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To cite this article: Petra Kolić, Laura Thomas, Christopher I. Morse & Kirsty M. Hicks (2022): Presentation of self, impression management and the period: A qualitative investigation of physically active women's experiences in sport and exercise, Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, DOI: [10.1080/10413200.2022.2032479](https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2022.2032479)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2022.2032479>



Published online: 07 Feb 2022.



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Presentation of self, impression management and the period: A qualitative investigation of physically active women's experiences in sport and exercise

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ABSTRACT

The menstrual cycle is an important biological process that can have implications for women's participation in activities of daily life. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand women's experiences, interactions, and perceptions of sport and exercise participation throughout the menstrual cycle. Five focus groups with 25 physically active women were conducted to investigate women's perceptions of their menstrual cycle, their thoughts, feelings, and actions in sport and exercise environments throughout the menstrual cycle. The dramaturgical writings of Goffman were used to understand women's self-presentation and experiences of interactional dynamics in sport and exercise environments. The findings highlight that the period was the most impactful aspect of the menstrual cycle on physically active women's experiences of sport and exercise participation. The results explore strategies that the women adopted to manage their appearance, concerns that informed women's decision-making processes, and the women's purposeful impression management when undertaking sport and exercise during their period, particularly in interactions with male sport coaches. The findings emphasize the importance of unpacking the often-implicit norms and expectations associated with the period in order to normalize dialogues with practitioners (e.g., coaches) and support women's continued participation in sport and exercise throughout the menstrual cycle.

Lay summary: Following five focus groups with 25 physically active women, we found that concerns over what others might think if they found out that women were on their period led our participants to choose clothes selectively and suppress their discomfort in many interactions when participating in sport and exercise situations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Fear of leakage of menstrual blood and concerns over subsequent reactions of others (e.g., coaches, other gym members) makes the period particularly impactful on how women feel and act in sport and exercise situations.
- Knowledge of what it means to women to be on their period (e.g., selective choice of clothing, suppressing of any signs of discomfort) is important for practitioners in the field to create open and relaxed conversational atmospheres that allow opportunity

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 July 2021

Revised 3 January 2022

Accepted 10 January 2022

for women to open up about their feelings and experiences if they choose to do so.

Introduction

The period, also known as menstruation, is a biological process that marks the start of every menstrual cycle and, although on average can last 3–7 days, the duration and symptoms are unique to the individual (Brantelid et al., 2014). Women's experiences of menstrual symptoms, such as heavy menstrual flow, fatigue, mood changes, pain, and discomfort, can affect how women feel and think about themselves (Chrisler et al., 2015; Fernández-Martínez et al., 2019; Schoep et al., 2019; Spadaro et al., 2018). Menstrual symptoms, as well as women's fear of heavy menstrual flow and bleeding through clothes often lead to negative connotations of the period as being messy, dirty, or disgusting (Fahs, 2020). Such views are reinforced by how the period is presented in societal narratives (e.g., upbringing—Jackson, 2019; education—Serret-Montoya et al., 2020; advertising—(Wootton and Morison, 2020)) that contribute to a sense of silence and stigma surrounding the menstrual cycle (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Kowalski & Chapple, 2000). Previous research has highlighted that the period represents a time in the menstrual cycle that can be particularly impactful on women's participation in everyday life. For instance, it has been shown that women did not discuss with others how they feel during their period (Jackson & Joffe Falmagne, 2013), they hid menstrual products on the way to and in public restrooms (Moffat & Pickering, 2019), and they wore clothes that ensure others in the workplace could not see menstrual products (O'Flynn, 2006). Other strategies that women employ to minimize the risk of others seeing signs of their period include the reduction in social activities to manage the period in private (Santer et al., 2008) and use of hormonal contraceptives to avoid the period altogether (Wootton & Morison, 2020).

Beyond activities of daily life, women's sport and exercise participation throughout the menstrual cycle has so far received limited attention, with research in this field largely focusing on physical performance (e.g., Ross et al., 2017) and injury (e.g., Beynnon et al., 2006). A small number of studies that have investigated women's narratives of sport and exercise throughout the menstrual cycle described the period as highly individual and indicated a predominantly negative impact on sport performance and physical activity (Brown et al., 2021; Bruinvels et al., 2021; Findlay et al., 2020; Kolić et al., 2021; Moreno-Black & Vallianatos, 2005). It has been reported that elite athletes experienced physical symptoms, mood changes, and reduced motivation to train on days of their period, which led some women to control the menstrual cycle (e.g., through contraception) in order to avoid negative performance effects and period-related anxiety during competition (Brown et al., 2021). Although elite athletes are prepared to talk to other women about their menstrual cycle, they perceived a "gender barrier" (Findlay et al., 2020, p. 1112) when considering period-related conversations with male coaches. Young women were particularly concerned about the visibility of their period (e.g., through leakage) and subsequent negative public attention, which was perpetuated by comments from parents, teammates, and coaches and led women to disguise signs of the period (e.g., menstrual product)

(Moreno-Black & Vallianatos, 2005). Women therefore generally accepted their menstrual symptoms (Findlay et al., 2020) and selectively avoided and/or adapted their physical activity routines on days of their period (Kolić et al., 2021). Kolić et al. (2021) highlighted that avoidance and adaptation of physical activity routines occurred especially when physically active women participated in sport and exercise in the presence of others (cf. Brantelid et al., 2014; Slade et al., 2009), such as other gym goers or coaches. However, physically active women's thoughts and behaviors in these social situations have yet to be studied in any real depth.

