

Period Talk: Working Back to Menstrual Girlhood through *Rookie* Mag

Kelsey Hawkins

Abstract: This article examines the emergence of “period talk” in *Rookie*, a now-archived online magazine for teen girls, as a site for both resisting menstrual stigma and reimagining menstruation outside dominant cultural narratives of shame, silence, and pathology. By employing critical discourse analysis and feminist memory-work, the author analyzes the menstrual discourses circulating through *Rookie*’s articles and comment sections alongside her recollected experiences of menstruation. She argues that period talk, as it manifests in *Rookie*’s menstrual content, offers girls unique and powerful kairotic opportunities to share their experiences with menstruation, proliferate menstrual knowledge, and challenge menstrual stigma in digital ecologies, illustrating the rhetorical power of girls’ digital literacies and communication practices and the affordances of mixed methodologies for recovering and reframing researchers own menstrual histories.

Keywords: [menstrual rhetorics](#), [genderlects](#), [girl talk](#), [period talk](#), [menstrual stigma](#), [girls’ media](#), [memory work](#), [critical discourse analysis](#)

Doi: [10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.4.08](https://doi.org/10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.4.08)

“If research hasn’t changed you as a person, you haven’t done it right.”

Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*

I was a late bloomer. I started my period in the summer between my freshman and sophomore years, at 15 years old. It started with vague discomfort in my abdomen – cramps. Then the blood came. As soon as I saw it, I felt the deep ache of irrevocable loss. I’d been dreading this day since my best friend began complaining about her period all the way back in fifth grade. But it wasn’t the pain I feared so much as what the physical condition of menstruation signified. Bound up in the knot of blood and hormones and adolescence was the knowledge, subconscious yet powerful, that the onset of menarche represented the cessation of childhood and a surrendering of the liberties afforded by/to my premenstrual body. I understood that I would no longer be able to move through the world in the ways I once had – freely, without consideration for things like stains or PMS symptoms. After I saw the blood, I put on a pad for the first time. It irritated me all day. I hated its nagging presence and the constant reminder that I was now, officially, encumbered, materially and also symbolically by the condition of menstruation. I languished in my mother’s bed all day, brooding and grieving. I suppose it may have been the hormones, but I remember feeling sincerely despondent. How could I spend an entire week each month straining against the nature of my own body for the rest of my life?

Kelsey Hawkins is an associate instructor of first-year writing at Indiana University Indianapolis. She earned her BA in English in 2022 and completed her MA in English in 2024, both from Indiana University. Her thesis explored representations of (post)carceral rhetorics in education and composition scholarship and abolition pedagogy, work she later presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. She currently serves as Chair of the Accessibility Advisory Committee for the Writing Program Administrators Graduate Organization. Her research interests include engagement-based writing assessment, the intersections of large language models and standard language ideology, and emerging forms of carceral logics in post-AI academic contexts. Her work has appeared in *ECWCA Journal*, *The Peer Review*, and *Xchanges*.

Introduction

For many girls, their first period is an affectively negative experience; they describe feelings of dread, loss, humiliation, and sadness when recalling their initiation into adolescence. These girls often associate puberty with a reluctant movement into womanhood that activates a grieving process for the loss of their girlhood¹. Menstruation continues to be a complicated issue as girls experience the corresponding limitations of both the physical menstrual body and the normative gender expectations which are projected onto it. Additionally, people who menstruate often encounter negative social stigma surrounding periods, period care, and the menstrual body in many domains of their lives.² Due to the social shame and silencing engendered by menstrual stigma,³ girls often rely on informal, digital channels to access and participate in discourses surrounding menstruation and the menstrual body⁴ However, there is growing interest in menstrual (in)justice⁵ in girls' digital self-representational practices,⁶ and in media produced for and by girls⁷ that highlights the power and efficacy of girls' digital literacies and rhetorical practices to resist and even subvert menstrual social stigma.

In this article, I analyze media produced and circulated in Rookie, an online teen-based magazine, in order to explore ways girls construct menstruation, gender, menstrual experiences, and themselves within digital contexts. Drawing on scholarship at the intersection of girlhood studies, digital rhetorics, and critical menstrual studies, I theorize "period talk" as the set of discursive practices that girls employ within digital ecologies to share their experiences with menstruation, proliferate menstrual knowledge, and challenge menstrual stigma. Ultimately, I hope my research clarifies how negative associations with menstruation shape girls' relationship to periods and their own bodies; how girls resist gender norms and menstrual stigma, shame, and injustice through their digital rhetorical practices; and the possibilities of blending feminist and girlhood methodologies for (re)imagining our own relationships to menstruation and menstrual bodies.

"Girl Talk" and Girls' Digital Media

The first wave of girls' media scholarship arrived in the 1990s, as scholars like Angela McRobbie, Susan Douglas, and Dawn Currie inaugurated girls' media studies as a legitimate and generative area of critical inquiry and academic research (Kearney). Much of the early discourses surrounding girls' media centered on representations of girlhood and girls' consumption of popular commercial media such as magazines, film, and television. The second wave of girls' media studies, ushered in with the publication of studies on girls' media culture, like *Mediated Girlhoods* (Kearney), *Girl Zines* (Piepmeier), and *Girls Make Media* (Kearney),

1 See Musu Bakoto Sawo.

2 For more on this stigma, see Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan C. Chrisler.

3 On menstrual taboos, see Alma Gottlieb; on menstrual concealment, see Jill M. Wood; on menstrual shame, see Maureen C. McHugh.

