



On the Blob:

Millennials vs Gen Zs talk menstrual health





Introduction

The UK's gender health gap, first highlighted by a report by Manual (2020), means women face a higher prevalence of illness, poorer health outcomes and restricted access to health services compared to men.

Thrive's previous research (2022) has championed women's health brands to use their expanding reach to help bridge this chasm and, in return, build long-lasting connections with female audiences. We believe that by better understanding women's differing needs, and by adjusting language and tone, we can do much to empower women.

Our latest research explores this perspective further, by examining women's menstrual health experiences.

This white paper looks at how women talk about their menstrual health, comparing Gen Z (born 1997-2012) and Millennial (born 1981-1996) women, to highlight any generational differences and similarities. We also explore communications from established and new period product brands to understand whether they truly reflect women's needs and priorities.

Key results and discussion points:

- ◆ Openness about menstrual wellbeing and symptoms is increasing; younger women are much more likely to discuss their periods with friends. In fact, it binds their friendships closer.
- ◆ Some period products, particularly tampons, engender fear among younger age groups.
- ◆ Pain and heavy flow are still major concerns for women.
- ◆ The impact of mood and stress-related menstrual symptoms on women's everyday lives is not recognised.
- ◆ There is much interest in new products – vaginal cups and period pants – and a demand for more choices, such as tampons with inbuilt pain relief.
- ◆ Non-traditional sources of menstrual information are on the up, including trustworthy sites, social media and cycle tracking apps.
- ◆ The punchy language used by disruptor period brands resonates with women. But there are opportunities for both new and established brands to step up their communications and reflect the realities of women's lives.



Contents

◆ Methodology	4
◆ Focus group insights	5
Symptoms and life stages	5
Alternative terms to describe periods	10
How women gather information on menstrual health	11
What matters most when women choose period products	11
Brand perceptions	13
◆ Brand communications insights	14
◆ Conclusion	18
◆ References	19
◆ Addendum	20

We had three research questions:

- 1 How do Gen Z women talk about menstrual health?
- 2 How do Millennial women talk about menstrual health?
- 3 How do period product brands talk about menstrual health?

To compare these three groups, we teamed up with linguists Dr Emma McClaughlin and Professor Svenja Adolphs from the University of Nottingham's School of English and Horizon Digital Economy Research to develop our research questions and project methodology.

We decided on a corpus linguistics approach; analysis of a digitised body of texts called a corpus, using specialist software to identify patterns, including the frequency and usage of specific words.

We used transcripts from 10 focus groups in total – five with Gen Z women (24 participants) and five with Millennial women (25 participants) – to create a corpus for each generation. Our partners at the University of Nottingham undertook the corpus linguistic analysis of these focus groups.

In addition, we gathered website content from 14 period product brands. Only brands that are available in the UK were included and were classified as corporates (large companies with global reach) or disruptors (smaller companies with a national or niche reach). This created our third corpus for analysis. More details of the corpora are available in the addendum.

Language is a window into human experience, helping us to understand variations and similarities in thought processes and behaviour (Jackson et al 2022). Understanding how groups of people speak allows us to see how their language choice reflects their thinking. An example in the women's health field might be around pregnancy – what a group of doctors might refer to as a foetus, a group of mothers would probably refer to as their unborn baby. This language choice might have considerable implications. Menstrual health is also a deeply personal, emotive topic. By facilitating open conversations, we aimed to reveal some stark themes and inspiration.



What women want – insights from the focus groups

Symptoms and life stages

Our focus group research reveals that women’s main menstrual health concerns are governed by their life stage. Key subjects per generation include:

Gen Zs	Millennials	Shared concerns
the confusion and worry experienced during their first period (menarche)	pregnancy and how it affects periods	use of hormonal contraception to regulate periods
use of tracking apps for learning about periods	seeking medical help in relation to post-pregnancy periods	pain, heavy bleeding and irregular periods
sharing products with school friends	the concealment imperative	mood changes

The experience of menarche

Gen Z women talked extensively about their first period – far more than Millennials. This is possibly because they’re younger and their memories are fresher.

