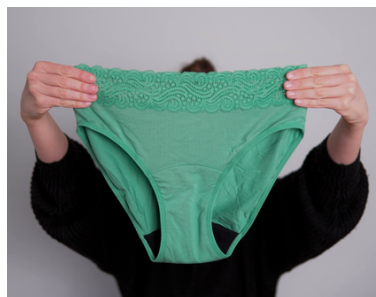
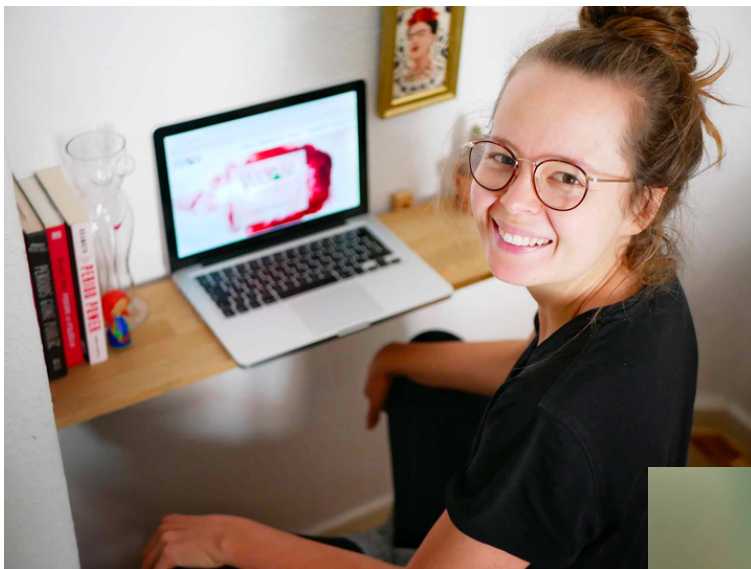


USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT MENSTRUATION

Guidance for the Period Equality Movement



What is this guidance for?

This guidance is to help you use social media platforms to better support girls, young women, and young people with periods. This includes communicating about menstruation with people who do not menstruate.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for organisations, communities, and individuals who are championing the Period Equality Movement and want to ensure that their social media is creating meaningful impact through engaging, educating, and empowering young people.

Why was this guidance created?

As well as offering an insight into what young people want when it comes to the Period Equality Movement online, this guidance aims to demonstrate the deepening blur between the online and offline experience for young people, and how we simply cannot detach the impact of online and offline activism.

Who created this guidance?

This guidance is a collaboration between Dr. Maria Kathryn Tomlinson and Acushla Young.



Dr. Maria Kathryn Tomlinson is a lecturer in Public Communication and Gender at the University of Sheffield. She has been researching periods for over eight years and is an expert in media, communication, and gender.



Acushla Young is a Menstrual Health Advocacy specialist and North West Manager at The Girls' Network. She has been working in the charity sector to empower young people within the Period Equality Movement for over three years.

How was this guidance created?

This guidance is based on Dr. Maria Tomlinson's findings from her Leverhulme funded research project: "Menstruation and the Media: Reducing Stigma and Tackling Social Inequalities". Maria spoke to 77 teenagers across Yorkshire (aged 16-19) about the online Period Equality Movement to see how it has influenced their views of periods and how the movement can better engage, educate, and empower them.

Using her expertise in menstrual health advocacy, Acushla examined Maria's findings to see how they could benefit the Period Equality Movement and to create guidelines. From Acushla's work, we have created a simple 6 point guide to ensure that you utilise social media optimally when communicating with young people about menstruation as well as the period poverty, shame, and stigma they can experience. We also offer advice on how to assess the impact of your activism.



Six Key Principles for The Period Equality Movement:

How to communicate effectively with young people via social media



1 Redefine your activism!

Activism is typically understood as taking direct action to bring about social or political change. Traditionally, this could include building a movement to deliver vigorous campaigning that aims to catalyse policy change on a national level. Social media activism is often criticised for being performative (i.e. involving very little effort and unlikely to realise actual change). However, the young people in Dr. Tomlinson's study viewed discursive acts, such as posting about menstrual experiences online, as a valuable contribution to creating positive change for menstruating women and people. According to young people, these discursive acts help to reduce menstrual stigma by encouraging open conversation about menstruation.