4 For an analysis of these, see Lise Ulrik Andreason.

5 See, for example, Margaret E. Johnson, Anita Diamant, Tomi-Ann Roberts, Shailini Vora, Swatija Manorama and Radhika Desai, and Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs.

6 See Sarah Hill, Rebekah Willett, Laila Nashid, and Amy Shields-Dobson.

7 See especially Mary Celeste Kearney, Jessalynn Keller, and Su Holmes.

shifting the scholarly focus to girls' reception, uses, and production of both popular and alternative, often self-made media. Researchers within girls' media studies such as Jane Greer, Sun Sun Lim and Jemima Ooi, and Sarah Banet-Weiser began to critically explore girls' textual productions, particularly their use of digital information and communication technologies to create rather than simply consume media by and for girls. Since the publication of Kearney's *Mediated Girlhoods*, critical inquiry into girls' uptake of digital technologies, their digital rhetorical practices, and digital media produced for and by girls has continued to proliferate.

Analyzing girls' digital media production and reception practices also offers unique insight into the ways that genderlects, especially "girl talk," emerge and operate within digital contexts. In her study on gendered discourses in the eighth-grade classroom, Heather A. Blair establishes "girl talk" as a particular genderlect or distinct language pattern and communication style associated with different genders, that is integral to the construction of gender within the community of students she studied. Blair argues that girl talk possesses its own set of sociolinguistic rules (316) and is a central vehicle for "doing gender" in the classroom (321). Girls in Blair's study used the particular linguistic, stylistic, and rhetorical features of girl talk to define and present images of themselves, build relationships with each other, and co-construct the "girl" identity operating within the classroom.

Working from Blair's conception of "girl talk," I theorize "period talk" to describe the set of discursive practices that girls and other menstruating individuals enact in order to process the implications of occupying the menstrual body, resist both menstrual shame and stigma, and construct empowered and agentic representations of menstruation. Like other linguistic and rhetorical systems, period talk operates through and is shaped by the mediums, digital and otherwise, through which they emerge and circulate. Within the context of my current research, I use "period talk" to describe the discursive, rhetorical, linguistic, and stylistic practices employed by girls on *Rookie* magazine's digital medium in order to "do" menstrual girlhood.

Rookie Mag

Rookie was a US-based online magazine "for and by teenagers" ("About"). Founded by teen fashion blogger Tavi Gevison in 2011, *Rookie* operated for seven years, publishing 78 issues before shuttering its doors in 2018. The magazine published a wide variety of genres including articles, Q&As, collages, photo journals, comics, and beauty tutorials. Contributors to the magazine primarily consisted of journalists, celebrities, and readers—most of them teenage girls themselves—and covered issues ranging from fashion, popular culture, sex, mental health, technology, relationships, and social issues. *Rookie* is a generative site for understanding girls' digital rhetorical practices and the ways that they digitally construct menstruation and girlhood because its mission, messaging, and content are explicitly girl-centric. Puberty and menstruation are common topics explored across *Rookie's* issues, and contributors often highlight the ways that menstruation shapes girlhood and girls' experiences. In analyzing various components of the publication, both content published by *Rookie's* contributors and the interactions that take place in comment threads, digital constructions of

girlhood, menstruation, and menstrual experiences emerge to clarify girls' relationship to menstruation and their menstrual bodies.

Methodology

As Kearney explicates in her overview of the field's second wave ("Girls' Media Studies 2.0"), girls' media studies is rooted in the disciplinary values, theories, and methods of both cultural studies and women and gender studies. Situated at the intersection of these disciplines, my research is similarly shaped by the methodological approaches privileged by cultural and women's studies respectively. In order to identify and analyze the manifestations of period talk on *Rookie's* website, I employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist memory-work, allowing each methodology to in/transform my interpretations of how girls "do" menstruation online.

CDA comprises an interdisciplinary approach to investigating the ways in which power is constructed, reproduced, and resisted through discursive structures and systems.⁸ As a framework for textual analysis, CDA allows researchers to "assume a political stance of defending and promoting the rights of girls" (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, "Girl-Method" 215) while emphasizing girls' media as sites of agency and empowerment. In order to perform a critical analysis of girls' menstrual discourses on *Rookie*, I used the website's tag function to search for content using the tags "period" and "menstrual cycles." This search generated a list of 28 results with content including "dear diary" entries, comic strips, videos, editorials, interviews, personal essays, and creative writing. Of these 28 results, I eliminated six from my analysis: five which only briefly mentioned menstruation and one video which is no longer accessible for viewing. Guided by Blair's findings on the discursive, linguistic, and stylistic features of girl talk, I created categories for identifying and coding *Rookie* users' rhetorical practices in relation to menstruation. These coding categories identified instances of girls engaging in personal interactions, using humor, employing what Blair calls "teen slang," telling stories, engaging supportive mechanisms like mirroring or echoing, and dialoguing across social and embodied difference. Five major themes emerged. In particular, my analysis revealed the ways that girls on *Rookie's* website used period talk to 1) construct and share menstrual knowledge, 2) process negative associations or experiences with menstruation, 3) form positive attitudes towards menstruation and the menstrual body, 4) challenge normative gender expectations and menstrual stigma, and 5) celebrate digital spaces as sites for identification and community-building.