They revealed how tough and confusing it was getting their first period. They recalled a lack of support – they learned about periods from formal talks or lessons at school, but said these did not adequately prepare them, something that Millennials agreed with.

“ I thought that because you weren’t allowed to go in the water unless you had a tampon you could not have a shower. [GZ] ”

Many used tracking apps for information and found them more reliable than discussions at school or home, or even with doctors.

“ I started using a period tracking app... part of it is to keep a diary to see if your mood changes is related to your cycle... [Mill] ”

Millennials also told us they felt unprepared for their first period, but their main concern was about others finding out. They wanted to hide that they had their period in school, adding that their schools contributed to period taboos.

“
I think when I was younger, I used to kind of hide my pad when I go into the loo. [Mill]
”

Our findings are supported by research by Newton (2016), which revealed that women commonly feel that their periods started unexpectedly and describe feeling emotionally unprepared.

But Gen Z women also revealed something different and positive – that menarche was also a time when girls supported each other, commonly sharing period products, for example.

Pregnancy

Pregnancy has a huge impact on menstrual health and was discussed by the Millennials in our study. They talked about how their periods have changed; some talked about their periods getting heavier, while others talked about periods becoming more irregular after having a baby. Some women had sought medical advice about their post-pregnancy periods simply because they did not know what was normal. Several participants also talked about their post-baby periods in more positive terms.

The use of hormonal contraception

The need for hormonal contraception is shared by both Millennial and Gen Z women. Millennials are concerned with the use of contraception to manage post-pregnancy periods and as a family planning method. The discussions revealed that Millennial women were more willing and likely to see healthcare professionals for medical issues such as pain and irregular periods. This applied particularly in relation to contraception.

Our discussions with Gen Z women also revealed that the use of hormonal contraception was common, for the dual purpose of managing their periods and as a method of contraception. However, Gen Z women were more likely to express having had negative experiences with healthcare professionals.

Emotional and physical menstrual symptoms

Both our Gen Z and Millennial focus groups featured much discussion of menstrual symptoms that can be classified as pre-period, period, and post-period symptoms.

Interestingly, Gen Z women mentioned far more symptoms than Millennial women. And there was a much wider discussion around the hormonal and emotional effects of periods in our younger group. For example, Gen Z participants said that they experience far more anger, irritation, and mood swings during and before their period. They were also more likely to mention skin issues.

Physiological changes might account for this difference. A study by Dennerstein et al (2011) found that PMS symptoms most associated with women in the younger years of menstruation included skin disorders, lack of energy, abdominal bloating, depressed mood, and irritability. Whereas symptoms such as breast tenderness/pain and weight gain were more associated with late reproductive/early menopausal transition.

In the post-period chat, while the Gen Zs mentioned positive feelings and experiences, the Millennials focused on negative post-period symptoms, such as tiredness and migraines.

Pre-period symptoms

Gen Zs		Millennials	
Symptoms	Frequency (Most to least)	Symptoms	Frequency (Most to least)
angry/annoyed/being blunt	██████████	anxious	██████████
more emotional	██████████	angry/annoyed/being blunt	██████████
skin problems/issues	██████████	less motivated/energetic	██████████
food cravings/eating more	██████████	feeling down/low	██████████
feeling down/low	██████████	worried about when it will come	██████████
anxious	██████████	more argumentative	██████████
less motivated/energetic	██████████	paranoia	██████████
no pre-period symptoms	██████████	period pain	██████████
mental health issues	██████████	more energy/motivation	██████████
less confident	██████████	increased sex drive	██████████
worried about when it will come	██████████		
nausea	██████████		
needing to be hugged/ comforted	██████████		
body changes	██████████		

