' in the product or service (Hohm & Snyder, 2015; Vance et al., 2009; McNeill & Sillence, 2018). User generated videos with a strong commercial flavour may be viewed with scepticism (Sillence, 2017) and individuals wanting to present trustworthy, credible accounts of their experiences with menstrual cups need to distance themselves from potential accusations of self-promotion and product endorsement.

Menstruation and menstrual cups

Despite menstruation being a normal part of life for many people; the stigma attached to women's reproductive health is well known (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Mathew, 2018). A strong cultural taboo means that menstruation is often kept hidden and not discussed (Roberts, 2004, Chrisler et al., 2014) and the shame and stigma around menstruation impacts upon many aspects of menstruants' human rights including education, health and freedom (United Nations, 2019). Information and messaging around menstruation and menstruation products often serve to heighten insecurities, especially for younger people. Advertising, for example around menstrual products, reinforces the risk of embarrassment if menstruation is not kept entirely private and concealed (Simes & Berg, 2001). Communication around early menstruation experiences is also often unsatisfactory and unsupportive with women expressing a desire for conversations that normalise menstruation as typical and acceptable and describe the existence of menstrual products other than pads and tampons (Rubinsky et al., 2020). Reproductive health-related stigma leads to a dearth of knowledge about all available menstrual products especially those considered to be "alternative" or outside the norm (e.g., menstrual cups).

Menstrual cups have been available since the 1960s. The reusable menstrual cup is a flexible cup made of medical-grade silicone and worn inside the vagina. Instead of absorbing fluids like a tampon, the blood is collected in the cup, which must be emptied several times a day and cleaned in boiled water after each cycle. Menstrual cups provide an alternative to the more popular but disposable tampons and pads because they can be seen to offer a number of physical, financial, and environmental benefits (Howard et al., 2011).

Studies of menstrual cup use have predominantly focused on feasibility trials in low-income countries showing that cups are well accepted, safe, easy to use and relatively comfortable (Arenas-Gallo et al., 2020). Existing tampon users have reported positive outcomes associated with using menstrual cups (Howard et al., 2011) and a recent review (Van Eijk et al., 2019) indicated that menstrual cups are a safe option for menstruation and that proper training and practice are important elements of continued menstrual cup use.

Despite the potential benefits, menstrual cup use is still relatively low and the global market for disposable products such as tampons is continuing to grow at a much faster rate (Transparency Market Research, 2018). Recent studies have shown that factors such as body shame and negative attitudes towards menstruation reduce the willingness to use reusable menstrual products (Lamont et al., 2019; Grose & Grabe, 2014). While increasing awareness of menstrual cups and emphasizing the positive benefits of the product leads to more positive attitudes towards menstrual cups (Milne & Barnack-Tavlaris, 2019).

Given the affordances of YouTube (Andreasen, 2020), menstrual cup videos offer a potential step towards destigmatizing menstruation and menstruants bodies, leading to the study's research questions: What is being communicated in videos of personal menstrual cup use and by whom? To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the characteristics and content of vloggers' videos on menstrual cup use. We present a description of vloggers and an analysis of communicated content followed by a critical evaluation of the potential value of these videos as a way of communicating about menstrual health. This study contributes to critical menstruation research and provides a practical perspective on how YouTube videos might be utilised in the communication of menstrual health.

Methods

A targeted sampling approach was used to acquire videos relating to menstrual cup use. 'Menstrual cup' was searched on YouTube and yielded over 200 thousand videos; these results were then sorted by 'most popular' videos. The videos available on YouTube are constantly changing, and so this is only an approximate number of videos available at that time (July 2020). The 100 'most popular' videos containing the words 'menstrual cup' in either the title, video or description or a combination of these were included in the content analysis. The 'most popular' videos were included as they are the most likely to be encountered by those seeking information on menstrual cups. Most videos either explicitly used the words 'menstrual cup', or a specific cup brand in their title. We wanted to be as inclusive as possible with videos and only excluded one video that was not in English. An English language only focus was a practical decision for the authors, but we recognise that non-English language videos also exist, although their inclusion was beyond the scope of this study.