My examination of period talk on *Rookie's* website also inspired a process of re/uncovering my own experiences with menstruation, many of which were reflected throughout the content I analyzed. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh explore self-reflection as a generative avenue for enacting critical research within girlhood studies ("Girl-Method"; "Mail-Order Memory Work"). They argue that "somewhere in the process of doing research with and for girls, we should consciously work with our own histories" using feminist memory-work to "work back to girlhood" ("Girl-Method" 226). First theorized by sociologist Frigga Haug, the process of

8 For a further definition of critical discourse analysis, see Teun A. Van Dijk.

memory-work involves collecting, analyzing, and theorizing written memories to “uncover the social meanings embodied by the actions described in the written accounts and to uncover the processes whereby the meanings – both then and now– are arrived at” (O’Reilly-Scanlon and Dwyer 88-89). Within the context of girlhood studies, memory-work allows researchers to “try to understand contemporary girlhood ... by exploring our own girlhoods” (O’Reilly-Scanlon and Dwyer 82). I engage memory-work in addition to my analysis of *Rookie’s* texts in order to understand contemporary menstrual girlhood while/by interrogating my own identity and self-concepts as they relate to menstruation. In this way, I connect my prior experiences with menstruation to the larger social knowledge(s) engendered by contemporary girls’ period talk.

Period Talk

In order to attend to both the discursive practices of *Rookie’s* contributors and my own memories of menstruation, the remainder of this article coalesces my perspective on menstrual girlhood with the perspectives of the girls participating in period talk in and through *Rookie* magazine. Below, I braid narrativized sections of my memories surrounding menstruation with analyses of *Rookie’s* content in order to explicate the five themes that emerged from the process of CDA and “work back” to a more clarified and complete understanding of my own menstrual girlhood.

Building Menstrual Knowledge

Many contributors and readers on *Rookie’s* website emphasize the importance of knowledge and awareness regarding menstrual issues and encourage each other to discuss their periods. In an article titled “What I Wish I Knew About my Period,” *Rookie* author Elizabeth Olson shares regrets about her early menstrual experiences writing, “I wish I had FOUND SOMEONE TO TALK TO! I had so many questions and fears about the whole business, and I think I would have been so much less self-conscious, and so much HAPPIER, if I had only had access to some friendly advice.” Other contributors echo Olson’s desire for access to menstrual knowledge. In a satirical “investigative report” titled “Puberty Is What’s Up,” Pixie Casey shares the exigency for her research saying, “I wanted to know about periods in case I get mine soon.” Reflecting on her lack of guidance and support, Olson encourages readers to have open conversations with the girls and women in their own lives: “So, talk to your friends! Talk to your cool older cousin or aunt or sister or your best friend’s cool mom or your OWN cool mom.” Similarly, in “How to Survive Puberty,” Monika Zaleska tells readers that “finding out as much as you can about what is going on—and how to deal with that—can be a big help.” At the end of Olson’s article, she concludes by calling *Rookie’s* audience to “leave your questions—and your good advice—in the comments.”

Members of *Rookie’s* community responded enthusiastically to Olson’s call, using comment sections and their own publications to circulate information about menstrual cycles, health and safety advice, tips for managing PMS symptoms, and period product recommendations. Contributors also leverage the affordances of the magazine’s digital space to share information more directly through hyperlinks. In a “Dear Diary”

entry from January 20, 2017, contributor Thahabu discusses her purchase of a menstrual cup, advising readers on the “hundreds of other brands that come in various sizes and shapes” (Barlow et al.). Olson similarly shares recommendations for alternatives to tampons, including a link to Aisle’s Diva Cup product. In another article, “The Sex Crylebration,” Krista Burton and Lola Pellegrino link to an article in *Hairpin* about period sex to offer readers perspectives on the normalcy of menstrual blood during sexual encounters. The inclusion of hyperlinks allows contributors to guide readers towards products and perspectives, forms of menstrual knowledge, that will allow them to construct menstruation in more empowered and agentic ways.

When I got my period for the second time, I decided to forgo the pads and put in a tampon. I crouched down on the bathroom floor and read through the instructional packet that came in the box. I could have asked my mother, my older sisters, or my friends for guidance, but I didn’t want to. Talking about it drew attention to the fact of my menstruation, made it more visible, and I was determined to pretend that nothing had changed about my body. In fact, I was determined to pretend that I wasn’t experiencing my period at all and, by extension, that I could still access the performance and presentation of the premenstrual body. This meant that I couldn’t discuss my period with anyone, couldn’t legitimize its existence by asking for advice or commiserating with the other menstruators in my life. I avoided conversations about things like pads, period stains, or cramps. My self-imposed silence around menstruation only increased the discomfort I felt in my newly menstrual body and the shame, disappointment, and frustration I experienced when my period came each month. Worse yet, my silence alienated me from the sense of community which might have helped me to navigate menstruation in healthier, more constructive, or even more empowered ways.

