



Essay

Re-imagining the Present through Futures: Speculative Design for Destigmatising the Menstrual Cycle in Organisational Contexts

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Abstract

Leading scholars have linked the stigmatisation of the menstrual cycle to gender disparities in organisational settings. This stigma harms both the external perception of working women and their health. Since this stigmatisation is not a natural imperative but a socially constructed phenomenon projected onto the female body, it is both possible and crucial to dismantle it. This short article presents speculative design as a method for reshaping the social stigma surrounding this female-specific condition. It argues that speculative design can provoke reflection and discussion by presenting aspirational visions of the future that emerge from a process of reimagination. Based on insights from semi-structured interviews, the article introduces a step-based model for implementing speculative design projects and related practices. This model aims to help organisations committed to dismantling the stigma surrounding this reproductive condition and becoming more gender inclusive.

Keywords

Speculative Design, Equitable Futures, Feminist Futures, Social Stigma, Menstrual Cycle

Introduction

In 2023, multi-media artist and filmmaker Sputniko! adapted her renowned artwork *Menstrual Machine* (2010) into an NFT named *Menstrualverse*, a wearable for avatars within the virtual platform Decentraland. The depiction of menstrual blood in the NFT led to approval challenges, resulting in a final version with blue liquid instead of red blood which highlights the ongoing taboos around female reproductive conditions. The original analogue artwork *Menstrual Machine*, a belt-like device simulating menstruation for non-menstruators, was previously showcased at New York's Museum of Modern Art, among other institutions, and raised similar questions on the perception of the menstrual cycle. It was through the medium of physical and digital design artefacts that Sputniko! was able to situate, ignite and catalyse continuous public debate on the social norms around menstrual stigma.

From a bodily perspective, the menstrual cycle is a female-specific, central biological condition that affects women's lives on various levels (NHS, n.d.). During the reproductive years – spanning from the onset of menstruation in puberty to menopause, which occurs at an average age of 51 – women must continuously adapt to the physical and emotional symptoms associated with this process. The symptoms of these approximately 28-day cycles are multifaceted, vary for each individual, and may include heavy bleeding, nausea, difficulty standing, heightened stress sensitivity, and anxiety (Schoep et al., 2019; Winer & Rapkin, 2006). Beyond its biological dimensions, menstruation holds far greater societal significance than is often acknowledged. It is deeply embedded in global body politics and contributes significantly to the persistent gender inequalities between men and women (Bobel, 2020). The menstrual cycle is surrounded by a prevailing social stigma, deeply rooted in culture and history, that has endured over the centuries (Karin et al., 2021). This stigma persists due to institutionalised hierarchies that reinforce the outdated patriarchal belief that menstruation renders the female body inferior to the male body.

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The term 'social stigma' refers to the negative association attached to an individual or group based on certain characteristics, whether visible or hidden (Goffman, 1986). This perception can cause others to view them as undesirable. During an outbreak, social stigma may lead to stereotyping, discrimination, social exclusion, or a loss of status.

Women face dual social effects from this stigmatisation of the menstrual cycle. On one hand, it influences how women are perceived, associating them with impurity and inferiority to men (Karin et al., 2021). Simultaneously, the stigma compels women to conceal evident signs or symptoms, potentially harming their health as cultural factors have been shown to determine menstrual health as much as biological factors (Grandey et al., 2020; Houghton & Elhadad, 2020; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). The United Nations Human Rights Council (2022) specifically acknowledged menstrual cycle stigmatisation as a hindrance to achieving gender equality, as the stigmatised perception of this biological condition adversely affects both women's behaviour and external perception.

The destigmatisation of the menstrual cycle has gained significant prominence in the interdisciplinary academic fields of Women's Studies and Gender Studies (e.g., Dahlqvist, 2018; Owen, 2022) drawing on feminist methods and the analysis of systems of privilege and oppression. In her recently published monograph, *The Hesitant Feminist's Guide to the Future* (2024), Ivana Milojević highlights how feminism, at its core, seeks to create 'a truly inclusive world that celebrates diversity and sees it as a source of enrichment rather than [superiority/] inferiority' (p. 46). This helps explain why the stigma surrounding the menstrual cycle is not just a dangerous misconception that threatens women's health, but a fundamentally feminist issue. Milojević (2024) further argues that feminism's roots lie in 'the recognition of pervasive issues within societies that inherently devalue women' (p. 24). Challenging this stigma is therefore not only important but essential to achieving the feminist goal of creating an inclusive society where female-specific conditions, such as the menstrual cycle, are not used to devalue women but are understood and respected as part of human diversity.

