

Indonesian University Students' Perceptions of Menstruation and Menstrual Products

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ABSTRACT: This study aims to investigate how young women (university students) perceive menstruation and women bodies and how their knowledge, or lack of, affects their menstrual product choices. Adopting a descriptive-qualitative method, the data were collected through questionnaires followed by focus group discussion involving female undergraduate students from first and second year. In analyzing the data, the researchers scrutinize the influence of female students' perception on women bodies as well as the menstrual taboos embedded in culture, values, and norms on how these young women shape and share their perception about menstruation issues and menstrual products. The results show that although menstruation remains a taboo subject, Indonesian female students are generally open to discuss about the issue of menstruation. As for the choice of menstrual products, they avoid the ones that are invasive such as menstrual cups, due to the fear of "losing their virginity". Their choice is also influenced by several factors which include habits that prevail in the family and the surrounding environment with mother having the most pivotal role. Another factor is practicality or proximity of purchasing the opted menstrual products with nearby supermarkets or minimarkets as the most favorable option. In terms of environmental sustainability concept, there appears to be an inconsistency between positive attitudes towards the idea and purchasing behavior for environmentally friendly menstrual products. A phenomenon called the attitude-behavior gap or A-B gap is found among the respondents.

KEYWORDS – menstruation, menstrual products, sustainability, women body.

I. INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is a natural phenomenon for women that occurs from the time they reach puberty (menarche) until they reach menopause. Menstruation marks the maturity of a woman's reproductive organs and is often part of a woman's routine and identity. Even though menstruation is experienced by most women, this is rarely discussed openly, one of the reasons is because of the stigma and taboo associated with menstruation. The mass media has also become one of the institutions that perpetuates the idea that menstruation is shameful and a taboo topic to discuss. In a patriarchal society where the norm is the male mindset and point of view, the female body is presented as something mysterious and different. This leads menstruation to be perceived as taboo and shameful. In many cultures, menstruation often becomes the reason for excluding women from various social, cultural and religious activities (Abdullah; 2002). Furthermore, the view about PMS (Pre-menstrual syndrome) which has become mainstream discourse limits women's access to productive activities and decision making due to the assumption that women are emotionally unstable.

In the midst of various ways of normalizing menstruation, especially on digital platforms and social media, negative stigma about menstruation prevails in many countries with different cultural backgrounds (Singh, 2019). Concepts surrounding women's virginity and chastity in patriarchal corridors in various cultures and

religions make it taboo to discuss menstruation in the public sphere as well as the use of internal menstrual products such as menstrual cups. In addition, advertisements for menstrual products that are often found in mainstream mass media such as television and magazines still emphasize the image of "secrecy" and "cleanliness" while at the same time eliminating the real experience of menstruation (Singh, 2019). Such messages make menstruation seems bad, dirty and taboo.

Apart from reproductive health, the impact of menstrual product waste on the environment is an issue that needs serious attention for environmental sustainability in the future. Over the course of her lifetime, each woman uses more than 16,000 single-use menstrual products on average. Meanwhile in Indonesia, menstrual product waste reaches 26 tons per day (Putri et al., 2021). This waste, which consists of disposable sanitary napkins and panty liners, takes around 500 to 800 years to decompose. Apart from that, if it is thrown into rivers, it will harm the water ecosystem. According to Ashley et al. (2005) in the last few years, the problem of menstrual product waste has received more attention than before. However, even with the growing issue of climate breakdown, menstrual products are still not a common topic of conversation among women. Without sufficient knowledge about menstrual product issues, women cannot understand or be responsible for their impact on the environment.