In order to code the videos, the two authors first watched the same 10 videos and made notes. The videos were then discussed in detail, to decide upon the important elements in relation to the research aims. From the discussions, the authors created a coding book, and a coding system. Both authors then separately coded the same four videos and then compared the coding to ensure that the coding booked worked and that coding was aligned. Any discrepancies between authors were discussed and an agreement on the code made. The authors then separately coded the same 10 videos checked and discussed the coding and made any edits to the coding book. Once happy with the coding, the remaining videos were coded. A total of 99 videos were coded (1 video was not English Language). The final coding book consisted of two overarching categories: details about the vlogger (age, channel category etc.) and details about the content of the video (settings, demonstration etc.). Vlogger age and channel type were taken from the vlogger description on YouTube or were coded from information provided by the vloggers themselves in their videos.

Next, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on the 50 videos identified as 'sharing a personal experience'. These videos followed the vloggers own experience of using a menstrual cup, this could be first time experience or a long-time user sharing their experiences or sharing their experiences of changing to a different cup.

The fifty videos were watched by the two authors (N=25 each). Both authors identify as English speaking, white cis-gendered women. We watched the videos and coded what was being communicated. We noted the context and setting of each video, for example, the location of the vlogger, time of day if stated and transcribed portions of the video as they related to the communication of information and experience. Initial notes about the videos were made including relevant details about what was shown but not verbalised e.g., blood in the cup, checking smartphones as well as relevant sounds in the videos e.g., sighing and whispering to provide contextual depth to the transcription. Initial codes, for example, knowledge, effort, journey, keeping it real, were developed. The codes were grouped into themes by the authors working collaboratively in response to the underlying research question: what is being communicated in videos of personal menstrual cup use? Any difficulties in grouping the codes

were resolved by discussion at this stage. The final set of themes were then named and described in a meaningful way and presented alongside illustrative quotes.

Results

There were 72 different vloggers identified from the 99 videos reviewed. Most of the vloggers were US based (65.27%), approximately 20% were UK based and the rest represented a variety of other nationalities e.g., Danish (2), Indian (3) and South African (1) (see Table 1 for more information). In terms of age, most vloggers were under 30 (80%). Of the 72 different creators, the vast majority (64) featured a vlogger rather than an animated or voice-only character. Eighteen of the creators represented companies and 41 of the vloggers had a series of menstrual cup videos on their channels, compared to 31 who had created a single menstrual cup video. In relation to the channels on which the vloggers posted their videos, the majority were posted on lifestyle channels while a smaller number were posted on health or eco-friendly channels.

Table 1: Demographic overview of vloggers (n=72)

Demographic information		**Number (percentage)**
Location	UK based	14 (19.44%)
	US based	47 (65.27%)
	Other nationality	11 (15.27%)
Age	Under 30	58 (80.55%)
	Over 30	14 (19.44%)
Channel	Eco-friendly channel	9 (12.50%)
	Health channel	19 (26.38%)
	Lifestyle channel	52 (72.22%)
Vlogger	Real person/Individual	64 (88.80%)
	Multiple people channel	6 (8.33%)
	Company	18 (25.00%)

Table 2 provides an overview of the video content. A key finding was that around half of the videos focused on personal experience of using a menstrual cup. Videos were typically filmed at home, 67of the videos were shot in the vlogger's bedroom, living room or bathroom. 14 of the videos were filmed over the course of the week and the rest were single timepoint videos. 53 videos focussed on a named cup and a total of 21 different types of cups were mentioned 17/53 were diva cup, 6 were saalt cup, 5 were lilycup, 4 mooncup and 3 were organicup. The majority of these personal experience videos featured a vlogger 'showing' a cup to viewers, with two thirds of videos containing a demonstration of a cup folding technique. Approximately 20% of the videos contained a demonstration of cup insertion or removal and 8% of the videos showed menstrual blood. The predominant messaging in the videos was around the benefits of using menstrual cup with reduced changing times and a reduction in waste for landfill being the two most cited benefits.

