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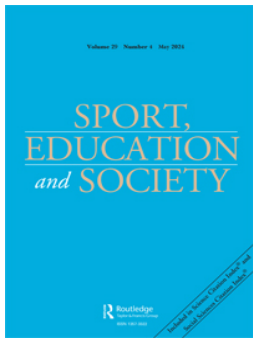
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# Stigma, menstrual etiquette, and identity work: examining female exercisers' experiences during menstruation

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## ABSTRACT

This paper addressed the identity work of female exercisers during menstruation. Specifically, we considered (a) behavioural expectations attached to the sport and exercise role identity during menstruation, (b) menstruation as a discreditable stigma, and (c) the impression management strategies that exercisers put in place to successfully enact the desired sport and exercise role identity during menstruation. Data were generated via 30 semi-structured interviews with female exercisers from diverse ethnic groups. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using phronetic iterative analysis. Data were interpreted through symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical theorisations of identity, impression management, and stigma. Our analysis highlighted the importance of the sport and exercise role identity, which was reflected in the time and money that the participants invested in their sport and exercise engagement. We illustrated that, during menstruation, behavioural expectations determined the participants' hidden management of menstrual symptoms to ensure the successful enactment of their desired sport and exercise role identity. This was because menstruation represented a discreditable stigma, a blemish that had to be hidden away from the view of others. Our participants therefore implemented impression management strategies including the use of props (e.g. pain relief), and management of their appearance (e.g. clothing, hair, makeup), manner (e.g. a stoic expression), and staging (e.g. standing at the back of an exercise class) to help with the enactment of their sport and exercise role identity. We believe this study makes a substantial contribution to the literature addressing menstruation within sport and exercise by unpacking the norms and expectations associated with menstruation. In turn, this study is giving voice to the unique needs and experiences of menstruating exercisers and with this, contributes to normalising conversations about menstruation and its impact on menstruators' daily lives.

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Menstruation; menstrual etiquette; sport and exercise; symbolic interactionism; Goffman; identity; stigma; impression management

## Introduction

Previous literature extensively discussed the societal barriers that female exercisers may face when engaging in sport and exercise environments, such as feelings of needing to prove oneself as a viable

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body in the gym environment, having to uphold traditional norms of femininity when exercising, or having to challenge stereotypes associated with participating in male-dominated arenas (e.g. weights rooms) (e.g. Coen et al., 2018; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). One developing area of inquiry focuses on menstruation as a barrier to sport, exercise, and physical activity. Menstruation, also known as the period, is a biological process that marks the beginning of every menstrual cycle (Brantelid et al., 2014) and represents an important aspect of women's health (Babbar et al., 2022). Experiences of menstruation, such as menstrual flow, fatigue, mood, and pain, are highly individual, and can affect menstruators' engagement in activities of daily life (e.g. school and work) (Babbar et al., 2022; Hennegan et al., 2021; Schoep et al., 2019; Shalini et al., 2022). Beyond the challenges associated with menstrual symptoms, menstruation often holds negative connotations as being messy, dirty, or disgusting (Fahs, 2017), which are reinforced by societal discourses, including upbringing and education, that often treat menstruation as something that menstruators should conceal in public and manage in private (Brantelid et al., 2014; Efiliti, 2022; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Moffat & Pickering, 2019). It has been shown that menstruators, therefore, hide menstruation from others, by avoiding conversations about how they felt during menstruation (Shalini et al., 2022), carefully carrying menstrual products in public spaces (e.g. up a sleeve on the way to the restroom) (Moffat & Pickering, 2019), wearing dark-coloured clothing (Jackson & Joffe Falmagne, 2013), or opting out of social activities (Schoep et al., 2019).