Discussing their perceptions of activism, young people spoke about individuals who engage in "personal efforts" online (such as posting information about period symptoms and sharing personal stories about menstruation). They reported that this kind of activism creates change because it normalises young people's menstrual experiences, therefore reducing the internalised menstrual shame that they experience offline.

One young woman commented on the feelings of shame young girls can experience offline when starting their period. As she explained, this shame could be eased through accessing social media posts where others talk about their menstrual experience:

“ You don't know who else is feeling the same thing as you are, if what you're feeling is normal... and obviously 99% of it is normal, but you don't know, and that kind of thing (#LiveTweetMyPeriod tweets) might help ”

This research also indicated that online acts of activism empower young people to bring discussions about periods into their offline everyday conversations with family and friends. For example, some participants spoke about their efforts to normalise periods by deliberately discussing them in mixed gender spaces. Online activism therefore empowers young people to talk about menstruation with confidence and challenge the stigma of talking about this topic in public.

On seeing an article about Kiran Gandhi's free bleed marathon in 2015, a young non-binary person commented on the power of this story to facilitate conversations that can make change:



“ Kiran Gandhi's (story) was effective for changing the way that other people might see periods or creating a discussion about it... Discussion leads to difference, eventually. ”

To better support young people via social media, we must start to expand our understanding of activism and impact. We must recognise the power of these online engagements to normalise menstruation and reduce the internalised, as well as external, period stigma and shame that young people experience offline.

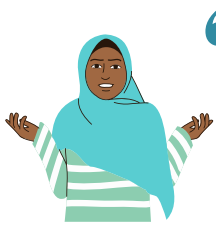
2 Be Youth Led!

Young people engage with online content created by other young people. Responding quickly to social media trends can extend your online reach, and the best way to do this is to have a creator who is already fully immersed within the communities that spark these trends.

“ A lot of the content (on social media) is created by younger people for younger people, so it’s a lot more real (than mainstream media). ”

One way to ensure your activism is youth led is to reach out to existing young people in your network and create specific social media roles that work for them. Another way is by doing your own research into existing communities on social media platforms, and inviting a young person who is already creating relevant content to join your team.

Although many young people in this study were passionate about creating change, some also discussed how this responsibility could be a burden for young people. They want to ensure that older adults are also aware of their role in addressing societal issues.



“ Why aren’t we allowed to be kids? Why do we have to grow up quicker because the older generations can’t sort out the problems themselves? ”

“ I think it’s good teenagers are having more of a voice, participating in activism and making change. ”

To create an **accessible** opportunity to empower a young person to lead change:

- **Respect their time:** Young people have multiple commitments, with disadvantaged young people often experiencing increased pressures on their time (e.g. difficulty in accessing transport, caring responsibilities). If you’re looking for a young person with lived experience of period poverty and shame to join your team, it is likely you will need to be flexible and work with the individual to create an accessible opportunity.
- **Value their expertise:** If you can’t reach your social media goals without the input and work of a young person, it is only right that they are reimbursed fairly for their time and expertise. Consider implementing an ‘Advocacy Reimbursement’ policy, where young people who are delivering a service that you could not obtain without them, are financially compensated for their time. Advocacy Reimbursement policies are being championed by Period Equality organisation Irise International.
- **Empower** young people to set the agenda by allowing them to create content about issues that matter to them.



Here are some of the period-related issues young people told us they feel passionately about and would like to engage with more online:

- Lived experience of periods beyond the biological
- Diversity of menstrual experience
- Gender dysphoria
- Period pain
- Free period products



3

Be Inclusive and Intersectional!



To utilise social media to empower all menstruating girls, young women, and people, your approach must be inclusive and intersectional. It is important that gender diverse young people and young people of colour feel seen, heard, and valued by the Period Equality Movement.

How can you ensure your social media is inclusive and intersectional?

- A) **Amplify** the voices and experiences of people of colour*
- B) Use **Inclusive** language

A is for... AMPLIFY!

Young people of colour within this research were thrilled to see women of colour being recognised for their activism within the Period Equality Movement. In response to an image of Kiran Gandhi freebleeding whilst running the London marathon, one young woman of colour shared:

“ I just love that she’s also a woman of colour because I find that really inspiring. Because especially in Asian households, from personal experience, there can be so much stigma attached to being on your period. If you’re religious too... like in my house, I’m not allowed in the prayer room if I’m on my period [...] So to be an Asian woman and to do that is really inspiring I think for a lot of us. I think it’s really cool. ”

Another young woman clearly demonstrated that this image of Gandhi led to her questioning and dismantling her own feelings of shame about leaking:

“ When I’ve been playing hockey and I am on my period, I’m always asking my friend, like, have I bled through? Is it on my legs? So maybe I shouldn’t be worrying so much if this woman can do that. ”



B is for... BE INCLUSIVE!