Navigating Negative Menstrual Associations

Many girls also used *Rookie’s* site to process negative experiences and associations with menstruation. The most frequent negative emotion attributed to menstruation was dread. In her article, Olson describes the prospect of her first period saying: “I heard my mom’s talk of getting me a bra as a threat, not a promise...I felt terror at the sight of my first pubic hair. And the scariest thing was the idea of getting my period—it just sounded like a very uncomfortable physical situation that comes with a lot of responsibility” (Olson). She later describes her period as “the *worst thing ever*.” Zaleska echoes Olson’s sentiment in her own article sharing, “I know some people wait impatiently ... to get their periods, but when I was 12, both of these things scared and confused me.” Girls also expressed fear and embarrassment about the ways that menstruation would be perceived by others. Olson writes, “aside from waking up and feeling dread, I can’t recall anything about the Day I Became a Woman ... I do remember wanting to cry, or maybe I did cry, and feeling embarrassed and convinced that everyone at school on Monday would just know what had happened.” Contributors are also frank about the negative effects menstruation has on their day-to-day lives. In “Bad Blood,” Emma Straub recalls, “it was the end of high school by the time I realized that bleeding every month sucked, and it quickly went from ‘sucked’ to ‘actually ruining my life.’”

Like Straub, I felt that my period was “actually ruining my life.” At the beginning of each month, a gnawing anticipation would take root in the pit of my stomach – the same dread I felt at the prospect of my first period actualized through the material and embodied reality of regular menstruation. By the first day of my period, I was a nervous wreck. I often couldn’t tell if the tightness in my abdomen owed itself to menstrual cramps or to anxiety, though I dismissed both with two 200mg tablets of Ibuprofen – less for pain relief and more to help me ignore my period’s persistent intrusions into daily life. For me, as for Olson, many of the anxieties I experienced around menstruation actually revolved around others’ perceptions of me. I associated menstruation with weakness, limitation, and constraint, and I believed that other people would ascribe these characteristics to me if my menstruation were made visible. A period stain would not have been a mere humiliation, but a betrayal, a laying bare of the girl I was after menstruation – weak, limited, constrained, no longer able to move with the freedom and power and pride of premenstrual girlhood. In many ways, the relationship I had to menstruation was warped by these negative associations, both the ones that I had formed towards my own period and the ones that dominant social narratives around menstruation perpetuate.

Forming Positive Orientations To Menstruation

Despite the prevalence of discussions surrounding feelings of dread, girls also use the magazine’s digital ecology to develop more positive attitudes towards menstruation. One of the ways they do so is by normalizing menstrual experiences. In a “Dear Diary” entry from October 6, 2016, contributor Alyson describes her first time using a tampon as “completely and utterly un-traumatic” (S. et al.). Straub also discusses the comfort that the embodied experience of regular menstruation can provide, sharing that “the clockwork regularity of my period is comforting to me—it’s satisfying to know that my body’s doing its thing just fine. Having your period is also a great way to know that you’re not pregnant, which can be very reassuring.” Girls also leverage the shared experience of menstruation in order to connect to other girls. Olson describes her experience menstruating at a girls’ summer camp: “When Julie and Melissa learned that the reason I was skipping group swim and waterskiing was that I had my period (You know what’s worse than a giant Kotex? A giant WATERLOGGED Kotex), they were aghast. They marched me into the bathroom, sent me into a stall with one of Julie’s Tampax, and stood outside the door. TIME TO LEARN.”

In addition to normalizing menstruation in order to form more positive attitudes towards periods, contributors to Rookie also articulate a sense of empowerment regarding their menstrual experiences. In a comic entitled “Period Drama” (see Figure 1), Eleanor Hardwick depicts a girl with braided pigtails in various states of grief, lamenting the existence of her period, its irregularity, and the discomfort of menstrual cramps.



Figure 1: From Hardwick's "Period Drama"

In the penultimate panel the girl recalls iconic female figures including Jane Austen, Queen Elizabeth, and Marie Antoinette. The last panel (see Figure 2) portrays Joan of Arc centered on an enlarged menstrual pad. She has blood coming from both the sword she grips to her chest and from between her legs. The text on this panel reads, "Super with no tampons, maxi and no pads, powerful women kept dry using rags. Joan of Arc knew the meaning of REAL period drama! That thought softens my tantrums (and most of my trauma)."

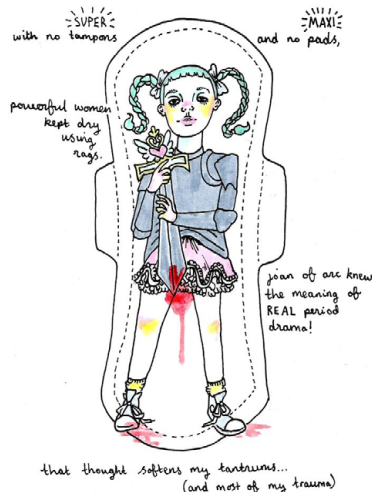


Figure 2: From Hardwick's "Period Drama" depicting Joan of Arc centered on a sanitary pad and holding a sword.

Hazel Cills creates a similarly empowered take on menstruation in "Power Failures." Referring to the embarrassment of period stains, she states:

So you got blood all over your chair in class, or on your couch when you took a nap, or just literally anywhere because you're a modern woman who goes places. Think of your bloodied happening as a work of impromptu feminist performance art—make sure to document everything in extreme detail, archive your tampons, and contact local galleries. BAM! Instant art star! (Cills)

In both instances, *Rookie's* contributors reinterpret menstrual experiences to construct empowering images of the menstruating girl.