Beyond activities of daily life, the impact of menstruation on menstruating exercisers has so far received limited attention, with research in this field largely focusing on the presently ambiguous impact of the menstrual cycle on training and performance (e.g. Ross et al., 2017), recovery (e.g. Romero-Parra et al., 2020), and injury (e.g. Maruyama et al., 2021). In contrast, a growing evidence base demonstrates consistently that menstruation can be impactful in modifying exercise behaviours, with a small number of narrative accounts of sport and exercise throughout the menstrual cycle describing menstruation as unique to the individual and often associated with negative experiences (Brown et al., 2021; Findlay et al., 2020; Zipp & Hyde, 2023). Similar to insights gained from the general population, athletes used self-management strategies, such as hormonal contraceptives and pain relief, to cope with a variety of physical (e.g. fatigue, bloating), mental (e.g. mood, motivation), and social (e.g. fear of leaking) aspects that heightened their anxiety and negatively affected their ability to perform during training and competition (Brown et al., 2021; Findlay et al., 2020). Research has also shown that athletes and coaches, although open to talk to each other about menstruation, lacked the confidence to initiate these conversations (Laske et al., 2022). In fact, menstruation has been described as a taboo topic that is met with awkwardness within sport and exercise (Zipp & Hyde, 2023). Menstruating exercisers therefore generally accepted their menstrual symptoms and selectively avoided and/or adapted their sport and exercise routines during menstruation (Kolić et al., 2021). This selective avoidance and adaptation held particular importance in the presence of fellow gym goers or coaches, who led menstruating exercisers to give careful consideration towards their sport and exercise behaviours (e.g. effort invested in a session) during menstruation (Kolić et al., 2023).

Despite the advances made in studying the impact of menstruation on training and sport performance, the micro-level experiences, consequences, and relational aspects of balancing menstruation with sport and exercise have remained relatively unexplored (Slade et al., 2009). While scholars have provided some valuable insights into menstruation as a silenced topic in sport and exercise (Zipp & Hyde, 2023), exercise avoidance and adaption (Kolić et al., 2021), and female exercisers' behaviour management during menstruation (Kolić et al., 2023), there remains little critical consideration of the ways in which female exercisers experience, understand, and respond to the norms and expectations attached to sport and exercise engagement during menstruation. It is imperative to understand in greater depth the multifaceted and wide-ranging role of menstruation (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013), 'as well as the profound impact of social factors' on menstruators' lived experiences (Johnston-Robledo & Stubbs, 2013, p. 6) to support sport and exercise engagement

during menstruation. As such, this paper seeks to break new ground in the menstrual health and menstrual education literature by presenting findings of a theoretically informed, qualitative study that investigated the experiences, practices, and meaning making relating to sport and exercise engagement during menstruation of 30 female exercisers from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The aim of the present study was to investigate female exercisers' negotiations of sport and exercise during menstruation with particular attention to their lived experiences, perceived expectations, enacted behaviours, and associated meanings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to respond to the following research questions: (a) What importance do female exercisers attach to sport and exercise?, (b) how do female exercisers enact their sport and exercise role identity during menstruation?, (c) what strategies do female exercisers implement in managing menstruation and their sport and exercise role identity?, and (d) what thoughts, feelings, and reasonings inform their actions?

At the heart of this investigation is the desire to develop an in-depth understanding of menstruation as a socially constructed experience (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013) that impacts women's sport and exercise engagement. We utilise a qualitative methodology to explore menstruation through the study of personal understandings, individual differences, and normative experiences of female exercisers' 'own viewpoints and embodied experiences' (Johnston-Robledo & Stubbs, 2013, p. 5). The insights of this study shed light on the varied ways in which female exercisers navigate sport and exercise during menstruation, and in doing so, raise important considerations for academics and practitioners involved in driving and supporting menstrual health, education, and communication. This is crucial to help overcome menstrual taboo, shame, and silencing, to inform best practices within sport and exercise environments (Brown et al., 2021), and to achieve menstrual wellbeing and equity (Hennegan et al., 2021).

## Theoretical framework

We utilised a symbolic interactionist conceptualisation of identity (Goffman, 1959; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Scott, 2015) to make sense of how female exercisers navigated sport and exercise during menstruation. In symbolic interactionist theory, *role identities* are definitions of the self in terms of the internalised meanings of social roles that a person enacts (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Scott, 2015; Thoits, 2003, 2012). Roles represent positions in the social structure that come with certain *behavioural expectations* (e.g. exercise regularly), which help enact a particular role identity (e.g. that of leading an active lifestyle) (Thoits, 2012). The behaviours attached to social roles are learned through socialisation that includes, but is not limited to, interactions with family members, educators, friends, and the media (Burke & Stets, 2009; Thoits, 2012). Social roles are therefore situated within society, where shared norms and expectations are developed through interaction and used to inform identity work (Scott, 2015). People can therefore develop multiple identities that hold various levels of prominence (McCall & Simmons, 1978) or salience (Thoits, 2012) with more prominent identities being enacted more frequently than less prominent ones, having greater (positive and negative) emotional implications, and overall holding higher importance in a person's life.