Several studies have been conducted, especially in developing countries, to examine women's interests and views regarding the use of environmentally friendly menstrual products. For example, a study conducted in India attempted to map the understanding and awareness of young men and women about menstruation (Srinivasan, 2019). Research in Nepal and Zimbabwe has focused on menstrual cups – an environmentally friendly, invasive menstrual product – in terms of understanding and training women about their use and looking at women's interest in using them sustainably (Pokhrel et al., 2021; Tembo et al., 2020). These two studies show that most women are still reluctant to use menstrual cups because they are constrained by socio-cultural values, especially because of concerns about reducing fertility and losing virginity. The previous research has not touched the group of young people categorized as Gen Z. Therefore, it is interesting to see Gen Z's perception of menstruation and the menstrual products they choose, considering that Gen Z is a generation with high awareness about the environment, climate change and green products (Ariesta, 2020). Therefore, this research seeks to examine the perceptions of Indonesian female university students regarding women bodies and menstrual phenomena that is reflected in their choice of menstrual products. Furthermore, this research is an attempt to explore Gen Z's perception and awareness of environmentally friendly menstrual products which lead to empowering women to instill independence over their own bodies and femininity.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

Adopting descriptive-qualitative method, the data was obtained from Indonesian university students focusing on the first and second year who were selected using purposive sampling rules. In the initial stage of the research, a questionnaire technique using Likert scale (1 for 'totally disagree', 2 for 'disagree', 3 for 'agree' and 4 for 'totally agree') was used to collect initial data regarding female students' perceptions about menstruation, the body and its manifestations in choosing menstrual products. This initial data was used to map female students' tendencies regarding their perceptions of menstruation which is reflected in the choice of menstrual products they use.

The initial response from the questionnaire was then triangulated with focus group discussion (FGD). This FGD was broadly divided into two groups; 1) a group of female students who consider menstruation to be taboo, and 2) a group of students who consider menstruation is not taboo. The two groups were brought together in one session. This is done so that each group can show the dynamics behind their choice of menstrual products and its relationship to their perceptions about menstruation and the environment and they can also exchange ideas and thoughts with each other. The FGD was designed in a semi-structured manner, with a series of pre-planned questions followed by further elaboration when necessary. These include, among other things, how they experienced menstruation when they were growing up until now, how they exchange narratives about women's

bodies and menstruation with their social environment, how they learn about menstruation and menstrual products and the history of using menstrual products. In the process, follow-up discussions with informants were organic. All interview (conducted in Indonesian) results were recorded audio-visually, then the discussions and responses from students were transcribed. From the FGD, qualitative data was produced in the form of discourse obtained from the two groups which was then analyzed simultaneously. In this case, the researchers underline the repetition of words in the FGD about their feelings, opinions and points of view about menstruation, menstrual products and environmental issues.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

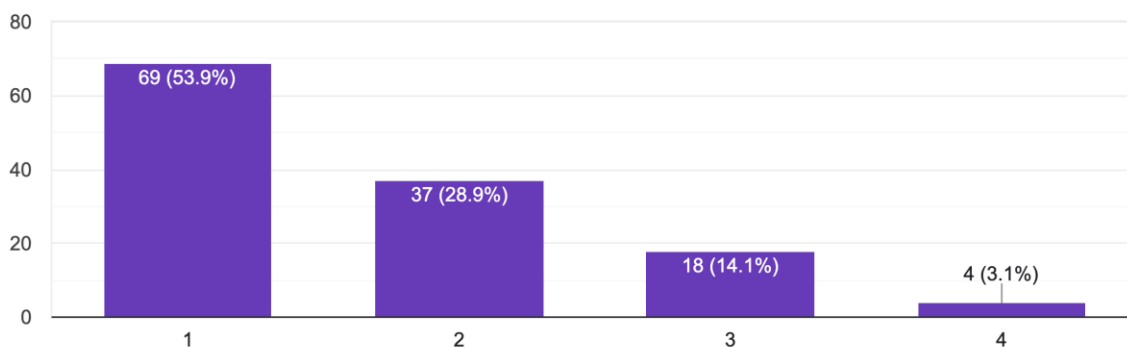
3.1. Indonesian Female Students' Perceptions of their Body and Menstruation

In general, respondents' views on the body and menstruation were divided into 2 groups. Respondents generally tend to be open when it comes to discussions about menstruation in general, related to the menstrual cycle, and menstrual products. The results of the questionnaire showed that respondents were quite comfortable with discussions about menstruation. 54% of respondents disagree if menstruation is a difficult and uncomfortable topic to discuss.

