

Navigating the Cycle: The Lived Experiences of Menstruation on Academic Stress and Performance in University Students

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND	WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT	APPROACH
<p>Menstruation as a Universal Experience: Menstruation affects most individuals assigned female at birth, yet its influence on daily life, particularly in academic settings, remains underexplored (Clancy, 2023).</p> <p>Hormonal Impact: Hormonal fluctuations, especially in oestrogen and progesterone, significantly affect cognitive processes like memory, attention, and executive functioning (Sherwin, 2003).</p> <p>Impaired Performance: Up to 90% of menstruating individuals experience premenstrual or menstrual symptoms (Rapkin & Winer 2009), with many reporting that these symptoms impair their ability to focus, manage time, or perform academically (Lee et al., 2019).</p> <p>Stigma: Stigma surrounding menstruation often silences open dialogue, leaving students without the support they need to navigate menstruation challenges (Chrisler et al., 2016).</p>	<p>Gaps in research: While existing research highlights hormonal influences on memory, attention, and emotion (Sherwin, 2003), few studies have explored how students experience and manage these changes in the context of university life (Munro et al., 2021).</p> <p>Lived Experiences: This project addresses that gap by exploring how menstruation influences academic stress, motivation, and performance. Using a qualitative method—Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)—it centres the lived experiences of students who menstruate.</p> <p>Deeper understanding: By taking a holistic view, this study aims to deepen our understanding of the menstrual cycle's role in shaping academic engagement and success (Cunningham et al., 2024).</p>	<p>Design: To address this gap, the study adopts a qualitative design, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of menstruating university students (Smith et al., 2009).</p> <p>Broader approach: Semi-structured interviews will uncover personal coping strategies, emotional responses, and the broader academic and social pressures that shape their performance (Rapkin & Winer, 2009).</p> <p>Sensitive nature: To accommodate the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were given the choice to either complete a questionnaire or participate in an interview. This flexibility was crucial, as some participants may have felt uncomfortable discussing menstruation in a face-to-face interview due to social stigma surrounding the subject (Willis, 2007).</p>

PROCEDURE AND PARTICIPANTS	RESULTS; Three Emergent Key Themes
<p>Following ethics approval from Staffordshire University, recruitment materials were shared via Facebook and a Qualtrics survey. Participants completed a questionnaire or took part in Microsoft Teams interviews, both using the same 13 questions for consistency.</p> <p>Informed consent was obtained, with participants assured of their right to withdraw at any time. Interviews 30–45 mins were audio-recorded, and participants were anonymised using unique IDs.</p> <p>Recordings were transcribed verbatim using Otter AI and reviewed by the researcher for familiarity with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants were debriefed and given support information post-interview.</p> <p>Experiential statements and exploratory notes were generated from the transcripts from this <i>Personal Experiential Themes (PETS)</i> for each participant were developed PETS were organised in tables to highlight individual narratives. These were then synthesised into <i>Group Experiential Themes (GETS)</i> to reflect shared meanings across participants, offering a holistic understanding of the collective experience.</p>	<div><div><p>A Struggle Between Health and Achievement: The Balancing Act of Student Life</p><p>A Struggle Between Health and Achievement: The Balancing Act of Student Life</p><p>University students' experiences of menstruation encompass physical, emotional, cognitive, and social challenges—all intersecting with academic responsibilities. This complex interplay often results in reduced productivity, increased self-awareness, and compromised well-being.</p><p><i>Physically, like I say, not too badly anymore. But mentally, yeah, my anxiety has increased massively because of it</i></p></div><div><p>Cognitive Struggles and Emotional Strain: Navigating Academic Demands During Menstruation</p><p>Cognitive Struggles and Emotional Strain: Navigating Academic Demands During Menstruation</p><p>This theme highlights the mental toll menstruation takes on students. Cognitive impairments—like brain fog—and emotional fluctuations add to the academic pressure, creating a challenging mental load.</p><p><i>I've had such a negative thought path during that time</i></p></div><div><p>The Silent Struggles: Invisible Burdens and Insufficient Institutional Support</p><p>The Silent Struggles: Invisible Burdens and Lack of Support</p><p>Menstruation often goes unacknowledged in academic settings, leaving students to navigate its challenges in silence. Stigma and limited institutional support amplify the emotional burden.</p><p><i>I think sometimes I can think quite negatively... I feel like I can't, I just feel like it's pointless sometimes.</i></p></div></div>

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the complex relationship between menstruation, academic stress, and student performance. While some students reported minimal disruption, many experienced cognitive, emotional, and physical challenges that impacted their academic engagement. These findings underscore the individual nature of menstrual experiences. Most participants managed their symptoms privately, rarely seeking formal help—reflecting a persistent stigma and lack of awareness in academic settings; The absence of policies, flexible accommodations left students feeling isolated and unsupported.

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