How Digital Media is Used to Fight Stigma

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Introduction

Stigma is considered to be a non-issue in our modern lives, as if it were something that only affected our ancestors. The reality is quite the opposite, however: though the origin of many stigmas is in the past, their effects manifest readily in the present. Shame and stigma exist in all cultures, our own included, and are particularly obvious in cultures outside of our own: in India (and more broadly, Eastern cultures), for instance, as I'll discuss later in this paper, women's hygiene—particularly that relating to menstruation—has life-threatening taboos associated with it. Consider the following two excerpts from New York Times articles about stigmatized women in India and Nepal, respectively.

> "The taboo of menstruation in India causes real harm. Women in some tribes are forced to live in a cowshed throughout their periods. There are health issues, like infections caused by using dirty rags, and horror stories, like that of one girl who was too embarrassed to ask her mother for a clean cloth, and used one she found without knowing it had lizard eggs in it. According to one of the Yatra outreach workers, the subsequent infection meant her uterus had to be removed when she was 13. She would be forever tainted as a barren woman, so that whoever saw her first in the morning had to take a bath to wash her stain away" (George 2012).

Forcing women to live in cowsheds, which are often poorly protected from the local elements and wildlife, demonstrates the society's disregard for those menstruating. Ignoring the risk of complications like those the mentioned girl suffered, living outside leaves one susceptible to mosquitoes, lethal scorpions,[1]

[1]India and surrounding regions are home to the world's deadliest scorpion, *Hottentotta tamulus* (the Indian red scorpion), among several other highly toxic species (Ismail 1995, H. S. Bawaskar and Bawaskar (1998)). Scorpion stings are not uncommon in these regions, and their true incidence is actually unknown due to underreporting (Tripathi et al. 2006).

and even man-eating beasts.[2] In addition to the physical danger in which the girl is placed, relegation to the cowshed, away from her family, bears shame in and of itself. Even those who see the girl are ashamed, and feel a need to cleanse themselves, which is a testament to the degree of reproductive stigma in this culture.

> "In some villages, menstruating women are sent to cow sheds. Women who just gave birth are also considered polluted, and many remain isolated with their newborns for several days. Two years ago, said Ms. Kunwar, the women's aid worker, a mother left her newborn alone in a shed for just a few minutes to wash her clothes. A jackal skulked in and snatched the baby" (Gettleman 2018).

In this case, a newborn faced certain death due to the unsafe conditions it and its mother were placed in due to the stigma surrounding menstruation and birth in Nepal. As referenced earlier, man-eating animals impose a real threat to unprotected peoples in certain parts of the world. The disregard for human life is similar here to the first excerpt; by perpetuating the myth that new mothers are pestiferous and therefore must keep outside, the enforcers are endangering the lives of both the infant and its mother.

Stigma requires perpetuation through generations: although these beliefs seem like they could be demystified by science, logic, and knowledge; they in fact are not, while the maintenance of shame strengthens the cycle of stigma. Modern medicine indicates no pollution in new mothers, yet still mothers are sent outdoors where horrors such as those described may happen.

Eliminating, or even reducing, such stigmas would have profound effects for many. The modern effects of taboo are not limited to menstruation, nor to women's health or hygiene, but these topics carry more prominent stigmas and effects than most issues. Digital media, in various forms, are proven tools to lessen and break stigma and its effects.

Indeed, digital media—including film, web forums, social media—are increasingly being used in different settings and by people of myriad backgrounds to unburden the stigmatized.

Key concepts to address in an attack of stigma are *public stigma*—"what the public does to people marked with an ... illness"—and *self-stigma*—internalized public stigma—also referred to as *external* and *internal*, respectively. There are well-established methods for changing public stigma: protest (appeal to moral authority), education (contradiction of myth by fact), and contact (interaction between the public and the stigmatized) (P. W. Corrigan and Penn 1999).

[2] It may seem ridiculous, but leopards and tigers have killed thousands of Indians in the past century. In 2008, tigers migrating from Bangladesh to India attacked and killed a number of people in West Bengal (Ians 2008).

Changing self-stigma is equally important to helping the stigmatized, though these methods are not so generally accepted; for instance, coming out, one of the primary methods for accepting oneself, bears consequences such as worsened discrimination (P. Corrigan Patrick W. and Wassel 2008).

