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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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UNDERSTANDING MENSTRUAL HEALTH: FEMALE STUDENTS' SOCIAL PERCEPTION AND AWARENESS ACROSS VARIOUS ACADEMIC STREAMS

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ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to explore and comprehend the social perception and awareness of menstrual health among female students from different academic streams. Menstrual health is essential to women's well-being, and understanding how young women perceive and approach this topic is crucial for addressing issues related to menstruation in educational settings and beyond. The study employed quantitative data collection methods. A structured survey questionnaire was distributed to diverse female students across various academic disciplines. The survey included questions about their knowledge of menstrual health, attitudes and social perceptions of menstruation, and access to menstrual hygiene products and information. The findings of this research highlight the varying levels of awareness and perceptions of menstrual health among female students from different academic streams. While some participants exhibited a comprehensive understanding and positive attitudes towards menstruation, others expressed misinformation and misconceptions. The study also revealed the significance of educational interventions in improving menstrual health awareness and breaking societal taboos surrounding menstruation. This research paper contributes to the literature on menstrual health by shedding light on the unique perspectives of female students from diverse academic backgrounds. The findings underscore the importance of promoting open discussions and awareness programs to foster a positive and informed attitude towards menstrual health among young women, thus promoting their overall well-being and empowerment.

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INTRODUCTION

Menstrual health is crucial to women's reproductive health, yet it remains a topic shrouded in silence, stigma, and limited awareness in many societies. In the context of female students in higher education in India, understanding the social perception and cognition surrounding menstrual health is essential for promoting their well-being and empowering them to make informed decisions regarding their reproductive health.

Menstrual Health: A Global Perspective: Menstrual health has gained attention globally due to its impact on women's lives, education, and overall well-being. Studies have shown that inadequate knowledge and awareness about menstrual health can lead to negative attitudes, poor hygiene practices, and limited access to menstrual hygiene products. The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasises the importance of comprehensive menstrual health education to empower women and girls worldwide.

Menstrual Health in India: In India, menstruation is often accompanied by cultural taboos, myths, and restrictions that contribute to the stigmatisation of women.

Research indicates that social norms and traditional beliefs surrounding menstruation perpetuate shame, secrecy, and limited access to menstrual hygiene resources. The Indian government has addressed these issues through initiatives like the Menstrual Hygiene Scheme and the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan.

Policy Context: Considering the research findings and to address the prevailing knowledge gaps and cultural taboos related to menstrual health among female students in higher education, the Government of India (GOI) has implemented several policies and guidelines. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises integrating comprehensive menstrual health education into the school curriculum to promote awareness, debunk myths, and foster positive attitudes towards menstruation.

The Influence of Education on Menstrual Health Knowledge and Practices: Education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' knowledge and practices related to menstrual health. Studies have shown that higher levels of schooling positively impact menstrual health awareness, leading to improved attitudes, techniques, and access to menstrual hygiene resources. Female students in higher education have the potential to become agents of change by

influencing societal perceptions and challenging menstrual health-related taboos.

Social Perception and Stigma Surrounding Menstruation: The social perception of menstruation significantly affects how women and girls experience their menstrual cycles. The silence and stigma associated with menstruation contribute to shame, embarrassment, and fear among women. Research highlights the negative impact of menstrual stigma on self-esteem, mental health, and educational attainment. Addressing social perceptions and challenging menstruation-related taboos are crucial to promoting menstrual health and gender equality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Menstrual health is critical to women's overall well-being, impacting their physical and mental health, education, and social participation. As female students in higher education represent a crucial population at a pivotal stage of personal and professional development, understanding their social perception and awareness of menstrual health becomes vital for promoting better menstrual health practices and addressing potential challenges during their academic journey. Several studies have been conducted to explore the knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to menstrual health among female students in higher education. Ahmad *et al.* (2021) conducted a study in Lucknow, India, and found that the lion's share of female college students had inadequate knowledge about menstrual hygiene but followed hygienic practices correctly. Similarly, Vashisht *et al.* (2018) in Delhi revealed that 42.6% of female undergraduate students faced restrictions during menstruation. Nair *et al.* (2007) conducted research among students in unmarried female adolescents in rural areas of East Delhi. They reported that only 33.4% of the girls were aware of all puberty-related changes. Additionally, there was a statistically significant association between increasing age and awareness of pubertal changes, with a p-value of less than 0.001. These studies underscore the need for improved education and awareness regarding menstrual health among female higher-education students. Researchers have conducted studies in various regions to gain further insights into this topic. Acharya and Bhat (2021) focused on menstrual hygiene awareness and practices among college-going unmarried girls in India, revealing prevalent misconceptions and taboos about menstrual health.

