



MANstruation: A cyberethnography of linguistic strategies of trans and nonbinary menstruators

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ABSTRACT

Trans and nonbinary experiences of menstruation are subject to menstrual discourse that is deeply gendered. Terms such as “feminine hygiene” and “women’s health” make trans and nonbinary people acutely aware that they fall outside of the ideal of the default menstruator. To better understand how such language affects menstruators who are not cis women and what alternative linguistic strategies they adopt, we conducted a cyberethnography of 24 YouTube videos created by trans and nonbinary menstruators, along with their 12,000-plus comments. We observed a range of menstrual experiences—dysphoria, tensions between femininity and masculinity, and transnormative pressures. Using grounded theory, we identified three distinct linguistic strategies vloggers adopted to navigate these experiences: (1) avoiding standard and feminizing language; (2) reframing language through masculinization; and (3) challenging transnormativity. The avoidance of standard and feminizing language, coupled with a reliance on vague and negative euphemisms, revealed feelings of dysphoria. Masculinizing strategies, on the other hand, navigated dysphoria through euphemisms—or even hyper-euphemisms—that showed an effort to reclaim menstruation to fit within the trans and nonbinary experience. Vloggers responded through tropes of hegemonic masculinity, using puns and wordplay, and sometimes relying on hypermasculinity and transnormativity. Transnormativity, however, can be polarizing, and vloggers and commenters who rejected stratification of trans and nonbinary menstruation challenged it. Taken together, these videos not only uncover an overlooked community of menstruators who demonstrate unique linguistic engagement with menstruation, but they also reveal destigmatization and inclusion strategies that can inform critical menstruation activism and research as a whole.

1. Introduction

In June 2020, J.K. Rowling tweeted a response to an article referring to “People Who Menstruate” (Sommer et al., 2020). Rowling (2020) wrote: “People who menstruate. I’m sure there used to be a word for those people.... Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?”—implying that broader language erases women’s lived reality. The backlash to Rowling’s thinly veiled transphobia was swift. Phrases such as “people who menstruate” or “menstruator” are used intentionally to recognize the multiplicity of bodies that menstruate and to challenge a discourse that centers cisgender women (Rydstrom, 2020). Common terms such as “women’s health” and “feminine hygiene” exclude people who are not women. A popular phrase in the burgeoning field of critical menstrual studies states that “not all women menstruate, and not all menstruators

are women” (Bobel, 2010: 158). The latter part invokes the plurality of menstrual experiences across the spectrum of gender identity, including transgender (hereafter “trans”) and nonbinary people who were assigned female at birth (AFAB), some of whom identify as masculine of center or masc. Menstruation may play a significant role in how menstruators experience their interactions with healthcare providers, their lived reality in a society dominated by a binary, cisnormative understanding of gender and sex, and their understandings of selfhood and identity.

Representations of menstruators largely neglect these experiences, favoring instead cisgender women as default menstruators. Our social world operates on norms that suppose an essentialist sex and gender binary. Yet, gender is socially constructed: performed, sedimented, and reproduced through social interactions and discourses within a

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heterosexual, cisgender matrix (Butler, 1993), within which trans, nonbinary and genderqueer individuals have to contest their identity and bodies.

Menstruation itself is stigmatized and considered abject. Much of the literature has dealt with the negative implications of menstrual stigma (see e.g., Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2013; Ussher, 2006). Nonetheless, gendered norms yield standards of “menstrunormativity” that confer relative privilege to cisgender women (Persdotter, 2020). Menstruation can be distressing as a conventionally gendered experience tied to social expectations of “what it is to be feminine and a woman” (Lowik, 2020: 2). Because of their gender identity and their menstruating status, trans and nonbinary menstruators are multiply stigmatized, pathologized, and marginalized.

While small, there is a growing body of literature about trans and nonbinary menstruation that addresses gender dysphoria and menstruation (e.g., Chrisler et al., 2016; Schwartz et al., 2022; Weiselberg; menstrual suppression as a response (e.g., Carswell and Roberts, 2017; Pradhan and Gomez-Lobo, 2019); and physiological effects of hormone therapy (e.g., White HughtoJaclyn and Reisner, 2016). Validating the emerging research, the Standards of Care for the Health of Transgender and Gender Diverse People Version 8 acknowledge that menstruation can contribute to worsening dysphoria in adolescents and gives guidance on menstrual suppression alongside recommendations to use patient-directed gender-inclusive language (Coleman et al., 2022: S54–S55, 5116). A few studies have explored the experiences and attitudes of trans and nonbinary menstruators in relation to the perceived default connection between menstruation, femininity, and womanhood (Chrisler et al., 2016; Frank, 2020; Lane et al., 2021; Lowik, 2020; Ragosta et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2022), and suggest it is a source of tension that may contribute to dysphoria (Chrisler et al., 2016; Frank, 2020). However, S.E. Frank (2020: 15) notes that dysphoria does not originate from menstrual bleeding itself but from the social norms constructing menstruation as female. A.J. Lowik (2020: 7) adds that not all trans and nonbinary menstruators experience a sense of distress, complicating “the dominant narrative ... that menstruation is always triggering of gender dysphoria for trans people” and that menstrual suppression must be the remedy of choice. Thus, there is a need to unpack and critique menstrual discourse to recognize “multiplicities of menstrual realities” (Persdotter, 2020: 367) and to understand how trans and nonbinary perspectives counter menstrunormativity and help degender and depathologize menstruation (Rydstrom, 2020).

Literature that engages with language highlights the pervasiveness of cisnormative language, from bathroom signage and official forms to “the ritualized celebration of fetal sex declaration” (Stroumsa and Wu, 2018: 585–586). Ragosta et al. found that trans and nonbinary respondents expressed some discomfort with SRH terms including the term “period” and used replacements such as “bleeding,” “shark week,” and “cycle” (2021).