Research Context

One context in which gender disparities become particularly evident is the organisational context (Joshi et al., 2015; OECD, 2022). While women represent nearly half of the Western workforce and their performance has been measured as highly as that of their male colleagues, they still experience underrepresentation in leadership, lower wages, and job security disparities (Grandey et al., 2019; Joshi et al., 2015; OECD, 2022; The World Bank, 2021). Leading scholars have identified the stigmatisation of female-specific bodily conditions, including the menstrual cycle, as one explanation for these disparities (Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Grandey et al., 2020). Menstruation – and, more broadly, the menstrual cycle – is often perceived as a source of inferiority, shame, irrationality, and incompetence in the workplace. Direct manifestations of the menstrual cycle, such as menstrual blood, are sometimes exploited to deride, devalue, discriminate against, and socially exclude women in professional settings. Moreover, this stigma has been shown to detrimentally impact a woman's prospects for career advancement (Grandey et al., 2020).

Influential sociology scholar Goffman (1986) explained that the construct of stigma materialises and reproduces itself socially and interactionally, as opposed to being objective or factual. This shows that as the stigmatisation of the menstrual cycle is not a natural imperative, but a socially constructed phenomenon that is discursively projected onto the female body, it is both possible and crucial to dismantle it. While efforts to reduce stigma have been explored across various disciplines, scholarly discourse highlights the potential of speculative design as a catalyst for initiating debates, fostering discussions, and ultimately facilitating a shift in perception (Dunne & Raby, 2013). As social movements in general, and women's and feminist movements in particular, aim to drive social change, they are inherently future-oriented (Milojević, 2024).

Speculative design, emerging in the late twentieth century and championed by designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (2013), deviates from traditional utilitarian or purely aesthetic approaches. While this design practice traditionally found a home in academia and art, its practical application has extended to organisations like IKEA, Sony, Samsung, and Google, to mention a few. The core purpose of speculative design is to stimulate critical thinking and generate novel ideas by envisioning fictitious artefacts representing desirable futures (Mitrović et al., 2021; Tharp & Tharp, 2018). Speculative design operates beyond rationality, allowing designers to explore

unconventional concepts that challenge assumed norms. By immersing oneself in a different world, detached from current politics and social structures, designers can question seemingly fixed assumptions. In relation to feminist issues, speculative design could be a powerful tool, another “pair of spectacles to put on, in order to both analyse the current patriarchal reality and envision alternative futures” (Milojević, 2024, p. 46).

Methods

In our research, we used the Futures Triangle (Inayatullah, 2005, 2023) to explore the future potential for destigmatising the menstrual cycle in organisational contexts through speculative design practices (Figure 1). The Futures Triangle served as a cognitive map, helping us interpret the past and form assumptions that drive plausible futures. This methodology underpins the formulation of our research question: How can we leverage the potential of speculative design to challenge and transform the stigma-laden perception of the menstrual cycle to foster gender equality within organisational contexts?

As shown in Figure 1, we examined the current context through literature and scoping interviews, mapping the ‘Weight of History’ which continues to anchor perceptions of menstruation in outdated notions. Centuries-old stigmas have framed menstruation as impure and inferior, shaping views of women’s bodies and limiting their professional opportunities and career progression. In contrast, the ‘Push of the Present’ challenges these enduring biases and the notion that menstruation is ‘gross’ or ‘vulgar’, bringing menstrual health into public discourse through feminist scholarship, activism, and speculative works like those of Sputniko!. These pivotal moments mark a shift in perception, as attention to menstruation has intensified and diversified, reframing it as an opportunity to explore meanings beyond anatomy and biology (Bobel et al., 2020). This includes examining its social dimensions, including workplace dynamics. Finally, the ‘Pull of the Future’ envisions a more inclusive world where female-specific conditions are not taboo but normalised and respected, fostering greater gender equality in professional settings. We argue that speculative design holds significant potential to drive this change by reshaping social attitudes and breaking free from historical constraints.

