

# How Does Social Media Help to Break Menstrual Shame?

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**ABSTRACT:** Menstrual shame is a common phenomenon in the modern society. With women have more and more awareness to break this specific social stigma, many practical ways appear. Among them, social media is a popular approach to fulfill this aim. This research paper studied how the social media can help to break menstrual shame based on the shame theory of Brene Brown. This research would be useful for scholars to understand the relationship between social media and menstrual shame and in the future, relevant practices can focus more on the role of social media. It opposed consistency of social media on promoting negative attitudes towards menstruation, by doing case study of Muruganantham Arunachalam and analysing the effect of movie, documentary and online speech of him, the study shows that social media are able to break menstrual shame by sharing experience, creating emotional connect and receiving emphatic response. Social media are effective platform to speak menstruation positively and eliminating the shame.

## 1. Introduction

Menstrual Shame is a negative attitude experienced by women that includes shame over their reproductive bodily processes and reduced self-esteem. It imposed detrimental impact on women's physical and mental health, sexuality, well-being, and social status. Menstruation is socially constructed as unfavourable by society through negative perceptions about women's cycles and negative responses to any mention of the menses. Early study by Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler highlighted several ways in which menstruation is stigmatized in our culture [1]. Chrisler and Gorman demonstrated that most media messages in the United States portray menstruation as unwanted, contributing to a stereotype of menstruating women, particularly premenstrual women, as violent, irrational, emotionally labile, out-of-control, and physically or psychologically ill [2]. Rupi Kaur shared a photo of herself sleeping in bed with her back to the camera in 2015, with a noticeable menstrual leak and stain on her jeans and another on the sheet. Because it reportedly broke the social networking guidelines, the photo was deleted from the platform twice. In this case, Instagram's action pursued "a lengthy legacy of humiliating people who menstruate... as though their bodies are innately unclean" [3]. However, it cannot generalized that all the social medias consistent with the concept that women's bodies are perceived as "gross" and "offensive."

Brene Brown used Shame Theory to investigate her interviews with 200 women and linked menstrual shame to it. She discovered that shame is felt as a severe sense of inadequacy and frequently leads to women avoiding social interaction, leaving them feeling imprisoned, alienated, and helpless. Sharing experiences, whether joyful or unpleasant, establishing connection, and anticipating and receiving an empathic response are all ways to erase those

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negative sentiments [4]. Briefly, discussing menstruation publicly is an important aspect of menstrual activism. Despite the fact that social media would purposely hide the issue of menstruation shame. However, being one of most common used and prominent sharing platforms, social media still go a long way toward assisting individuals in speaking out about women's menstrual shame and assisting women in marginalized groups in obtaining a feeling of belonging and gaining empathetic response, which is to help break menstrual shame.

This research will investigate how the social media are able to help break menstrual shame. Movie and online speech sharing will be the main social media platform to be focused on. The wide distribution, visual attraction, role model effect will be the positive features being considered to explain how social media can achieve the process of sharing, emotional connecting and responding.

This research has helped society become more aware of the need for menstrual shame to be addressed, as well as the help of social media as an important tool in modern society to change established culture and norms.

It will address in the order of introduction of case study, description of case study and analysis of case study. The conclusion and suggestion will be also concluded for evaluating the drawbacks of the study and future advice.

## 2. Method

In this study, a case study will be employed to conduct an in-depth assessment of Muruganantham Arunachalam's experience and accomplishments. Case studies can offer a full explanation of the case and allow different aspects of the case to be investigated. The relationship between social stigma and social media may be well related through each component or interpretation under case study,

and then draw broader conclusions and findings. Furthermore, the goal of this study is to discover how social media might assist to overcome menstruation shame, as numerical data can only represent the surface of the problem rather than how and why it occurs. The case study generated qualitative data that may be used to investigate the motivation and cultural and behavioural backgrounds of social media and menstruation stigma, as well as those discovered via and opinion. It eliminated quantitative data pre-judgements by encouraging respondents' sentiments to speak for themselves. Many scholars tend to think highly of the quantitative study and look down upon the qualitative research. However, in order to take a deep perspective to do research on social media and menstrual shame, this research prefer the method of case study.