Our study focuses specifically on menstrual language. We used grounded theory for a cyberethnography of public transvlogs, such that the language creators chose themselves was our starting point. We not only identify the terms menstruators adopt, but critically examine the context of their use asking how language is used and what it conveys. We rely on insights from feminist and queer theory and sociolinguistics to analyze and explain word choice. We find that vloggers employ varying linguistic strategies that defeminize, degender, and sometimes masculinize the experience as well as strategies that challenge transnormative assumptions, reflecting the complexity and diversity of lived experiences within the trans and nonbinary community.

2. Language matters

That a phrase such as “people who menstruate” can trigger so much debate shows how much language matters. As early as the 1940s, researchers examined menstrual euphemisms and theorized about their function and significance (Ernster, 1975; Joffe, 1948; Kissling, 1996).

Colloquial expressions for menstruation reflect, maintain, and reinforce cultural attitudes about menstruation—many of them negative (Ernster, 1975; Newton, 2016; Tomlinson, 2021). Common euphemisms function as avoidance strategies and reflect internalized menstrual stigma (Kissling, 1996). Menstruators go to drastic efforts to hide and conceal menstruation, physically and linguistically (Jackson and Falmagne, 2013: 379; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2013: 11). However, vernacular also allows individuals to make menstruation “their own” (Newton, 2016: 136) and opens up spaces for activism, which may be significant for trans and nonbinary people who menstruate.

The perspective of trans and nonbinary menstruators can be understood as “outsider within,” as coined by Black feminist scholar Patricia Collins (1986: S15). Collins (1986) explains that “outsiders within occupy a special place—they become different people, and difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established ... insiders to see” (1986: S29). Kristen Schilt (2006) translates this to trans identity, arguing that trans men have an outsider-within perspective allowing them to see how gendered disparities are maintained. The interweaving theories of queer linguistics and trans identity yield immense potential in analyzing how trans and nonbinary people speak to and about their menstrual experiences as “outsiders within”.

Theorists from the fields of linguistics and sociology have long recognized the connection between gender and language. Norms emerge in and through speech practices, “mediated by ideologies postulating a culturally situated and historically anchored relation between identity and language” (Greco, 2012: 569). “Radical linguistic constructivism,” as coined by Judith Butler (1993: 5), posits that the subjective experience of individuals in the material world is constructed and experienced through language (see also Barrett, 2014: 197–198). Language can index or challenge gender. Many trans and nonbinary people, who are so often excluded in dominant speech practices, are highly sensitive to language (Kulick, 2019: 1–2). Queer linguistics challenges and deconstructs binary systems for categorizing sex, gender, and sexuality (Davis et al., 2014: 1). Because of their locations on the margins of gender and language, trans people hold power as linguistic agents (Kulick, 2019: 3), and they actively use language as a resource for identity and community formation (Barrett, 2014: 199; Butler, 1993).

Apart from practical effects, such as more welcoming healthcare and media environments (Stroumsa and Wu, 2018: 587), language use by and for trans and nonbinary menstruators offers the possibility to disrupt “conventional gender discourse” (Stone, 2006: 165). Yet, so far, we have limited knowledge of how trans and nonbinary people speak about their menstrual experience. Between menstrual stigma, threat of harm, and often intense discomfort that trans and nonbinary menstruators face, it is challenging to access conversations on an already-deemed “private” topic in public, though there is immense benefit in doing so. Our cyberethnography of YouTube videos by trans and nonbinary menstruators, along with their viewer comments, locates a platform where community conversations are happening. Relying on these conversations allows us to begin filling the trans and nonbinary menstrual language gap. We ask: What relationship do trans and nonbinary menstruators have to the dominant discourse about menstruation? What linguistic choices do they make to talk about their menstrual experiences? What role do constructions of gender play in these linguistic strategies?

We find that menstruators adopt a range of linguistic strategies that allow them to avoid explicitly referring to menstruation, to reject the femininity associated with menstruation, and to masculinize the experience. Menstruators reflect extensively on their choice of language—how it relates to feelings about their body and its potential impact on others. Some challenge transnormative notions of expected gender dysphoria. The diversity of language choices behind this language contributes to the broader narrative that can inform menstrual activism.

3. Methodology

The internet provides a cyberspace for interaction (Rotman and Preece, 2010) that many LGBTQIA+ individuals embrace as a place for (relatively) safe identity development, self-representation, and community building. Online spaces can be sites of queer resistance, making publicly visible what cis-heteronormativity would rather hide (Ashford, 2009; de Lima Lopes 2022; Rothbaum et al. 2022).

As a method of inquiry rooted in the internet, cyberethnography is nonstatic and reflective to accommodate the rapidly changing “computer-mediated environment” (Robinson and Schulz, 2009: 696). YouTube is one forum LGBTQIA+ individuals use to build community, discuss challenges, and connect on an open platform. “Transvlogs”, or serial video blogs made by trans and nonbinary creators, have become popular for documenting and sharing one’s gender transition (Bosom and Medico, 2021; Eckstein, 2018; Miller, 2019). Their ubiquity has contributed to the creation of a user-created “living” archive of trans corporeality and identity” (Raun, 2015: 702), which we used as a source of data to investigate language use by trans and nonbinary menstruators as one tool through which they conceive of and construct their menstrual identities. We chose this data source for a number of reasons, including the publicly accessible nature of the vlogs, access to informal community interaction and unprompted language use, and to avoid distress other methods (e.g., interviews) might elicit.

In June 2020 we selected, transcribed, and coded videos—and thousands of accompanying viewer comments—about menstruation by trans and nonbinary vloggers. We created seventeen combinations of search terms, consisting of the words “menstruation,” “period,” “transgender,” “nonbinary,” “FTM,” “AFAB,” “men,” and “trans.” While we recognize the shortcoming of using standard language as an entry point, even this strategy yielded rich insights into informal and nonstandard language use. We conducted the search directly within the YouTube search bar. For each keyword combination, we screened the first fifty results and found often-overlapping, sometimes distinct results ultimately yielding twenty-four videos by nineteen distinct vloggers, posted between August 2015 and February 2020. Videos ranged from three to eleven min and included 0 to 3900 comments (with V004 being the most discussed video), totaling 12,795 comments.