In this essay, I will argue that digital media are effective tools in combating the negative effects of stigma, external or internal. In doing so, I will present several examples of different digital media being used to counter stigma, shame, and taboo.

Close Analysis: *Padman*

The Bollywood blockbuster *Padman* (Balki 2018) is an exemplar use of digital media to challenge stigma for social change and public benefit. It focuses particularly on the destigmatization of women's natural menstrual periods and associated hygiene, as well as promotion of safer habits regarding the former. The film was inspired by and closely resembles the life and work of Arunachalam Muruganantham, a social activist from Tamil Nadu who introduced low-cost sanitary pads, and depicts Lakshmi,[3] a common man attempting to protect his wife and loved-ones, in his stead.

The film's executives and actors have publicly expressed their intent to make social change with *Padman*. The film, along with its accompanying social media campaign/challenge, attempts to attack the taboo surrounding menstruation in Indian culture. This taboo is pervasive throughout the Indian culture—especially in rural regions—and transcends religion, crosses state boundaries, and exists even in other countries (most notably Pakistan[4]). Even if a viewer does not hold a similar view on these issues, he is assumed to be familiar with them and know several others who do. *Padman*'s stars, Akshay Kumar and Sonam Kapoor, ignited a social media challenge, asking their followers to generate online discussion regarding women's menstrual health and hygiene around the movie's release, getting the topic on everyone's minds and normalizing pads. The film was created, according to its writers and actors, exactly because the

[3]In the film, he is usually referred to as "Lakshmi," which refers to the eponymous Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity (Lochtefeld 2002) and is typically a female given name. His full name, Lakshmikant, is the masculine form of the name, and means husband of Lakshmi, i.e., Vishnu—a principal deity of Hinduism and the Supreme Being of the Vaishnavism tradition (Flood 1996). It is likely no coincidence, then, that the film's writers have made their hero's name a reference the God of Protection and that which preserves good (Zimmer 1946).

[4]In fact, the taboo and discomfort regarding menstruation is so severe among Pakistani and Kuwaiti leaders that the film was banned in both countries ("Akshay Kumar's Padman Won't Release in Pakistan" 2018). Despite the views of the leadership, many Pakistanis wanted the film to release in Pakistan to generate discussions regarding women's health: outraged that Pakistan's Central Board of Film Centers blocked the movie's release, many Pakistani women pointed out the irony in the censorship (supposing that, for example, the leadership's wives don't and never have menstruated), while others sent pads to the board (Jadoon 2018). Of note, India's Censor Board requested no edits to the film, according to lead actor Akshay Kumar; suggesting an interest from the Indian leadership in eliminating the shame.

taboo surrounding menstruation is so inescapable in India (and culturally similar countries). With the film, they sought to diminish the ruinous social and medical effects menstruating (i.e., being women) has on women's lives (Press Trust of India 2017).

The film begins with the celebration of Raksha Bandhan, an annual festival in which men promise to protect the women of their lives. Lakshmi swears to protect his new wife, Gayatri, and the other women of his family. Lakshmi learns quickly upon living together that Gayatri uses dirty rags for her menses and insists she begin using sanitary pads instead, for her safety. Even after Lakshmi buys and presents Gayatri with sanitary pads, his wife refuses due to the pad's excessive price. Fearing for his wife's health, and unable to afford commercially available sanitary pads on a long-term basis, Lakshmi is left with no choice but to make his own. His family and town turn against him, claiming Lakshmi has gone mad to obsess over a "woman's matter"—until his pads become massively successful and he is recognized both nationally and internationally.

Usage of uncleanly rags and similarly unsanitary alternatives (such as ashes and husk sand) is prevalent in India and developing countries, and can lead to health complications like toxic shock syndrome (Davis et al. 1980, Todd (1988), Kehrberg et al. (1981)) and reproductive tract infections (Goyal 2016). Gayatri's rag is hung to dry under clothes, receiving neither direct sunlight nor public attention. Such improper drying can lead to fungal and bacterial growth on the rag, especially given the blood residue inevitably left on the rag. A doctor in the film confirms these dangers, telling Lakshmi he frequently sees women with infections resulting from their use of rags.