Within the context of limited qualitative studies in elite athletic populations (Brown et al., 2021; Findlay et al., 2020), there remains a paucity of in-depth research into the experiences and strategies adopted throughout the menstrual cycle by physically active women in the general population (e.g., Kolić et al., 2021; Moreno-Black & Vallianatos, 2005). Previous research has usefully identified the effect of the menstrual cycle on women's psychological wellbeing, including interpersonal sensitivity, depression, and anxiety (Nillni et al., 2015), depressed mood and cognitive symptoms (e.g., concentration) which could in turn affect their participation in everyday life (Van Iersel et al., 2016). However, we have yet to support women's voices by highlighting their unique thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, particularly in interpersonal situations where the menstrual cycle often continues to be treated as a taboo topic (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). It is imperative to understand in greater depth "the complex and varied role" of the menstrual cycle "as well as the profound impact of social factors on women's lived menstrual experiences" (Johnston-Robledo & Stubbs 2013, p. 6) to support sport and exercise participation throughout the menstrual cycle. One approach that is particularly valuable to studying personal experiences in interpersonal situations is the focus group. Focus groups encourage participants to take control of the conversation, "develop their views from hearing the perspectives of others" (Moffat & Pickering, 2019, p. 772), and they provide opportunities for participants to support one another in unpacking sensitive perspectives, vulnerable moments, and normative experiences (Kitzinger, 2006). The data generated in such collective conversations can allow insight into "relational aspects of self, [and] processes by which meanings and knowledges are constructed through interaction with others" (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 123). The aim of the present research was therefore to investigate women's experiences, interactions, and associated meanings of sport and exercise situations throughout the menstrual cycle. Focus groups were conducted to respond to the following research questions:

- What phase(s) of the menstrual cycle do physically active women perceive to be impactful on their sport and exercise participation? Why do physically active women think this way?
- What strategies do physically active women put in place to manage their sport and exercise participation throughout their menstrual cycle? Why do physically active women act in certain ways?

At the heart of this investigation is the desire to develop an in-depth understanding of the menstrual cycle as a "socially constructed" experience through the interplay of

biological (i.e. menstrual symptoms) and socio-cultural factors (i.e. social interactions) (Koutroulis, 2001, p. 188) that is relevant to women's sport and exercise experiences. To explore how physically active women present themselves and manage their behaviors in sport and exercise on days of their period, we turn to Goffman's (1956, 1959, 1967) dramaturgical work on the presentation of self in everyday life, which provides an insightful framework "for examining body management in social interaction" (Koutroulis, 2001, p. 189). The insights gained from this study are hoped to help normalize conversations about the menstrual cycle and its impact on women's sport and exercise participation and inform the understanding of not only the academic community, but also practitioners in sport, exercise, and women's (menstrual) health.

Theoretical framework

Most people are concerned with how they present themselves and the impressions they make on others around them (Dimmock et al., 2020). In applied sport and exercise settings, athletes have particular interest in portraying desirable versions of themselves, for instance, to manage competitive anxiety (McGowan et al., 2008), body image concerns (Thøgersen-Ntoumani & Ntoumanis, 2007), and promote team efficacy and team performance (Myers et al., 2004). Physically active, menstruating women have to take into consideration an array of factors (e.g., menstrual blood, bloating, fatigue), which inform how they position and reposition themselves in sport and exercise environments throughout their menstrual cycle (Koutroulis, 2001). We turned to Goffman's dramaturgical analysis of everyday life to understand how physically active women acted in sport and exercise situations throughout the menstrual cycle, why they acted in certain ways, and how social forces shaped their perspectives (Shulman, 2017). The dramaturgical lens offers conceptual tools to examine face-to-face interactions, to investigate behaviors that people convey and, sometimes more importantly, choose not to convey in social encounters (Shulman, 2017). Goffman's ideas regarding the presentation of self and impression management were particularly fruitful to interpret how physically active women sought to manage their appearances and interactions when participating in sport and exercise situations.