Bobel's book (2019) delves into cultural and social factors shaping girls' perceptions of menstruation, particularly in the Global South, shedding light on societal norms and gender dynamics influencing menstrual health awareness and practices among female students. In Bangladesh, Jahan and Nessa (2017) conducted a case study to understand female students' challenges in accessing menstrual health information and hygienic products, emphasising the importance of policy interventions to combat stigma and promote awareness. Adhikari *et al.* (2020) explored knowledge, attitudes, and practices of menstrual health among female students in higher secondary schools in Nepal, highlighting the significant influence of peers and family on menstrual health awareness. Hennegan *et al.* (2019) conducted a systematic review to understand menstruation experiences in low- and middle-income countries, providing relevant insights for female students in higher education and emphasising the role of cultural norms in shaping menstrual health awareness. Similarly, Upashe *et al.* (2015) assessed the knowledge and practices of menstrual hygiene among high school girls in Ethiopia, calling for targeted educational interventions to enhance menstrual health awareness in the region. In the Indian context, Das *et al.* (2015) examined the relationship between menstrual hygiene practices, access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and the risk of urogenital infections among women. The study's findings have implications for female higher-education students concerning menstrual health-related disorders. The reviewed literature collectively highlights several important aspects of the social perception and awareness of menstrual health among female higher-education students. There are prevalent misconceptions, taboos, and stigmas surrounding menstrual health among this population, and cultural norms and gender dynamics significantly influence their perceptions and practices. Moreover, the

influence of peers and family members on menstrual health awareness is evident in various contexts. The literature emphasises the necessity of targeted educational interventions to improve menstrual health practices among female students, and policy interventions play a crucial role in addressing the challenges they face in accessing menstrual health information and hygienic products. Additionally, the association between menstrual hygiene practices and the risk of urogenital infections underscores the importance of proper menstrual health management among female students. However, it is essential to note that most reviewed studies are location-specific, and cultural variations may exist. Further research in diverse settings is required to understand the social perception and awareness of menstrual health among female students in higher education. In conclusion, the reviewed literature provides valuable insights into the social perception and awareness of menstrual health among female higher-education students. It highlights the influence of cultural norms, gender dynamics, and familial factors on menstrual health practices. The findings underscore the importance of targeted educational interventions and policy measures to promote better menstrual health awareness and practices among female students, thus contributing to their overall well-being and academic success. Further research in various contexts is essential to develop comprehensive strategies for improving menstrual health among this population.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

1. To determine the level of social perception and awareness of female students about menstrual health.
2. To determine if there is any significant difference in the perception and awareness of female students of different academic streams about menstrual health.

Hypothesis

1. **H₀₁- There** is no significant difference in the perception and awareness of female students of different academic streams about menstrual health.

Variables

- Independent variables- social perception and awareness of the female students of higher education
- Categorical variables- Academic Streams

Population – The female students of higher education in West Bengal.

Sample: 100 female students of higher education were selected through purposive sampling.

Tool of the Study: The researchers developed and standardised the tool used in this study. A self-made questionnaire with 30 questions has been used to collect data.

Analysis and Interpretation

Objective 1- To determine the level of social perception and awareness of female students about menstrual health.

Analysis & Interpretation of 'Awareness': The present study aims to provide a comprehensive idea of menstrual health awareness and social perception among female students of different higher education streams and draw some insights from national and international research studies.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Prior Awareness about Menstrual Health: From the responses obtained, it can be inferred that the level of prior awareness about menstrual health among students is moderate, and 43% of students

had no previous awareness about it before menstruating. However, it is essential to note that there may still be gaps in their understanding, as many students do not have a clear idea about certain aspects of menstrual health (Bhatt & Bhatt, 2004).

Theoretical Knowledge about reproductive organs: The students have some theoretical knowledge about reproductive organs and their functions. Several studies conducted in India and other countries have indicated that female higher-education students possess some theoretical knowledge about reproductive organs and their functions (Upadhyay *et al.*, 2018; Mahajan *et al.*, 2017). However, this study reveals that 19% of students never studied reproductive organs and their functions!

Awareness about Menstruation and Health: Regarding the connection between menstruation and anaemia, the responses suggest that most students know that anaemia is not directly linked to menstruation. However, 15.5% of students believe menstruation causes anaemia. This knowledge aligns with findings from previous studies (Nair *et al.*, 2018). However, there is only moderate awareness among students about the impact of oily and spicy foods on menstruation, as some students may lack comprehensive information on this aspect (Bobel, 2019). 27.5% of students said that menstrual cramps are directly connected to oily and spicy foods.