Brown did solid research on shame and concluded that shame is a common phenomenon, but it can be varied according to different individuals. Brown especially emphasized that shame has a great impact on individuals' mental health, as individuals can feel isolated and powerless. Shame performs a weapon to destroy an individual intangibly. So, based on Brown's theory, it can be known that shame is negative and should be eliminated from the society as much as possible. Besides this, Brown also demonstrated well the relationship between different kinds of shame and social stigma. So, this theory of shame provides a theoretical foundation for this research.

### 3. Case Study

#### 3.1 Case Description

A typical case of this research topic will be the Pad man: Muruganatham Arunachalam. He invented a low-cost

sanitary making machine, which helps millions of women over 106 nations to get access of sanitary pads. He discovered his wife can only use rags in her menstruation cycle, since the sanitary pads are too expensive to afford (around ₹12). Rags, old cloths or bed sheets are unhygienic and unhealth for female in period to use as the bacterial infection will easily leads to many gynaecological disease. Arunachalam decided to help this wife by inventing a low-cost sanitary pads (around ₹2.10). However, his wife instead of feeling thankful to his contribution, she was feeling embarrassed and ashamed. Residents in their village also critical Arunachalam's behaviours. It makes Muruganatham Arunachalam to realize the feudal value of menstrual shame and others' incorrect perception to menstruation are the main restrictions for women who are not willing to speak out their hygiene needs. He needs to break the established value on speaking menstruation negatively [5]. In this case, social media take a crucial role to help Muruganatham Arunachalam to break menstrual shame by transmitting his story and persuading people to perceive female hygiene and menstruation health. His story was filmed into two movies, Phullu (2017) and Pad Man (2018), and two documentary films, Menstrual Men (2013) and Period. End of Sentence. (2018). In 2012, he was also used TED, a famous American online speech platform, to speak out his story and encourage more people to stop menstrual Shame.

#### 3.2 Case Analysis

The social media bring positive impacts. Pad Man released across 3350 screens worldwide, and gaining a relevantly high box office [6] (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Market Distributions and Gross Revenue of Pad Man Movie

Market(s)	Gross revenue
India	₹1,049 million (\$14.9 million)
Overseas	₹102.83 crore (\$15,617,101)
China	₹669.1million (\$10.1 million)
Japan	¥73,576,400 (₹48 million \$681,622)
Other territories	₹33.66 crore (\$4,78 million)
Worldwide	₹207.73 crore (\$31.73 million)

About 5000 Low-cost sanitary pads machines were already installed in 27 States and Union Territories, including India, some Asia and Africa countries, and even developed countries like U.S and U.K [6]. In February of 2018, the largest production house of SVF collaborated

with government to distribute free sanitary pads to school girls as well as showing the Pad Men movie to create awareness of menstruation health among girls [7]. All those positive impacts of Pad Man movie proved how films can being used as important tools for social change.

Since film are visual creatures, films are able to create emotional connection with their audiences, regardless of language barriers or other factors. Especially when the entertaining elements combined with its educational elements, the social issues of period poverty are being addressed in the film and effectively awared and influencing audience to make a change. Thus, the Pad Man revolution are being triggered around the world, which many people stands out to take social media campaigns and other meaningful activities, including Pad Bank for women who couldn't afford sanitary products and Pad dispenser for women who need pads emergently [8]. The most famous one is the Pad Man challenge, which many celebrities, including famous actor Aamir Khan, post their pictures of hold a sanitary pads [9]. No matter of their gender, people speak out the need of menstruation in public to share their experience. Emotionally, their experiences are able to touch wide range of people. Especially, these acts are able to help boosting women speaking right, which female can have place and courage to stand out and speak for themselves. The hygiene and menstruation health knowledge in the movie passed to audience to eliminate outside discriminations and impression of society to menstruation. People will no longer to perceive menstruation as sin and disgust.