People seek to legitimise their claims of having a particular role identity by enacting *role performances* (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Shulman, 2017), which consist of all the activity that a person demonstrates 'before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers' (Goffman, 1959, p. 32). This is an ongoing process aimed at convincing other people of a desired *front* that helps 'define the social situation for those who observe performance' (Goffman, 1959, p. 22). Whether or not people present a convincing front to others by delivering *competent role performances* is determined by *actual* and *reflected appraisals*, which refer to the direct feedback that a person receives about how others view them (actual appraisals) and a person's perception of how they believe others see them (reflected appraisals) (Burke & Stets, 2009). Competent role performances, as determined by actual and reflected appraisals, or a combination of both, can foster a person's well-being by promoting belief in their own 'ability to achieve desired goals (a sense of

control or mastery over life)' (Thoits, 2012, p. 361). Role performances therefore not only serve to maintain role identities but also to achieve social integration within established social structures (Burke & Stets, 2009; Goffman, 1967; Shulman, 2017).

Because competent role performances can have positive consequences for a person's status and well-being, people endeavour to give credible performances (Goffman, 1959). This routinely involves *impression management*, which refers to a person's continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation 'of their identities in order to create a particular image, or desirable impression, upon the audiences they encounter' (Scott, 2015, p. 82). It includes strategic decisions about what to display to and conceal from others, which is especially important when an identity is (at risk of being) 'spoiled' through the exposure of 'blemishes of character' (i.e. undesirable features or characteristics – e.g. menstrual flow, tampon) (Goffman, 1963; Shulman, 2017). Such a *stigmatised* identity arises through a discrepancy between a person's attributes (e.g. menstrual symptoms), their desired role identity (e.g. sport and exercise role identity), and the attached norms and expectations (e.g. silencing of menstruating status during menstruation) (Goffman, 1963). While *discrediting* stigmas are immediately visible, *discreditable* stigmas are those that can be hidden. Although the invisibility of the latter (e.g. the invisibility of menstrual flow in a public setting) allows enactment of a desired role identity without the embarrassment, social exclusion, and judgement that disclosure of stigmatising characteristics might render, it leaves the person in fear of what would happen if others found out about their stigma (Scott, 2015).

To prevent a particular role identity from being spoiled by stigmatising features, Goffman (1959) described *defensive practices* including *dramaturgical discipline* and *dramaturgical circumspection* as key impression management efforts. Dramaturgical discipline refers to the ability to 'offer a show of intellectual and emotional involvement' in the performance presented to others, while remaining 'affectively dissociated' (Goffman, 1959, p. 210). A person, who demonstrates dramaturgical discipline, is 'someone with self-control' who can manage their *manner* (i.e. how a role is performed, such as a stoic expression to mask menstrual pain), including 'one's face and voice' and conceal the actual emotional response in place of a socially accepted one that is displayed to others (Goffman, 1959, p. 211). A person can also demonstrate dramaturgical circumspection by controlling aspects of their performance that others can see to anticipate 'any unfavourable impression that might be unwittingly conveyed' (Goffman, 1959, p. 219) and prevent negative consequences, such as feelings of shame, judgement, or social exclusion (Goffman, 1959, 1963; Shulman, 2017). This could include one's *appearance* (i.e. clothing, and other features that assert a role – e.g. dark clothes during menstruation), *props* (i.e. objects used to support a performance – e.g. pain relief medication), and *staging* (i.e. physical environment – e.g. avoidance of certain exercises during menstruation) (Shulman, 2017).

Utilising symbolic interactionist theorisation of identity and Goffman's dramaturgical writings on impression management and stigma, we endeavoured to make sense of how female exercisers managed their bodies and controlled the information they disclosed to others (or withheld) within sport and exercise environments during menstruation (Koutroulis, 2001; Shulman, 2017).

## Methodology

### Participant selection and recruitment

We aligned our thinking with an interpretivist research positioning (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) to make sense of the identity work of female exercisers during menstruation. We recognised realities as dynamic and dependent upon the interpretations of those who participate in them (relativist ontology), knowledge as individually and socially constructed (subjectivist epistemology), and we therefore studied female exercisers' unique perspectives through elaborate accounts (idiographic methodology) (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Following ethical approval from the Institution Review Board of the first author (project ID: 34368), the research team distributed recruitment

media through their personal social media outlets, community-based sports organisations, local sports clubs, and fitness centres.