Table 2: Overview of video content (n=72 videos total)

Context of videos		**Numbers**
Type of video	Personal experience	50
	First experience	24
	Commercial connection	4 sponsored videos 8 affiliated videos 11 containing adverts
Props used in videos	Unboxing	29
	Cups shown	88
	Animations used	17
	Models used	11
Demonstration of cups	Folding techniques	62
	Inserting/removing cup	16 discrete videos 4 audio only
	Menstrual blood	8
Benefits of cups	Reduced changing times	42
	Reduction in waste	41
	Cost savings	31
	Getting to know your body better	28
	The elimination of chemicals within the body	23
Problems with cups	Leaks	34

In what follows, we focus on the qualitative analysis but situate it in relation to the content analysis described above. We analysed the videos in relation to the research question: what is being communicated in videos of personal menstrual cup use?

The content of the videos was captured in four themes: embodied knowledge; technology enabled intimacies; persuasive narratives and a collective sense of community. Table 3 presents an overview of themes followed by a discussion with illustrative quotes below.

Table 3: Descriptions of the video content themes

Theme	**Description**
Embodied knowledge	Vlogger shares information and expertise around menstrual cups use to help those considering the switch or to improve the experience of longer-term cup users.
Technology-enabled intimacies	Vlogger shares the experience by 'showing' menstrual cup use. This is usually the vlogger's first time using a cup and often involves personal demonstrations.
Persuasive narratives	Vlogger share the benefits of using menstrual cups and advocate for their use. Persuasive arguments vary in tone and focus but often include environmental, cost or health-based arguments.
A collective sense of community	Vlogger encourages interaction and engagement across vloggers and viewers in order to generate and sustain a community-based repository of information, advice and support

Embodied knowledge

Vloggers shared their expertise with viewers including the sharing of important facts, knowledge, tips and advice. The vloggers were 'experts by experience' and catalogued their lived experienced detailing how they had acquired their expertise. Vloggers had already tried

different cups, had made beginner's mistakes, and had worked out more effective methods through a process of trial and error. This experience had been accrued over several years "I have a lot of experience of using menstrual cups. I have been using them on and off for about 15 years" (Video 41), and vloggers typically referred to the number of cups they had tried or the length of time they had been using menstrual cups as a way of demonstrating their expertise and credibility.

The fact that vloggers were had significant personal experience of cup use meant they were able to help viewers by saving them time, money and unnecessary effort. Vloggers often described their videos as the resource they wished they'd had at the beginning of their menstrual cup journey.

> Share my experience with all of them so that you guys don't have to do that work, spend all that money buying different cups... I hope this is very useful to you guys. (Video 63)

> Today we are going to talk about menstrual cups, and I am going to give you some tips that I really wish someone has given me. (Video 2)

In addition to drawing on their own lived experience, vloggers also communicated their active research credentials. Sharing the findings of their extensive research about menstrual cups was often presented as time saving for the viewer and protecting them from poor, inadequate or incorrect information.

> I've done loads of research on these, before, during and even after I started using menstrual cups, so now I can share that with you. (Video 8)

The videos represent the distillation of all the effort the vloggers had put into their own menstrual cup journeys. The resulting video was presented as the best quality source of information with the implication that what was being shared was 'better', more useful and more accurate than the resources vloggers had had available to them when they started their menstrual cup journey. As a way of emphasizing these differences, vloggers were able to point to unique information for viewers information that cannot be found elsewhere.

> A little bit of story time...I had a difficult, difficult time getting the sucker in the first time I did it. It took me a good 30 minutes to get inside of there. No-one told me in all of the tutorials I watched, all the things I read online that you needed some sort of water or lube to get it up there.... So, I would definitely recommend using lube especially your first time using this cup, a lot of people will say 'oh water is fine that's enough lube for you' no no, no, no you want to use lube the first time. In my humble opinion that helped me a lot. (Video 35)

Technology-enabled intimacies

This theme captures the way in which YouTube allows vloggers to 'show' viewers their very personal experiences of using menstrual cups. The vloggers present visual evidence of using a cup and often focus on first time experiences. As viewers, we have the vicarious experience of menstrual cup use in these 'raw experiences' that go beyond simple tips or carefully edited product reviews.