We applied the following inclusion and exclusion criteria: We included videos created by trans men, transmasculine individuals, and nonbinary, masculine of center gender-fluid, and genderqueer individuals, all of whom were AFAB. We excluded videos by trans women, acknowledging that while there are existing conversations about their relationship to and experience of a menstrual cycle, they could vary significantly from the AFAB trans and nonbinary experience and would warrant their own study. We determined the vloggers’ gender identities based on their self-identification. While vloggers identified across a spectrum, most were trans men or aligned themselves with masculinity. Of the nineteen vloggers, fourteen identified as trans men and five as nonbinary, genderqueer, or agender, or used they/them pronouns; two of the latter specified being masc or masculine-aligned. We refer to the group of vloggers as “trans and nonbinary menstruators” to be inclusive of individuals who identify as one or both. We eliminated commercials, product promotions (unless integrated into the video itself), and videos from pop culture and news sites. We also excluded any videos whose primary purpose was transphobic or exclusionary, identifiable by content that invalidated trans existence, trans menstruation, or otherwise attacked trans and nonbinary individuals. We uploaded each video into a software (otter.ai) to create a transcript of the audio content and then manually edited the transcript for accuracy. We also used a software (exportcomments.com) to export the comments underneath each video.

YouTube is a public forum; the vlogs attracted extensive views and comments. However, the distinction between public and private on social media is blurred, and the transvlogs are geared toward a specific audience with whom the vloggers shared their personal experience. In alignment with principles of internet research ethics (Burles and Bally,

2018; Franzke et al., 2020), we therefore anonymized the vloggers and commenters by assigning each video a code (V001–V024).

We used NVivo 12 for coding and conducted our analysis in accordance with Kathy Charmaz’s (2006) principles of grounded theory. Based on the first engagement with the data, our initial draft codebook was expansive and covered categories including challenges, dysphoria, community, individual emotions, and language use. RK presented codebooks and memos to ITW and LCH to discuss the further development. Given our interest in the intersection of gender and language, our final codebook focused on language use and its implications for menstrual experiences. We began the process of theoretical integration (Charmaz, 2006: 46) by creating a memo for each code and brainstorming theories that fit the patterns we identified in the data. We asked ourselves questions about form and function: How does trans and nonbinary discourse linguistically engage with menstruation? Why might a certain term appear frequently, or be notably absent? We sorted through the language codes to create a list of every term. RK and ITW divided this list into themes, from which we engaged in axial coding (Charmaz, 2006: 60) to subsequently align themes with linguistic strategies that facilitated reframing menstruation. These included (1) avoiding standard and feminizing language; (2) reframing language through masculinization; and (3) challenging transnormativity.

3.1. A note on positionality

It is important for us as researchers to recognize our positionalities in reference to the individuals from which we draw our analysis, in particular given the long history of pathologization of trans and nonbinary individuals in and through academia. ITW and LHC identify as cisgender women, while RK identifies as nonbinary. These videos, created by trans and nonbinary individuals and publicly posted, allowed us to learn from, observe, and analyze language use without subjecting individuals to interviews. We recognize that objectivity is impossible when coding and thus align ourselves with Charmaz’s (2006: 10) articulation of grounded theory as an approach that “explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an *interpretive* portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it.” Although the videos and comments certainly play a role in our interpretations, ultimately our analysis is our own. We remain incredibly grateful to the vloggers who spoke about their personal experiences so honestly and vulnerably.

3.2. Limitations

Our research holds several limitations. Given that most vloggers identify as trans men or align themselves with masculinity, our data reflects a masculine bias, leaving room for further study of menstruators who identify as androgynous, femme, or are otherwise un-aligned with masculinity. We have minimal access to demographic data, largely due to the nature of transvlogs. While this means that there are certain analytical questions of intersectional identities we cannot fully explore (such as race, ethnicity, geographic location, and exact age), we believe that given the dearth of research in this area the benefits of our approach outweigh the costs particularly regarding the labor (emotional and otherwise) that an interview-based study would require. This leaves space for future research on vernacular across demographics. That said, regarding their age we can deduct that the vloggers all appear young. Age and the presence or absence of medical transition can have an impact on dysphoria, attitudes toward self, and attitudes toward menstruation (Becker et al., 2018; White Hughto and Reisner, 2016). Also based on appearance, the videos primarily show white vloggers, which may specifically reflect primarily white language choices and generally exemplify dynamics of an “unmarked norm of whiteness,” as Martino et al. (2021: 769) suggest. This leaves absent alternate linguistic strategies by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and signals a need for deep investigation of intersectionality in trans and nonbinary menstrual experiences. Likewise, videos appeared to be all in US/UK English,

excluding experiences from other regions or countries as well as those expressed in other languages.

In addition, YouTube is a platform and informal community space with an inherently performative nature (Raun, 2015), and language reflects this. Most vlogs are intended to convey personal stories informally to an audience of largely sympathetic individuals sharing some of their identities and experiences, which could lend itself to vernacular rather than “formal” language about menstruation and disallows us to draw conclusions about language use in other settings and with other audiences and interlocutors.

4. Linguistic strategies to reframe menstruation

We identified eighty-five euphemisms and terms—many of which were unique—that trans and nonbinary menstruators used to refer to

menstruation (see Fig. 1). We discuss these euphemisms in clusters connected to linguistic strategies, including (1) avoiding standard and feminizing language; (2) reframing as masculinizing; and (3) challenging transnormativity. These strategies reflect trans and nonbinary experiences of menstruation, dysphoria, tensions between femininity and masculinity, and transnormative pressures. Reliance on vague and negative euphemisms while avoiding standard and feminizing language reflects feelings of dysphoria. Masculinizing strategies, on the other hand, navigate dysphoria *through* euphemisms—or even hyper-euphemisms—that engage in notions of menstruation as both abject as experienced within trans and nonbinary menstruating bodies. Transnormativity affects the linguistic strategies that some adopt but is also challenged by vloggers and commenters who reject stratification of trans and nonbinary menstruation. Thus, language functions in many diverse ways—each valuable for articulating an inclusive menstrual



Fig. 1. Visualization of 85 identified euphemisms and terms used in transvlogs by trans and nonbinary menstruators to refer to menstruation.

experience.