Symptoms during period

Gen Zs		Millennials	
Symptoms	Frequency (Most to least)	Symptoms	Frequency (Most to least)
having to stop usual activities	10 bars	bad pain	10 bars
bad pain	10 bars	having to stop usual activities	10 bars
more emotional	10 bars	worrying about doing usual activities	10 bars
moodiness/irritability	10 bars	less energy than usual	10 bars
wanting to be alone	10 bars	moodiness/irritability	10 bars
syncing periods with others at home	10 bars	eating comfort food/unhealthy food	10 bars
bloating	10 bars	no symptoms or problems	10 bars
worrying about doing usual activities	10 bars	syncing periods with others at home	10 bars
feeling unattractive	10 bars	no sex drive or not wanting to be touched	10 bars

Post-period symptoms

Gen Zs		Millennials	
Symptoms	Frequency (Most to least)	Symptoms	Frequency (Most to least)
glowing	10 bars	tiredness	10 bars
feeling good	10 bars	bad migraines	10 bars
better sleep	10 bars		
feeling motivated	10 bars		

Mood

Mood changes dominated the discussion around symptoms, particularly in the Gen Z groups. Many Gen Zs and Millennials discussed mood changes as a sign that their period is about to start.

“ *I think the only person who would necessarily know that I was on my period without me telling them, based on my moods, would be my partner. [Mill]* ”

Younger women were more likely to use tracking devices to monitor their moods as a key part of their cycle tracking.

“ *My app does help me know when to expect it and you I can look ahead then if there's something troubling me or it's mostly about my mood really. [Gen Z]* ”

Periods and relationships

We wanted to understand how periods affect relationships. Both groups talked about being able to talk to friends about menstrual health – and how it cements bonds.

“ *When I got to secondary school, I had friends who started way before me and, it was a very open place so that was nice. [GZ]* ”

“ *It can bring me a bit closer to my female friends because you bond over how rubbish it is. And that's nice. I can say: 'I'm just on my period and feeling crap. Can we just watch a film instead of going out?'. [Mill]* ”

Interestingly, some Gen Zs mentioned monitoring how they talk to male friends about periods, to ensure they don't feel too uncomfortable.

“ *I've got quite a few male friends and I think I'd be OK talking to them about periods. But I think, at the same time, they'd probably be uncomfortable, and I wouldn't want to put them in that situation. [GZ]* ”

There was some discussion among Millennials about how periods can place strain on relationships with partners.

“ *I definitely know that we have more arguments when I'm about to go on my period, just because I'm much more sensitive to things he does all through the month. In those few days before, I just cannot bear them. [Mill]* ”

In terms of talking about periods with their families, women in both groups mentioned mums and sisters, with mums the go-to person on menstrual health. Gen Zs talked about brothers not being understanding and both cohorts talked about the challenges of talking to their dads.

“ I always find I get a lot closer with my mum. You have that sort of shared experience of how horrible it is at some points. It’s nice to have someone to say ‘It’s OK, I’ll make you a hot water bottle or a cup of tea or something.’ [GZ]



Alternative terms used to describe periods

Gen Zs		Millennials	
Term used	Frequency (Most to least)	Term used	Frequency (Most to least)
time of the month	██████████	time of the month	██████████
monstrous	██████████	my cycle	██████████
being on	██████████	Aunt Flo is visiting	██████████
being hormonal	██████████	being hormonal	██████████
inconvenient	██████████	bleeding	██████████
monthlies	██████████	coming on	██████████
Mother Nature’s visited this house	██████████	having my flowers	██████████
on the blob	██████████	leaking	██████████
on the mountain	██████████	Niagara Falls	██████████
uterus time	██████████	on my reds	██████████
werewolf time	██████████	on my Ps	██████████
(consciously not using a term that specifies gender)	██████████		

How women gather information about their menstrual health

Women seem to be seeking new ways to gather information about their health. For example, nhs.uk is seen as a place where both age groups can get expert health information without being judged or dismissed.