I can recall only one positive experience discussing menstruation in my girlhood. I was in my sophomore history class, seated next to my best friend, a girl I had known since middle school. Behind me sat another girl who we each considered a close, but recent, friend. At some point we began listing our worst PMS symptoms. My best friend laughed bemoaning how much she cried during the week leading up to her period, sometimes over videos of animals, sometimes because no matter how much she straightened her hair it just wouldn't lie flat. "I went into my closet and cried for fifteen minutes!" She sounded exasperated, and so did we as we teased her, but really we weren't. Really we felt a strong combination of sympathy and identification and solidarity.

"The worst part is the pain in my back," offered the girl behind me. "Ugh, me too. The worst." I was trying to be nonchalant, casually commiserating about this most common of premenstrual symptoms. In reality, I was relieved, almost elated. I had heard about menstrual cramps from my friends for years, how they'd lie doubled over in their beds trying to soothe the pain in their abdomens. When I started experiencing PMS symptoms, I didn't know that those cramps could make their way into other areas of your body, and I had begun to wonder if there was something wrong each time the dull ache settled into my lower back. I didn't talk to anyone else about this because I couldn't talk about menstruation at all. Each month, I popped an Ibuprofen and catastrophized, worrying myself into a frenzy about this ostensible abnormality. Now, here was this girl telling me I was normal, that she felt this too, that it was, really, no big deal.

I felt, still feel, such gratitude to this girl who was so generous with her honesty, so transparent in sharing her own experiences with menstruation though we had only known each other for a few months. Not only was my experience validated, normalized, but I was exposed to a different way of thinking about menstruation. These girls showed me that I didn't have to hide my period, or discipline my menstrual body into invisibility, or relegate my experiences into silent nonbeing. That day in history class, I tasted, for the first time, the sweetness of menstrual community.

Resisting Menstrual Stigma



Figure 3: Second panel from Cutler's "Bloody Becky."

Responding to Zaleska's article on surviving puberty, user tortu12 comments, "I'm realizing that there is no need to treat all of this like some embarrassing secret." In a Sunday comic titled "Bloody Becky and the Thought-Provoking Period Stain," Margalit Cutler further rejects the shame and embarrassment that some girls feel surrounding menstruation by neutralizing and normalizing period stains. The comic (see Figure 3) depicts a girl standing in front of a couch, turning to examine a period stain on the back of her jeans and surrounded by three other girls. A close-up of the girl with the period stains reveals her inner thoughts with the text "Oh. My. God. I'm so embarrassed." Despite her self-consciousness, the three girls she is with express thoughts ranging from sympathetic ("I hate it when that happens") to the introspective ("Did I get my period this month?") to the banal ("hmm...I want peanut butter and jelly"). Cutler's comic suggests that the shame associated with visible signs of menstruation is unwarranted and reminds viewers that they do not need to feel so insecure about menstruation. In her article, Olson is even more overt in her rejection of menstrual shame arguing that "there's nothing shameful about getting your period."

Contributors also use the publication to reject common social narratives surrounding menstruation. Zaleska writes, "sometimes it can feel like celebrating and/or feeling shame about your body are the only two narratives available. Rejecting the idea that there is one way to grow into what adults sometimes call a 'lovely young woman' (barf) can help." Olson's discussion of the discomfort of menstrual cramps embodies the dualism of menstrual experiences. She shares, "I consider this the worst part about being magical enough to create life." While menstruation is at times painful and uncomfortable, it also signifies the power that some girls and women possess to reproduce and sustain life. Casey's faux investigative report on puberty uses humor to satirize the ways that parents, boys, and financial stakeholders conceptualize menstruation, using humor to critique the obfuscation, confusion, and performative optimism that inform narratives of menstruation. Casey "interviews" multiple sources for the investigation including the mother of the fourth-grade investigator, a neighborhood boy named Tony Flavio, and the fictionalized @heycoolteens, a "professional Twitter account run by the teen-outreach marketing division of Z&P Personal Grooming Products, Inc." Casey parodies parents' tight-lipped reluctance to discuss periods openly, boys' lack of menstrual education, and corporations' manufactured relatability to girl consumers, deconstructing the narratives that surround menstruation, narratives which often do not align with girls' lived and embodied experiences of menstruation or that perpetuate menstrual shame and exploitation.

Contributors also use the magazine's platform to share issues of menstrual injustice. Olson notes in her article that "if men got their periods, the first day of each cycle would be a paid vacation day." User soph-blogger16 also advocates for more serious discussion of menstrual issues, arguing "puberty HAS to be talked about...We MUST talk about puberty."

I continued to resent the embodied experience of menstruation for several years after my first period, never quite finding the voice to share my experiences the way I had with the girls in my history class again. The silence and resentment fed into each other like Ouroboros, the snake devouring itself. I never complained about my pe-

riod – I never “moaned” about cramps, never missed class or excused myself from social events, never used PMS symptoms as an exemption from PE or household chores. But I often wanted to. I longed, secretly, maybe even subconsciously, to listen to my unwieldy body, to accept menstruation’s existence, even to admit its disruptions into my day-to-day life. I recognize now that I was afraid of menstruation, afraid of my body, afraid of myself. It seemed that the only way to assuage my fear was through denial and, when denial was not enough, a fierce and total rebellion against my menstrual body and the limitations projected onto it. I recall a self-righteous ritual in which I would wear white pants on the first day of my period each month to prove to myself that nothing was different, that menstruation would not change my self-presentation or the ways that I moved through the world.