The young people in this research neither related to nor understood certain words that are commonly used within the Period Equality Movement. This included the term ‘menstrual health’. We therefore recommend that language used on social media is simplified and in its most common form (e.g. using the word ‘period’).



Young people responded positively to the use of gender inclusive language alongside terms such as ‘girls’ and ‘women’ within period-related social media. During the focus groups, they used language such as “people with periods” and spoke positively about social media posts in which transgender men and nonbinary people discuss their menstrual experiences. Many students were unaware of the menstrual experiences of transgender and nonbinary people but were keen to learn more about how to support all people who menstruate.

- We must acknowledge that the digital divide disproportionately affects people of colour and the importance of undertaking an intersectional approach within period equality work. Offline communications, engagement, and leadership are vital to enable equitable access to the movement.
- Intersectionality is a term born within the Black Feminist movement to represent the multiple forms of oppression that black women experience. An intersectional feminist approach considers how gender interacts with factors such as race, class, sexuality, and (dis)ability.

* We use the terms "women/people of colour" to reflect the language used by the participants in Dr. Tomlinson's research. Approx. one third of Dr. Tomlinson's research participants were black, asian, or from other ethnic minority groups.

4 Engage Boys and Men!

One of the most common things young people wanted to see within the Period Equality Movement online was the inclusion of boys, men, and people who do not have periods within the menstrual conversation. Some young people in this study expressed concern that online period activism risks “putting men off” and is “too politicised”. However, many felt that engaging people without periods within the period equality movement could “make the cause seem more legitimate”.

Although many young men in this study were keen to learn about menstrual experiences, they were generally disinterested in existing online campaigns about menstruation because they could not relate to their messages. For example, one young man expressed:

“if I'm honest, I normally just click off them quite fast because I suppose they don't really apply to me that much”.

Answering a question on how best to engage boys and men, one young person stated:

“ You need to give them a reason to want to listen. ”

Consider creating period content relating to other movements that more easily cut across genders, for example, mental wellbeing movements, environmental campaigns, and the cost of living crisis.

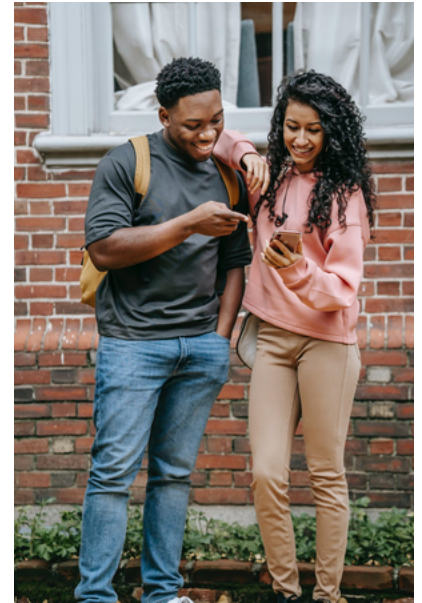
Boys and young men gave examples of engaging with periods on social media through study videos, memes, or football-related content. One boy said:

“ There's one footballer I follow and he's Brazilian. He does a lot with charities to help fund things in Brazil... One time he did a massive supply package for loads of different people... there were also sanitary products, but that's the only thing I've ever seen (online relating to periods) ”



TOP TIP:

Contact your local football team and ask them what they are doing to address period poverty and shame within their community. Perhaps you can offer the opportunity to do some collaborative work on social media to introduce period equality into their football community?



5 Collaborate Effectively!

Would you like to increase awareness, build your movement, or educate young people online? Rather than doing it alone, collaborate with those who have already built a trusted online following of young people. There are two predominant ways in which young people are hearing about period poverty and learning about period equality through collaborative social media:

A. Organisations and brands collaborating with social media influencers and TikTokers within their online circles

Social media influencers are individuals who have built an online following, typically on Instagram and TikTok, and are able to use their position as a well-known individual to promote or recommend services, products, or information to their online community. TikTokers are individuals who create regular content on TikTok with high engagement. Young people are becoming more aware of sustainable period products and the existence of period poverty from organisations and brands collaborating with influencers they follow online.