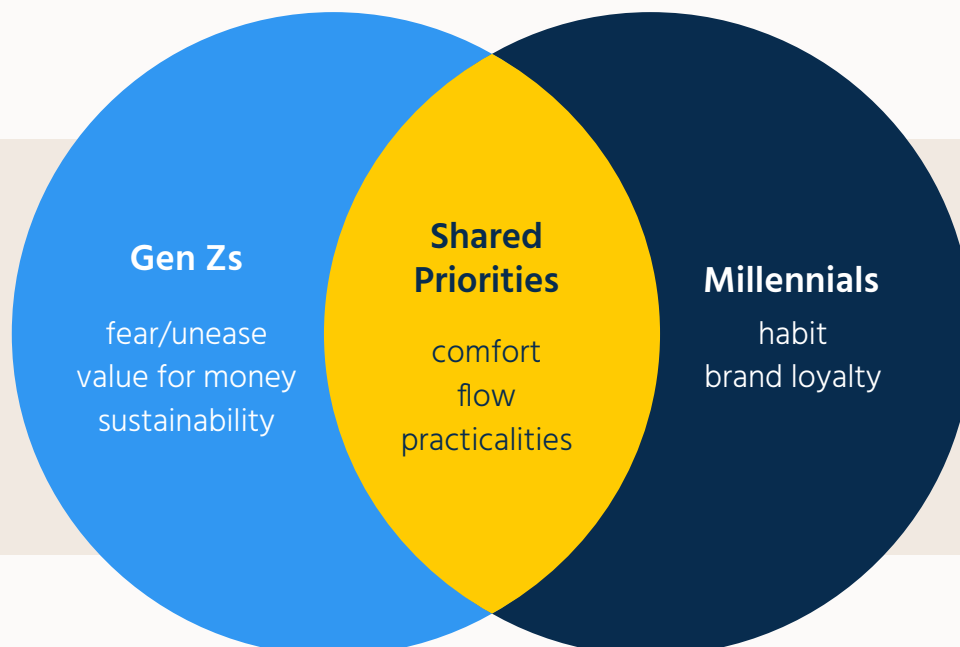
Gen Z women are more likely to discuss their experiences of healthcare in negative terms. They are also more likely to be looking for other ways to find their health information. For example, Gen Zs place more importance on using period tracking apps to monitor their period and learn more about menstrual health.

Social media has also emerged as a place where information on women's health is shared and received, especially among Gen Zs. They told us they regularly use it to gather information on periods and period products. Instagram was by far the most frequently mentioned social media platform – and both groups talked about seeing adverts for period products on the platform.

We found that the women in our focus groups are not passive recipients of information. They told us that they actively change how they consume health content, searching widely across social media and the web to find exactly what they need.

What matters most when women choose period products

Our focus groups revealed that women decide on products based on several different factors.



From pads and tampons to menstrual cups, period pants and reusable pads, women have product options. But what matters to them most when they make their choices? Our focus groups showed clear differences between Millennial and Gen Z women.

Habit and **brand loyalty** are big drivers for Millennial women in their consumer decisions. Tampons are their preferred period product as they ‘do the job’ and there is a reluctance to abandon the familiar to try something new. They’re more inclined to stick to brands they know, rather than try alternatives, even if they’re more cost-effective. Many revealed that they are unhappy with the patronising tone of some of the big brand ads, but this still didn’t make them want to change products.

“ I’d rather use known brands like Always night pads and Tampax during the day, just because they are proper brands and not low cost. [Mill] ”

On the other hand, Gen Z women’s choices are strongly influenced by the cost of products. Many said they prefer using menstrual cups because they’re more economical in the long run.

“ I use a menstrual cup because you buy it once and you don’t have to keep buying them. [GZ] ”

Period product choices are also influenced by **long-standing fears**. For example, Gen Zs are more likely to avoid tampons, due to concern about toxic shock syndrome and uneasiness about how to use them.