Lakshmi first recognizes the hardship menstruation causes Gayatri when, after sitting to eat with her family, she suddenly ups and leaves the house. Confused, Lakshmi asks his mother what happened, only to hear that he shouldn't get involved. Lakshmi finds Gayatri on the balcony of the house,[5] sitting on the bed and beginning to eat. Upon demanding Gayatri to come and eat inside with the family, she begs him to "speak softly.... It's a woman's problem. Please stay away.... This is tradition. It's impure. You go inside!" Lakshmi responds, "These rituals are for fools. Come inside and create a new ritual." Even though all the menstruating women in the house and village share Gayatri's experience with periods (and it's obvious hers just started since she's outside), Gayatri asks Lakshmi to not call attention to it for fear of people hearing and feeling shameful. Despite their status as newlyweds, Gayatri begs Lakshmi to stay away, not to touch her, nor to fret. Just before the meal, Lakshmi had sworn to take care of the women of his household, most of all his wife, but in this moment she asks him not to take care of her. She resorts to the argument of tradition, as well as one of cleanliness—she claims it would be uncleanly for

[5]Most every home shown in the villages has an outdoor, covered balcony with a bed and furniture for one to live outside. During their "five days," it's typical that the women in a household live in this space, do not go indoors, and do not touch anyone. The only other shown use of this space is for drying laundry.

her to be inside while bleeding, despite exposing her body to the microbiome of the dirty rag. Lakshmi, completely unconvinced by her reasoning, begs his wife to join him inside—at this point, he knows nothing of the rag she uses, but only asks to set an example for the other women and not subject herself to imprisonment outdoors when she could instead live during these few days. Sanitary and health issues aside, Lakshmi doesn't understand why menstruation causes such commotion among the women in his life, and wants them to continue living normally during their periods. Lakshmi criticizes the taboo as needlessly exaggerated to the pharmacist and public, while the film's writers express similar sentiments to the film's audience.

The film repeatedly uses ironic contrast to make its point: throughout the movie, characters call sanitary pads "dirty," despite the fact that they are actually thoroughly sanitized while the commonly used rags are not. After Lakshmi buys the pads and his wife refuses to use them due to their price, Lakshmi goes to work and sees someone cut himself while operating machinery. Lakshmi responds immediately, and tries to help his friend. As his coworkers huddle around Lakshmi and the injured man, one of them gives Lakshmi a cloth to use a bandage. Lakshmi yells at them "Not a dirty cloth!" Realizing he is carrying a pack of sanitary pads, he starts applying one to the man's arm, a coworker tells him not to use it since "this is for women." At the hospital, after the doctor asks who ingeniously used a pad, the same coworker attempts to blame Lakshmi: "I was tying a cloth... This is Lakshmi's doing. Lakshmi, why did you use this dirty women's thing on his arm?" Without missing a beat, the doctor informs the room that Lakshmi did the right thing, since "this thing is the cleanest" and that if they "had used some dirty cloth, ... he would have got an infection and maybe even lost his hand!" The doctor flips Lakshmi's coworker's argument back at him, eliminating credibility of the argument that pads are physically dirty and illustrating just how unsanitary using a cloth is. Though in this instance, the argument is about a wounded arm, the logic holds and the stark contrast makes viewers consider applying the same logic towards the menstrual use case. The explicit mention of infection risk and the horror of losing an arm serves to make the audience realize that using dirty rags can result in loss of limbs or reproductive organs.[6]

Digital media is central to Lakshmi's filmic innovation. Lakshmi, hoping to learn relevant materials science, briefly becomes a servant to a University professor. Unfortunately for him, the professor is rarely home; instead of learning from the professor, the professor's son teaches Lakshmi to use their computer and Google to learn what he needs. Through the digital, Lakshmi makes two critical learnings: first, he learns about cellulose fiber, then finds and contacts a supplier; second, he learns about an all-in-one sanitary pad production machine (which costs a few million dollars), upon which he bases his homemade, compartmentalized,

[6] In 2017, American model Lauren Wasser (who could afford proper healthcare, something most of the film's characters cannot) needed to have a leg amputated and experienced countless other medical issues as a result of wearing a dirty tampon for too long. She publicized her experience in the hopes that others would not make similar mistakes (Bever 2017).

low-cost pad machine. Without the knowledge he gleaned from the Internet, Lakshmi would have never succeeded in mass-producing pads and helping women on the scale he did.