4.1. Avoiding standard and feminizing language

Vloggers and commenters employed euphemisms and indexicals to avoid standard language and terms perceived as feminizing. We explore these strategies in the context of the compounded stigma that trans and nonbinary menstruators face and in relation to dysphoria.

4.1.1. Euphemisms and random word use

Some vloggers relied on common euphemisms—terms such as “time of the month.” Likely connected to the cyclical nature of moons, some individuals chose phrases such as “blood moon,” “moonsickness,” and “moon moon time.” References to the color of blood included “The Red Death,” “The Crimson Fever,” “Code Red,” and “drank too much red kool-aid.” Notably, these phrases are relatively gender-neutral and vague, cueing an experience without gender-laden specifics. Other euphemisms, such as “the monster of the month,” “death week,” “a bloody cunt problem,” and most explicitly “that monthly thing that people don’t usually like when they’re trans,” were overtly negative.

While some euphemisms were similar to those cis women use, others were novel and unique. A phrase several commenters used was “Voldemort week,” citing (ironically, given her rejection of gender-neutral menstrual language) the evil Lord Voldemort from J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books because of his tagline, “he who shall not be named.” Other strategies included seemingly random highly individual-specific terms with no direct connection to menstruation, such as “gorpflob” and “Mr. Melon Man.” One commenter indicated that “my period buzzword with my parents is ‘chocolate’” (V004). When communication about menstruation is necessary but uncomfortable, having a pre-established code word dissociated from recognizable (and possibly gendered) menstrual language can be helpful. Using an absurd word may bring humor and lighten the experience. One commenter explained the word “penguin,” stating: “It used to be a sort of inside joke, where trans guys ... knew what it meant, but cis people were just confused Made for some good laughs” (V004). Thus, using “penguin” serves a dual conversational function: inclusion via a common code and exclusion of cisgender people.

4.1.2. Minimal use of standard language and replacement through indexicals

Euphemisms often replaced standard language. Although terms such as “menstruation” and “period” appeared, they were noticeably sparse. Fewer than half of the videos and comments used the terms “menstruation” or “menstrual” at all, and most that did primarily used them in reference to menstrual cups or other products. “Period” was the most common “standard” term but was used primarily in video titles and descriptions to establish context, often alongside a disclaimer of discomfort with the term. Many vloggers seemed to settle for it as a commonly understood term (among cis people) rather than deliberately choosing to say “period.” For instance, a commenter on V014 wrote: “I will type ‘period’ but only online and becuz it’s kinda the ‘proper’ word for it.”

With this active negotiation of language, vloggers and commenters demonstrated metalinguistic awareness—or “the ability to reflect upon and manipulate the structural features of spoken language, treating language itself as an object of thought” (Tunmer and Herriman, 1984: 12). Individuals reflected on their linguistic choices and their meanings. Out of the twenty-four videos, thirteen included a trigger warning or disclaimer about the video’s content. V004 spoke about recommending alternate terms to describe one’s period and then apologized for his own contradiction: “And I’m really sorry that I’ve said it so much in this video, it’d just be very difficult to avoid the word.” With the exception of introductory remarks and trigger warnings, vloggers largely avoided “standard language.”

Apart from euphemisms, vloggers and commenters relied on

pronouns and determiners, implication, and tone; or they skirted language entirely. One of the most common avoidance techniques was to use pronouns or determiners such as “it,” “that,” “that/those thing/s,” and “all of that.” In standard language, pronouns replace a term once it has been introduced; however, they can also replace nouns that have never been specified, most commonly using “it.” Similarly, determiners reference a specific object, such as “Hey, I hate *this topic* but I feel like I should talk about *it* anyway” (V019, emphasis added). Both types fall under the category of “indexicals” in linguistics—terms that refer to the relationship between objects and their context (Hanks, 1999: 124). Trans and nonbinary menstruators used indexicals to remain as vague as possible, often without ever naming “it” (menstruation) at all.

In a number of instances, individuals explicitly referenced an uncomfortable relationship with language; for example, one commenter wrote: “omg i hate every word that has to deal with *that*” (V014, emphasis added). This individual expressed negativity both toward language and “that”—an indexical reference to menstruation, intentionally replacing specific language with general pronouns to avoid terms that cause discomfort.

V012 offered an even more explicit indication of the language struggles that trans people face. He said, “So today’s video is going to be about ... uh ... yeah. Okay, I don’t know how to say it.” He stumbled while trying to verbalize the topic; his subsequent reflection recognizing his own linguistic limitations highlighted one of the primary tensions in discourse about trans and nonbinary menstruation. Yes, words for menstruation exist. But they are gendered and have triggering potential for many menstruators. “Standard language” is not an option for all menstruators. Thus, trans and nonbinary individuals who seemed to “not know how to say it” engaged in avoidance strategies.

4.1.3. Compounded stigma and dysphoria

In general, euphemisms as avoidance reflect internalized stigma. The transmission of euphemisms involves learning “not only of the terms themselves, but of the social expectations of pain, irritability, and moodiness” (Ernster, 1975: 12) that they carry with them. Iris Marion Young (2005: 111) argues that menstrual stigma places cisgender menstruating women “in the closet” about their menstrual status; “somatophobia and misogyny continue to hold over women in some circumstances the threat of being ‘outed’ as menstruators, sometimes with serious consequences to their self-esteem or opportunities for benefits.”

If cisgender menstruators are in the menstrual closet, then trans and nonbinary menstruators are in a closet *within* the closet. They may experience compounded stigma and threats to their personal safety, choosing coded terms because of exacerbated safety risks (Chrisler et al., 2016: 1240). Anti-trans stigma is widespread (White Hughto et al., 2015), and gender nonconformity and being a non-normative menstruator increase risk of violence, hate crimes, and discrimination (Stotzer, 2009). This exchange between two commenters took place in response to V001, who talked about being self-conscious about buying products in public:

Commenter 1: “Please don’t feel self conscious about being a guy buying feminine products. This isn’t the 50s!”