“ I think the idea of a tampon scared me a lot – the information on the back about toxic shock syndrome that just freaks me out. [GZ] ”

They are also more concerned with the **sustainability** of period products. Within the Gen Z focus groups, there was much more discussion using the words ‘sustainable’ and ‘sustainability’, mostly in the context of menstrual cups. ‘Reusable’ was also used, mainly when discussing period pants and reusable pads, which were seen as the most eco-friendly and cost-effective options. However, it was acknowledged that there are very few truly sustainable products out there, so it’s hard to make eco-conscious choices. And sustainability was not the most important aspect when choosing, for most women it is a ‘nice to have’ rather than a ‘must have’.

“ So little has changed in what’s on offer. We need more innovation in terms of the types of products for pain relief and sustainability. [GZ] ”

Comfort is a big factor affecting product choice in both cohorts of women. Many said they don’t like the feel of pads in their underwear. Others talked about how much cleaner tampons make them feel, especially on heavier days.

“ I feel like towels can be a hindrance sometimes if you want to wear certain types of clothing. [GZ] ”

Flow was a recurrent theme among our participants. Both age groups talked about how certain products are uncomfortable towards the end of their period, when flow is lighter, and they discussed switching to other products as it changes. Some talked about needing to wear multiple products on heavier days. Several participants, especially among our Gen Z participants, said they choose products like menstrual cups and pads because they enable them to track their flow.

Women also told us that **practical considerations** also come into play. For example, their product choice can be influenced by what they are wearing, or what activities they have planned.

“
I prefer tampons over towels, because I'm a dancer so they're a lot easier to use. [GZ]
”

Finally, product decisions can be triggered by **cycle changes**. For example, many women revealed to us they've been prompted to switch products after pregnancy, and due to natural fluctuations in their period over time.

Brand perceptions

We asked women about their views on brand advertising. Many women, especially Millennials, are critical of period product advertising. They find campaigns to be 'unrealistic', 'annoying' and 'uninformative'. Many feel that brands don't really understand what women go through when they are on their period.

“
Annoying. Tampax, with the 'You can do anything' roller-skating and then you're just going to horse riding. None of us want to do that when we bleed. None of us do. It doesn't reflect me in those adverts, it's really annoying. [Mill]
”

Many do not like the use of blue to represent blood in advertising of period products. They believe that the advertisers inadvertently contribute to taboos and period shame.

“
I really don't like the typical pad adverts where they say you need to hide your period and our products will help. It feels slightly like its shaming women. [GZ]
”

However, new product ads on social media platforms are using a different tone, according to some women in our focus groups, and have piqued their interest.

“
Period pants are another lifesaver, I found from Instagram ads. I saw an ad and I was like 'Oh, I'll look into that' and ended up buying a pair and realising they're really good. [GZ]
”



Companies on menstrual health – insights from the brand analysis

As brands have such great potential to provide empowering women's health information, we decided to examine how they currently talk about menstrual health and how far they fulfil the needs of women.

To understand this, our partners from the University of Nottingham undertook a corpus linguistic analysis of web content from 14 period product brands.

The analysis looked at:

- ◆ Brands available in the UK.
- ◆ Six corporate brands with large global reach: Always, Bodyform, Kotex, Lil-lets, Stayfree and Tampax.
- ◆ Eight disruptor brands with smaller or niche reach: Callay, Cora, Dame, Mooncup, Natracare, Organyc, RubyLove and TOTM. Details of the corpus we created can be found in the addendum.

Main findings

There's an **empathy shortfall**

Both corporates and disruptors focus on a host of menstrual health issues such as dietary choices, medications and exercises for period pain/cramps and PMS symptoms. But within this content there is a strong focus, especially on the corporate side, on 'not to worry' and 'don't panic' messaging, for example, about irregular cycles or spotting.

“ *Bad period cramps... should only cause concern if they are frequent, severely painful, and cannot be relieved by over the counter medication. [Stayfree]* ”

Disruptors do better when describing these menstrual issues with the help of personal stories. Their sites offer blog content on the personal experiences which cover issues such as period cramps, duration, flow, and regularity, and first period experience.