We employed a two-phase purposive sampling strategy. First, we used criterion-based sampling to gather information-rich insights central to our inquiry (Patton, 2015) and recruited menstruating people, who were (i) assigned female at birth, (ii) aged between 16 years and menopause, (iii) physically active, engaging in sport, exercise, or physical activity two times per week or more (e.g. resistance training, cardio-vascular training, CrossFit, swimming, fitness classes, etc.), and (iv) from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds. We then utilised snowball sampling (i.e. where new participants are identified via the connections of existing participants) as some participants referred their peers to our study information, which was especially useful in increasing the ethnic diversity among participants (Patton, 2015). The final sample consisted of 30 participants (aged 17–46 years) from the following ethnic groups: 12 white British, 11 Asian, 3 white (other), 2 African, and 2 Black Caribbean (Race Disparity Unit, [n.d.](#)). All participants gave written consent prior to study participation and verbal informed consent at the beginning of their involvement in data collection.

### **Data generation**

In keeping with our paradigmatic positioning, we utilised semi-structured interviews as our method of data generation. Semi-structured interviews are an established method that allowed us jointly with the participants to construct knowledge relevant to the inquiry (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), while allowing participants to steer discussions towards unique behaviours, experiences, and interpretations that were personally meaningful to them (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

Prior to the interviews, we iteratively developed an interview guide, which was informed by our theory framework, empirical literature, and critical conversations within the research team, and which outlined topics relevant to the inquiry and example questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). We emailed the interview guide to participants approximately seven days prior to interviews to allow for familiarisation with interview questions. Each interview started with an introduction, a summary of the purpose of the interview, and demographic questions (age, ethnicity, religion) and then explored (i) the importance and meaning of sport and exercise in the participants' lives, (ii) participants' menstrual experiences, (iii) norms and expectations attached to sport and exercise during menstruation, and (iv) strategies employed by participants in their management of sport and exercise during menstruation. Questions sought to explore *what* the participants' experiences were, *how* participants navigated sport and exercise during menstruation, and *why* participants thought, felt, and acted in certain ways (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Although the interview guide was useful to steer conversations to topics relevant to the inquiry, the interviewer was attentive, curious, and responsive to the participants' unique narratives (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). To this end, follow-up probes (to clarify points or seek more detail) and curiosity-driven questions were utilised as unexpected or interesting dialogue developed (Robinson, 2023).

Each participant took part in one interview with four interviews taking place in person and twenty-six interviews conducted via online interviewing using Microsoft Teams. The decision to offer in-person and online interviewing served to remove potential barriers to study participation (e.g. arising from travel requirements), and to allow participants to fit interviews conveniently into their day-to-day lives (O'Connor & Magde, 2017). All interviews were conducted by a female researcher (the fourth author) to help with the building of trust and rapport through sharing personal perspectives, relating to participant experiences, and showing empathy and understanding (Miller, 2017) and arranged at mutually agreed times with participants. In total, 30 semi-structured interviews took place (one interview per participant), amounting to a total of 23 h (30–71 min per interview). Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed by the first author (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article to ensure the anonymity of participants, organisations, and other people mentioned during interviews (Tracy, 2020).



## Data analysis

For this investigation, we drew upon the principles of phonetic iterative analysis (Tracy, 2018). This approach enables the analysis of the participants' experiences in relation to specific issues at the heart of the inquiry, as well as the unique considerations that inform the participants' behaviours, views, and perspectives (Tracy, 2018). The phonetic iterative analysis was therefore aligned with our ontological and epistemological assumptions as it facilitated rich interpretations of how female exercisers navigated their sport and exercise identity during menstruation and what considerations informed their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

To enact the phonetic iterative analysis, we (re)read interview transcripts multiple times in a primary cycle of coding, during which we defined descriptive codes that encapsulated key data extracts (Saldaña, 2021). In practical terms, this involved adding data extracts from interview transcripts to a preliminary analysis table, grouping data according to their descriptive content, and assigning initial codes. The analysis table evolved as more data was added, which meant that we defined new codes, changed existing ones (e.g. one code split into two codes), and developed overarching categories. These interpretations focused on developing context-specific understandings of 'who, what, when, where' (Tracy, 2020) and included codes, such as 'planning ahead', 'drinks', and 'pain relief' (grouped into the category 'strategies pre-, mid-, post-workout'), or 'menstrual products', 'clothing', 'make up', and 'hair' (grouped into the category 'disguise of menstruating status').