When participating in social life, Goffman (1959) theorized that people deliver performances in so-called regions of performance. The front stage region comprises of social situations where people expect others to judge their behaviors. On the front stage, people therefore seek to deliver performances that are credible and authentic (Shulman, 2017). Preparation for front stage performances occurs in the back stage region that allows people to rehearse behaviors, reflect upon past performances, and plan for future interactions (Goffman, 1959). Sometimes the back stage is a space we have to ourselves and other times we invite other people into this space if we feel we can trust them in helping us enact desired performances. Front and back stage regions are therefore in flux depending on people's distinct interpretations of their surroundings (Goffman, 1959). As people participate in different social environments, they demonstrate a range of performances that aid the development and upholding of a social persona (Shulman, 2017). Goffman considered such routine behaviors "institutionalized" if stereotypical expectations exist to help people make sense of them (e.g., hide menstrual products in

social situations because the period is something that must be managed in private). People align their actions with institutionalized behaviors when they desire to build a social persona that fits with established norms in those social settings that they wish to belong to (Goffman, 1959). To maintain expressive control of their persona, people use expressive equipment that can include habits, characteristics, or items (e.g., clothing; Goffman, 1959).

With the help of expressive equipment, a person (the performer) seeks to control their behaviors in ways that lead others in the social situation (the audience) to recognize their keeping of a particular status (Goffman, 1956). By controlling behaviors and enacting performances in ways that give the audience an impression of an authentic social persona, performers engage in so-called impression management. It is important for performers to play their roles credibly to maintain or elevate their social status (Shulman, 2017). Lack of control in a social situation could lead the audience to doubt the performer and the social persona they were hoping to enact (Goffman, 1959). People therefore seek the approval of others and avoid communicating out of character, because of concerns over negative comments from their audience and a desire to avoid the embarrassment that would arise from portraying “incompatible definitions” (Goffman, 1956, p. 264) of a social persona. When somebody or something, however, does spoil a person’s performance and puts at risk the impression given to the audience, restorative steps are taken to save face (Goffman, 1967). Here, the performer can adopt defensive practices to protect their social persona (e.g., attend football practice in spite of menstrual discomfort without mentioning this to the coach; Goffman, 1959). Usually, it is in the interest of the performer and the audience to stage predictable behaviors as they render a sense of order and certainty (Shulman, 2017). This is so, based on people’s desired to maintain “social systems that organize all of that interactional traffic” (Shulman, 2017, p. 7).

Methodology

Paradigm

This study was embedded within the interpretivist research tradition to facilitate an in-depth understanding of how women view, interpret, and adapt to individual and social experiences with sport and exercise throughout the menstrual cycle. To position our research, we will now outline the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions that guided this study.

Interpretivist ontology, which is concerned with “the structure of reality” (Crotty 1998, p. 10), recognizes multiple social realities which individuals inform through interactions (Hammersley, 2012). Realities are therefore dynamic and dependent upon the perceptions of those who participate in them (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Throughout the present study, we recognized that physically active women’s experiences evolved in interaction with their surroundings and were dependent upon situational characteristics of the sport and exercise situations in which they participated on days of their period (e.g., experiences of menstrual symptoms, relationships to peers and coaches, physical environment—gym or training ground).

Interpretivist epistemology, which concerns itself with the knowledge that we develop in social realities, recognizes knowledge as individually and socially constructed (Crotty, 1998). Emphasis is on exploring the subjective knowledge of those, who are at the center of qualitative inquiry (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In the present study, we therefore recognized both the researcher and participants as active agents, who contributed to context-specific and interpersonal processes of meaning creation (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Together, the researcher and participants created knowledge in the form of physically active women's recollections of sport and exercise experiences on days of their period and reflections upon the diverse perspectives of different participants.

To this end, we drew on idiographic methodology that focused on “contingent, unique, and often subjective phenomena” (Mallett & Tinning, 2014, p. 17). The overarching aim of idiographic methodology is to provide elaborate accounts of selected cases, such as one or more persons, organizations or occasions, which facilitate in-depth study of the diverse perspectives of those who are at the center of the inquiry (Markula & Silk, 2011). We therefore drew on qualitative methodology to provide opportunity for the participants to share their diverse experiences in interaction with the researcher and other focus group members.

Our alignment with interpretivist ontology, epistemology, and methodology prompted us to act in a transparent and reflexive manner throughout the present study, considerate of the diverse understandings, meanings, and experiences that we as researchers brought to the research process as well as those that the study participants defined in sport and exercise situations throughout the menstrual cycle.

Participants

Following ethical approval from the Institution Review Board of the principal author, the research team distributed recruitment leaflets among university staff and students, through public and university sport clubs, and fitness centers. Participant recruitment was purposeful and participants had to meet the following criteria: (i) women aged 18 years or older with regular menstrual cycles (i.e. cycle length of 21 to 35 days [Fraser et al., 2011]) and (ii) be physically active, engaging in sport, exercise, or physical activity three times per week. Typical activities could include some or all of the following: sport participation (training and matches), resistance training, cardio-vascular training (e.g., walking or running), Cross Fit, and exercise classes (e.g., fitness, swimming, Pilates).

Twenty-five participants, aged 20 to 35 years, took part in five focus groups, which were led by the principal author and arranged at mutually agreed times and locations with all participants.