Diagram 1. Responses about discussing the topic of menstruation

I feel that issues related to menstruation are difficult and uncomfortable topics to discuss.

128 responses



Furthermore, their perceptions were confirmed in the FGD in which respondents explained that they did not hesitate if men were present when discussing menstruation with their friends. Respondents also shared information about their habits of discussing the menstrual cycle with friends in their circle. In discussing their irregular menstrual cycle, respondents tended to be comfortable and open to get answers about whether this was also experienced by their friends. There was even one respondent who admitted that she did not hesitate to discuss this topic with her father. This strengthens the respondents' openness in talking about menstruation with the opposite sex. Even though the opposite sex is a family member, the fact that respondents do not hesitate to discuss it with the opposite sex shows a detachment from the perception that only women are the ones who have knowledge about menstruation. Respondents' openness about menstrual products is influenced by need factors. In discussions within the group, it was stated that during menstruation, they did not hesitate to ask relatives or close male friends for help in getting sanitary products. When respondents shopped for sanitary napkin products themselves, they were not embarrassed by the presence of men around them, or when they had to be served by a male cashier. Needs become more basic factors that must be met and not hidden.

Meanwhile, for more specific discussions regarding menstruation, the respondents tended to be reserved. Discussions about reproductive organs, reproductive organ health, and virginity are still very closely guarded and tend to be difficult topic to discuss. Moreover, the results of discussions with respondents showed inconsistencies between openness to discussing issues surrounding menstruation and reluctance to call menstruation "menstruation". Instead, there is a tendency to replace the word menstruation with other words that have a similar meaning but do not sound as 'vulgar'.

Saya biasabilangnyalagihaidataulagiudzuratauberhalangan. (FD, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

Saya agakmalunyebutmenstruasi. Jadi biasanyamenyebutnyadatangbulan. (RV, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

I usually say that I'm "haid" or "berhalangan" or "sedanguzur". (FD, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

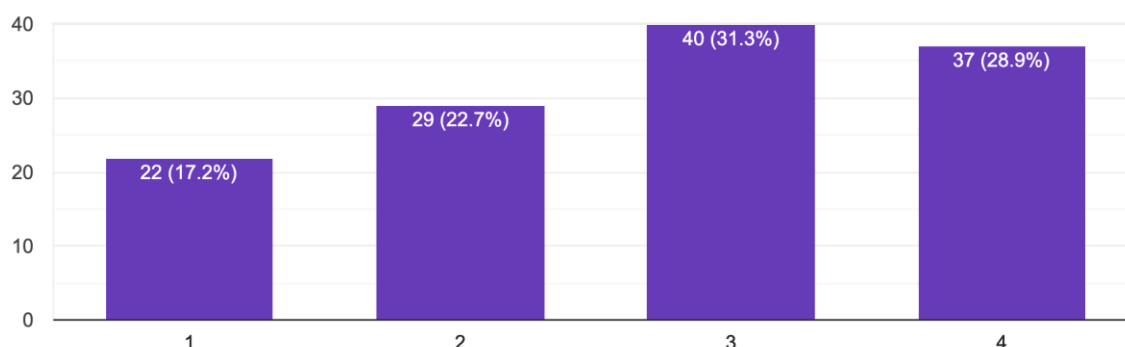
I'm a bit embarrassed to say menstruation. So, I usually call it "datangbulan". (RV, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

According to Lozada (2015), language is a tool to maintain taboos related to menstruation. The silencing of discourse about menstruation is done by avoiding the word 'menstruation' itself and using slang words instead. This ultimately forms a stigma and taboo about menstruation itself.