B. Organisations and brands collaborating with social media accounts that are built around a particular interest related to period poverty

These social media accounts are unlike typical 'influencer' accounts, as they are less centred around promoting the existence of one particular individual, but act more as a community account to bring people together with similar interests and ideologies, such as feminism, body positivity, and women's health. Young people shared examples of how their engagement with these types of accounts made them aware of various health and social issues around periods. As their responses showed, these social media accounts are often hubs for learning and awareness-raising, with young people utilising them to receive answers on taboo issues that they are not getting offline.

“ I follow this self-love account. Because it's all about acceptance and self-acceptance, it does touch on periods. ”

“ I follow a lot of general women's health accounts because I'm sick of not having information about periods. ”



COLLABORATION TIPS

- When you're looking for potential collaborations, enable a young person to do the research, as they will be more aware of the individuals and accounts other young people are currently interacting with online - sometimes the most well-known influencers on TikTok at any particular time can be a smaller comedian rather than a well established celebrity!
- Influencers and accounts that have huge followings are difficult to engage due to their high demand and high price points. Look into collaborating with 'micro-influencers' (people who have 1,000 - 100,000 followers that have potential for growth).
- Target influencers and accounts that have a genuine passion for periods - We found out that young people are acutely aware of 'inauthentic collaborations', where social media influencers who do not have a vested interest in the cause promote a brand or product simply because they are getting paid to do so. This diminishes the desired effects of the collaboration (increased following, purchases) due to viewers not trusting the promotion of the brand or product.



6

Educate Honestly!

Most young people in this study stated that they use social media for period education because they're looking to fill the gap in menstrual health education that they are experiencing offline. It is therefore paramount that period education online is **accurate** and **informative**.



“ Most of the information we get on periods is from the media... it educates young people more than their school. ”

Some participants were aware of the high number of younger girls (aged 13 and under) who use social media for period education:

“ A lot of young people now have phones, so they'll obviously be on social media even though they're not old enough, and they'll see it so it will educate them more than their school. ”

“ TikTok is very much the big sister you don't have. ”

Young people expressed that they are predominantly consuming period education on social media in the form of videos on TikTok. These videos include people talking about their lived experience or simply sharing information on periods or products, as well as trends, experiments and 'period hacks'.

Participants shared that learning about periods through social media enables a sense of community and belonging with other people who have periods:

“ It (social media) can connect people who are in a similar situation, you're not alone. ”

“ There's one TikToker... She's very, very open about trying to break the stigma with discharge and periods, and stuff like that. I enjoy watching her videos because it just makes you feel you have a bit more solidarity with people. ”

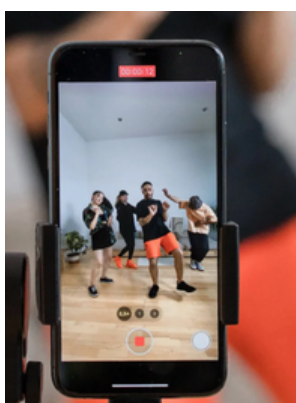


Young people expressed how viewing period content on social media also encourages the normalisation of periods. For many of the participants, seeing posts about periods was a normal part of their everyday use of social media. As one young woman said: "It is just there!". Participants frequently spoke about the power of social media to normalise periods:

“ You see on TikTok people do videos about their periods... trying to make it normal. ”

Another young woman spoke about a period video she had seen on TikTok that contributed to normalising periods:

“ She (Olivia Duffin) was explaining how it were normal and how you shouldn't be embarrassed about it. Because she has a mix of genders on her platform, she was trying to normalise it. [...] I feel like she made it seem more normal than what everyone else wants to see. ”



Think about current TikTok trends: could you create a period-focused video using a current trend? (e.g. trending sounds, dances, or challenges)

This is how young people would like to learn about periods via social media:

• Be realistic and accurate

Young women and people with periods are searching for truthful representations of menstruation online and want less 'toxic positivity' around periods. It is of the utmost importance that those who are creating period education material are relaying accurate information to truthfully inform young people about menstrual experience.

One young person commented on the educational value of TikTok videos, saying: "With TikTok there are quite good informational videos that sometimes pop up... talking about actual facts and statistics and just going in depth."

Another young woman shared the value she places on seeing real elements of menstruation online: "Some people do post blood to ask if it's normal. I've seen stuff like that on TikTok because they're like 'is anyone having problems like this?'... People in the comments were telling them what it was, and it was normal, so I thought it was helpful".