At the time, I saw this defiance as a form of antagonism towards menstruation, but in retrospect I interpret it differently. I recognize that it was at once a manifestation of the shame I felt towards my menstrual body and also an act of resistance to normative menstrual performances and socially constructed limitations on the menstrual body. I am at once dismayed by the ways that I silenced, shamed, and contorted myself to deny my experiences but also impressed by my stubborn refusal to accept the social expectations of menstruating girls. I think that if I had given voice to my complex and often contradictory feelings around menstruation, I might have found a healthier, less self-harmful outlet for expressing my frustration about the reality of occupying a menstrual body. If I had engaged in menstrual discourses more with my peers, perhaps my defiance would not have turned inward in such destructive ways. I might have come to see menstruation as normal, maybe even powerful as many of Rookie’s contributors found when they began talking more openly.

Celebrating Digital Community

Both contributors and readers of Rookie’s content expressed the importance of media that reflects girls’ experiences with menstruation and creates a digital space for girls to interact with one other. One common sentiment shared was a sense of identification with other girls’ menstrual experiences. User ohhellohi comments, “it’s actually just refreshing to hear someone who has had the same experiences as me.” Other users express a similar relief and even connection with the girls publishing and commenting on Rookie’s website. User emlyb writes, “I don’t have much more to add, apart from this is EXACTLY how i feel. seriously. thank you. i just want to hug you right now <3.” The heart emoticon in particular shows up across many comments, especially on articles that discuss menstrual experiences. Responding to a thread in which commenters share their anxieties over missed and late periods, user Kathryn writes “you guys i thought i was the only one <3.” It’s clear that the girls who publish and read Rookie’s content appreciate the connections, identification, and shared experiences that the magazine’s online ecology affords them.

These affordances also shape the content that is produced on the site. Readers demonstrate an obvious demand for and appreciation of period-related content. User Lila comments, “I was wondering when Rookie was going to do another post on sex/menstruation/stuff like that and here it is!” “This is why I love this site so much!” shares user BritishFish on Zaleska’s article “How to Survive Puberty.” Interestingly, both contributors and commenters respond to the demand for discussion of menstrual issues. Zaleska shares the exigency

for her article, writing “I think [accepting puberty] is daily, continuing work, but that work is made easier by sharing what you are going through.” User Alyssumflower takes up Zaleska’s call in a comment articulating the struggles she faced because of her changing body and the ways that it was sexualized after she started her period. She concludes the comment by expressing the purpose of sharing her story: “I’m saying all of this just in case there is a girl like me out there who needs help.”

“I wish I had read this ten or twelve years ago”

user foreverrocket

It wasn’t until I was in my early twenties that I began to interrogate my relationship with menstruation. I was searching for relief from menstrual cramps that were increasing in severity and longevity. Every month I spent the first day of my cycle slumped over my desk in class or grimacing in pain behind the register of the coffee shop where I worked. As a young woman who struggled to discuss menstruation with others throughout her teenage girlhood, I wasn’t sure where to turn now that I was in need of practical advice and commiseration. Unsure who to consult, I conducted a Google search for products designed to alleviate period cramps. I came across a “Mini Mall” column on Rookie’s website about “self-listening devices” (Wilson et al.). One of the products recommended and hyperlinked was Holy Sponge’s Our Lady of Mercy Antispasmodic Cramp Balm which Jamia Wilson promised would “ease your pain and make you smell like a lush garden.” I can’t remember if I purchased the balm or not, but I do remember that this article sent me down a rabbit-hole of reading. One of the tags attached to the article was “period,” and I quickly navigated to related content, hoping to find more advice about cramps but also, secretly, ravenous for any period-related content. Over the next several weeks, I found myself consumed by the menstrual discourses circulating through Rookie, perusing the products included in the “Daily Links” column, reading “Dear Diary” entries about PMS and menstrual sex, laughing at the “Sunday Comics” that featured period stains or bloodied pads, and finding my experiences mirrored back to me in articles like the ones analyzed above. I even left a comment responding to Olson’s article, though I could no longer identify which cryptic username might have been mine after the years between my first read and this project.

That comment was the first time that I had willingly, enthusiastically, and PUBLICLY engaged in discourse related to menstruation. I felt emboldened by the community of girls who were openly discussing their periods and menstrual issues, refusing to be silenced by cultural stigma or their own internalized shame. It was also the first time that I began to critically interrogate my own relationship to menstruation. After reading some of Rookie’s period content, I realized how normal my feelings and associations surrounding menstruation were, but I also recognized that much of my relationship to menstruation was informed by menstrual shame, stigma, and cultural narratives that did not align with how I experienced my own body and my bodily performances. Over the next couple of years, before Rookie released its final issue, I engaged regularly with the magazines’ menstrual discourses. In joining the girls’ digital community and participating in the period talk which proliferated there, I began to liberate myself from the constraints of traditional menstrual narratives and come to an acceptance of and even appreciation for menstruation. It was an early but integral step in redefining my teenage girlhood

experiences with menstruation, building a healthier and more positive conception of the menstrual body, and resisting the varied forms of menstrual shame, stigma, and injustice that had so long contorted the relationship I had with my period.