We see 'evidence' of the time it takes to insert a cup for the first time rather than having to rely on the product packaging's assertions that menstrual cups are 'easy to use'. We see vloggers inserting their cups, usually in a bathroom setting. The camera usually stays focused on the vlogger's upper body and face but sometimes the shot is wider, and the vlogger covers

or blurs out their genitals in post-production editing. The videos capture the most intimate moments of cup insertion and removal, and the vloggers invite us to share these experiences, moment by moment right alongside them. We see menstrual cup use situated within the context of everyday lives and the closeness between viewers and vloggers is emphasized. Their physicality is emphasised, we can hear their breathing, sighing and see the sweat on their brows. Thinking aloud gives us an insight into their thoughts and feelings. Here we see the idea of the idea of the experience-sharing as living vicariously with viewers able to see and almost feel what menstrual cup use is like without having to experience it first-hand themselves.

Vloggers make it clear that they are going to keep it 'real', they are not going to sanitize the experience and that this is an opportunity for the viewers to share that experience with them. They want the audience to bear witness to insertion and removal and there is no apology for the intimacy and only the briefest warning before showing the blood. The videos are purposely slow with cup insertion and removal occurring in real time. The slow unedited nature of these segments adds to the credibility of the experience. In one video, for example, we watch as the vlogger tries to insert the cup, checking the time it has taken on her phone, she needs to take time to re-read the instructions and the camera carries on filming throughout. The video feels unrehearsed, and the vlogger appears somewhat disorganized and nervous presenting a very authentic experience.

> Okay I think I'm done, actually that didn't take as long as I would think, probably only took, let me see how long I've been recording about three minutes (Video 18).

> Now the getting it out which is the bit I'm a bit freaked out about so you put a finger in and you kind of you have to release the suction oh my god it really sucks ok relax (picks up the instructions and reads them) ok so you pinch it and pull it ok so now I see why people struggled you have to get very involved its very strange (can hear suction release) ok there (Video 55).

For many vloggers, sharing the individual experience in the video is about sharing the journey of menstrual cup use more broadly. Vloggers discuss their sense of trepidation and their belief that (in some sense) having their viewers share the experience will ease their nerves and prevent them from being alone. These early experiences appear to serve both the vlogger and the viewer as they do it 'together'.

> I've been watching so many reviews from people online who say they absolutely love these and I wanted to try one for ages so that's what I am going to do today, and I thought I'd bring you guys along on my journey with me. (Video 31).

> I really wanted this to be a first impression video for those of you who have never tried this, or maybe you have, and you just wanted a good laugh at someone trying to for the first time, but I really wanted this to genuinely be a helpful video, for maybe those of you who are scared, to see me be scared but do it, so. (Video 6).

Some of these experience videos focus on the first time the vlogger inserts or removes their cup. In other, longer videos we follow the vlogger over a number of days and the videos contain ongoing cup use alongside reflective elements in which vloggers try to capture their thoughts and feelings towards their menstrual cup use. The fact that viewers are invited into intimate spaces such as the bathroom or the vlogger's bedroom adds to the feeling of closeness. We are being asked to be trusted confidants. We have a glimpse into the vlogger's everyday life – conveying and confirming the sense that they are normal people, and these are genuine experiences not staged simply for the camera, but everyday life captured by the camera. We bear witness to vloggers' poorly lit bedrooms, workplaces and the inside of their

cars as they provide an update on their cup use as it is embedded in everyday activities. The range of settings speaks to a sense of evolving time, highlighting the time and effort involved in introducing menstrual cups to your life. Interestingly, we see some differences here in terms of overt commitment to continued cup use. Some vloggers were keen to state their desire to 'have a go' with menstrual cups or to 'give them a try'. These vloggers, often with lifestyle rather than eco channels, tended to upload only a single video often in response to a perceived trend around menstrual cup videos. Other vloggers focused on making a longer-term switch to using menstrual cups and often produced a series of videos around cup use.

Situating the videos in a real-world context enhances the everyday sense of experience and helps the viewer feel as though they are experiencing it alongside the vlogger. Viewing the experience embedded in the vloggers personal situation highlights the shared experience.

Persuasive narratives

Many vloggers communicated a persuasive narrative around the benefits of menstrual cup use. In such videos, vloggers delivered a clear, impassioned speech advocating for menstrual cups. They explained about why they had started using cups and the positive changes cups had brought to their lives. In some cases, these messages were simple expressions of gratitude for the availability of cups "I am fully converted, I love the menstrual cup life". (Video 10).