Toward the end of the film, once Lakshmi has built his pad-making machine (and won the President's Award for the Life Changing Innovation of the Year), and helped women in villages across India establish their own sanitary pad factories, he is invited to speak at the United Nations. On stage, with the streets of New York City behind him and an audience of hundreds before him, Lakshmi explains his success, motivations, and the importance of his innovations. He explains in his broken English to the audience that the pad gives women two more months of life annually: "Five day every month woman sitting outside house doing nothing! Five into twelve equal to sixty. One year, sixty days, two months waste. Woman wearing pad meaning two month life extra! Why for man twelve months year but woman only ten months?" Once again, Lakshmi and his writers aim to make their respective audiences see the absurdity of the menstrual taboo: when the wasted days are tabulated as two months per year rather than five days per month, and the contrast of a man's twelve month year to a woman's two month year is presented, it's immediately obvious how much women miss out on in their lives as a result of the taboo and lack of pads. Lakshmi presents the choice to women: wear a rag and miss two months per year, or wear a pad and live each year in full, making it difficult for any women to refuse the idea of using pads. Hopefully, too, the contrast drawn helps husbands realize how much living their wives miss without good reason, and will want to change that. Notably, Lakshmi's argument isn't for his filmic American audience (for whom its not really relevant), but an appeal to the real Indian audience watching the movie in theaters. These lines constitute a powerful, audience-oriented take-home message: a sixty year-old woman has wasted ten years of her life doing nothing for no obvious reason or benefit.

In the aim to promote discussion and not just monologue at an audience with the film, a social media challenge accompanied the film: people posted pictures of themselves holding a sanitary pad, with a caption along the lines of "Yes, that's a pad in my hand and there is nothing to be ashamed about. It's natural. Period." The film's stars, with a combined follower count across Instagram and Twitter nearing 80 million, shared many of the fan posts, helping to reinforce the normality of menstruation and its associated hygiene. In doing so, the "Twitter effect" (Tryon 2013), or the idea that social media can massively distribute word-of-mouth ideas (particularly responses to movies by moviegoers) was leveraged in two ways: (1) the discussion and posting about the film and feminine hygiene prompted moviegoers to watch, and (2) the posts promoted further (follow-up) discussion of feminine hygiene itself, helping to generate a secondary Twitter effect and helping to educate more people about feminine hygiene. While judging social impact at this point is difficult, *Padman* clearly successfully used the Twitter effect: it dominated the Indian box office weekend one (making over ten times what the next film did) and maintained a top two position for six consecutive weeks ("India Box Office Index," n.d.). (*Padman* fell behind only

Disney's *Black Panther* in that span.) The social effects of the film and its social media presence were called the "PadMan effect" by IBTimes India—while the magnitude may be difficult to quantify at this point, the intent was clearly to have broad social impact as convergent media, and *Padman* achieved that at least in some capacity to have an eponymous effect.

Knowing that young children are more impressionable and often uneducated about menstruation, the film's producers organized showings in rural schools to normalize the concept of menstrual hygiene to young girls, their peers, and teachers (Press Trust of India 2017). Young children learning early the normality of menstruation and the necessity of proper hygiene is expected to reduce the stigma and taboo of these topics in India, both now and as these children grow.

Padman combats both public and self-stigma with its use of ironies, contrasts, and exaggerations: for example, Lakshmi's U.N. speech should make women realize how much of their life they're wasting, forcing them to come to terms with the negatives of menstrual stigma; and may make others (men) realize they're missing their wife's or mother's cooking two months of the year over a taboo and for little to no benefit, for instance.

Example: Viral Video Clips

The Internet and social media have created the phenomenon known as "viral" content, wherein a media object is massively shared throughout communities. Such content, by its viral nature, can raise awareness or share information quickly and thoroughly.