Commenter 2 retorted: “that is a very idealist point of view ... trans people ... are murdered everyday by men (statistically). Living in constant fear of being discriminated against, beaten or worse for something as simple as opening a pad or using the restroom is unfortunately a very real threat. To say the problem doesn’t exist because we’re living in some fictional progressive utopia is dangerous misinformation.”

This exchange addresses the compounded stigma and safety risks that trans people experience when faced with structures that marginalize them and put them in harm’s way.

Additionally, many vloggers and commenters distinctly articulated

their negativity as rooted in dysphoria. V019 said: “Being on your period generally sucks, I guess every cis girl can confirm that, but it sucks even more when you’re trans.” Others expressed similar sentiments, citing dysphoria as making the trans or nonbinary menstrual experience not just painful and inconvenient, but traumatic. V021 narrated how he used to feel suicidal from menstruation-related dysphoria. A commenter wrote, “I feel like I’ve been cut in two” (V021). Another commenter described that “my dysphoria combined with the wave of hormones just starts banging pots and pans in my mind yelling ‘UR BODY IS WRONG UR BODY IS WRONG UR BODY IS WRONG UR BO—’” to which six individuals responded, including one who wrote, “i have never related more to anything in my life” (V003).

Many vloggers drew a connection between gender dysphoria and language. V009 explained: “I know that’s one of the things that frustrates me the most with my dysphoria is seeing how everyone else talks about their periods ... because society keeps telling us what a period is and what it means for people who are assigned female at birth.” Individuals frequently cited the gendering of menstrual products—“feminine products” marketed “for women,” located in flowery, perfumed, pink and purple packaging in “feminine hygiene” aisles—as dysphoria-inducing (V009). Such aggressive gendering indexes menstruation to femininity, which many trans and nonbinary menstruators either do not relate to or actively reject.

4.1.4. The simultaneously abject and overbearing feminine

Femininity is a complex construct, within which menstruation sits awkwardly and paradoxically. It is commonly framed as the smelly, earthy, leaky process intrinsically linked to (cis) women’s bodies, yet it renders them less feminine, falling short of conventional ideals of attractiveness (Jackson and Falmagne, 2013: 380). Menstruation must be overpowered by deodorizing, cleaning, and containing the body (Ussher, 2006). Such attitudes imply that menstruation is a sign of weakened femininity; yet trans and nonbinary menstruators appear to associate it with the opposite—a hyperbolic, emphasized signal of femininity that taps into shame rooted in the perceived incongruence between their sexed bodies and their gender identities as the result of pervasive cisnormativity.

Menstruation has been used to justify the essential sex/gender binary, asserting it as an undeniable and inherent marker of difference between female-assigned and male-assigned people (Grosz, 1994; Shail, 2005). As a result, trans and non-binary individuals associate menstruation and its standard language with femininity. In fact, “menstruation” seems so tied up with femininity that even attempts at gender-neutral language cannot change that. Noticeably, none of the vloggers or commenters used the term “menstruator.” One person used the phrase “people who menstruate,” and eight persons used phrases such as “people who have periods.” While many menstrual activists and scholars (including ourselves) perceive and use such language as gender-neutral, rejection of the standard language of “menstruation” seems deeply ingrained—at least in the informal forum of YouTube. It is not just terms such as “women’s health” or “feminine hygiene” that seem dysphoria-inducing; menstruation itself and language deriving from it are marked as feminine.

Vloggers and commenters expressed how menstruation constantly contested their perception of self. V009 said: “There were people in my life that were transphobic that told me how could I think that I was a different gender when Mother Nature herself told me via my period that I was a woman. Every single time I had my period, I had that constant reminder to me of this is proof that you are a woman.... This is something that makes you a girl.” Although trans and nonbinary menstruators share with cis menstruators the burden of menstruation as abject, they seem to interpret it differently as not a weakened, but an overbearing femininity and constant reminder that they fail to meet standards of menstrunormativity.

4.2. Masculinizing strategies

Possibly in response to indexing menstrual language as feminine, many vloggers and commenters strategically turned to (newly invented) hyper-euphemisms that referenced men or masculinity.

4.2.1. References to men or male anatomy

Several individuals referenced the anatomy of male-assigned bodies, possibly serving gender-affirming purposes. Examples included: “crap I’m bleeding from my butt again,” “we bleed copiously from our man parts,” and “my undropped testicles are bleeding.” By reframing the menstrual experience as one that can be experienced with “man parts,” the speakers were better able to relate menstruation to their own gender identity. This reframing gave some individuals a feeling of power, even joy. For example, a comment under V007 read: “You’re bleeding manly blood from your manly man cave.” Other commenters replied: “YES. THE POWER” and “This fucking made my day.” This statement purposefully asserted how “manly” menstruation is—as if repetitively driving the point home made it more affirming.

Many individuals altered standard language through puns to emphasize masculinity or non-normative menstruation. Examples included: “queeriod,” “meriod,” “MANstruation,” “MENstrual cycle,” “duderus,” and “manly hygiene.” Such wordplay is a lighthearted but surprisingly effective counternarrative to the feminized status of menstruation. Having been left out of the conversation, these menstruators reclaimed menstrual terminology for themselves. One commenter replied to the use of “MENstrual cycle,” “Oh my god. This actually helps me to deal with it” (V004). This indicates the implicit power of language and how sharing this language builds community among trans and nonbinary menstruators.

4.2.2. Battle and war metaphors

Videos and comments also demonstrated a preference for euphemisms with strong masculine connotations, including references to bloodiness, wounds, warfare, and battles, which are typically associated with masculine scripts (Milani, 2014). References included “hemorrhage from places unmentionable,” “an old war wound that opens up and bleeds every month,” and “the blood sacrifice.” Such language hyperbolizes the bloody aspect of menstruation and conjures images of bloodshed. This might help individuals treat menstruation like an injury. For example, one commenter wrote: “I have to use gauze to stop the bleeding. That’s a fun way to deal with dysphoria” (V004). A reply—“I’m now using this as a coping mechanism”—directly adopted masculinized reframing techniques.