“ *All I know is that when my period cramps hit, they have literally stopped me in my tracks walking down the street. I have to stand/sit still, close my eyes, screw up my face, clench my fist and pant like a loon until it passes and then I'm fine! (Until the next one!). [TOTM]* ”

Another gap in the brand offering is providing advice on how to talk to doctors about menstrual health. Discourse tends to stop short at ‘don’t be embarrassed’ without offering more supportive tips on how to overcome the stigma or shame associated with talking about periods.

Brand advertising needs to be more realistic and empowering

Our analysis of product advertising has shown that corporate brands run the risk of alienating their audience with the tone of their advertisements. Adverts tend to promote an idealised period experience, one that includes feeling ‘fresh’ and ‘confident’, but also implies that period products need to be hidden.

“ *They are thin enough to slip into your pocket to take with you to the bathroom when you need to change your pad. [Always]* ”

Women of both generations in our focus groups made it very clear that they were unhappy with this tone. Disruptor brands seem to understand this sentiment and even openly criticise traditional period advertisements.

“ *What we’d like to see is simply the chance to have our periods however we have our periods, and to see a range of experiences represented in advertising so we can all find something to relate to. [Callay]* ”

Emotional symptoms aren’t given the spotlight they deserve

With advice mainly focusing on physical symptoms, such as period pain, cramps, headaches, irregular bleeding and infections, there is less focus on the emotional or hormonal aspects of menstrual health. Apart from some simple advice on dealing with low mood from disruptor brands, the overall focus is on physical symptoms.

Brand corpus: most frequent symptoms	
Symptom	Frequency (Most to least)
headache(s)	████████████████████
cramp(s)	██████████████████
bloating	██████████████████
hot flashes	██████████████████
fatigue	██████████████████
dryness	██████████████████
acne	██████████████████
fever	██████████████████
night sweats	██████████████████

This contrasts starkly with the symptoms our focus group participants spoke about.

Gen Z Corpus: most frequent symptoms		Millennial corpus: most frequent symptoms	
Symptom	Frequency (Most to least)	Symptom	Frequency (Most to least)
having to stop usual activities	10 bars	bad pain	10 bars
bad pain	8 bars	having to stop usual activities	8 bars
more emotional	6 bars	worrying about doing usual activities	6 bars
moodiness/irritability	6 bars	less energy than usual	6 bars
wanting to be alone	4 bars	moodiness/irritability	4 bars
syncing periods with others	4 bars	eating comfort food/unhealthy food	4 bars
feeling bloated	4 bars	syncing periods with others	4 bars
worrying about doing usual activities	4 bars	no sex drive	4 bars
feeling unattractive	4 bars	extreme symptoms due to endometriosis	4 bars

Complicated language from established brands

The tone used by corporate brands and disruptor brands in their content differs quite significantly. Corporate brands often use technical and textbook-like language, especially when describing how menstruation works.

“ If the egg is not fertilised, it disintegrates and dies. Likewise, the corpus luteum withers. This causes the uterus to shed its lining, the endometrium, causing the bleeding of menstruation. [Kotex] ”

Disruptors use a blend of personal and scientific voices, and are also more likely to use inclusive language such as ‘people with periods’ and ‘people who menstruate’. And by using personal accounts, disruptor brands do a better job of talking about women’s lived experiences, for example, how menstrual health can affect relationships.

“ *I fear I’ll end up pushing my boyfriend away with my irritability, my occasional rage, and my downright bitchiness to others when I have a hot flash. [Cora]* ”

There’s a lack of content for older audiences

With largely puberty-related content and first period advice, the corporate brands seem to mainly target a younger audience.

In contrast, disruptor brands have more articles addressing menopause, and period stories from people of different ages. Cora’s blogs dedicated to the subject of menopause stood out as a great example of this.