Cramping and pain from periods can obviously have effects on one's performance, but female athletes rarely discuss their periods with the press or public.[7] Fu Yuanhi, a Chinese swimmer who competed at the Rio Olympics, was on her period while competing. China, similarly to India, has severe taboos surrounding menstruation; in fact, "very few Chinese women use tampons, because it is widely, and falsely, believed that they can rob a woman of her virginity" (Feng 2016). Fu, in an interview immediately after missing the podium in a team event, was consoled by the reporter who claimed that Fu "gave it [her] all, given the circumstances ... [of her] stomach pain." Fu clarified to the reporter and the interview's audience two things: firstly, these were not "stomach pains"—her period had just started; and secondly, her period is not an excuse for poor performance. Fu told the world, "at the end of the day, I just didn't swim very well" (Shanghai Expat 2016).

In her interview, Fu accomplished several feats: she acknowledged the existence of her periods; she claimed that performance is not impossible while menstruating, that menstruation is not a debilitating disability and is not nearly as severe

[7] Perhaps this can be attributed to society's association of menstruation with weakness and sports with strength. Then to gain equal footing with male athletes, women avoid mentioning their menstruation even though it may be significant.

as it is made out to be; and made statements worth sharing for viewers. The interview is groundbreaking for female athletes generally, but even more so for Chinese female athletes who must work against additional stigmas. This interview "went viral," and became so popular on Chinese social media that even the New York Times wrote about her and her statements. On Weibo, China's Twitter-like platform, there were more than a half-million searches for the related hashtag in the day following the interview (on top of the discussion), and broad support for Fu and women more generally in the context of menstruation and their strength from men and women alike. Chen Yaya, a feminist activist and researcher from Shanghai pointed out, "Fu Yuanhi's comments have raised awareness, because Chinese society still approaches menstruation indirectly, even considering it 'unlucky.' But there's no need for this at all. The period is simply an everyday phenomenon" (Feng 2016). Fu's statement acknowledged this fact in an appropriate context: as an (decorated) athlete and a role model, her interview highlighted that she and her competitors frequently compete during their periods, and that its ordinary to do so and succeed in competition. The interview's format, being brief, made it particularly shareable on social media as a short video clip.

We can see that Fu wanted to address public stigma by sharing her womanly experience with her audience and pointing out the normality of it. It's possible that, in the vein of the web forums example, she was also attacking her own shame by revealing her experience.

Example: Web Forums

The Internet has enabled us to discuss experiences with sympathizers, and makes unnecessary coincidences such as common locality, agreeable personalities, or even interpersonal trust. Web forums are particularly advantageous for the stigmatized, insofar as these benefits are almost necessary to share without personal judgement. Because women's health issues frequently carry stigma, web forums seem an ideal platform to help women. In particular, online forums allow those suffering a condition to asynchronously converse with others across the globe undergoing similar experiences—such forum users may post anonymously, from the comfort of their homes, without needing to present themselves and their issues before an expert (or needing to pay for services). The "anticipated negative appraisal and anticipated negative behavior" associated with disclosing is referred to as "*disclosure stigma*". In fact, studies have shown the efficacy of online forum usage insofar as both challenging stigma's (and particularly disclosure stigma's) effects and increasing disclosure.

These studies showed an increase in internal stigma because of forum usage; this higher self-stigma is related to likelihood of disclosure of symptoms to health-care providers, or help-seeking behavior, in the case of perinatal mental

illness.[8] Forum usage may help in the recognition and revelation of self-stigma, the first step in moving past the stigma's harmful effects. The study further suggests that clinicians can can prescribe patients to trusted online forums that "facilitate expression" of the stigma being addressed in order to promote more thorough disclosure (Moore, Drey, and Ayers 2017).

The same authors' prior study demonstrated the few (if any) harmful effects that come about as a result of forum usage to challenge stigma. It reported that such forum usage "may strengthen professional treatment uptake and adherence" (2016). Thus, prescription of forum usage to combat a stigma's negative effects[9] is a safe and effective method to increase outcomes for those suffering from stigmatized conditions.

Discussion

In an analysis of stigma and taboo, we should consider why this shame exists in the first place—i.e., for whom is it useful? Stigma and shame are neither natural nor inherently useful; thus there must be a reason for their cultural existence. Furthermore, what is the relationship between cultural power imbalances and stigma?