Diagram 2. Responses about menstrual blood

I think menstrual blood is dirty and disgusting.

128 responses



Based on the results of the questionnaire above, 60.2% respondents viewed menstrual blood as something dirty. The results of follow-up discussions in the FGD also confirmed this. One respondent stated that "I feel uncomfortable seeing my own menstrual blood because it feels dirty" (RV, discussion on 11 Nov 2023). Menstrual blood is often associated with dirty and disgusting bodily fluids, so in some cultures, menstruating women are prohibited from participating in religious and social activities (Singh, 2019).

3.2. Female Students' Perceptions About Menstrual Products

3.2.1. The Compatibility of Menstrual Products with the Concept of Female Body

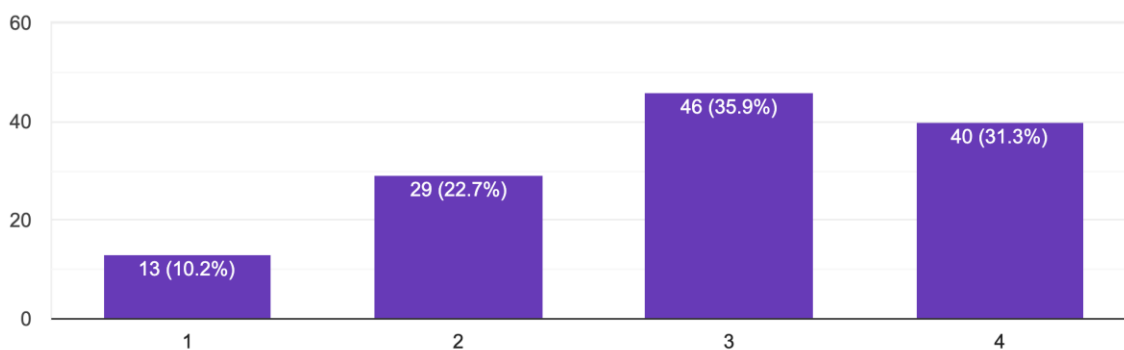
Women have many reasons for choosing menstrual products, one of which is the suitability of menstrual products with their body concept, especially regarding menstruation. The results of the questionnaire confirmed

that 67.2% of respondents chose menstrual products in the form of disposable menstrual pads or disposable sanitary napkins, as seen in the following diagram.

Diagram 3. Responses about choosing Non-Invasive Menstrual Products

I will choose non-invasive products (such as sanitary napkins) because I think invasive menstrual products will break the hymen.

128 responses



From these results, it appears that the majority of respondents choose non-invasive menstrual products because they concern that menstrual products inserted into the female organs, such as menstrual cups or tampons, will injure the female organs, especially the hymen. This is greatly influenced by the sociocultural norms in Indonesia, especially the importance of virginity and the hymen for young unmarried women. In patriarchal culture, virginity is a symbol of a woman's personality. If a woman is able to maintain her virginity until marriage, the woman is labeled as a good woman. On the other hand, if a woman loses her virginity before marriage, the woman will be perceived as a bad or naughty woman (Kurnianto, 2017).

This also applies to Gen Z female students who became research respondents, that as many as 65.7% were worried that their hymen would be damaged. In other words, the majority of respondents consider the hymen to be an important aspect in defining their worth as women. Female students' views about virginity directly influence their choice of menstrual products. Respondents stated that they were hesitant to use invasive menstrual products such as menstrual cups. They feared these products would "take their virginity." Some respondents were concerned about the size of the menstrual cup which was considered too large and would be painful or even damage the female organs, as recorded in the following FGD excerpts.