Many of the videos contained key persuasive arguments about the practical reasons for switching to menstrual cups. These fell into two categories; those aimed at practical benefits for the individual viewer and those aimed at more collective benefits for the environment. Individual benefits centred on cost and time savings, but the majority of messages focused on the collective environmental benefit of reducing menstrual product waste. Some of these messages were incorporated into the vloggers own narrative account of their switch to menstrual cup use while others were more direct addressing the viewer and utilizing modal verbs like 'should' to indicate behaviour change.

> First of all the reason why you should use a menstrual cup if you are a menstruating person is because an average menstruating person uses an average of 12000 tampons in their lifetime – that is a lot of trash because there is the tampon which is usually made from bleached cotton which is bad then there is applicators which are usually made from carboard or plastic also not ideal then they come wrapped in plastic up to three times there is just so much trash connected to periods its absolutely insane there's also the notion that menstrual cups are in the long haul much much much cheaper cos they are one or two time purchases. (Video 9).

Another persuasive feature of the videos was their positivity around women's bodies and choices. Menstrual cups were discussed as part of reducing stigma around menstruation. Cups provided choice and allowed vloggers to find out more about their bodies and their menstrual cycles.

> It has taken the worst time of my month and made it completely natural and easy and comfortable. Why are we not teaching girls from a young age about them? (Video 4).

> The most amazing thing that I love about using the menstrual cup is the closer connection I have with myself you know because you are getting pretty close and intimate with that area and I think using it has allowed me to break free of a lot of old thought patterns that I have been implanted with by society about how our menstrual cycles are something to be completely grossed out about and not be talked about. (Video 61).

Vloggers were keen to be transparent about any financial links between their videos and cup manufacturers. In the very few cases where vloggers were talking about a product they'd been sent by the manufacturer, they were open about this and were not afraid to report on negative features of the cup. In general, vloggers were keen to explicitly reject any commercial links between their videos and any menstrual cup companies and to reassert their passion for menstrual cup use.

> We're not sponsored by anything. Who would sponsor us? Some people think we are doing this for the money. No, I'm passionate about menstrual cups. (Video 69).

A sense of collective community

This theme speaks to the desire of vloggers to develop a community of knowledge and shared resources, to be able to connect with and support other menstrual cup users and to provide a network of cross platform resources.

Many of the vloggers engaged in explicit community building activities. This involved providing informational support, encouragement, continuous interaction and acknowledging key community members. Vloggers recognized the wide reach of the developing community in terms of membership, resources and platforms and encouraged viewers to subscribe to their channels but to look more broadly for resources that worked for them and to share good contacts. The videos often cross-referenced other vloggers and named 'key' community members as well as signposting viewers to other websites.

> Before you go out and buy one go and check out the website PACII because not only do they have a quiz you can take that can determine which cup will be right for you it also helps you to compare all the different cups that are out there, and they have discount codes for some of them. (Video 41).

> One of the YouTube channels that we usually watch for guided tutorials or whatever. She's like our master and I'll put the link in the description below. Like Bree – the girl in the channel it's like one of the first products she used when she got her period. (Video 69).

This served to enhance the credibility of the vloggers, demonstrating their in-depth knowledge of menstrual cup resources and their confidence and humility in allowing viewers to look elsewhere for information. Vloggers were also keen to reiterate the limits of their own personal experience, that everyone is different and that viewers would still need to find out what worked for them. Vloggers encouraged community building through the sharing of peer experiences encouraging engagement and interaction. Many vloggers asked viewers for feedback comments and questions and there was a sense of trying to start a conversation about menstrual cups and menstruation more broadly. Vloggers offered to answer viewers' questions but recognized the strength that could be gained from the 'wisdom of the crowds'.

> If you have any more questions, please leave them down in the comments section below I would love to answer them if I can't answer them maybe our fellow watchers and subscribers can help you out down there as well. (Video 35).

> Any questions? Can hopefully answer any of them, tried loads of cups. Let's start a discussion in the comments and help each other! (Video 2).

Finally, there was a sense of commitment to the community and the vloggers wanted to highlight the closeness they felt with their viewers. Some vloggers described how they had made the video in response to viewers requests or that they were fulfilling promises to keep viewers updated on their experiences.