We investigated this research question in 2023 as part of an ongoing research project at the University of the Arts London, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. We conducted a series of semi-structured interviews to explore the work of acclaimed designers who operate at the intersection of speculative design and organisational practice (Table 1). Our interviews also involved company managers who are currently engaged in projects addressing the stigma surrounding the menstrual cycle (Table 1a). The decision to conduct separate sets of interviews was driven by the challenge of identifying speculative designers specifically focused on addressing the menstrual cycle stigma within organisations, which further underscores the relevance of this article. The final sample of interview participants included both women and men to ensure that the findings regarding the employment of speculative design in destigmatising the menstrual cycle would be relevant to all members of an organisation and speak equally to women and men. Given the scope of our research and location, we limited our investigation to European countries, specifically the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, and Austria.



Fig. 1: Futures Triangle mapping menstrual stigma from past to an ideal future, centring speculative design to challenge biases and drive change.

Table 1: Interview participants.

Participant	Location	Current position
P1	London, UK	Co-founder of a research studio exploring the future of organisations through speculative design; Consultant at futures thinking firm.
P2	Vienna, Austria	Futurist at a research and technology organisation focused on speculative fiction.
P3	London, UK	Director of a futures thinking studio.
P4	Zurich, Switzerland	Self-employed designer specialising in speculative and desirable futures for organisations.
P5	London, UK	Team Lead of the foresight department at a large international organisation, responsible for leading speculative design projects.
P6	Berlin, Germany	Co-founder and futurist at a feminist futures collective.

Table 1a: Interview participants.

P1A	Berlin, Germany	Brand Manager for a period underwear brand.
P2A	Berlin, Germany	Marketing Manager for a period underwear brand.
P3A	Berlin, Germany	Brand Manager for a period underwear brand.
P4A	Berlin, Germany	Social Media Manager for a sustainable period care brand.

Insights From Interviews

Reimagining stigma through speculative design

During our fieldwork activities we realised that, unlike designs aimed at practical application, speculative design mostly serves as a catalyst for debate. In fact, the potential of speculative design lies in its ability to inspire thinking and introduce new ideas by presenting aspirational visions of the future. The imaginative and playful nature of this approach injects discussions about the future with a sense of possibility. Garcia (2023) specifically argues that by engaging with seemingly impossible worlds “uncertainty is taken as a core stimulus to collaborative imagination rather than a threat” (p. 11), thereby reducing tendencies for discouragement and paralysis. P5 synthesised this central characteristic of speculative design as follows:

“The idea of speculation is to move yourself [...] as a designer outside of your current world, and your current politics and your current social arrangement and imagine how things could be otherwise and see that actually, the things that you think are set in stone [...] are actually just assumptions that have been made and can be different.”

In the interviews, it became clear that abstract, intangible concepts lend themselves particularly well to speculative design proposals, as tangible objects can materialise these ideas for better comprehension. It follows that the abstract issue of social stigma offers an ideal topic for speculative designers to engage with and navigate the realm of possibilities. By envisioning speculative futures, designers can create scenarios in which the menstrual cycle is not only normalised but even becomes a central and celebrated aspect of society, and so dismantling the stigma associated with it. In the interviews, P2 called this the "process of reimagination" which involves replacing negative perceptions with empowering alternatives. P2 describes this concept as follows:

“The first important thing [of the speculative design process] is to find a narrative that shifts the stigma and replaces it with something else. So, for example, if the topic of a menstruating person is a highly stigmatised one, it is important to find a narrative that is not charged with shame but with strength, for example, and that portrays a menstruating woman differently.”

Similarly, Ilper’s (2024) analysis, which deconstructs the stigma surrounding the female-specific bodily condition of menopause, emphasises the need for a paradigm shift. Ilper suggests viewing menopause as a natural transition and an opportunity “for women’s empowerment, wisdom, and potential for personal growth, which benefits whole societies in the long run”. It becomes clear that the process of reimagination aims at shifting societal attitudes by presenting narratives that evoke strength rather than shame.