Data collection

Five focus groups with 25 participants (five participants per group) lasted an average of 75 minutes and ranged from 61 to 90 minutes. Focus groups with participants, who knew others within focus groups privately, promoted relaxed atmospheres and encouraged the development of elaborate accounts (Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Wilkinson, 1998). While the suitability of focus groups to study sensitive topics has been questioned

(Madriz, 2000), it has also been considered whether the menstrual cycle was in fact a sensitive topic or whether the aforementioned questioning was an example of “the social pressures to disappear menstruation from social view (including discourse)” (Moffat & Pickering, 2019, p. 772). Throughout focus groups, the principal author therefore reminded herself that the participants’ openness and detail of accounts would vary depending on how comfortable they felt to talk about their menstrual experiences. She shared her own experiences to help break the ice among participants (Moffat & Pickering, 2019) and to reassure participants that focus groups represented opportunities for women to “empower themselves by making sense of their experiences of vulnerability” (Madriz, 2000, p. 843).

When determining the size of focus groups, the authors sought a balance between groups small enough to allow participants many opportunities to contribute, while ensuring the groups were big enough to facilitate interactional dynamics (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). A similar balance was sought when considering the number of focus groups conducted for the purpose of this study. Following recent recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2021), ongoing reflection regarding the richness and diversity of the focus group data in addition to pragmatic constraints (e.g., the principal author was due to take a period of extended leave) led the authors to the in-situ decision to halt data collection after five focus groups.

A focus group guide was utilized that outlined topics of interest and example questions. Each focus group started with a brief summary of the research and questions, following which the principal author explored women’s experiences with the menstrual cycle and sport and exercise situations. Focus groups began with questions about how the participants felt throughout the menstrual cycle; how the participants managed their sport and exercise participation throughout the menstrual cycle; which phases(s) of the menstrual cycle affected the participants’ sport and exercise participation; and why participants thought, felt, and acted in certain ways. Although focus groups were designed to discuss women’s sport and exercise participation throughout the menstrual cycle, within all focus groups, the period dominated the participant responses. In response to participants’ “high degree of control over the direction and content of the discussions” (Sparkes & Smith 2014, p. 87), focus groups also explored what attitudes and opinions about periods the participants believed to be inherent in sport and exercise environments and how these attitudes and opinions made the participants think, feel, and act. Participants were invited to prompt one another, to pose questions, to share experiences, and to comment on the perspectives of other participants (Kitzinger, 2006). The principal author acted as a moderator, who moved the conversation from one topic to another and guided the participants with open-ended questions, comments, and summaries (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Focus groups were audio- and video-recorded with participant consent and transcribed for further interpretation.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify patterns of meaning across focus groups (Braun et al., 2016). It represented an active and generative process during which the researchers’ subjectivity served as “an analytic resource” in “their reflexive engagement”

with focus group data (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 330). Reflexive thematic analysis offered the researchers flexibility to act in a recursive manner by moving back and forth between different phases of the research process (Morgan & Nica, 2020). This allowed the researchers to draw on relevant concepts in Goffman's theoretical contributions to inform their evolving interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

For the purpose of this study, we followed the analytic process outlined by Braun et al. (2016) beginning with data familiarization, which involved the principal author reading and re-reading focus group transcripts to immerse herself in the data. Secondly, the principal author generated succinct codes that identified important passages in the data, which were considered relevant to respond to the research questions. Here, the analysis centered on emic readings of the data, which focused on context-specific interpretations of participant experiences (Tracy, 2020). Analytical questions included "What are the participants' experiences of sport and exercise participation throughout the menstrual cycle?", "How do the participants conduct themselves in sport and exercise throughout the menstrual cycle? Why do they act in certain ways?", "What phases of the menstrual cycle affect the participants' sport and exercise participation? Why do the participants think this way?", "What opinions about periods do the participants believe to be inherent in the perspectives of others in sport and exercise? Why do the participants think this way?" Analytical questions helped generate codes that identified, for example, the period as a phase that impacted sport and exercise participation, menstrual symptoms, clothing (e.g., dark color, long sleeves), decisions regarding types of exercise, silence and hiding of the period, tracking and planning, conversations among women, conversations in sport and exercise. Then, the principal investigator began to generate initial themes for the purpose of which she examined codes and collated the data into wider patterns of meaning (i.e., potential themes). The main two themes generated throughout this process related to the participants' self-management (including menstrual symptoms and behaviors in sport and exercise) and the participants' perceptions and management of interactions in sport and exercise. The whole research team came together to review, name, and agree themes as "patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 589). To accomplish this, the research team looked over the data extracts allocated to different codes and themes and relocated them, if this was felt appropriate. Finally, led by the principal author, the analysis moved to the writing up phase, which interweaved the data with an "analytic narrative," that provided a detailed and in-depth "interpretative commentary" (Braun et al., 2016; p. 203). Following the initial data familiarization and coding, when refining themes and developing a written narrative, etic interpretations that considered how Goffman's dramaturgical ideas could inform in-depth interpretations became increasingly important (Tracy, 2020). Questions that guided the theoretical interpretations included, "What performances do the participants aim to deliver on the front stage of sport and exercise?," "Why do the participants enact these performances?," "What strategies do the participants use to deliver these performances?," "What impressions do the participants want to give?," and "Why do the participants want to give these impressions?" and helped generate theoretically informed themes relating to the participants' presentations of self and to their impressions of self in sport and exercise (see Findings and discussion).