Perhaps certain taboos existed to protect the public, or maybe instead they are enforced to preserve a group's power. It's plausible that at one point, before modern hygienic tools were available or true sanitation was possible, menstruating women were banished from the home to limit spilling of blood indoors (e.g., due to the foul smell, risk of attracting animals, staining, health concerns for others within the home).[10] The taboos observed in *Padman* and the vignettes presented in the Introduction, however, go beyond these sorts of demonstrable benefits for relegation of women to the outdoors. Worse, discussion of menstruation, associated hygiene, and complications is forbidden, and such taboos are not to be questioned. Gayatri points out that by tradition, she should not touch others, even with the obviously clean parts of her body. Clearly, women's power is suppressed via menstrual taboo, which results in a larger power disparity in favor of men. Under the (naive) assumption that power is a zero-sum game (and that having more power is better), these womanly stigmas benefit men at women's expense. The fears of womanly issues likely arose out of health concerns before

[8] Perinatal mental illnesses are defined as mental health issues related to pregnancy, and are reported to affect a large portion of pregnant women. Many such women do not seek professional treatment. (Moore, Drey, and Ayers 2017)

[9] While these studies focused on perinatal mental illness stigma, it doesn't seem that there is anything special about this stigma so the findings would likely apply for other stigma. Further research must be done to make firm conclusions, though.

[10] This is indicative of preferential treatment of some peoples over others. In particular, we see preferential treatment of those who don't menstruate over those who do—i.e., men are the ones receiving (perceived) benefits at the expense of the women. We might attribute this disparity to the power dynamic between men and women, and specifically to the trend that men have more power than do women and the patriarchal structures reinforcing the imbalance.

modern science and medicine made them moot and a slight cultural preference for men; as they were passed down generationally, they become more perverse and powerful, thus cyclically creating stronger cultural preferences for men (since women were increasingly seen as naturally impure). Further discussion on this topic is likely beyond the scope of this essay; in brief, "the powers that be" (e.g., patriarchy, capitalism, political systems) maintain their power cyclically via the oppression of already disadvantaged groups by associating stigmas with those groups and thus gaining additional power over those groups and being able to further discriminate against them, while simultaneously limiting the marginalized from identifying with their stigmatized identities. ETI, a non-profit organization working toward an inclusive society for youth with disabilities by combating social stigma agrees with this view (Dolinsky 2017).

Another central issue on this topic is how stigmatized peoples deal with stigma, particularly through the digital. The web forums studies by Moore, Drey, and Ayers provide one method to cope with self-stigma and the individual effects of public stigma, namely by using the Internet to discuss those stigmas with others who share the stigmatized experience. Those wishing to attack public stigma may create projects like *Padman* or give interviews as Fu Yuanhi did, in the hopes that their statements will be seen broadly by the public and accessible to all. Others still may create works intended for their own stigmatized communities to address mostly self-stigma within the community, such as the video games described in *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (Anthropy 2012) and *Videogames for Humans* (kopas 2015). It seems the digital is particularly useful compared to other media in that production and manipulation of the media object is easier (more people are able to create or participate in such media, due to a low skill requirement; and achieving exactly what the artist desires is more feasible using digital technologies), as is distribution and dissemination. Furthermore, in the context of convergent media, discussion regarding a media object (including reviews, fan content, and knowledge databases) become accessible and influential to those consuming or participating in the media object. Additionally, increased interactivity can be achieved via the digital, allowing partakers to come to their own conclusions (as, perhaps, players of *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013) would) a la *Inception* rather than forcing a particular view upon them.

Conclusion

With an understanding of the motivations behind and consequences of stigmatization, there is clearly a moral obligation of both individuals and society collectively to work against its deleterious effects. Often, even if a stigma was once "for the best," they are now based on faulty or outdated logic and knowledge, and serve little purpose but oppressing marginalized peoples. Thus, we conclude that working against the pernicious effects of stigmas is in our societal interest. As shown by the examples presented in this paper and particularly the strategies employed therein, digital media proves to be a powerful and helpful tool in

fighting stigma, taboo, shame—in the external and internal domains—and their associated harms. Individuals may use digital technologies to attack their own self-stigma and/or create stigma-fighting media objects massively disseminated via digital platforms to change others' perceptions. By using digital media to counter stigma, we can work to create a more equal, equitable, and enjoyable society.

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