Takutmencobahal yang nggakbiasadigunakan. Kalaumencobasesuatu yang barutakutnyagimanagimana. (RV, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

Bagisaya, kalaupakai tampon atau menstrual cup takutmelukai vagina, jadibelumberani. Takutterjadisesuatu, karenaharusdimasukkan. (AJ, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

(I am) afraid to try things I am not used to. I am afraid something will happen when I try something new(RV, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

For me, if I use a tampon or menstrual cup, I'm afraid of hurting my vagina. (I am)afraid something will happen, because it has to be inserted. (AJ, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

The results of this discussion are in line with the findings of Ndichu et al (2021) who stated that in Kenya, menstrual products that require internal installation are very unpopular and their use is even avoided due to women's discomfort with inserting the product into the vagina and the still very strong perception about the importance of women in maintaining the hymen which is an indicator of virginity.

Furthermore, the results of discussions with respondents showed that the possibility of female students in trying or using menstrual products other than disposable sanitary napkins or environmentally friendly products was very low. Many said that they were not sure about using it for various reasons, such as not being sure about the function and effectiveness of the product and the high price of the product.

Takut *nggak* nah and arahnya aatautakutnantinya bocor. (AS, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

Sudahterbayangin mencobacelanamenstruasi. Tapi, memikirkan harganya yang lebih mahal jadi *nggak* duludeh. (FD, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

(I am) afraid that the products can't hold back the blood and leaking. (AS, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

I have been thinking about trying menstrual pants. But, considering the expensive price, I don't think I will buy the product in the near future. (FD, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

AS' opinion above confirms the respondent's general opinion that menstrual blood is something that must be hidden because it is dirty blood as explained in the previous sub-chapter. Therefore, it is important for respondents to use products that they are sure of their effectiveness. Despite that, some respondents expressed positive attitudes towards menstrual pants. They are not reluctant to try non-invasive eco-friendly menstrual products such as menstrual pants if they get enough information about the product. In addition, several respondents also stated that they would be willing to try menstrual pants if they were cheaper or free.

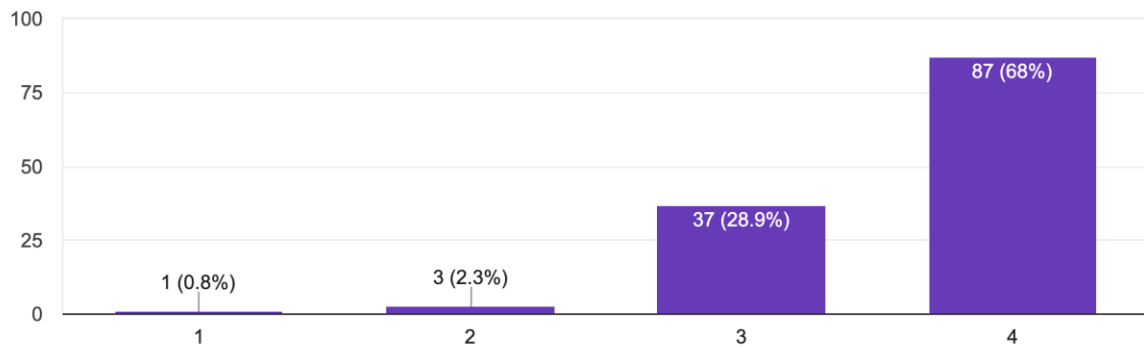
3.2.2. Compatibility with Habit in Society and Practicality in Purchasing

There are many factors that influence women's choice of menstrual products, such as personal preferences, cultural norms, access to resources, and the experiences of women themselves and other women (Asumah et al: 2022). As recorded in the results of the questionnaire, it was noted that almost all respondents (96.9%) stated that they chose products that were easily available around them, such as in minimarkets or supermarkets (see diagram 4). Apart from the fact that currently in Indonesia minimarkets can be found in every corner of neighborhood and have become the main choice for our society for shopping, this choice might also be motivated by the fact that shopping at minimarkets allows respondents to minimize the need to interact with other people, especially sellers (cashiers), so it is more practical when choosing menstrual products according to their needs.