As we defined fewer new codes, we moved on to secondary cycle coding, where we considered relevant empirical and theoretical literature to generate more abstract interpretations (Saldaña, 2021). This focused on developing understanding of 'how, why, because' (Tracy, 2020) and primarily involved the use of symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical theorisations of identity, impression management, and stigma (e.g. Goffman, 1959, 1963; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Shulman, 2017). As part of this process, we reflected upon preliminary interpretations, revised initial codes, grouped smaller codes together where appropriate, moved codes around depending on how they related to theoretical concepts, and examined how codes attended to the defined research questions and alternative research directions (Saldaña, 2021). For example, the codes 'menstrual products', 'drinks', and 'pain relief', were grouped into the category 'props', while 'clothing', 'make up', and 'hair' were grouped into the category 'appearance', with both categories exemplifying defensive practices that the participants used to disguise their menstruating status.

When engaging in this cyclical data analysis, we carefully considered how ethnic belonging may or may not have impacted the participants' views, experiences, and perceptions. Through reflexive discussions as a research team, we felt that there were limited significant differences in the experiences between participants of different ethnic belonging. This may be explained by the fact that half of our participants identified as white British or white (other), or that those identifying as non-white, had been subjected to Western influence for a significant period in their lives through cultural socialisation and education in the United Kingdom (UK), and that therefore, our participants shared comparable experiences and attitudes regarding menstruation and menstrual stigma within the context of sport and exercise (cf. Hjerm et al., 2018; Zingora et al., 2019).

Writing was key to our phonetic iterative analysis as a means of discovery, analysis, and knowing that helped us transition from a series of column headings and data extracts beneath them to the research findings and analysis presented below (Denzin, 2017). It involved an active process of jointly exploring, discussing, writing, and rewriting the distinctions, boundaries, and interconnections between categories, which was accomplished by developing analytical memos and reflective commentaries about emerging interpretations, analytical outlines that explored how our data and evolving interpretations might answer the research questions, and rewriting versions of this manuscript numerous times (Saldaña, 2021; Tracy, 2018). Throughout this process, we defined two core themes, each covering analytical points that reflected the nuances of the theme itself, which we felt represented the data well and responded to our research questions in ways that readers



would consider useful and thought-provoking. What follows is a thematic discussion of the identity work that female exercisers enacted in sport and exercise during menstruation, which is informed by our paradigmatic, practical, and theoretical dispositions (Denzin, 2017) and is therefore open to multiple interpretations.

## Findings and analyses

Through our phronetic iterative analysis, we generated two interconnected themes that explore: (a) how the participants' enactment of their sport and exercise role identity during menstruation was informed by behavioural expectations, and (b) what impression management strategies the participants strategically used to prevent menstruation from spoiling the successful enactment of their sport and exercise role identity.

### *Enactment of the sport and exercise role identity – with menstrual etiquette!*

Our interpretation of the data was that sport and exercise engagement represented an important, or salient (Thoits, 2012), role identity for those under study. It provided the participants with purpose and meaning in life as well as behavioural guidance. For example, the participants demonstrated how they enacted their sport and exercise role identity on a regular basis (e.g. 60 min per day or 3–4 times per week), and invested significant financial resources to support its successful enactment:

I tend to hit the gym three to four times a week. That will be to do a workout myself or an exercise class. So about 4 h there and I run once or twice a week, so six or seven hours in total. (Phelia, Asian)

I play team sports three times a week. I train on a Thursday, play matches on Saturday and Monday. I also train every morning, a combo of gym and home workouts, and I teach Pilates four times a week. (Vonni, white British)

My gym membership is £25. Then clothing wise, I'll have splurges. I like to buy clothes from Nike, GymShark, which are pricey. I'd say I spend £100 up to a couple of hundred pounds each month. It makes me want to exercise more. (Agnesse, Asian)