When considering the rigor of this study, we aligned our thinking with a relativist approach, moving away from universal quality criteria toward considerations that were crucial to our inquiry (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Specifically, we ensured that the execution of the study, including the data collection, analysis, and interpretation, aligned with the ontological and epistemological positioning of interpretivism (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Secondly, we worked toward thick descriptions of participant voices (Ponterotto, 2015). The rich data extracts presented in the findings and discussion section and their theory-informed interpretations aim to be of value in other research contexts (Smith & McGannon, 2018), for instance to those studying athletes' experiences across sports and sporting levels or those interested in utilizing Goffman's dramaturgical texts to make sense of menstrual experiences within and outside of sport and exercise contexts. Finally, the research team acted as critical friends, who supported reflection and offered alternative interpretive possibilities (Smith, 2018; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Findings and discussion

Following the recursive analysis of focus group data, two areas were explored for the purpose of this paper. Although focus groups explored the physically active women's sport and exercise participation throughout the menstrual cycle, the participants highlighted the period as most impactful on their sport and exercise participation and their enjoyment of being physically active. The first theme therefore unpacked how the participants managed sport and exercise participation during their period with particular attention on the strategies employed to hide signs of their period. The second theme was concerned with the ways in which the participants managed the impressions given to others when interacting with coaches and training partners on days of their period. Throughout this section, pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity of participants.

Presentations of self on days of the period

The participants in the present study agreed that the period represented a particularly important time of the month that required "regulation of their bodies" (Chrisler, 2008, p. 7) and led them to reconsider their sport and exercise participation. Sport and exercise situations represented the front stage of social life (Goffman, 1959), where the participants performed on days of their period to convince their audience (i.e. others in sport and exercise settings) of the social persona they portrayed when they were not on their period (i.e. well and fit to play sport; Fischer et al., 2007; Shulman, 2017). The period therefore prompted participants to prioritize activities that they could perform, as they would normally do at other times of the menstrual cycle. For example, Fiona, Lisa, and Evelyn said:

Fiona: If you're doing a HIIT class, you don't feel great doing the squats or the burpees when you're on a period if you're wearing a sanitary towel, because you can feel it coming out. So they're ones to avoid.

Lisa: If I was on my period, I'd do something like cycling where I'm sat down. It's safer. You can still do your gym as you'd normally do but kind of ... without having to worry about the period.

Evelyn: I'm the same, like I wouldn't go to a Pilates or a Yoga class or anything like that if I was on period and instead, I'd opt to do some resistance training or something. **(Group 2)**

Similarly, Emma described:

Emma: I think if I go to the gym on my first day, I won't do legs or bum, I would do like upper body and I won't go to the swimming pool that week to be fair. I don't tend to go on my period.

Researcher: Why is that?

Emma: I don't know, I am just like, "I can't do it." I just don't feel comfortable in a swimming costume while I am on my period ... or squatting and things like that when I'm bleeding. It's being around other people... I wouldn't want to seem off or anything. Upper body is a safer choice. **(Group 4)**

The primary reasons why their period was such a crucial time of the menstrual cycle were concerns of leakage and the embarrassment that would arise if others saw menstrual blood (Brown et al., 2021). The participants' perspectives pointed toward internalized views of the period as a matter of silence that had led them to treat the period as something that must remain private in public spaces (Jackson, 2019; Jackson & Joffe Falmagne, 2013; Wootton & Morison, 2020). For instance, Tess, Vera, and Emma described their experiences in the following way:

Tess: My periods were always heavy. I get worried thinking, "Have I leaked?"

Vera: I know what you mean.

Tess: That's my worry.

Emma: Especially when you're in tight leggings in the gym and you're like, "Oh no, what if like I leaked and the whole gym is going to see?"

Tess: As soon as your session's done, back to the toilet, so it's like a military operation.

Emma: It is, isn't it?

Tess: Yes, checking, making sure I have not leaked. Sometimes I feel on edge as well, like when I sit down. Have I had an accident?

Vera: I was playing football and we had a white kit. It was my worst nightmare being on my period and leaking on the pitch. I had nowhere to go. I was in the middle of a field playing football. I always have to wear undershorts and I wore black undershorts, but there was a time where I had leaked through my pants, my undershorts. Then it had just started to go onto the shorts as we finished. It didn't go all the way through, so it wasn't visible, but you could just see it on the line and it was awful, really awful.

Researcher: Oh no ... when did you notice?