Menstrual Pasts/Menstrual Futures

As the memories of menstruation that I re/uncovered reveal, the influence of menstrual stigma and shame is pervasive, persistent, and insidious. For many girls, menstruation is a source of deep social stigma, reinforced by cultural narratives that mark menstruation as a taboo topic.⁹ Additionally, menstruation is often constructed as nonnormative,¹⁰ disordered¹¹, or contaminative.¹² From an early age, girls are exposed to and internalize these attitudes leading to feelings of dread and anxiety surrounding menarche. These fears are quickly realized as postmenstrual girls begin to be treated differently by others whether they are adultified and sexualized¹³ or urged to conform to behaviors and presentations that restrict the freedoms afforded to their premenstrual selves.¹⁴ Girls' internalization of social stigmas surrounding menstruation contribute to the "culture of concealment" or the ways that "menstrual taboos and stigma shape women's experience of menstruation and manipulate women into menstrual shame and secrecy" (Wood 319). In collecting and analyzing my memories of menstruation, I can see the ways that the culture of concealment perpetuated negative associations with menstruation and warped my relationship to and experience of menstruation. The consequence of this process for me, as for many girls, was disconnection from my body and from a community of girls who could have encouraged me to see menstruation in more constructive and subversive ways. The cycle of silence, denial, shame, and alienation reinforced the dominant narrative of menstruation that I had internalized as a girl.

Within these ideological and material menstrual conditions, period talk emerges as a powerful vehicle for disrupting harmful cultural constructions of menstruation, resisting menstrual shame and stigma, and co-constructing menstruation in more affirming ways. By engaging in period talk online, girls within *Rookie*'s digital ecology (including, eventually, me!) were able to proliferate menstrual knowledge, process both negative and positive experiences with menstruation, resist the imperatives of concealment and shame, and engage in restorative and validating forms of community and connection. As my analysis of *Rookie* magazine clarifies, period talk is a legitimate and powerful avenue for advancing more just menstrual futures and for promoting girls' rhetorical and social agency in the discourses surrounding menstruation. I encourage scholars situated at the intersection of girls' media and menstruation studies to continue to explore and examine the ways that period talk emerges and operates across a range of discursive spaces, digital or otherwise.

Finally, I hope that my article demonstrates the value of employing multiple methodologies, such as

9 See Gottlieb.

10 See Iris Marion Young.

11 See Chrisler.

12 See Janet Lee.

13 See Sawo.

14 See Janet Lee and Jennifer Sasser-Coen.



critical discourse analysis and feminist memory-work, to engage with girls' experiences of menstruation. By analyzing both contemporary digital discourse and personal recollections, researchers can begin to dialogue across multiple generations of girls, understanding the evolving ways in which menstruation is constructed and understood. The process of working back to former experiences may also encourage researchers to re-see their own memories of menstruation—memories that may have been shaped by silence, shame, or cultural stigmas—and to critically interrogate how these experiences might be mediated or (re)interpreted over time. For me, this process was enlightening, transformative, and deeply healing. I call on future researchers to engage in this process of memory-work, not only to interrogate the ways that menstruation has been historically stigmatized but also to begin rewriting their own relationship to menstruation.

Works Cited

"About." *RookieMag*, www.rookiemag.com/us/. Accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

Andreason, Lise Ulrik. "Menstruation Mediated: Monstrous Emergences of Menstruation and Menstruators on YouTube." *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel, Inga T. Winkler, Breanne Fahs, Katie Ann Hasson, Elizabeth Arveda Kissling, and Tomi-Ann Roberts, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 511–28.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah. "Branding the Post-Feminist Self: Girls' Video Production and YouTube." *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*, edited by Mary Celeste Kearney, Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 277–94.

Barlow, Amil, Steffany, and Thahabu. "Dear Diary: January 20, 2017." *RookieMag*, 20 Jan. 2017, www.rookiemag.com/2017/01/dear-diary-january-20-2017/.

Blair, Heather A. "Genderlects: Girl Talk and Boy Talk in a Middle-Years Classroom." *Language Arts*, vol. 77, no. 4, 2000, pp. 315–23.

Bobel, Chris, and Breanne Fahs. "The Messy Politics of Menstrual Activism." *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 1001–18.

Burton, Krista, and Lola Pellegrino. "The Sex Crylebration." *RookieMag*, 29 Oct. 2013, www.rookiemag.com/2013/10/the-sex-crylebration/3/.

Casey, Pixie. "Puberty Is What's Up." *RookieMag*, 26 Apr. 2012, www.rookiemag.com/2012/04/puberty-is-whats-up/.

Chrisler, Joan C. "2007 Presidential Address: Fear of Losing Control: Power, Perfectionism, and the Psychology of Women." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1–12.

Currie, Dawn H. *Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and Their Readers*. University of Toronto Press, 1995.

Cutler, Margalit. "Sunday Comic: Bloody Becky." *RookieMag*, 8 Feb. 2015, www.rookiemag.com/2015/02/sunday-comic-bloody-becky/.