Discussion

Our study shows how people sharing personal experiences on YouTube communicate information, advice and support to viewers thinking of using or already using menstrual cups. We note that the most popular menstrual cup videos on YouTube were overwhelmingly positive about cup use emphasising the individual and social benefits of reusable products. Half of the videos reviewed contained personal experiences of cup use. These videos conveyed embodied knowledge as well as sharing the intimacies of cup use. Vloggers offered persuasion narratives to viewers regarding menstrual cup use by communicating the benefits and strongly encouraged a more open discussion of menstrual cups and menstruation more broadly. Overall, the videos provide visual communication into the experience and the accompanying language and commentary works alongside to communicate embodied knowledge and experience and to build knowledge sharing. From a critical perspective, the potential value of this form of communication on menstrual health prompts three key discussion points: 1) Potential for destigmatization, 2) The complexity of motivations and 3) The inclusivity or otherwise of the videos and vloggers.

Firstly, the fact that content on menstrual cup use and menstruation more broadly is being widely shared on YouTube is a positive potential step towards the destigmatizing of menstruation. Communication and information about menstruation and menstrual products in general is often limited (Rubinsky et al., 2020) but YouTube is providing a space for this information. As with other peer sharing around product use on YouTube, we noted that YouTube acts as a content community (Burgess & Green, 2009). Vloggers encouraged cup use as a way of fostering a closer connection to one's body and saw the process of providing viewers with knowledge as empowering. The videos encouraged viewers to find out more, to share their experiences and to talk more openly about menstruation. In this sense, embodied knowledge and experience becomes powerful and sharing these experiences fuels a sense of collective empowerment within the community and a challenge to the stigma surrounding menstruation.

In relation to cup use specifically, raising awareness can lead to more positive attitudes towards menstrual cups and increased intention to choose less environmentally harmful products (Milne & Barnack-Tavlaris, 2019; (Peberdy et al. 2019). YouTube provides a unique opportunity to communicate embodied knowledge about cup use that goes above and beyond simple product reviews. Vloggers 'showing' their experience with cups provides viewers with information that is otherwise difficult to find. Cup size information, for example, is not standardized making it difficult for women to assess and choose a suitable menstrual cup from manufacturer's product information (Manley et al., 2021). While more traditional product reviews often focus on the benefits, the intimate nature of many of these videos mean that menstrual cup use is experienced 'vicariously'. The initial difficulties with insertion and removal, the unexpected sensations and in some cases the menstrual blood are all visible to the viewer allowing them to make their own assessment of cup use.

Secondly, a more critical evaluation of vlogger motivations is needed here. While we see language and visual communication combining to communicate genuine, embodied knowledge and experience, complexities of motivation are present.

On one hand, vloggers often stated that the purpose of their posts was to help viewers by sharing their expertise and experience. Vloggers frequently refer to their desire to save viewers from unnecessary effort, cost or time expenditure. A helping motivation has been noted in other studies of health vlogs. An analysis of vlogs by users diagnosed with HIV, diabetes or cancer noted that wanting to help others was a key driver for posting vlogs (Huh et al., 2014). The authors also noted that helping others was often intertwined with self-help and this finding resonates with the journalling style videos of new cup users that explicitly invited viewers to 'accompany' the vlogger on their menstrual cup journey providing a form of virtual support. Unlike the vloggers in the Huh et al., (2014) study, our menstrual cup vloggers are not sharing social support for chronic illness management. The vlog, as a form of identity disclosure e.g., as someone with HIV or cancer, has arguably far less meaning for the vloggers in our study. Many of our vloggers posted their videos in the context of a 'lifestyle' rather than 'eco' or 'health' channel, with many producing only a single video. For these vloggers, the implicit tension between being a 'menstrual cup user' and a 'YouTuber' was more apparent and underpinned by requests for subscribers, and 'likes', even if more overt financial links were often absent. These vloggers were also more likely to reference the current popularity of menstrual cups, trending on YouTube.

Nonetheless, for some vloggers, their commitment to menstrual cup use and information sharing was front and centre of their videos and they were at pains to communicate the genuine nature of their experiences, anticipating any potential criticism and acknowledging explicitly or implicitly any parallel motivations for posting their videos.