To summarise, the first theme emerging from our investigation underscores how speculative design's effectiveness in dismantling the stigma of the menstrual cycle lies in its ability to serve as a catalyst for generating new ideas and critical thinking. This reveals the broader societal impact that speculative design can have by addressing, challenging and shifting ingrained and tabooed perceptions.

The materiality of speculative design

In the interviews, it also became clear that the materiality, or outcome, of speculative design projects, does not have to take the form of physical artefacts which were traditionally most commonly employed by speculative designers. In fact, addressing the stigma of the menstrual cycle within a speculative design project can be achieved through various formats and mediums. P5 summarised this aspect in relation to the menstrual cycle as follows:

“Every time design explores the immaterial, whether that’s that [stigma] [...] you have to bring it back to something tangible, there needs to be a story told through an object or a thing or transaction or interaction or service or whatever it is and that then often officiates reality.”

Other speculative design mediums mentioned during the interviews that could be employed in the organisational context include literature, film, apps, websites, stories, cultural probes, workshops and toolkits. The decision ultimately hinges on the reimagined narrative that needs to be conveyed and the medium that would have the greatest impact on the organisation. Overall, materialising a reimagined narrative of the menstrual cycle through speculative design doesn’t need to be confined to physical artefacts:

“It used to be physical objects, and with physical objects, the range of what's possible is very tiny or tinier than doing speculative design on apps and services and websites, and because of that, you can do pretty much everything. Or like, I guess, people are much more open to hearing strange things coming from the internet [...]” (P1)

A ‘dirty discipline’ in the organisational context

Our investigation uncovered speculative design's emergence as a niche and undefined practice within organisational contexts, revealing a notable barrier – the absence of pre-defined rules for integration in institutionalised settings. Despite this lack of structure and streamlined processes, our findings suggest that an integration of speculative design in organisations is both possible and beneficial.

“It can be employed but how depends on the company, depends on the possibilities. And there are many possibilities.” (P2)

The development and introduction of a structured process therefore becomes key. Echoing this, P4 said:

“It's totally important to find a structured form. It tends to be unstructured, a dirty discipline, where you usually experiment wildly. [...] But I think to make it more corporate applicable, it has to be structured and you have to find a good form of communication and mediation.”

The interviews further highlighted that, as in any design discipline, a nuanced understanding of the audience and the intended impact of the speculative design project within an organisation is needed for an initial sense of direction and structure. The interviews revealed the difficulty designers face when integrating into organisational contexts, as they are often perceived as outsiders, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. To address this challenge and establish a more effective project structure, the interviews emphasised the importance of involving employees early in the design process. By engaging them from the outset, employees become active contributors to a co-developed process, rather than passive observers. This approach can foster a sense of personal agency and optimism while also marking a significant shift from the traditional view of speculative design as a solely designer-led endeavour, thereby contributing to the evolving scholarship (Dunne & Raby, 2013; Mitrović et al., 2021).

During the interview, P4 also highlighted the relevance of a co-design approach within a 'traditional' organisational context.:

“[...] there is that challenge with traditional or conservative companies that are still totally dominated by men and where feminism doesn't play a role yet. And that's the challenge, to reach out to the people there and make them understand 'Hey look, is this really the future you want?' or is this a better future?' To

let them develop futures themselves. I think there's still an extreme amount of work to be done, to break down these thought structures that we've all been socialised with, especially now in our developed Western world.”

The Way Forward

The application of speculative design in an organisational context is a niche but growing practice. Our investigation suggests that it has the potential to challenge stigmatised perceptions of the menstrual cycle by opening up to possibilities, fostering imagination and prompting critical reflection. Based on our findings, we offer a step-based perspective (Figure 2) to assist organisations willing to integrate speculative design methodologies to enhance gender equality and fight biases towards female-specific conditions. The model is complemented by a set of recommended practices for organisational leaders at each step to support implementation (Table 2).