Videos and comments went beyond seeing wounds as gender-neutral; they associated blood with masculinity—even hyper-masculinity. Masculine tropes such as suffering through pain and toughing it out appeared in statements like these: “You’re a guy, bleeding, in pain. That’s damn tough stuff dude. Most guys can’t handle that” and, “it can actually be considered quite masculine: all the pain and gore, and how the uterus is by far the strongest muscle in the body, so I know I’m stronger than cis males” (V001). Several individuals used masculine-coded war metaphors such as “seppuku of the uterus.” One commenter argued: “Bleeding and feeling hellish pain for days sounds like something a viking warrior would go through” (V004). Another said, “I call my periods The battle, and I always vision myself as a warrior with battle wounds” (V020). By reflecting masculine scripts, these statements may symbolize individuals’ attempts to regain control as their gender identity battles against an unwanted, uncontrollable biological process. Battles express a feeling of internal struggle often connected to dysphoria while allowing menstruators a masculinity not typically associated with menstruation. While such metaphors may be affirming for trans and nonbinary menstruators who prioritize masculinity, others challenged these views, as we will discuss below.

4.2.3. Natural and mythical creatures

Additional euphemisms referred to natural or mythical creatures that signal masculinity, with “shark week” being particularly prominent. Although cis menstruators also use “shark week,” which rose to menstrual prominence in a 2005 Urban Dictionary definition (“shark week” 2005), the videos and comments indicated that trans and nonbinary menstruators have adopted it as part of community vernacular. One commenter stated, “it seems to be a common Enby thing” (V004). Another commenter said, “Shark week?! Omg xD that’s perfect.all bloody and I could kill you” (V014). Sharks, blood, and killing are generally associated with masculine traits, thus likely part of the appeal. Two other popular mythical creatures were werewolves and Satan. Phrases such as “Satan’s flood,” “Devil’s waterfalls,” and “forced sacrifice to Satan” connect menstruation to the often-hypermasculinized figure of the hellish underworld. Similarly, werewolves are usually portrayed as masculine, vicious creatures to be feared. They undergo a human-to-wolf transformation when the moon is full—a cyclical pattern just like menstruation. Hypermasculinization combined with their perceived disguise may be what makes werewolves attractive hyper-euphemisms for trans and nonbinary menstruators, who may feel like they are able to “pass” save for “werewolf week.”

4.2.4. Masculinization and transnormativity

Some individuals find affirmation in wordplay and hyper-euphemisms based on masculine scripts, upending the association with femininity. They may overcompensate in reaction to a hyper-feminized event to overcome the disconnect between how they feel about themselves and how they assume they are “read” in the world (Seamont, 2018: 73). In our study, the menstrual hyper-euphemisms stand out for their exaggerated masculine tropes. In contrast to avoidance strategies that reflect negativity, masculinization strategies allowed individuals to reclaim menstruation and make it “their own” (Newton, 2016: 136) by carving out space in menstrual discourse. One commenter wrote: “one thing that really helps is seeing guys/masculine people talk about it. Like I’ll feel really gross and kind of dysphoric when I’m on mine. But then I find a video like this where you’re totally masculine and you’re just casually telling it like it is about periods ... just watching this actually makes me feel so much less shame about it” (V004). By tapping into socially indexed aspects of masculinity, he and other menstruators engaged in an existing hegemonic social construction—including at moments its pitfalls—yet also offered a specific and potentially more inclusive paradigm rooted in their specific menstrual experience. While both trans men and nonbinary individuals used such strategies, much of this language is intentionally masculine and may not feel ideal for a nonbinary person who does not identify with masculinity.

Masculinity is part of large-scale social structures that are inherently relational (Connell, 2005: 39). Not only are there diverse masculinities, but relationships exist between these different masculinities that privilege “the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations” (Connell, 2005: 76). Trans and nonbinary masculinity is viewed as subordinate under this frame (Parent and Bradstreet, 2017: 290), influenced by the dominant sociocultural discourse that privileges cisgender men. Because language is embedded in hegemonic social, cultural, and ideological contexts (Lawson, 2020: 420), meaning-making of masculinity is “expressed in language through features of language indexical of cultural discourses of masculinity” (Kiesling, 2007: 661). Language shows us how vloggers and commenters linguistically navigated a context where they earn masculinity by achieving normative ideals.

The language chosen may reflect pressure to conform to standards of masculinity coupled with medical standards of transness (Bettcher, 2014; Cromwell, 2006; Vipond, 2015). Violence is central to hegemonic white Western masculinity, tying masculinity to nationalism, expansion, and solidification of patriarchy (Connell, 2005). Trans and masc nonbinary menstruators draw upon these masculine scripts in their

hyper-euphemisms, perhaps as a way to index power and dominance (Kiesling 2207: 660) in a realm where the broader norms marginalize their masculinity. At times, this may cause inadvertent engagement in transnormative discourse.

Transnormativity, as with similar concepts such as heteronormativity, homonormativity, cisnormativity, or menstrunormativity (Persdotter, 2020), is a social phenomenon that hierarchically stratifies a category of people and in doing so ascribes value to certain forms of being over others. Transnormativity was institutionalized by the medical field and regarded as necessitating certain recognizable narratives both within and outside of the trans community for justification and legitimization (Billings and Urban 1982; Stone, 2006; Vipond, 2015). Transnormativity privileges trans people whose gender identity falls within the gender binary and who have medically and/or physically transitioned, marginalizing those whose behaviors, identification, or physicality do not align (Johnson, 2016; Jones, 2019). Some accounts of trans identity confer more “authenticity” than others, effectively normalizing transnormative ideals by gatekeeping access to medical care, social/cultural acceptance, and formal recognition (Garrison, 2018). These prescriptions are linked to biomedical transition—influenced by the pervasive “wrong body model” (Bettcher, 2014) and the privileging of passing through presentations of the body and/or gender expressions that align with sociocultural expectations of masculinity (Catalano and Chase, 2015; Rubin, 2003). Thus, pressures to be “trans enough” come from a number of external sources and can quickly become internalized, influencing language and discourse. Many vloggers addressed how biomedical transition decisions impacted their preferred language about menstruation. One vlogger spoke about how after he got top surgery, “I started to feel a lot more comfortable with myself, and I think that’s why I’m okay now with getting my period, and even calling it my period. Like when I was 13, 14, 15, I did not want to call it my period” (V020).