In these cases, vloggers used the powerful visual medium to stress the genuine nature of their experiences. Slow, real time videos document tricky first-time experiences with cups and intimate settings often captured other 'actors' e.g., mums, sisters and friends going about their daily lives. This 'in-the-moment' sharing and insight into the vlogger's situation helps build rapport with viewers (Liu et al., 2013). For those with a health or eco channel, they also stressed the benefits of menstrual cups beyond the more commercially listed product benefits such as reduced cost and waste to consider enhanced self-knowledge and body awareness. These messages also push back at the common marketing discourse around 'protection' (Malefyt & McCabe, 2016) with a narrative that situates menstruation as a normal part of life.

Tensions inevitably arise for vloggers communicating personal experiences given the potential for accusations of commercial involvement around products (McNeill & Sillence, 2018). In our study, we see that vloggers explicitly distanced themselves from potential accusations of financial gain in relation to the products they were using. Although where commercial links did exist, vloggers made a point about being transparent, for example, being in receipt of free samples. This is often perceived as acceptable compared to direct payments (Pfeuffer et al., 2020).

Vloggers were comfortable sharing resources and signposting towards other videos, vloggers and social media resources. The extent to which websites allow and encourage cross referencing is seen as a positive trust marker (Sillence, Briggs et al. 2004) and referencing other social media tools expands the reach and promotion of the vloggers who often view YouTube as part of a toolkit of resources (Isika et al., 2019) for generating and sharing social support. Again, the encouragement to like, subscribe and ask questions is both an opportunity for sharing embodied knowledge but also a recognition of the motivation complexity of YouTubers. These multiple, but not necessarily competing, motivations warrant further

investigation in terms of viewers' perceptions but do not wholly detract from the availability of the potentially destigmatising content round menstruation.

Thirdly, it is important to assess who is creating these videos and the relationality between Youtuber and viewer. We know that in assessing credibility, viewers put importance on similarity matching. This might involve an assessment of the vlogger's age, location and circumstances and a reflection on the meaningfulness of the video and its content for viewers.

Here it is worth noting that the videos were predominantly created by young, white, American women with content referring to products and retail outlets available in the US. Despite this, the videos often captured people in very different circumstances in terms of living arrangements, job status and caring responsibilities. Vloggers were keen to highlight important cultural differences around menstruation to provide further contextual information for their videos. The vloggers were perhaps more representative of YouTube users rather than potential users of menstrual cups with relatively few older vloggers. In terms of being inclusive, the videos usually referred to other woman and girls although one video talked about people who menstruate. The lack of non-cisgendered representation in this space is highlighted by Faust (2020) in their review of menstrual product adverts on Instagram, and future work should aim to understand the situatedness of vloggers with respect to age, ethnicity, sexuality, socioeconomic diversity and health status. The range of persuasive narratives from eco-friendly to improved health and body awareness provided opportunities for viewers to identify or distance themselves from the vloggers. The overwhelmingly positive messaging around cup use, despite some initial difficulties, may have been heartening to some but disheartening to those who for a variety of reasons find that cup use is not an option. We echo the call for more work that explores stigma around menstruation especially for marginalized menstruators (Bobel, 2020).

Implications and future work

For health communicators, YouTube videos are a potentially valuable form of communication around menstrual health and menstrual cups in particular. The presence of this content is a step towards destigmatizing menstruation. For researchers, it will be interesting going forward to examine viewer reaction to the vlogs. Exploring viewers' commentaries will allow a greater understanding of how motivation complexities are interpreted and responded to by viewers. While some of the vloggers made menstruation 'visible', it would be interesting to examine the extent to which product-focused menstrual activism (Bobel & Fahs, 2020) and the efficient hiding of menstruation is a narrative in these personal experience videos compared to more commercially oriented menstrual cup videos.

Conclusions

This paper has highlighted how YouTube can provide people with novel opportunities for discussing and 'embodying' personal experiences around a topic that is still considered by some as off limits. Vloggers work hard to communicate knowledge and experience in their menstrual cup videos and seek to engage viewers in the sharing of collective knowledge and expertise. Given the paucity of information on menstruation and reusable menstrual products in general, YouTube videos in particular those communicating personal experiences, provide a potentially valuable resource for health communication and education.

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