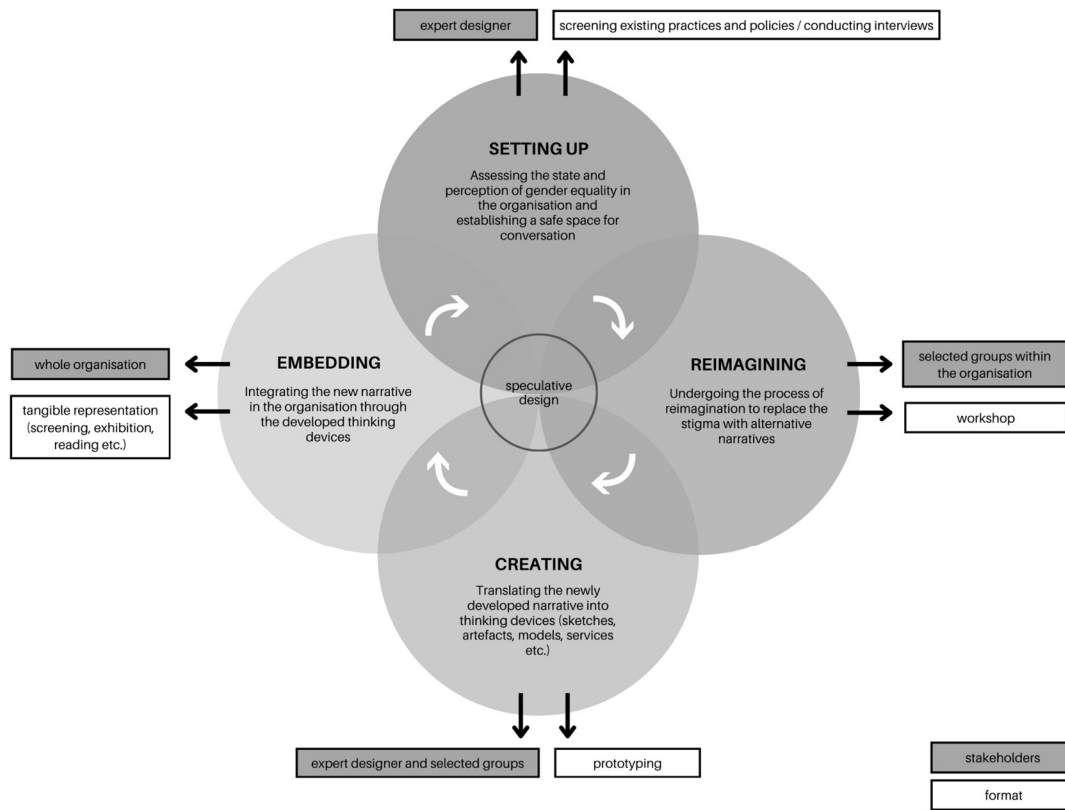


Fig 2: Model for integrating speculative design in organisations.

First – Setting up. Since the menstrual cycle is a personal and sensitive topic, creating a safe space for conversation is essential. Speculative design can challenge participants by moving beyond traditional logic to explore the ‘what ifs’ and ‘maybes’ of the future. At this stage, a thorough analysis of the organisation’s and its employees’ understanding of gender equality and unconscious biases is crucial. According to our investigation, this should be led by the expert designer in collaboration with the management team and involves reviewing current practices, having informal conversations, and interviewing employees to assess perceptions. This knowledge forms the foundation for the speculative design process.

Second – Reimagining. After gaining a nuanced understanding of the organisation and its employees, the process of reimagination unfolds. The goal is to broaden imagination and explore potential narratives that could

replace the stigma associated with the menstrual cycle. This marks a departure from the present, encouraging creative thinking. The speculative design process possesses the crucial ability to "loosen, even just a bit, the grip on our imagination" (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p.3). This reimagination process can be led by the speculative designer or as a co-design effort involving management, employees, or a group thereof.

Third – Creating. The focus now shifts to selecting an appropriate speculative design medium that brings the narrative to life. This medium should be powerful enough to effectively stimulate reflection and initiate discussions. Accordingly, we define speculative design mediums as *thinking devices* - design artefacts such as sketches, models, or fictional products and services - that make ideas tangible for effective communication and support a shift in thinking that can alter sociocultural perceptions.