Although most research indicates that trans men rely on hyper-masculinity when they perceive themselves as insufficiently externally read as their gender (Catalano and Chase, 2015: 423; Rubin, 2003), menstruation appears to be a threat of a different nature. While not externally visible (due to the imperative of menstrual concealment), menstruation is about the body, and for trans people, embodied experiences matter significantly (Rubin, 2003: 11). As such, some trans and nonbinary menstruators react in hypermasculine ways in response to a threat that originates internally but is shaped by societal expectations.

When engaging in transnormative masculine narratives, there is a risk that judgments about authenticity—of self and others—“replicate ways in which oppression ... evolves into internalized oppression through the concept of transnormativity” (Catalano and Chase, 2015: 419). As Josefin Persdotter (2020: 358) argues regarding menstrunormativity, we always create new menstrual monsters. Discourse about trans menstruators has veered in the direction of a trans menstrunormate: the individual who was assigned female at birth, identifies with masculinity, experiences intense dysphoria around menstruation because it is gendered feminine, and is actively undergoing medical intervention to suppress or eliminate menstruation. In this way, the perceived discordant experience of trans menstruation is trans-normatively naturalized (Ruin, 2016). In response, individuals may attempt to authenticate themselves in line with this normative ideal through hypermasculine tropes. This fails to capture other, less-transnormative menstrual experiences, including by those who do not align with masculinity, who cannot or choose not to undergo medical transition, or who do not experience dysphoria about menstruation.

4.3. Challenging transnormativity

While many individuals adopted masculinizing strategies in response to dysphoria, others challenged such strategies and the notion of transnormativity. These challenges took several forms, including questioning the expectation of dysphoria, validating the experiences of trans

and nonbinary menstruators who do not undergo medical intervention, and normalizing that non-cis women menstruate.

4.3.1. Contesting the assumption of dysphoria and the normativity of biomedical intervention

Dysphoria about menstruation is real and painful for some—but not all—trans and nonbinary menstruators. Several exchanges revealed this tension. One commenter accused V002, who discussed using tampons, of not being “trans enough.” They wrote: “If u were really trans u wouldn’t be able to stick a tampon up your hole cuz of dysphoria.” Another commenter challenged this: “each trans person deals with this is [sic] their own way ... and it is not our place to judge whether or not someone else is trans.” V005 stated, “you don’t have to be like, I hate this. If you don’t hate it, you know, you’re still trans, you’re still trans enough.” These exchanges reveal how the question of being “trans enough” is central to perceiving how one “should” experience menstruation. Those who do not conform to this expectation are sometimes silenced by the loud narrative of dysphoria. Challenges to these expectations stand as important reminders that the experience of transness and menstruation is far from monolithic.

Another area of normative discussion is the perception that biomedical transition must be a goal. Yet, not all trans and nonbinary menstruators fall into this category. Testosterone is expensive and not always available, it does not always suppress menstruation, and some individuals do not want to take it. V003 described how “a lot of people have a misconception that ... all of us are on testosterone. But the truth is, a lot of us still [experience periods] when we’re pre-T or we don’t want to go on T or if you’re like me, and you’ve been on T for a year or three months and somehow you’re still bleeding.” Several others experienced a “revenge of the period” while on testosterone; even while undergoing medical intervention, bodies do not react the same. Another commenter explained, “i don’t think taking androgens would turn out well for me. So I just take a mind over matter approach to menstruation” (V021).

In response to the argument that a person who dislikes their period should get a hysterectomy, several pointed out that this is not what all people want, even if it were to relieve dysphoria. V007 spoke about how upset he was to get his period after more than eight years on testosterone but also explained that he did not want to remove his uterus. A supportive commenter told him: “i totally get [it], like you said, we never know what the future will be about and it’s always good to keep options. Stay strong!” Two other vloggers received less supportive comments. One was asked why they did not just “get a hysto,” to which they replied: “you can’t ‘just’ get a hysto. lmao it’s a lot more complicated than that. Also, not every transmasculine person wants to be permanently sterilised because they have dysphoria around their period” (V003). It is easy to assume that biomedical intervention is always effective and desired, based on the dominant conversation. Yet, the reality is much more complex; the trans lived experience of “ambiguities and polyvocalities” (Stone, 2006: 166) so evident in the vlogs deserves to be recognized.

4.3.2. Degendering menstruation

Whether dysphoric or not, the majority of vloggers challenged normative discourse by degendering menstruation. They affirmed the “right” to be non-cis and menstruating, even if it goes against cis- and transnormativity. A frequent phrase stated, “this doesn’t make you/me any less of a man/any less nonbinary.” One commenter wrote: “Remember your body and your mind are very different. Gender and sex are different. You feel like a man ... and therefore you are. Thats all that matters.” (V007).

Many stressed the individuality of menstruators’ experiences while situating these experiences in society. V019 tied in the social gendering of menstruation, stating: “there’s also a social side to the subject because most people in our society think that only girls and women get the period and that’s an image that has to change.” A commenter added: “I get very annoyed by the complete trans erasure that goes along with

almost anything period related. If trans people were only represented in period ads and if periods and the people who get them were just talked about more I bet allot [sic] of trans/non-binary people would have an easier ... time” (V021). By stressing representations of menstruation through language and advertising, vloggers demonstrate that dysphoria is not innate but created by perceptions of the default menstruator. Interestingly, euphemisms are absent here. The vloggers use standard language, “period,” and straight talk to challenge the apparent contradictions between menstruation and gender and validate the experience for each other.