Moreover, Muruganatham Arunachalam's TED talks receive 1.8 millions views on "How I started a sanitary napkin revolution!" [10]. TED is an America media organization, which allowed to post online talks for free distribution. Online speech on social media is beneficial for its wide distribution. Speech in person are restrict numbers of audiences, since the limited factors of places, time and microphone's loudness. However, there is no restriction on online speech as the social media are open to everyone. As the distribution are wider, the impact will be greater for breaking menstrual shame. While Muruganatham Arunachalam share his experience and using his speech to encourage the society to stop menstrual shame, he also builds up a role model in listeners 'mind. A positive role model are able to public speaking confidence and create leading effects. He ignored the outside negative comments and insist on the way which is not promising by others, even his wife. His behavior is adventurous, but it is also an important landmark in India's history. The uniqueness of his behavior is more likely to catch attentions worldwide and attract more audience to watch and understand the dilemma India's women meet. Since he is doing a social business, the speech is also focusing on his career. He is able to attracted investments as well to enlarge the standard of his company and the effect of breaking menstrual shame. That can be achieved because in secondary socialization, media are one of the vital social agents, where people can be convinced and imitated the behaviours of role models. Muruganatham Arunachalam tells listeners that his behaviour is attainable, which motivated his audiences to follow his path in the past and achieve the final goal of breaking menstrual shame. Notably, he is a male. His gender representation also send message to the male audiences that even the shame didn't happen on them, but they still need to help females around them, especially for those of female who

need are vulnerable during their menstruation.

In addition, the title social media gives to Muruganatham Arunachalam is Pad Man. It helps audiences to link with other superhero of Spider Man, Bet Man and so on. All those heroes are making the world a better place. The film maker who choose Muruganatham Arunachalam to film actually promote a sense that even you didn't have super power, but if you are doing anything remarkable and beneficial, then you can be the heroes of the society.

## 4. DISCUSSION

This research focuses on menstrual shame and analyzes the role of social media in solving this problem. However, based on this study and beyond the above analysis, some other implications also can be drawn. The first one is the awareness of social stigma. It can be noticed that in the research field of sociology and public policy, social stigma has already become a dominant research topic. It is not to say social stigma is a newborn in the academic world, instead, social stigma is a long-lasting problem both in the real world and academic field. However, it is only in the modern society, with the dynamic and various forms of social stigma, scholars and decision-makers pay more and more attention to it. Menstrual shame accords with this finding. Currently, women are struggling for and asking for equity and equality, menstrual shame is one of social stigmas that women experience and is becoming a key point in their efforts. The second one is the relationship between social stigma and social media. Social stigma plays a more and more significant role in social issues. Not only social media can reflect how the society is changing, but also social media becomes an effective way to change the world. Take Weibo as an example, scholars have done numerous research using Weibo as a case study and found social media can influence people's mental and physical health. And relevant quantitative studies also prove this causal relationship. So, it is almost a consensus that social media affects various aspects of the society and an individual. Discussing the way to solve social stigma, social media can't be an exception. But, it should be noticed that social media's specific characteristic determines the practical ways should well fit the specific context, and there shouldn't be a single method to deal way this problem, especially when menstrual shame is only part of women's focus. The third point is that this research has its limitation, that is, using the research method of case study. Case study can only relate the chosen theoretical foundation to the chosen case. Although it can provide a deep perspective to do research, it can't be generalized to other situations. So, based on this study, in the future, scholars can collect data to evaluate the real effect and that would be more useful for women changing their current status.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This case study still has shortcomings and problems. First of all, the high impact and box office can only mean that

the event has received wide attention but it cannot prove that every viewer agrees with the film's viewpoint. Especially since the event took place in India, where gender differences and religious views are deeply rooted, the shame of menstruation may not be completely eliminated by art cinema alone, and such issues still need time and other systematic interventions, such as education in schools. At the same time, while it is difficult to capture the perceptions in the data, it is hard to argue with the idea of how many people have actually eliminated menstrual shame without concrete data to support it. Second, regarding the menstrual revolution brought about by the movie, many people blur the concept of menstrual shame and menstrual shyness. More than menstrual shame, there is also a segment of the population that believes that menstruation is part of privacy, so women have the right not to discuss it in public, and it is not because of shame about menstruation that is behind it. Therefore, in future studies, interviews with audiences who have seen the film documentaries and presentations or long-term studies are needed to concretize the effect of social media on breaking menstrual discrimination. On the other hand, menstrual shyness as an interfering research item should be illustrated with specific examples. This would make the study more accurate and representative.

Overall, based on the shame theory Brown previously pointed out, social media provide platforms for Muruganantham Arunachalam to share his experience through films, documentary and online speech. The movie and films visual elements and storytelling creates a positive impression on Muruganantham Arunachalam. The online speech presents his story in first-perspectives. The publicity of his experiences brings sense of belonging by other disadvantaged female and male who also faced the similar problems and concerns, thus echo a big social movement to break the menstrual shame.

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