Impact on Daily Activities: The responses indicate that most students know that household chores can be continued during the menstrual cycle. This finding is consistent with research conducted by Jahan and Nessa (2017) in Bangladesh. However, 21.1% of students think household chores should be avoided during menstruation! Again, there seems to be a misconception among most students that participating in sports during menstruation harms their health. 42.3% of students think participating in sports during the menstrual cycle is harmful! This belief may stem from societal taboos and a lack of awareness about menstrual health guidelines (Hennigan *et al.*, 2019).

Guidance on Menstrual Health: A significant finding is that many students (50.7%) either remain indifferent or agree that they never receive guidance about menstrual health from their science teacher. This lack of guidance aligns with observations made by Adhikari *et al.* (2020) in Nepal, emphasising the need for better educational interventions.

Co-curricular Activities during Menstruation: Students responded differently about engaging in co-curricular activities during menstruation. According to the majority's perceptions, they may participate in activities like Yoga, Dance, Drama, etc., during the menstrual cycle. However, 21.8% of students think they should not participate in co-curricular activities during the menstrual cycle, while 16.2% remain indifferent! This finding highlights the need to address misconceptions and promote positive attitudes towards co-curricular involvement during menstruation (Das *et al.*, 2015).

Menstrual Health Terminologies: Most (60.5%) of the students have not clearly understood 'Premenstrual Syndrome' (PMS). This lack of awareness has been observed in various studies, indicating a need for comprehensive menstrual health education (Upashe *et al.*, 2015).

Menstruation and Contaminants: 18.3% of students are unaware that menstruation releases no contaminants but dead cells, while 8.5% remain indifferent! This misconception requires attention, as proper knowledge about menstrual hygiene is essential for maintaining health (Garg *et al.*, 2019).

Sanitary Napkin Usage: 95.1% of students agreed that using old cotton cloths as substitutes for sanitary napkins is not healthy, indicating some level of awareness about menstrual hygiene products. Considering the above analysis, it is evident that there is a moderate level of awareness about menstrual health among female students in higher education. However, several gaps and misconceptions must be addressed to ensure comprehensive menstrual health education. The Government of India (GOI) policies and guidelines outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 can significantly promote

better menstrual health awareness and practices among students. By incorporating comprehensive menstrual health education in the curriculum and implementing supportive policies, higher education institutions can contribute to female students' overall well-being and academic success. Further research and strategic interventions are necessary to develop comprehensive strategies for improving this population's awareness of menstrual health.

Analysis & Interpretation of 'Social Perception': Menstrual health is a crucial aspect of women's overall well-being and significantly impacts their physical, mental, and social aspects. Despite the advancements of the 21st century, there are still prevailing misconceptions and cultural taboos about menstruation among higher-education students.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Tamarind, Pickles, and Yogurt during Menstruation: A significant number of students (38%) still believe that consuming tamarind, pickles, yoghurt, etc., should be avoided during menstruation, reflecting prevailing cultural taboos surrounding menstrual practices as surfaced during other research works by Sharma *et al.* (2018).

Hesitancy in Buying Sanitary Napkins: A concerning finding in line with the research outcome of Reddy *et al.* (2020) shows that 14.1% of students still hesitate to buy sanitary napkins themselves, which may indicate social stigma or lack of access to menstrual hygiene products.

Packaging of Sanitary Napkins: Nearly 80% of students responded that sanitary napkins need not be wrapped with newspaper while selling, reflecting awareness about proper packaging and disposal methods.

Open Discussions about Menstruation: A substantial 7% of students do not feel comfortable discussing menstruation openly, indicating the persistence of social taboos and discomfort in addressing the topic, as indicated by a research study by Patel and Das (2019).

Superstitions and Misbeliefs: A notable 5% of students believe that if menstruating women touch pickles, it could lead to the pickles getting spoiled, highlighting deep-rooted superstitions associated with menstruation.

Social Exclusion: Alarming findings show that 9.9% of students confirmed that their family members consider menstruating women as untouchables, pointing to harmful social practices.

Advertisements and Menstruation: In the context of advertisements related to menstruation, nearly 30% of students do not feel comfortable watching sanitary napkin advertisements with family members, as found in a study by Mishra *et al.* (2020), indicating the sensitivity of the topic in the familial context.

Men Buying Sanitary Napkins: A concerning 40.8% of students do not feel free to ask any male family member to buy sanitary napkins for them, suggesting potential barriers to menstrual product access.

Menstruation and Religious Practices: Approximately 20.4% of students believe that menstruating women should not participate in worship, while 18.3% remain indifferent about it, reflecting the influence of cultural norms on religious practices during menstruation.

Hair Wash and Menstruation: A significant 19% of students think a woman should not wash her hair with shampoo during menstruation, indicating misconceptions about personal hygiene practices.

Menstruation as Contagious: Disturbingly, 2% of students believe that menstruation is contagious and harmful, leading to the belief that girls having periods should sleep in separate rooms.