- Diamant, Anita. *Period. End of Sentence: A New Chapter in the Fight for Menstrual Justice*. Scribner, 2021.
- Douglas, Susan. *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. Random House Books, 1994.
- Gottlieb, Alma. "Menstrual Taboos: Moving Beyond the Curse." *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 143–62.
- Greer, Jane. "Remixing Educational History: Girls and Their Memory Albums, 1913–1929." *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*, edited by Mary Celeste Kearney, Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 221–42.
- Hardwick, Eleanor. "Sunday Comic: Period Drama." *RookieMag*, 28 Apr. 2013, www.rookiemag.com/2013/04/sunday-comic-period-drama/.
- Haug, Frigga. *Beyond Female Masochism: Memory-Work and Politics*. Verso, 1992.
- Hill, Sarah. "Exploring Disabled Girls' Self-representational Practices Online." *Girlhood Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2017, pp. 114–30.
- Holmes, Su. "'My Anorexia Story': Girls Constructing Narratives of Identity on YouTube." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1–23.
- Johnson, Margaret E. "Menstrual Justice." *UC Davis Law Review*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–79.
- Johnston-Robledo, Ingrid, and Joan C. Chrisler. "The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma." *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 181–99.
- Kearney, Mary Celeste. "Coalescing: The Development of Girls' Studies." *NWSA Journal*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1–28.
- Kearney, Mary Celeste. *Girls Make Media*. Routledge, 2006.
- Kearney, Mary Celeste. "Girls Media Studies 2.0." *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*, edited by Mary Celeste Kearney, Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 1–14.

- Kearney, Mary Celeste. *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*. Peter Lang, 2011.
- Keller, Jessalynn. *Girls Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age*. Routledge, 2015.
- Lee, Janet. "Menarche and the (Hetero)Sexualization of the Female Body." *Gender and Society*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1994, pp. 343–62.
- Lee, Janet, and Jennifer Sasser-Coen. *Blood Stories: Menarche and the Politics of the Female Body in Contemporary U.S. Society*. Routledge, 1996.
- Lim, Sun Sun, and Jemima Ooi. "Girls Talk Tech: Exploring Singaporean Girls' Perceptions and Uses of Information and Communication Technologies." *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*, edited by Mary Celeste Kearney, Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 243–60.
- Manorama, Swatija, and Radhika Desai. "Menstrual Justice: A Missing Element in India's Health Policies." *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 511–28.
- McHugh, Maureen C. "Menstrual Shame: Exploring the Role of 'Menstrual Moaning.'" *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 409–22.
- McRobbie, Angela. *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*. Unwin Hyman, 1991.
- Mitchell, Claudia, and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh. "Girl-Method: Placing Girl-Centered Research Methodologies on the Map of Girlhood Studies." *Roadblocks to Equity: Women Challenging Boundaries*, edited by Jeffrey Klaehn, Black Rose Books, 2008, pp. 214–33.
- Mitchell, Claudia, and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh. "Mail-Order Memory Work: Towards a Methodology of Uncovering the Experiences of Covering Over." *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1998, pp. 57–75.
- Nashid, Laila. "Understanding Digital Narratives of Black Girlhood Through Social Media Aesthetics." *Girlhood Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2024, pp. 86–102.
- Olson, Elizabeth. "What I Wish I Knew About My Period." *RookieMag*, 23 Apr. 2013.



- O'Reilly-Scanlon, Kathleen, and Sonya Corbin Dwyer. "Memory-work as a (be)Tween Research Method: The Beauty, the Splendor, the Wonder of My Hair." *Seven Going on Seventeen: Tween Studies in the Culture of Girlhood*, edited by Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, Peter Lang, 2005, pp. 79–94.
- Roberts, Tomi-Ann. "Bleeding in Jail: Objectification, Self-Objectification, and Menstrual Injustice." *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 53–68.
- S., Lucia, Alyson, and Cammy. "Dear Diary: October 6, 2016." *RookieMag*, 6 Oct. 2016.
- Sawo, Musu Bakoto. "Personal Narrative: Let Girls Be Girls – My Journey Into Forced Womanhood." *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 93–97.
- Shields-Dobson, Amy. *Postfeminist Digital Culture: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Straub, Emma. "Bad Blood." *RookieMag*, 24 Oct. 2012.
- Van Dijk, Teun A. "Critical Discourse Analysis." *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, edited by Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin, Wiley, 2015, pp. 466–85.
- Vora, Shailini. "The Realities of Period Poverty: How Homelessness Shapes Women's Lived Experiences of Menstruation." *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 31–47.
- Willet, Rebekah. "Constructing the Digital Tween: Market Discourse and Girls' Interests." *Seven Going on Seventeen: Tween Culture in Girlhood Studies*, edited by Claudia Mitchell and J. Reid-Walsh, Peter Lang, 2004, pp. 278–93.
- Wilson, Jamia, Kiana Flores, and Tayler Montague. "Mini Mall: Self-Listening Device." *RookieMag*, 3 Feb. 2017.
- Wood, Jill M. "(In)Visible Bleeding: The Menstrual Concealment Imperative." *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 319–36.

Young, Iris Marion. *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

Zaleska, Monika. "How to Survive Puberty." *RookieMag*, 11 May 2015.