Diagram 4. Responses about the Choice of Easiness to Obtain Menstrual Products

I tend to choose products that are easy to find at the nearest marts

128 responses



In terms of choosing menstrual products, apart from mothers and other close people, TV advertisements related to sanitary napkins play an important role in being the main source of information about menstruation and menstrual hygiene management, as confirmed by 88.3% of respondents (see diagram5). The results of this study reaffirm the results of previous studies regarding the important role of advertising in choosing menstrual products as exemplified in various other countries such as Bangladesh (Poly, et.al, 2020), Nigeria (Eleboda& Funke, 2020) and India (Verma, 2015) and research on different demographic groups such as young women at junior high school level (Syahda&Elmayasari, 2020) and high school level (Inayah, 2022). The important role of advertising was also reiterated during the FGD, as seen in the following quote from DV:

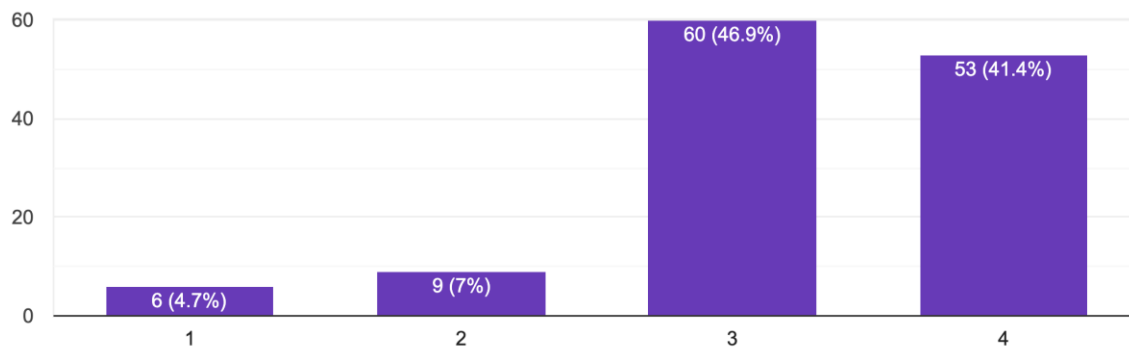
Iya (terpengaruh), samaseperti A. Kalausaya, awalawaltuhpake yang sirih, terusakhirakhirinisayabaru gantike yang *cooling fresh* gitu. Dan ternyatasiklussayajadilebihpendek, dan *nggak*terlalusakit. Jadi, sayaberalihke*cooling fresh*. Ya, rasanyalebihademsih. Saya juga seringmerasasakit (nyeri), kalaupaka*cooling fresh* iniberkurangsakitnya. (DV, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

Yes (affected), same as A. For me, at first I used betel (variant), then recently I changed to cooling fresh. And it turns out my cycle is shorter, and it doesn't hurt as much. So, I switched to cooling fresh. Yes, it feels cooler. I also often feel sick (pain), if I use cooling fresh, the pain will be reduced. (DV, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

Diagram 5. Responses About Choosing Menstrual Products Because of Mass Media

I tend to choose products that are commonly seen in the mass media (TV) or that are generally used by people around me.

128 responses



One interesting thing regarding the role of parents (mothers) in choosing menstrual products is that, different from middle school and high school teenage girls, the respondents in this study who were undergraduate students began to show agency over their own selves by secretly negotiating with their mothers over menstrual products they choose, as mentioned in the following FGD by RV and HN:

Saya terpengaruh. Kan dari keluarga saya ditetapin sama mamah saya 'ini produk yang bagus, pakai ini saja', jadi dari awal menstruasi saya pakai produk yang sama (tetap). Tapi ternyata saat akhir akhir ini ada iklan pembalut "Nat***" yang katanya lebih bagus, dan ada efek dinginnya. Terus saya kepo dan membeli tanpa sepengetahuan mamah saya. Ternyata memang lebih enak. Tetapi karena mahal, saya tidak rutin beli tiap bulan. (RV, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