I spend a lot of money! I've got my gym membership. If I do park run then I've got that membership to consider, although that's minimal in comparison to the gym. And I'm always buying athletic leisure wear as well because I train it, run in it and lounge about in it. Like, I recently got a pair of Nike Invincibles that cost £170. (Phelia, Asian)

Importantly, the behavioural expectations attached to the sport and exercise role identity that guided the participants' everyday conduct, included behavioural expectations of responsible menstrual etiquette (Koutroulis, 2001; Moffat & Pickering, 2019). For our participants, this menstrual etiquette reinforced the notion that their bodies, when presented in public spaces, should adhere to boundaries (Moffat & Pickering, 2019), which determined what was and was not considered acceptable to maintain their desired role identity (McCall & Simmons, 1978). Specifically, they suggested that public displays of menstruation were unacceptable. Rather, societal norms dictated that they should hide the 'leakiness' of their menstruating bodies (Longhurst, 2001) and create the public impression of a well-functioning self that was not menstruating (Wootton & Morison, 2020):

You're expected to do the same, lift the same, train the same ... be subtle when going to the toilet. I think in netball, I feel I'm expected to behave like normal, so I feel like if I went into training being like 'I'm not feeling great, I'm on my period, I feel off', it wouldn't wash. I would still be expected to play at the same level that I always do. I feel like we have to be quiet about it and keep it private, like it's something to be ashamed of. (Reeva, Asian)

It's an unwritten rule that no one is meant to know. It's something you deal with yourself. You're expected to menstruate without menstruating. You're meant to go to the gym as if it's a normal day. It's definitely not something that I would feel comfortable talking about in the gym. It's meant to be a secret. Even in the changing rooms when you're around other people who might be on the period. (Elsie, white British)

Interestingly, the behavioural expectations had negative implications for how the participants felt. Particularly the perceived need to continue acting in the same way as during times outside of menstruation, made the participants feel worried without necessarily experiencing accidents (i.e. leakage) or other negative implications (e.g. display of menstrual product) when engaging in sport and exercise during menstruation. Indeed, through socialisation, the participants learned what to expect from other people (Shulman, 2017) if these others were to find out that the participants were menstruating. The anticipated responses of others were associated with feelings of embarrassment and self-consciousness, which the participants incorporated as part of their 'repertoire of responses that people can have' (Shulman, 2017, p. 31) and therefore led them to feel embarrassed, self-conscious, and anxious about disclosing signs of menstruation:

A lot of it is associated with embarrassment. I don't think it's embarrassing to get your period, but it is embarrassing if things go wrong, and you've bled through your clothes or left a stain somewhere. (Delia, Asian)

I feel less confident being in the gym, especially if it's a mixed gender gym, because there's always that concern as to what happens if I were to have an accident or are people watching me. I'll avoid the gym if it's a busy time of the day, it's more eyes on me, which makes me feel self-conscious. (Rafaela, Black Caribbean)

I'm anxious when it's heavy. Because when I was young, I had accidents and because it wasn't spoken about, I didn't know how often to change my sanitary products, so not even things like how often to change were talked about. That fear of leaking is really ingrained in me. (Zorah, Asian)

Menstruation could therefore be considered a discreditable stigma, a blemish of the body that needed to be hidden, but that brought with itself a fear of being uncovered and in turn, put at risk the successful enactment of the desired sport and exercise role identity (Goffman, 1963; Shulman, 2017). Even though menstruation was a normal, biological function, its undesirable signs acted as stigmatising features that pointed towards a 'blemished' person and had implications for how the participants felt within sport and exercise environments during menstruation (Koutroulis, 2001). Menstrual stigma was grounded in negative connotations associated with menstruation (e.g. menstrual flow being dirty or a tampon being embarrassing), and their impact on participants (e.g. feeling worried, anxious, or embarrassed), which were incompatible with stereotypical understandings of how female exercisers should act (Goffman, 1963; Koutroulis, 2001; Shulman, 2017). Indeed, it was other people's knowledge about our participants' menstruating status that could move menstruation from being a discreditable stigma to a discrediting one, i.e. one that was visibly seen (Goffman, 1963) and therefore determined whether legitimisation of the sport and exercise role identity was successful or not.