• Go beyond the biological

Young people want to understand the entire menstrual experience, not just the biological process of menstruation as seen in textbooks. This finding is supported by Plan UK's Breaking Barriers 2018 report, that found that young people want more online information on lived experience of periods, such as how to deal with pain.



One young person shared a useful interaction they had with an Instagram post that took a more holistic approach to period management, they said: "It (the post) tells you how to control the pain, what's good for the pain, what to eat and just gives you tips. And there's other women around the world that are commenting and talking about it as well, so, it's really interactive".

• Avoid traditional femininity

Some young people shared that they do not care for traditional depictions of femininity within social media posts about periods. One young woman said, "I think also not make it aesthetically pleasing. A lot of the posts I see online there's pretty drawings of women with flowers and stuff but I'd rather just know the facts instead of just women drawing nice pictures and then giving me one fact".

**PERIODS
HAVE NO
GENDER**

VULVANI

• Be funny

Humour is a tool that came up time and time again when young people spoke about normalising periods online. Humorous memes and relatable content can make traditionally taboo topics easier to approach. One young person said "If you can make jokes about it, it is no longer this big serious scary topic that people don't really want to talk about".



For example, young people shared that they especially like to engage with period-related content that engages with popular culture. One young person suggested: "Linking it (period content) to pop culture, like Mean Girls, everyone knows what the scene is from Mean Girls, but by linking it to periods and stuff, then you can connect with it more."

However, there is one caveat - it's only funny for women and people with periods when it comes from the point of view of the person having the period, rather than misrepresentations from partners who do not have periods.

Measuring Impact:

Organisations and activists exist to make an impact. This guidance is based on the following important finding from Dr. Tomlinson's research: the impact of online social media engagement transcends into the offline experience, meaning that to accurately measure the impact of online content, we must investigate the offline results.

To do this, we must go beyond looking at online engagement data in the form of likes, followers, clicks etc, and analyse the experiences of the people behind these numbers.



What might this actually look like?

A. Select a cohort of people who have engaged with your content. This could be from those who have interacted with your posts (liked or shared) or are followers of your account.

B. Invite the cohort to an interview, focus group, or to fill out a questionnaire.

C. Ask questions that will demonstrate the offline impact your online content has had on their lives. Here are some examples:

- Did you learn anything from engaging with this content?
- How has this content affected you?
- Have you spoken about this content/the topic of this content with anyone since engaging with this post?

D. Analyse the data and look for examples where change or influence on the participant can be seen from engaging with your online content.

Consider showing your participants copies of your previous social media content to remind them of materials they may have engaged with online.

Helpful Resources

- Getting started on TikTok:

<https://connectassist.co.uk/blog/getting-started-on-tiktok-a-guide-for-charities/>

- TikTok for Charities:

<https://charitydigital.org.uk/topics/topics/a-charity-guide-to-tiktok-8245>.

<https://reasondigital.com/blog/tiktok-for-charities/>

- Find out more about TikTok's Initiative, 'TikTok for Good':

<https://www.tiktok.com/forgood?lang=en>

- Instagram for Charities:

<https://charitydigital.org.uk/topics/topics/social-media-for-charities-101-instagram-8777>

- Instagram Tips for Non-Profits:

<https://donorbox.org/nonprofit-blog/instagram-for-nonprofits>



Any questions...?

Why is Facebook not included in this guidance?

Because young people rarely use Facebook - unless they're trying to get in touch with older relatives.

What about newspapers and magazines?

The young people in this study rarely accessed these directly. However, many read online articles that they discovered via social media (e.g. from magazines such as Cosmo and Vogue).

Endorsements

The below organisations endorse this guidance, and by doing so, make a commitment to listen to young people's voices and utilise their social media platforms to better support girls, young women, and people with periods.

Brook: The Sexual Health and Wellbeing Charity



Chula



Comics Youth CIC



Element Society



Fumble



Finding Endometriosis using Machine Learning (FEMaLe)*



Freedom4Girls



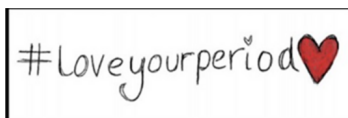
Girls Friendly Society



Irise International



Love Your Period



Menstrual Matters



Period Positive**



The Real Period Project CIC



Wuka



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