Kalau saya sih, kalau di rumah ngikut apa yang mama saya anjurin. Tapi kalau di kost sendiri, saya orangnya suka nyoba nyoba biar bisa tau mana yang lebih nyaman. Nyoba nyoba berdasarkan bungkus yang menarik. (HN, diskusi pada 11 Nov 2023)

I was affected. From my family my mother told me 'this is a good product, use it', so from the start of my period I used the same product (still). But it turns out that lately there has been an advertisement for "Nat***" sanitary napkins which are said to be better, and have a cooling effect. Then I was curious and bought it without my mother's knowledge. It turns out it's actually better. But because it's expensive, I don't regularly buy it every month. (RV, discussion on 11 Nov 2023).

For me, at home I follow what my mother advises. But when I am at my own boarding house, I like to try things out so I can find out which one is more comfortable. (I) Try it based on the attractive packaging. (HN, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

From the two quotes above, we can see the dialectic between the role of mothers and advertising in the respondents' decisions in choosing menstrual products. The wider social circle, age, and possibility of these young women to live alone independently, provide wider space for them to make their own decisions about what menstrual products they want to use, although still based on advertisements in the media they see.

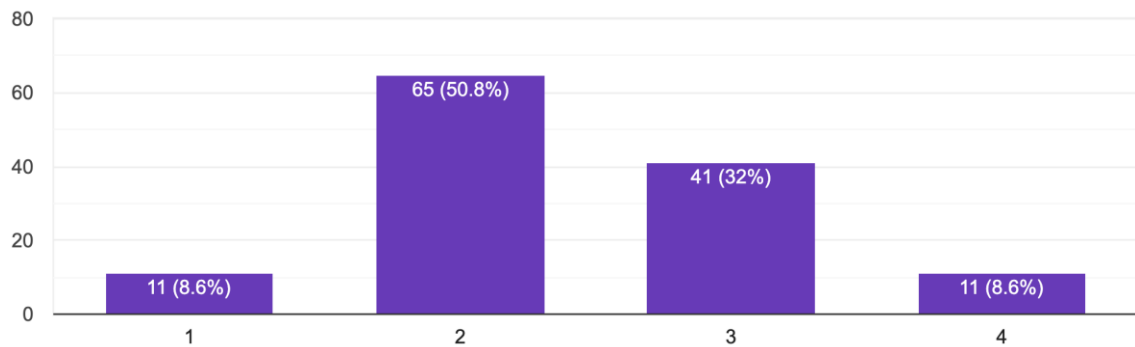
3.2.3. The Choosing of menstrual products and sustainability

Almost 100% of respondents in this study showed high environmental awareness and that they also expressed support for environmentally friendly products (74.8%). However, what is interesting is that there is an anomaly or inconsistency between a positive attitude towards the idea of environmental sustainability and the behavior of purchasing environmentally friendly menstrual products (which minimize waste), as seen in diagram 6 where 50.8% said they disagree and 8.6% of them even said they strongly disagree. Apparently, this is not a unique finding in this study, it is also found in many other parts of the world, such as in Switzerland (Tanner& Kast, 2003), Belgium (Vermeir& Verbeke, 2008), Portugal (Paço&Raposo, 2009), and in Germany (Moser, 2015). For Boulstridge& Carrigan (2000), this phenomenon is called the attitude-behavior gap or A-B gap.

Diagram 6. Responses about Choosing Menstrual Products that Minimize Waste

I tend to choose products that minimize waste

128 responses

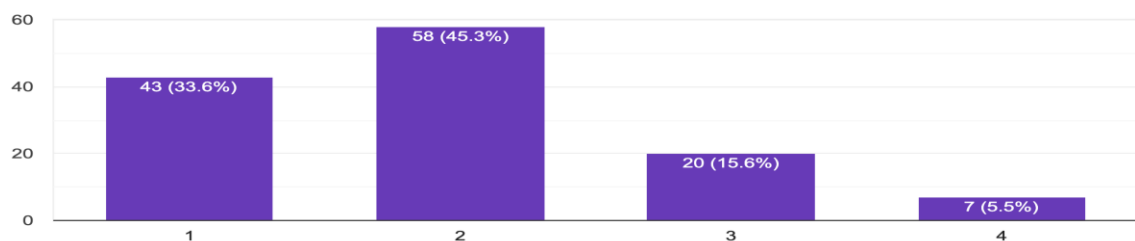


Uniquely, the tendency not to buy environmentally friendly menstrual products (which can be used repeatedly and for a long time) also remains high even if they can save more money (see diagram 7).