### **Impression management strategies used to avoid menstrual stigma**

The participants implemented impression management strategies (Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967; Shulman, 2017) to hide that they were menstruating, especially in case they were to bleed through clothes (e.g. leggings and trousers) or when they were carrying menstrual products (e.g. tampon, pad) to the bathroom. This was to avoid a stigmatised position, one of physical repulsion (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013) and moral inferiority (Fahs, 2017). Control of bodily expressions was key to how identity work was enacted and how desired embodied information was perceived by others (Goffman, 1959; Koutroulis, 2001). For example, this was accomplished by exercising dramaturgical discipline through control of facial expressions and gestures (i.e. their manner) that helped the participants detach their publicly displayed behaviours from their menstruating status and how they truly felt during menstruation (Goffman, 1959):

I try not to make facial expressions, I try to look unfazed or stoic, because even though I can feel my pad or tampon, I don't want to show it on my face. (Rafaela, Black Caribbean)

I try to act normal so that people don't get clues that I might be on my period, as in in my face. I try to blend in. I pretend it's just like a week ago when I was doing the same workout. If I feel lightheaded, I wouldn't show it. My

face doesn't show pain or discomfort, even if it is there. I avoid touching my stomach or back or adjusting my underwear. (Berta, white British)

In addition to exercising dramaturgical discipline, the participants aimed to control elements of their role performances that other gym goers could see as part of their sport and exercise role identity (Goffman, 1959, 1963). This dramaturgical circumspection primarily focused on managing one's appearance, use of props to aid desired role performances, and careful staging of the sport and exercise of role identity (Goffman, 1959; Shulman, 2017). Especially changes to clothing (e.g. different fit, colour, length, or multiple layers), as strategies used to manage appearance, were previously documented as common self-management strategies that female exercisers implemented to minimise the likelihood of leakage becoming visible during menstruation (e.g. Kolić et al., 2021; Kolić et al., 2023). When our participants spoke about appearance, they referred to the strategic use of clothing, makeup, and hair style during menstruation:

When I'm on my period, I care a lot more about my appearance in the gym. I make sure that my period pad isn't showing by wearing thongs, but when I am wearing thongs, I wrap my pad around the thong, so then it's moulded into me, how a normal thong would. Because if I wear a full brief, you're going to see it through my leggings, and I don't want that. It would look like I've got poo in my underwear. That's why I need to wear my special underwear and some good leggings. (Lia, Asian)

I have my black and navy leggings and gym sets that I wear on my period. They tend to be longer and looser than my usual sets. I also definitely do my makeup, take extra effort with it and with my hair as well, because I know that I'm not going to really feel comfortable in the clothes that I'm wearing, so I need to boost myself in some way. (Ilyssa, Black Caribbean)

In addition, the participants used a range of props, including menstrual products, pain relief medication and caffeinated drinks, when engaging in dramaturgical circumspection. It is noteworthy that these props were mostly used in preparation for enacting their desired sport and exercise role identity, for example before going to the gym, when the participants planned for upcoming role performances (Goffman, 1959; Shulman, 2017):

If you use a pad, changing it makes a lot of noise when you're in the bathroom, so when I use the toilet and I change my pad, I have to open it, or take it off, that makes a lot of noise. So, I do it very slowly or quietly so that nobody can hear. Even when I take my sanitary product from my locker to the bathroom, I hide it, instead of having it in my hand, even if I'm in an all-female toilet. (Rafaela, Black Caribbean)

I rely on pain relief, I'm not somebody that takes pain relief unless I'm on my period and playing sports, to play as normally as possible. I take a tablet before I play sports to get through it. I don't want to stop or bring it to the attention of the coach. And my hot water bottle on the journey to netball to reduce my symptoms as much as possible. (Vonni, white British)

Jelly Babies and coffee before the gym or bananas and liquorice. It helps me do better with enduring exercises. The combination of sugar and caffeine. It works well for the duration of whatever session I have planned. (Sharde, white [other])

Even with appearance and props strategically in place, the participants voiced a desire to also control the physical environments of sport and exercise as much as possible (cf. Goffman, 1963; Shulman, 2017). The participants therefore influenced the staging of their sport and exercise role identity through selective avoidance, for example of exercises or machines, as well as strategic positioning in their exercise environments, to avoid the gaze of other gym goers (Jackson & Joffe Falmagne, 2013; Wootton & Morison, 2020). This 'objectifying gaze' (i.e. the visual inspection of the body by another person) had the power to interrupt our participants' immersion in the exercise environment and, deeply rooted in the internalised embarrassment associated with disclosure of the menstruating status, led them to act in a hypervigilant and self-surveillant manner (cf. Gervais et al., 2011; Riley et al., 2016):