Vera: When I got home. It wasn't a straightaway instinct to look, but when I got home I was like, "Oh my god if I stayed longer it could have got so much worse." I have had these situations and I am just like, "If I had stayed longer somewhere it would have been visible." **(Group 4)**

The participants worried what others might think if they found out that they were menstruating and therefore adhered to “menstrual etiquette” (Sommer et al., 2015, p. 1303) by demonstrating institutionalized behaviors (Goffman, 1959) that fit with established expectations of how physically active women “should” act in sport and exercise environments (cf. Kowalski & Chapple, 2000). This was important for the women to avoid delivering a performance that did not fit the social persona that helped them maintain the social status they had secured as non-menstruating women in sport and exercise situations (Goffman, 1956; Shulman, 2017).

It was therefore important to prevent leakage. To achieve this, the participants implemented self-management strategies (cf. Armour et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2016). The strategies commonly included the use of big menstrual products and underwear as Emma, Tess, and Vera explained:

Emma: Normally, I would wear a thong. When I am on my period, I am, “Right let’s get the granny pants out.” [Laugh]

Tess: Yes, high ones. Not low ones or little ones.

Vera: If you leak there’s more ...

Emma: More material to soak it up.

Tess: I can put a bigger pad in. It sticks on better instead of little ones. If I am out and about, so it doesn’t rub. And I need the big one because my periods are quite strong at the start. The little ones are of no use for that, I need the bigger pads to soak up all the blood.

Vera: Yes, definitely the bigger ones give more material to soak up the leak. **(Group 4)**

It was of further importance to the participants to be mindful of their physical appearance in front of others. The participants planned which clothes they would wear on days of their period to minimize the risk of leakage. As the following grouped quotations exemplified, the color and fit of clothes as well as having spare clothes available were most important:

Lisa: I change what outfit I wear. I do always wear leggings or shorts but like adapt which pair depending on their fit. I need to know they fit when I’ve got a pad in, if that makes sense.

Nina: Yes, definitely change your clothes.

Beth: And colour, always black, dark colours. Just in case. You never know ...

Lisa: I carry spare pants with me. Because I leaked through my skirt. I had to go to the toilet and wash it off so I always keep spare pants—just to be prepared for those situations. **(Group 3)**

Olivia: I quite often pack leggings and shorts so if I am on and it’s one of the first two days I will probably never wear leggings.

Paula: I will wear shorts and t-shirts.

Rebecca: My gym wear changes completely and I just got the same lot that I wear each period. **(Group 5)**

Kate: I’d wear probably just dark leggings and a baggy top whereas today I’ve got a crop top underneath this but I would never dream of wearing that if I was on my period.

Megan: I think I would also; most of my sports gear is black anyway. I think I would go for tights than shorts.

Kate: Yes, I wouldn't wear shorts. Way too loose, I'd constantly think about my pad.
(Group 1)

Although individual clothing choices for sport and exercise participation varied on days of the period, the participants shared preferences of dark colors and styles that enabled easy use of menstrual products. The participants utilized clothes and menstrual products as expressive equipment (Goffman, 1959) that helped them maintain expressive control over the social persona they portrayed in sport and exercise situations. The thoughtful planning reflected in the data presented so far, demonstrated that the participants were self-surveillant and hyper-vigilant to ensure they were prepared when their period started and implemented effective concealment strategies that would allow them to be seen to behave as non-menstruating women do (Wootton & Morison, 2020).

Impressions of self in sport and exercise

Having identified that the participants sought to manage their appearance in sport and exercise, it was of further interest to unpack considerations relevant to interactions with others. The women spoke in depth about their interactions with coaches, agreeing that they did not discuss anything period related (e.g., pain or fatigue) with coaches, as they did not want to be seen in any way other than their fit self. The participants wanted to demonstrate to coaches a willingness to play sport at all times and did not want the period to be used “against them.” The following grouped data extracts exemplified how the participants acted and why they did so in certain ways:

Megan: If you train regularly and all of a sudden, your muscles ache a bit or you're uncomfortable within your own body you won't be able to push it 100% during training. And then, you sometimes get a comment like, “Oh what's going on with you?” from your coach in front of your group and you have to go like, “Well, ummm, hmmm.” If it's a good environment, then people usually understand but in male dominated sports it's just not fun to say.

Anna: Yeah I think that's particularly hard. That's why all the conversations go on in the changing rooms. They very much stop by the time you sort of get out and you're with the coach. (Group 1)

Olivia: If you tell the coach, “I have stomachache or cramps,” they will be like, “Well can you at least try?” At least if they see that you have tried and have not put in the usual shift, they can then take you off.

Rebecca: I think they see it as an excuse. And it's not something that you broadcast or feel can broadcast. Especially towards coaches, like amongst yourselves it's not too bad.

Researcher: So what makes you feel as though you can't say something to the coach about your period?

Sophie: They might say, “What do you want me to do about it” or “Man up a bit.” They don't understand.

Paula: I want to play at weekends. I have to go to training, otherwise there are implications.