Diagram 7. Responses about Choosing Reusable Menstrual Products

I tend to choose products that can be used repeatedly over a long period of time because overall it can save more money.

128 responses



There are several reasons why this A-B gap phenomenon can occur, one of which is due to habit factors, as stated by Tsakiridou et al. (2008). This was agreed by several respondents as seen in the discussion excerpt below.

Kepikiransampahnyanutpuk. Tapigakbisadihindari. (HN, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

Belum *kepikeirantentangudahngabisinberapa. Tapi kalautentang sampah, kepiikiran. Tapi karena kebutuhan, jadi yaudah.* (DV, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

I'm aware that the trash is piling up. But it can't be avoided. (HN, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

(I) haven't thought about how many packages I've used. But when it comes to trash, (I do) think about it. But because I need it, I have no choice. (DV, discussion on 11 Nov 2023)

Past habits and behaviors guide consumers' preferences and influence their purchasing behavior, making them difficult to change.

IV. CONCLUSION

Indonesian female students generally think that the issue of menstruation is not something embarrassing to talk about, even though they limit discussions related to menstruation to family members and closest friends. However, this finding is also inversely proportional to their tendency to replace the word menstruation with other equivalent words when speaking, especially in the public sphere. This gives an understanding that to a certain extent, menstruation remains a taboo subject. This menstrual stigma and taboo also ultimately shape their perception of menstrual blood as dirty and disgusting. However, female students show an interest in getting to know their own bodies by using the menstrual cycle as a reference.

Trends and tendencies in choosing menstrual products by female students can be divided into three aspects, namely (1) choosing products that are in accordance with the concept of the female body, (2) choosing products that are in accordance with environmental habits, and (3) choosing environmentally friendly products. In general, disposable sanitary napkins were chosen and used by the majority of respondents. The use of environmentally friendly menstrual products that are invasive, such as menstrual cups, tend to be avoided by female students. This is related to the strong sociocultural norms that prohibit products from being inserted due to fear of "losing one's virginity" due to tearing of the hymen, or fear of injuring the vagina due to the size of the product. Thus, in general, the concept of a woman's body being pure and virgin is still the main benchmark in selecting menstrual products for female students. Furthermore, the research results also show that product selection is also influenced by the habits that prevail in the family and the surrounding environment. Among other things, mothers are the first mentors for young women regarding menstruation. The products that mothers use at home will be the main products that female students will use in the future. Apart from that, the existence of minimarkets and supermarkets nearby makes it easier to access the opted menstrual products. However, the role of advertising in mass media, such as television, was also the main trigger for respondents' choice of menstrual products. Regarding the concept of environmental sustainability, there appears to be an inconsistency between positive attitudes towards the idea of environmental sustainability and purchasing behavior for environmentally friendly menstrual products. Female students still show reluctance to use environmentally friendly menstrual products and reduce the waste of single-use menstrual products.

The results of this research open up opportunities to further explore topics related to body issues, menstruation and environmentally friendly menstrual products among teenagers and young women. One way is to deconstruct taboos, stigma, and societal boundaries around menstruation as a natural bodily process. Furthermore, there are concrete steps that can be taken by educators and community. Educators and communities can provide sex education from an early age for girls that prioritizes the concept of women's empowerment regarding body and menstrual issues, so that they can introduce alternative menstrual products (apart from disposable sanitary napkins) that are more environmentally friendly.

V. Acknowledgements

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