4.3.3. No monolithic trans menstrual experience

Not only do trans and nonbinary people experience menstruation in various normative and non-normative ways, but they are aware of the role of language in shaping these normativities. They identify language that perpetuates harm and intervene to reinterpret menstruation for themselves. “Period talk is powerful. It allows [one] ... to explore, disrupt and test the gender norms that surround menstruation” (Newton, 2016: 145). Genders are not disembodied, and AFAB trans and nonbinary embodiment carries with it the “physical knowledge” of menstrual experience that “results in a multi-perspectival embodiment” (Seamont, 2018: 17) that characterizes the *trans* or *nonbinary* construction of gender. Trans men are men, and nonbinary individuals are nonbinary, but they are men/nonbinary individuals of the trans and nonbinary experience. And although this group of vloggers may largely share a masculine identity, the ways they conceive of menstruation and speak about it varies; masculinities are always plural (Abelson and Kade, 2019: 167).

Given their identity and embodied experience, trans and nonbinary menstruators have an “outsider-within” perspective (see Collins, 1986; Schilt, 2006) on menstruation and menstrual discourse. They experience menstruation as individuals “inside” a shared embodied experience, and yet simultaneously “outside” because menstruation is gendered as female-assigned. Trans and nonbinary individuals respond to this outsider-within status in various, sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting ways. Some actively avoid feminizing terms or even any language that explicitly references menstruation; some develop hyper-euphemisms that reflect masculinity; and some seek to degender language. This multitude of experiences and strategies is evidenced by, as Collins (1989: S29) notes, some resolving the outsider-within tension by suppressing their difference and others actively leaving to remain outsiders. Some navigate these tensions by taking on a social activist, educational, or community-building role and view their vlogs as serving that purpose. V004 explained, “I really just want to talk about and raise awareness that some guys do have periods.” Many vloggers and commenters seem to value YouTube as a platform to exchange their experiences.

The vlogs also reveal processes of negotiating transnormativity. The engagement in transnormative scripts is revealing of hegemonic expectations. Konnelly (2021: 79) urges to flip from asking “How do trans people conform to normative structures” to “How have normative structures shaped how we understand trans people’s ways of being” (emphasis in original). This focus on the lived experience and way of being allows for a more nuanced examination of the many possible motivations for and strategic uses of language by trans people, including “the many creative forms of trans resistance” (78). From humor to hyper-euphemism, trans menstruators’ language interacts with trans norms in a variety of ways.

Ultimately, trans and nonbinary menstruators “are neither *essentially* gender normative nor *essentially* gender subversive. Judging [them] as a group by their commitment to the gender revolution obscures ... heterogeneity” (Rubin, 2003: 164). How trans and nonbinary menstruators linguistically respond to menstruation reveals processes of gender construction, or deconstruction, that allows them to cope with, challenge, and speak to their individual experience.

5. Conclusion

Language about menstruation is gendered. Trans and nonbinary menstruators know this and possess a level of metalinguistic awareness that allows them to deconstruct menstrual language and reformulate it to carve out spaces for themselves. Trans and nonbinary people are not monolithic; thus, the linguistic strategies they use operate differently. Avoidant language reflects menstrual stigma compounded with anti-trans stigma; it can also be a response to dysphoria due to the gendered nature of menstrual discourse. Masculinizing strategies respond by reframing menstruation through tropes of hegemonic masculinity, sometimes reaching the level of hypermasculinity and trans-normativity. Yet, intertwined with these strategies is engagement that seeks to counter normativities, emphasizing the diversity of the menstruating community and leveraging ideologies towards a number of trans resistance goals.

Incredible richness exists in the language that trans and nonbinary people use to talk about menstruation. From argot-like discourse such as “penguin” and using figurative terms such as “werewolf” to wordplay such as “MANstruation,” trans and nonbinary menstruators curate unique language for their needs and wants. They negotiate language in real time on YouTube, creating space for conversation that enables them to share their experiences and assert their identities. The publicness and performativity of YouTube transvlogs allows for the intimate to reach into the public, thus providing a platform for building community and engaging in menstrual activism.

Language has an invisible power that those included in the dominant conversation take for granted. Analyzing this space of connection, self-affirmation, and linguistic construction demonstrates how language affects and matters to trans and nonbinary menstruators. Language and its indexical relationship to gender norms is not static—“it is through circulation, repetition, and transformation that gender norms and practices are constructed and deconstructed, between a past that has made us and constrains us, and a future open to possibilities and creations” (Greco, 2012: 582). Trans and nonbinary menstrual discourse both engages in and challenges normative structures and assumptions, articulating a menstrual identity that sits “outside-within” cisgender constructions of gender and embodiment.

This research can be applied to inform inclusive language-practices in areas such as healthcare, education, media, social movements, and policy. Given the burgeoning developments in the menstrual space, we must examine how our language includes and excludes. When we justify the use of “girls and women” as “shorthand” to “increase readability” (PSI et al., 2021: 3), we engage in harmful cisnormative language and lose the diversity of the menstrual community. Menstrual activism that linguistically minimizes trans and nonbinary menstruation contributes to beliefs that trans activism and feminism are mutually exclusive, one allegedly leading to the erasure of the other (Ruiz, 2016). Some assume that we cannot achieve the goals of a feminist menstrual movement while degendering menstruation and that we cannot articulate trans and nonbinary experiences while affirming cis woman-indexed menstruation. To the contrary, we argue that it is the very presence of multiple lived experiences that produces the richness of inclusive language. Cis and trans menstruators experience menstruation within a context of external norms that dictate how bodies should look, how identities should be constructed. Trans menstruators are subjected to such norms in compounded ways with undeniable effects on wellbeing and safety, including harm inflicted by cisgender menstruators and “feminists” themselves. Cisgender menstruators have a long way to go in recognizing relative privilege and validating trans experiences, which does not erase cisgender experiences and the negative impacts of menstrual stigma. Language carries potential to destabilize stratifying stigma and norms of menstruation for all bodies; therefore, we must take all menstrual experiences, identities, and voices “out of the closet(s).” However messy in their embodiments, nuances, and intricacies, not all women menstruate and not all menstruators are women, and our language not

only ought to reflect but embrace these pluralities.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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