Women in our focus groups told us that their product choices have changed with age. And positively, the most significant keywords identified in the disruptor corpus are related to period products, such as ‘Mooncup’, ‘cup’, ‘brands’ and ‘products’, and they offer advice on how to choose the right product. But there are still gaps in their communications when it comes to embracing a broader age range of women.

The full diversity of women’s needs isn’t always reflected

Brands naturally focus on promoting the benefits of their products.

Corporates describe their products in terms of comfort and the confidence they can give women. ‘Comfortable’, ‘confident’ and ‘fresh’ came up as the top keywords in the corpus around products.

Meanwhile, disruptors largely focus on the social and environmental impact of period products, championing their own eco-credentials and offering real stories about product use. And with ‘access’, ‘afford’ and ‘organic’ being top keywords in the disruptor corpus, there is a focus on both period poverty and the provenance of materials used in products.

This is at odds with what women told us in our focus groups, which is that no one factor alone determines their period product choices. Habit, brand loyalty, comfort, practicalities, fear, sustainability and value for money all contribute.



Conclusion

Menstrual health communication between women and brands is limited. From broad brushstroke communications where women are encouraged to feel ‘fresh’ or to keep their periods discreet, to valuable voices of individual women’s experiences of their periods, there is a wealth of communication in this sphere.

However, women are unhappy with the products and support in this space; they are actively looking for innovation. There’s a move away from traditional healthcare sources to digital platforms when seeking out information about periods. Gen Z women in particular are less inclined to seek help from healthcare professionals, and are more open to getting their menstrual health information from social media and period tracking apps.

Providing more information – beyond technical voices – would enable fuller conversation and support women on the journey to understanding their menstrual health. Brands could act as a partner to inform and empower women to manage their menstrual health and to seek further support when needed.

Key actions for menstrual health communications:

- Remove the concealment imperative. Although this largely affected Millennials in their early menstruating years, it persists in brand advertising through the language around discretion.
- Provide a wider view of what menstruating means. Women are fed up with advertising that promotes unrealistic aspirations – they want brands to keep pace with cultural and social changes.
- Support symptoms beyond pain, cramps and heavy flow. The women in our research wanted space to talk about subjects including moodiness and irritability, their lack of sex drive and having to stop doing their usual activities.
- Provide broader guidance on menstrual health. While there is plenty of good information on what’s normal, especially for younger women, women want to know how their menstrual health will change at different life stages.
- Empower women with the knowledge to better understand and talk about their menstrual health. As we seek to close the gap between healthcare professionals and women, giving women the language to talk about their menstrual health will empower them to communicate their needs.



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Addendum

We conducted 10 focus groups in total – five with Gen Z women (24 participants) and five with Millennial women (25 participants). The focus groups were conducted in April and May 2022 and were run by two health researchers at Thrive. The transcripts were compiled by linguists at the University of Nottingham. This created our first (Gen Z) and second (Millennial) corpus.

In addition, we gathered website content of 14 period product brands. Only brands that are available in the UK were included and the brands were classified as corporates (large brands with an international reach) or disruptors (smaller brands with a more niche reach). Corporate brands were: Always, Bodyform, Kotex, Lil-lets, Stayfree and Tampax. Disruptor brands were: Callay, Cora, Dame, Mooncup, Natracare, Organyc, RubyLove and TOTM. This created our third (Brand Communication) corpus.

Corpus	Number of words
Gen Z focus groups	58,467
Millennial focus groups	59,198
Brand communications	684,782 (corporates: 233,858; disruptors: 450,924)

		Number of webpages	Total number of words
Corporates	Always	116	68,201
	Bodyform	46	34,197
	Kotex	134	63,363
	Lil-lets	35	21,204
	Stayfree	15	7,770
	Tampax	46	39,123
	Total	392	233,858
Disruptors	Callay	42	36,743
	Cora	85	92,717
	Dame	31	23,971
	Mooncup	125	103,785
	Natracare	124	88,976
	Organyc	28	15,682
	Ruby Love	63	47,892
	TOTM	58	41,158
Total	556	450,924	