Four – Embedding. The next step involves deciding how the thinking devices will be embedded into the organisation. Various implementation examples surfaced during our research, such as curating and exhibiting artefacts, screening movies in case film was the chosen medium, or conducting workshops for employees to engage with new potential visions of the menstrual cycle. The implementation choice hinges on the medium itself, strategically aiming to amplify the effectiveness of the communicated narrative and facilitating its iteration. By fostering discussions and debates around thinking devices, the goal is to provoke thoughts, challenge assumptions, and inspire critical thinking about the future.

This model is designed to be iterative, allowing it to be repeated multiple times, involving different organisational stakeholder groups each time and refining the narrative with each iteration.

Table 2: Recommended practices for organisations’ leaders.

Step in Process	Suggested Practices
Setting up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting up interviews between the designers and selected employees • Re-evaluation of current practices related to gender equality within the organisation through internal policy review and conversations with key stakeholders • Allowing designers time and space to familiarise themselves with the environment, its rituals, and existing dynamics to carve out a safe space for conversations
Reimagining	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Running future-scoping workshops with a selected group of employees, possibly starting with senior staff and key decision-makers in the organisation • Ideating and developing new narratives that replace the stigma surrounding the menstrual cycle with positive associations
Creating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prototyping <i>thinking devices</i>. These do not necessarily need to be complex or possess aesthetic qualities; it is more important what the devices <i>say</i> rather than how they look • Do not present one medium as the only option. Thinking devices can take various forms, from literature to film, apps, websites, stories, cultural probes, workshops, and toolkits. Any medium can become a thinking device • Here, the designer plays an important role in supporting the creation of thinking devices, but without leading the conversation or dictating the meaning associated with the devices
Embedding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating tangible representations or experiences for the entire organisation that effectively integrate the thinking devices and provide a space to showcase them • Always acknowledge contributors • When possible, use the thinking devices in day-to-day operations, making them an integral part of the organisation’s environment

Conclusion

As humans, we can imagine and create novel ways of doing and being. For centuries, individuals of all genders have endeavoured to envision what true equality would look like. However, throughout history, this imaginative capacity

has often been more pronounced among a creative minority (Milojević, 2024). In this short paper, we have shown how speculative design methodologies can effectively challenge and dismantle the societal stigma surrounding the menstrual cycle by presenting reimagined and visionary perspectives. By extension, we demonstrated how this ability of a specific creative minority – speculative designers – can be brought into traditionally reactive contexts, such as organisations, to transform them into proactive spaces for change.

To do so, we proposed a step-based model to help organisations integrate speculative design methodologies, fostering a more inclusive environment for women and thereby reducing gender inequalities. Each step is accompanied by practical recommendations to initiate changes in perceptions related to menstrual cycle stigma within organisational contexts. The identification of new opportunities for a more inclusive future is made possible by the interdisciplinary nature of this research project. The blending of social, organisational, speculative design and futures studies extends the scope of each discipline, allowing a novel proposal to emerge.

We recognise the limitations of our study, the first of which is the limited interview sample. It should be noted that empirical studies of speculative design in organisational contexts are scarce, and interviews are rarely used (with exceptions of large-scale projects, e.g., Mitrović et al., 2021), but we chose this method to enable participants to openly share their individual experiences and perspectives. Hence, we started with a limited but rich sample of experts.

Building on this short article, which forms part of our ongoing research, our work is now focused on developing and elaborating upon the model by expanding its practical applications and involving more participants. It would also be valuable to test the model – currently defined at a theoretical level – for its validity in organisational contexts. Other researchers might find this useful and may also explore the use of speculative design to dismantle the stigma associated with the menstrual cycle in different social contexts. Finally, we hope other researchers will help decenter Western perspectives by engaging more participants from the Global South, acknowledging that our findings are currently limited to a European context.

Overall, this work highlights not just the importance, but the necessity, of bringing together different disciplines and practices to dismantle long-standing female-specific stigmas to create fairer and more inclusive feminist futures.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that gender identity is not determined by biological sex. In this research, we use the term 'women' to refer generally to menstruators, recognising the limitations of the terminology. Our study includes and aims to benefit all individuals who menstruate, including those who do not identify as women or exclusively as female.

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