Rebecca: Even though you might not be feeling great in training, you just go. You just turn up and do the session however you can.

Olivia: It's a sign of weakness. If you don't go training you don't get played. If you turn up and you are like, "I am really feeling terrible," it's almost better to play below your standard and get subbed at seventy minutes. Or just bench at the start, get twenty minutes because then at least you are there, you are showing willingness to play. (**Group 5**)

The participants were mindful of how they acted on the front stage of sport and exercise and sought to give the "impression of a well-functioning self" (Fischer et al., 2007, p. 1308). This impression management (Goffman, 1959) was particularly important when the women attended training sessions led by male coaches. The participants did not speak to these male coaches about pain, discomfort, or heavy menstrual flow because they worried about men's reactions (Brown et al., 2021). The participants expected a lack of understanding from male coaches, who did not know what it felt like to menstruate. The period and associated signs (e.g., blood or fatigue) threatened the reality that the participants aimed to portray in sport (Shulman, 2017). They worried about the consequences if they were to show coaches how they really felt "behind the mask" they wore on days of their period (Goffman, 1959, p. 206). Endeavoring to act in a competent manner, the participants therefore regulated behaviors (Fahs, 2020) to avoid potential awkwardness or judgment from male coaches, which previous research has shown to occur if men perceived women's openness and information about the period as too graphic (Peranovic & Bentley, 2017). For instance, Megan, Danielle, Anna, and Kate suggested:

Megan: It's so awkward especially for men.

Danielle: But why is it awkward for men?

Megan: I don't know, because they don't know it and it's not talked about.

Anna: Yes I guess if you were to ring up your coach, who was a man and say these are my problems, he couldn't really gauge in his head whether that was a real problem or not. It's difficult really because I guess women would naturally gravitate to other women to talk about it.

Megan: I think for men, it's sometimes just as awkward or even more awkward to have the discussion if you're a coach.

Kate: If you don't understand it as well.

Anna: Or is it literally just, "I've never been through it, I don't understand." (**Group 1**)

Heather, Fiona, Chloe, and Isabelle expanded on the idea that men's lack of understanding could stem from a lack of personal experience with the period coupled with limited public discourses addressing the period:

Heather: I think it's just still a little bit like, not taboo, but like just actually not spoken about. It's ignored by most people as a subject. I guess, is it because it doesn't affect men or... or they don't feel like they could talk about it. I still think it's just a subject that's kind of, it's something that affects, well most women but you just crack on and get on with it.

Chloe: Well it's the sort of thing that... in my experience, men just don't want anything to do with it. It just makes them uncomfortable. I don't think, it's not spoken about in my circle unless it's a group of girls.

Fiona: I'd say it's a taboo subject... when I'm reflecting on it, I realise it's not really been brought up, so I guess we only, at our own level, talk about it if we want to...

Isabelle: Yeah but it's not spoken about publicly. So, I don't think you ever think about it as a man. **(Group 2)**

Our study participants believed that disclosure of their menstrual status represented a vulnerability that could be used against them (Brantelid et al., 2014; Koutroulis, 2001) and they therefore showed a willingness to play sport even when they did not feel well because of their period. In line with previous research, which has shown that men considered a woman less competent after they had witnessed signs of the period (e.g., a woman accidentally dropping a menstrual product—Roberts et al., 2002), our participants feared negative consequences for their contribution to sport. They endeavored to “save face” and adopted “defensive practices” (Goffman 1959, p. 1967) by attending training sessions and investing as much effort as possible without ever communicating to coaches if they were in discomfort because of their period.

Contrary to a reluctance to open up to men, the participants did not feel the need to use impression management in the same way when they were with female training partners. They felt that they could openly speak to women about how they felt on days of their period and found support in knowing that other women could relate to what it felt like to menstruate. As an example, Heather, Isabelle, and Chloe believed that periods united women:

Heather: I'd preferably want to tell a female.

Isabelle: Another female.

Heather: I think there can be solidarity sometimes.

Chloe: Definitely.

Heather: Like if I'm with one of my mates and it just happened to me and I'm on my period, I don't know sometimes there's that little like we're both women and we have periods. I wouldn't say that's particularly nice, but I do think there can be that solidarity side to it. You're both going through the same thing and one will be like, “Yes I feel so bloated today” and you'll be like, “Me too.”

Fiona: It does bring you together and you feel like you've got each other's back more, I think. **(Group 2)**

The view that women could lean on each other extended beyond talking about the period into helping each other maintain expressive control (Goffman, 1959) over the period during training sessions. The participants believed that women shared a frame of reference when it came to menstrual experiences (Brantelid et al., 2014). They therefore disclosed their menstrual status and vulnerabilities they associated with the period and invited trusted women onto the back stage as supporters of the social persona that they were hoping to convey in sport and exercise situations (Goffman, 1959). Vera, Emma, Tess, and Laura discussed in this context:

Vera: I have been in a situation where like I have asked somebody to look out to see if there's like a tampon string or anything for me?