Vermilion Application: Around 6.3% of students think a woman should not apply vermilion during menstruation, while 19.7% remain indifferent, suggesting a mix of beliefs and attitudes.

Use of Tampons/Menstrual Caps: A significant proportion (42.3%) of students remain indifferent about tampons/menstrual caps, possibly due to limited awareness or cultural inhibitions, as reported in the research by Singh and Chatterjee (2020).

Misconceptions about Tampons/Menstrual Caps: Alarming findings show that 3.5% of students believe using tampons/menstrual caps can lead to losing virginity, highlighting misconceptions about these menstrual hygiene products. Misconceptions about tampons/menstrual caps are also evident in the study by Sharma and Patel (2018).

science, science, and humanities, respectively. Therefore, an independent sample post-HOC test is required to find differences between social science, science and humanities students' awareness and social perception scores.

Findings: From multiple comparisons, it can be interpreted that the perception and awareness score difference is statistically significant for science and social science students. Again, the score difference is statistically significant for students belonging to science and humanities at the 0.05 level.

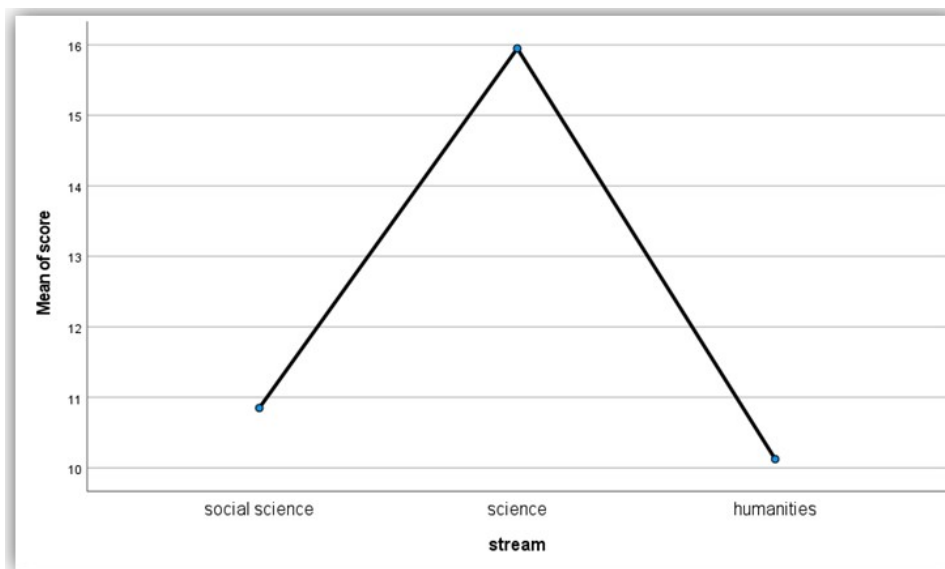
ANOVA					
score					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	806.217	2	403.108	8.886	<.001
Within Groups	5307.375	117	45.362		
Total	6113.592	119			

Post Hoc Test

Multiple Comparisons						
Dependent Variable: score						
Tukey HSD						
(I) stream	(J) stream	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
social science	science	-5.100*	1.506	.003	-8.68	-1.52
	humanities	.725	1.506	.880	-2.85	4.30
science	social science	5.100*	1.506	.003	1.52	8.68
	humanities	5.825*	1.506	<.001	2.25	9.40
humanities	social science	-.725	1.506	.880	-4.30	2.85
	science	-5.825*	1.506	<.001	-9.40	-2.25

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Mean Plot



Objective 2- To find out if there is any significant difference in the perception and awareness of the female students of different academic streams about menstrual health.

Ho 1: There is no significant difference in the perception and awareness of the female students of different academic streams about menstrual health.

FINDINGS

The analysis in the table- shows that in the case of the ANOVA test between and within groups, the F value is 8.886 and P=0.001 (P<0.05) for the variation of streams of studies. So, Ho1 is rejected, and it can be concluded that there is a significant difference in awareness and social perception about the menstrual health of students in social

science, science, and humanities, respectively. Again, looking at the mean plot, we can see that students from social science and humanities scored lower on the perception and awareness score scale, and those from science scored higher. So, it can be concluded that the students who belong to social science and humanities scored lower on the perception and awareness scale than those who belong to the science stream.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the prevalence of misconceptions, cultural taboos, and social stigmas surrounding menstrual health among higher-education female students. Despite the advancements of the 21st century, there is a need for targeted educational interventions and policy measures to promote better menstrual health awareness and practices. The GOI's policies, particularly the NEP 2020, provide a

framework for addressing these challenges and fostering a positive and informed approach to menstrual health education. Continued efforts and research in diverse settings are essential to develop comprehensive strategies for improving menstrual health among this population and ensure their overall well-being and academic success.

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