In a class I would normally stand in the front row, but when I'm on my period, I choose somewhere near the back, in the last row so that nobody is looking at me. I don't want anyone to see the back of me. Especially if I'm doing

step aerobics, you're up and down ... I don't want anyone looking because of the shame and embarrassment of potentially leaking. (Tannie, white [other])

I focus more on machines than weightlifting. And when I do include weightlifting, it is exercises that don't involve opening my legs wide. I do more upper body than legs and everything is lighter. I won't push myself as much, I rather do a weight that I know I can do. Sets will be shorter because I'd rather be able to say that I went to the gym and did a full session, than push myself too far and fail to do that. (Tessa, white British)

## Conclusion

Through the use of symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical theorisation (e.g. Goffman, 1959, 1963; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Scott, 2015), this paper makes two key contributions that expand our empirical understanding of menstruation as a socially constructed experience for female exercisers: First, this study builds upon existing literature (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013) to offer an original interpretation of how menstruation is experienced as a discreditable stigma (i.e. hidden from the view of others) that is associated with worry, stress, and anxiety. In the present study, these emotions were largely driven out of fear of menstruation becoming a publicly visible, discrediting stigma, which could lead to shame, embarrassment, and judgement in the public eye. Secondly, this paper offers novel insights into how female exercisers responded to the fear of the discreditable menstrual stigma becoming a discrediting one by endeavouring to conceal their period from others. Specifically, our investigation has demonstrated how the participants in this study implemented impression management strategies to hide menstruation and uphold the impression of a well-functioning self when engaging in sport and exercise during menstruation. Often using multiple impression management strategies concurrently, this included changes to their appearance (e.g. dark clothes, make up), use of props (e.g. menstrual products, pain relief), control of their manner (e.g. stoic facial expression despite being in physical discomfort or pain), and careful staging of their sport and exercise engagement during menstruation (e.g. stand at the back of an exercise class).

Whilst this paper makes a significant contribution to our understanding of menstruating exercisers' experiences of menstruation in sport and exercise environments, we also recognise some limitations, which relate to the lack of diversity among the cultural and religious affiliations of participants. In a research field that has been largely inattentive to diversity among research participants, we sought to include menstruating exercisers from a range of ethnic groups, however, still, over half of our participants were white and the majority had no religious affiliation. Therefore, we suggest that future research engage in critical, in-depth investigations of how cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors impact menstrual experiences and menstrual stigma, and in turn, how this might impact perceptions of and engagement in sport and exercise during menstruation. Here, it would be particularly useful to critically examine the intersection of menstruation, gender, and ethnicity within sport and exercise environments using appropriate gender theories (e.g. Butler, 2006; Coen et al., 2018; Ravel & Rail, 2007). Such research would give voice to heterogenous menstrual needs, and help us understand and respond to ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity often found in contemporary Western societies (cf. Tracy, 2020).

Finally, we believe that this paper raises important considerations for how we may seek to educate people (in the broadest sense) if we want to reduce, and eventually, overcome menstrual stigma. Here, we believe that the development of interventions aimed at improving menstrual health education and communication would be of particular benefit (Laske et al., 2022). Especially so, within school sport environments (including physical education and after-school clubs), as well as community-based sport-for-change programmes. These interventions should involve pupils, teachers, and coaches in collaborative research processes through co-creation to account for the heterogeneity of menstrual experiences, attitudes, and needs, and, in turn, to develop outcomes tailored to individual circumstances of menstruating girls, women and those supporting them (e.g. teachers and coaches) (Leask et al., 2019). The design, implementation, and evaluation

of interventions aimed at fostering menstrual health education and communication is crucial in efforts to move away from societal norms presenting menstruation as a 'hygiene crisis' that must be dealt with secretly without the knowledge of other people (Wood, 2020) towards discourses determined by knowledge, empathy, and openness that help young menstruators cope with their first experiences of menstruation, and support them in becoming confident, menstruating adults who feel that they can proudly participate in activities of daily life during menstruation.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in MMU e-space at <https://doi.org/10.23634/MMU.00633595>.

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