Emma: Or if I am squatting, I am like there is nothing there is there?

Tess: Yes, I have done that before.

Vera: Because I don't want to be embarrassed in front of other people.

Tess: Especially when you are hot and sweaty.

Laura: And you just say to a friend, “I am on my period, I hope I have not leaked” and they say, “No you are alright.”

Researcher: What’s the worry here?

Vera: I don’t actually know because you shouldn’t actually care because they are nobody to you.

Emma: I don’t know maybe I think they think I am unhygienic and not looking after myself. You know, how boys or girls might be like, “Oh, she’s got dead greasy hair like she doesn’t shower.” They might think the same like, “Oh, she’s not taking care of herself, like going to the toilet when she needs to go.” So maybe that’s why.

Tess: It’s that embarrassment. My friend knows me, I can trust them to look out for me. I might not know the other people at the gym, but I wouldn’t want anyone to know I’m on the period because it’s not really something you’d kind of address in that setting. I’d be mortified to go back to the gym if anyone knew. **(Group 4)**

Applied implications

Our study supports initiatives, such as Free Periods and #MenstruationMatters, that work to break menstrual stigma, encourage people to speak openly about the period, and facilitate access to menstrual products (Brighter Communities Worldwide, 2020; Free Periods Ltd., 2021). Indeed, our participants highlighted that availability of menstrual products was essential for sport and exercise participation on days of their period. This knowledge is relevant to sport clubs and gym facilities, as their provision of free menstrual products would facilitate easy access to menstrual products in sport and exercise, which could in turn help ease women’s fears around leakage of menstrual blood on days of their period.

Our study participants suggested that they sought to continue their sport and exercise participation on days of their period with some adaptations that catered for physical well-being, energy levels, and expected consequences that complete sport and exercise avoidance might have (e.g., a missed training session sometimes meant that the next match could not be played). An understanding of the period as a process that is subjectively perceived and therefore managed by women in different ways is of relevance to sport and exercise practitioners (e.g., coaches, fitness instructors and personal trainers) as part of their continuous professional development around women’s health (Clarke et al., 2021). Of particular importance are our participants’ descriptions of an awkwardness that they usually perceived around men. Sport and exercise practitioners might therefore want to reflect upon their own understandings and assumptions of the period. Although not all women might wish to disclose their menstrual status, practitioners can break the silence surrounding the period by embedding the menstrual cycle as a topic of discussion when planning for training and performance. Such efforts to normalize conversations about the period could go a long way to reduce its status as an awkward, silenced topic.

Limitations and research directions for qualitative inquiry

While the present study set out to explore physically active women’s experiences of sport participation across the menstrual cycle, the findings and discussion focused on

the participants' experiences of their period. Participants steered focus group conversations toward the period, as it was most impactful on their sport and exercise participation (requiring planning, preparation, and behavior change). A limitation of the present study might therefore be that it did not explore other phases of the menstrual cycle. Of particular interest to future qualitative inquiry could be the luteal phase, which has been associated with symptoms of fatigue, bloating, appetite changes, poor concentration, etc. (known as premenstrual syndrome [PMS] or premenstrual dysphoric disorder [a severe presentation of PMS]) that can affect women's participation in everyday life (Johnson, 2004; Rapkin & Winer, 2009).

In the present study, focus groups with physically active women, who knew each other privately, prompted free flowing dialogues as the participants discussed aspects that were important to them. However, focus groups might prevent some participants from expressing their thoughts freely, particularly when discussing topics, such as the menstrual cycle, that could lead to memories of discomfort, vulnerability, or embarrassment. Future qualitative research investigating women's sport and exercise experiences throughout the menstrual cycle might therefore seek to employ in-depth one-to-one interviews to allow participants to elaborate on "norms, decision making, interpretations, motivations, expectations, hopes, and fears" in an intimate setting (Guest et al., 2013, p. 116). Particularly cyclical interviewing (e.g., two interviews per participant) with a female researcher could give participants with different personality characteristics (e.g., introvert) and menstrual experiences the opportunity to take a slower pace at opening up about their menstrual experiences (Read, 2018).

Conclusion

The present qualitative study demonstrated that although the period represented an impactful time of the menstrual cycle that affected how physically active women felt and acted, our study participants sought to continue their involvement in sport and exercise on days of their period. To increase their comfort and confidence to participate in sport and exercise, the participants implemented strategies to manage their period, including the use of menstrual products that catered for heavy menstrual flow, underwear that rendered feelings of control over menstrual flow, and dark colored or loosely fitted clothes that would cover leakage of menstrual blood (in case this was to happen). In addition to period management, our participants managed the impressions they gave to others in sport and exercise situations, making clear distinctions between male coaches to whom they endeavored to demonstrate a fit self and female training partners to whom they opened up about the period. Our study emphasized that physically active women's ultimate aim was to hide their status as menstruating women from others in order to conform to norms and expectations associated with women not on their period.

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